Governance Goes Global:
Power, Authority and Order in the Twenty-first Century

Mark Beeson


Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of global governance and the changing position power and authority in the contemporary international system. The paper reviews five recent edited collections which have attempted to grapple with this complex, evolving terrain and argues that for all the growing importance of civil society and non-state actors, states remain critically important components of the new international order.

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Although there is still a good deal of debate about the origins, extent and ultimate impact of ‘globalisation’, most observers agree that the intensity, complexity and variety of contemporary transnational flows, processes and interactions mean that there is something novel and distinctive about the present era (see Held et al 1999). More than a quarter of a century ago Keohane and Nye (1977) produced a path-breaking book which described a form of ‘complex interdependence’ that emerged from processes we now associate with globalisation. Importantly, Power and Interdependence highlighted the blurring of the domestic-foreign policy divide, and the array of new non-state actors that was becoming a prominent part of ‘transnational’ relations. At the beginning of the twenty-first century many of the trends they identified have consolidated and spawned a burgeoning literature subsumed under the rubric of ‘global governance’.

All of the books reviewed here are concerned with global governance in some form or other, although there are some significant differences in emphasis. What is common
and revealing, however, is that every volume is an edited collection. This is not to say that there haven’t been some important single-authored contributions to the field of governance studies (see, for example, Reinicke 1998; Rosenau 1997; Young 1999), but the very diversity and complexity of the potential component parts of global governance seem to lend themselves to this sort of multi-author analysis. The books are generally distinguished by the celebrity or otherwise of their respective contributors and by the range of case studies they employ. All of them can be recommended as useful introductions to a complex topic although, as we shall see, some are more coherently organised and theoretically innovative than others. However, the sheer number of volumes addressing broadly similar themes suggests that global governance is a concept whose time has come.

Theorising global governance

Governance has long been staple of the political science literature, and has been employed to describe of the ‘self-organizing, interorganizational networks’ which, in addition to governments, help to authoritatively allocate resources, exercise control and coordinate social activities (Rhodes, 1997) At a time when some observers believe that the extent and complexity of cross-border economic interactions make some sort of transnational coordination and cooperation between individual governments a functional necessity if the processes associated with globalisation are to operate successfully (Cerny, 1995), then it is perhaps unsurprising that the concept of governance would take on a global dimension.

In the introduction to Global Governance, Rorden Wilkinson details the array of new actors that have assumed prominent positions in the international system, and argues that it is the way these actors ‘combine to manage …a growing range of political, economic and social affairs’ that is one of the distinctive qualities of global governance, even if it is a process that is as yet not ‘complete and fully coherent’ (p 2). A degree of caution in the claims made about the extent or significance of global governance is a noteworthy quality of most of the contributions to these volumes. The very subtitle of the collection edited by Cooper et al – Towards a New Diplomacy? – is indicative of the mixture of circumspection and qualified optimism that pervades many of the essays. Readers – and the contributors to Enhancing Global Governance, for that matter – might have been better able to make a judgement about the possible extent, novelty and usefulness of ‘new diplomacy’ as a concept had it been more unambiguously spelled out at the outset. Given that most of the essays in this collection are connected in some way to the United Nations it was never clear – to this reader, at least – whether the ‘new diplomacy’ was in some way limited to, or driven by, UN-sponsored initiatives, or whether it was emblematic of a more generalised transformation in global processes.

One of the ‘key arguments’ of Enhancing Global Governance is that the sources of ‘innovation and initiative’ in the international system are ‘being transformed’ (p 5). This claim is substantiated through a number of case studies that detail how new actors and issues are influencing policy outcomes. There is a degree of repetition here – no less than three chapters cover issues revolving around the movement to ban landmines – which may be illustrative of the limited number of success stories available. Indeed, as Cameron concedes in his analysis of the process that culminated in the Ottawa Treaty prohibiting the use and production of such weapons, ‘the uniqueness
of the issue, the fortuitous circumstances surrounding the ban movement, and the willingness of key players to go way out on a diplomatic limb’ (p 83), mean that it is a case study with limited wider implications. Likewise, Nossal’s excellent analysis of the use of sanctions against Angola and its lucrative diamond trade comes to the sobering conclusion that ‘it seems unlikely [that] had countries of greater consequence been the targets [of sanctions] we would have seen such unanimity in the efforts to create smarter, sharper, and stronger UN sanctions’ (p 264).

Other chapters in *Enhancing Global Governance* that consider the relationship between the United States and the UN remind us why the influence of the latter organisation has frequently been constrained by the actions of powerful states - which is why most analysts of global governance focus on other actors and employ different conceptual frameworks to make sense of the new realities. Although the contributors to *Taming Globalization* are also concerned with creating ‘adequate structures of global governance’ that will allow globalisation to be ‘reconciled with democratic principles and social justice’ (p 9), they operate on a larger canvas than Cooper et al.

Some way this is unsurprising, as this rather slim volume contains some of the biggest names in contemporary social science. Robert Wade spells out why market-centred globalisation has done little to alleviate chronic patterns of inequality and poverty, Joseph Stiglitz tells us how it might all be different if some of the most prominent agencies of transnational governance like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were less influential, Robert Goodin reminds us why we ought to care about it, and David Held suggests how ‘cosmopolitan multilateralism’ might provide the basis for a new international order. Whether readers find Held’s ideas inspirational, Utopian or just unlikely, his claim that the continuing absence of more inclusive, accountable and effective strategies for dealing with globalisation’s all too tangible inequities could lead to its ultimate failure is one that needs to be taken seriously if interdependence is to be sustained. The period between the two World Wars serves as a powerful reminder that there is nothing inevitable or irreversible about continuing globalisation (see James 2003).

**Accountability and governance**

The other two substantive chapters in *Taming Globalization* are by John Ruggie and Robert Keohane, and provide an important theoretical dimension to the overall volume. Ruggie revisits the concept of ‘embedded liberalism’, first articulated in a highly influential and much-cited essay more than twenty years ago (Ruggie, 1982). The essence of the earlier version of embedded liberalism was the claim that a trade-off existed between economic openness and national autonomy: states agreed to greater international economic integration as long as they retained a capacity to manage the domestic social impacts of liberalising initiatives. As Ruggie points out in the new essay, such an implicit agreement was predicated on the idea of discrete national economies managed by relatively autonomous states. However, the transnational restructuring of corporate activity and the growing influence of international financial markets ‘threatens to leave behind merely national social bargains’ (p 94). Ruggie’s surprising and optimistic conclusion is that corporations will play a key ‘bridging role’ between an increasingly global economy and national communities. Whether business has the capacity or, more pointedly, the desire to take on this sort of role is a moot point, but Ruggie rightly highlights the gaps in
transnational governance structures that traditional, nationally based-political actors seem incapable of addressing (see, Strange 1996).

Keohane’s chapter is concerned with the implications that more globalised patterns of governance may have for accountability. The disjuncture between nationally-based polities and unelected, generally non-transparent, but highly influential transnational institutions, and the latter’s concomitant capacity to corrode democratic principles, is one that has long been recognised (Held, 1995). Keohane’s particular concern reflects both his interest in international institutionalisation and his underlying assumption that ‘the vision of global society is a mirage’ (p 136). For Keohane, at least in the sphere of ‘complex interdependence’, or the dense networks of economic and political connections that characterise much of the industrialised world, future governance structures will continue to be dominated by states, but they will share power with non-state actors. Elsewhere, ‘coercion and bargaining’ rather than ‘persuasion and emulation’ will be the norm, and fundamentalist rather than democratic values are likely to predominate. At the very least, Keohane’s chapter serves as a salutary reminder that the preoccupations of these volumes are predominantly those of the ‘developed’, industrialised, rich world. Much of the developing world participates in global governance either at the margins or under a regulatory regime laid down by the United States and a handful of other countries (Woods, 2002). Nevertheless, Keohane concludes that ‘the world needs more multilateral governance not less’ if powerful state and non-state actors are to be held accountable.

Although Keohane wants to argue that multilateral organisations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are, in fact answerable to both governments and a wider array of civil society actors, he is forced to concede that ‘in the last analysis they are in fact accountable, through internal processes, only to a few powerful states and the European Union’ (p 145). Indeed, as Keohane notes, this lack of broadly-based accountability is even greater in the case of non-state actors like multinational corporations and transgovernmental or private sector networks. This lack of accountability and the question of precisely which organisations or actors are able to make authoritative decisions about the allocation of resources is consequently at the centre of contemporary theoretical and policy debates. To their credit, both of the other volumes under review here take seriously the questions of power and authority that the growing prominence of non-state actors and inter-governmental organisations raise. Both provide sophisticated - and in the case of Political Space – quite innovative conceptual frameworks with which to try and make sense of the new developments.

Geography and governance

The editors of Political Space borrow a number of concepts developed primarily by geographers in an effort to avoid the ‘territorial trap’. The primacy attached to the nation-state in the practice and conceptualisation of international relations has led to a preoccupation with nationally demarcated spheres of economic and political activity. The possible theoretical limitations of such an approach have been especially apparent to political-economists, who have drawn attention to the way global forces have effectively undermined the idea of discrete national economies. The most forceful and persuasive statement of this possibility in these volumes actually appears in The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance (hereafter EPAGG), where
Stephen Korbin outlines the impact of economic globalisation on nation states, the rise of the networked economy, and their combined impact on geographic space which, he argues, is ‘losing meaning as the basis for the organisation of markets’ (EPAGG, p 46). While both Political Space and EPAGG are concerned with the implications of these developments, Political Space contains some of the most ambitious theoretical attempts to get to grips with it.

The editors’ introductory essay in Political Space provides the most complete attempt to delineate a conceptual framework for, and description of, the terrain upon which nascent practices of global governance unfold. In this context, global governance becomes

‘not so much a reference to the control exercised by effective authorities on a truly global scale, than a concept that invites investigators of political space in today’s world to map the patterns and consider the source(s) of whatever order and compliance they may observe’ (p 8).

Central to this endeavour is the recognition that the line between the public and private sectors is blurring and that governance ‘emanates sometimes from discrete and identifiable actors, but as often as not, from their complicated relationships on various levels’ (p 9). These themes and the open-ended nature of the research project provide the basis for a number of exploratory essays by some very prominent international relations theorists: K.J Holsti examines the problem of change; Richard Little provides a comparative historical context with which to make sense of contemporary realities; the editors, Robert Latham, and Stewart Corbridge all provide separate considerations of some of the theoretical implications that flow form reconfigured political space. Other, more mundane, space considerations prohibit a detailed consideration of all of these chapters. A couple of the contributions to this volume are, however, worth briefly highlighting.

One of the most interesting chapters in this collection is by John Agnew, a prominent geographer, who has been responsible for some of the most innovative attempts to link the generally separate concerns of space and power (see, for example, (Agnew and Corbridge 1995). He continues this endeavour here and concludes that power is always historically realised and contingent. In short,

…power is not a fixed in given territorial units but changes both its character and spatial structure as different geographical scales (local, regional, national-state, world-regional, international and global) change their relationships to one another as the political practices of the global geopolitical order change’ (p 115).

This approach, which self-consciously eschews the idea that power is synonymous with or can be ‘reduced to state territoriality’, provides a way of thinking about the complex, multilevel, and spatially distributed nature of power. It also highlights the way power relations have evolved over time. The key point that emerges from this sort of analysis, and which is implicit in many of the contributions to these volumes, is that the nation-state is but one form and location of power, and a fairly recent, historically contingent one at that. Indeed, if the global governance debate does nothing else, it should alert us to the fact that there is something distinctive and different about contemporary patterns of transnational interaction and we need to develop ways of thinking about them that reflect this underlying reality.
Revealingly, some of the most important contributors to contemporary debates about governance and globalisation come from outside of the discipline of International Relations. Saskia Sassen, for example – a sociologist – has become one of the foremost analysts of global processes and their spatial and political implications. (So prominent is she, in fact, that she also appears in *EPAGG*). Her major concern in this essay is the way in which formerly national governance functions are being ‘denationalised’ as regulatory responsibility shifts from the national to the transnational, and from the public to the private sector. One of the most important consequences of the new patterns of interaction between states and private sector market actors is, Sassen argues, the creation of a ‘new normativity that attaches to the logic of global capital.’ (p 178). The idea that particular values associated with ‘Western capitalism’ might come to dominate economic and even social activity is hardly new (Strange 1990). What is becoming clearer, however, is that the regulatory role that business has increasingly assumed is establishing enduring standards and patterns of behaviour through formal instruments like patents and intellectual property law, and by modelling business practices, which in turn become pervasive norms that exert an influence over economic and ultimately political practices (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000). Importantly, states are playing a crucial role in adjusting their own internal administrative architectures and practices in line with the functional requirements of globally-oriented business - and frequently handing greater power and authority to business as a consequence.

*Authority and governance*

These processes are often subtle and difficult to recognise or make sense of as they become part of everyday reality at multiple levels. One area in which we might expect to see opposition to the pervasive influence of business is in ‘global civil society’. Given the attention this idea has received in the scholarly literature and the potential role some see global civil society playing in new structures of global governance (Keane 2003; Lipschutz 1992), the concept is given surprisingly little attention in these volumes (although see Lipschutz and Fogel in *EPAGG*). While it is important to remember that not all of the actors in civil society are associated with ‘progressive’ causes or necessarily agents of political liberalisation (Morris-Suzuki 2000), it is clear that NGOs in particular have assumed a prominence and ubiquity that makes them potentially important parts of new governance structures.

James Rosenau (1992;1997) has played a major role in popularising and explicating the idea of global governance and his analysis of the role of NGOs in international system makes it clear why ‘it seems inconceivable that the interstate system is still the sole arbiter of the course of events’ (p 266). This volume generally and this chapter in particular should be compulsory reading for the – depressingly large – number of international relations scholars who persist in producing relentlessly state-centric analyses of contemporary events that pay perfunctory, if any, attention to the new patterns of international interactions in which non-state actors play such a major part. One of Rosenau’s most important contributions in this collection and elsewhere has been to show how authority – be it associated with state or non-state actors - can be decisive in determining political, economic and social outcomes, and how the power to act authoritatively is not simply a function of the formal position of an actor or agency. Rosenau details the various types of authority – moral, knowledge-based,
reputational, issue-specific, and ‘affiliative’ – which underpin the habitual patterns of compliance that distinguish authority relations, and which help to account for the distinctive patterns of governance that characterise the contemporary international system. The significance of authority relations is given an even more prominent place in *EPAGG*.

For the editors of *EPAGG* authority refers to the ‘institutionalised forms or expressions of power’ (p 4). The problems of accountability identified by Keohane and others are brilliantly dissected by A. Claire Cutler who has produced some of the most original analyses of the private-public interface and its implications for governance regime (Cutler, 1999). Here she points out that

> efforts to hold private institutions accountable are bound to flounder, for that which goes unrecognised is difficult to regulate…The legally formalistic associations of authority with the state function ideologically by depicting the world not as it *is*, but as it *ought* to be [p 24, emphasis in original].

Cutler details the way in which corporations have effectively created legal and regulatory regimes to create commercial law, or the sort of regimes that have been created under the auspices of intergovernmental organisations like WTO. In effect, she argues, ‘firms are basically functioning like governments’ (p 32). This process is not made any easier to understand because governments are frequently willing partners in this shift of regulatory responsibility. As Louis Pauly points out in his examination of the regulation of global finance, ‘blurring the boundary lines between public and private is part of an intentional effort to render opaque political responsibility for the wrenching adjustments entailed in late capitalist development’ (p 77). Put differently, governments are able to claim that their systematic abnegation of responsibility for the basic welfare and compensatory functions that were once considered central components of the post-war settlement are inevitable, inescapable responses to the ineluctable logic of ‘the markets’. There are two obvious problems with such a claim: first, if governments are no longer autonomous or capable of regulating key elements of the international political-economy then their legitimacy is fundamentally undermined. Second, the financial sector demonstrates just how dangerous it can be to rely on ‘self-regulation’ and ‘the market’ to determine economic outcomes in a sector that is dominated by a handful of vested interests (see Beeson, 2003a).

*Global governance: Déjà vu all over again?*

Most of the contributions in the volumes under consideration here focus on either the political aspects of governance or on the underlying processes of economic restructuring and integration that are influencing the way governance occurs. As a consequence, there is an understandable preoccupation with new actors and modes of interaction. There is also a noteworthy - and welcome – recognition that the state is neither the only nor even always the most important agent in processes of governance that are increasingly dependent on other actors. This is not to say that states are becoming redundant or powerless, as some of the more breathless accounts of globalisation would have us believe (Ohmae 1996). On the contrary, there have been a number of persuasive, recent analyses of contemporary governance and state-market relations that have suggested that state power might actually be enhanced by
processes associated with globalisation (see Kahler and Lake 2003; Weiss, 2003). Of course, such analyses are - like most of those considered above - almost exclusively concerned with those governments that possess a high degree of ‘state capacity’, or the ability to formulate and implement policy in response to economic restructuring and competition. Many states in the developing world have neither the internal state capacity to respond to such pressures, nor the ability to influence the wider international system that effectively shapes the rules of the governance game. As with so many other aspects of globalisation, governance is a highly uneven, spatially differentiated, and power-laden process that reflects enduring political, economic and even strategic asymmetries.

It is noteworthy that the continuing importance of strategic issues is a striking lacunae in these collections. Only Enhancing Global Governance takes this potentially decisive element of global governance seriously. Even then, only one author, Ramesh Thakur, explores security issues in a systematic way. Significantly, Thakur points out that the United States’ increasingly unilateral foreign policy poses major problems for multilateral diplomacy and intergovernmental organisations like the UN, which seek to manage transnational relations and problems. While this tendency may have been most dramatically highlighted in the recently strained relations between the US and the UN, it is also important to recognise that this growing predilection for unilateralism and the direct application of state power is also happening in economic relations. The US’s pursuit of bilateral trade agreements, for example, is not only at odds with the idea that economic agreements and regulation will inevitably become more multilateral and multi-actor, but it is a reminder that the most powerful states retain critical sources of leverage that they are not averse to using (Ravenhill 2003). This is especially the case when strategic imperatives – the ‘war on terror notwithstanding – have released the US from the need to indulge former Cold War allies (see Beeson 2003b).

There are, therefore, some important continuities as well as a number of novel features subsumed under the rubric of global governance. True, there is an array of new actors that have become integral components of the international political economy and the regulatory superstructure that attempts to govern transnational commerce. At the same time, however, the international system is characterised by continuing disparities of power, influence and capacities to take part in, never mind actually influence processes of global governance. While the emergence of NGOs and other actors from civil society may be welcome, potentially emancipatory, and something scholars need to factor into their depictions of contemporary international relations, this should not blind us to fact that some states remain pivotal actors in the international system and that global governance is - at this stage, at least - a shorthand for a number of processes and relationships that are likely to become more important, but which continue to be powerfully mediated by states. Indeed, if some of the gloomier prognostications about a world regressing to a struggle over diminishing resources prove correct (Hirst 2001), then discussions about global governance may prove somewhat redundant. Yet in the foreseeable future, Rosenau may be right that the emerging world order will ultimately become so decentralised and multicentric that it will ‘not lend itself to hierarchy or coordination under hegemonic leadership’ (p 263). If he is correct, we may be witnessing the beginning of the end of unipolarity and the attempt by one state and its subordinates to impose itself on the international
system. Getting from here to something that actually looks like global governance could prove the tricky part, though.

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References


