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How Global Institutions Rule the World

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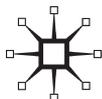
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CHAPTER 1

WORLD GOVERNMENT IS HERE

The specter of global government has been haunting the world for centuries. For some, its mere evocation raises fears of despotism and imperialistic domination, whereas some idealist thinkers have equated global government with general prosperity and perpetual peace. This book does not deal, however, with alarming fears or with well-intentioned wishes. Its focus of attention is the current, real world. In the following pages I show how world government actually exists, to what degree the current global institutions are efficient in making decisions for the provision of global public goods, and how their institutional rules and procedures can be compatible with some acceptable notion of democracy.

That world government is already with us in many important respects may appear a dubious statement in the light of the high fragmentation among bureaus, unions, organizations, agencies, and groups that try to deal with global affairs. There are several thousand international associations in the current world, counting federations of nations, regional unions, military alliances, nongovernmental organizations, religious groups, informal networks, private/public arrangements, treaties, and agreements. But only 36 of such entities can be strictly considered “inter-governmental, universal membership organizations” (which are defined as those including at least 60 countries or at least 30 if they are equitably distributed in several continents, with the diversity of membership reflected in their management structures, according to the database of the Union of International Associations). They include, most prominently, the United Nations and its dozen agencies, the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Criminal Court, a number of technical bureaus like the Universal Postal Union or the International Telecommunication Union, as well as other, apparently more informal but highly powerful

mechanisms, such as the Group of Eight (G-8) and the Group of Twenty (G-20).

The degree of internal consistency and effectiveness in delivering public goods of all these global institutions is uneven. Even the most prominent of them have different memberships, as not all officially recognized states are members or can participate directly in their activities. They use different rules for representation and different procedures for decision-making. And states choose to develop international cooperation either within or outside those global institutions to different degrees, depending on the matter at hand and the specific rules enforced.

A centralized, unitary, sovereign world government, thus, does not exist—that is obviously a fact. But the main point I will argue in this book is precisely that the variety of institutional arrangements currently used by different international organizations is not an indicator of weak capacity of decision-making or of policy enforcement at the global level. It reflects, on the contrary, the extensive scope of their activities and the complexity of the global agenda of issues.

In fact, the world is forcefully governed by global institutions, such as those mentioned above, which deal with such vital issues as security, political violence, financial stability, economic and human development, poverty, trade, climate change, crimes against humanity, standards for time, transport and communications, just to mention a few. Governing the whole world on all these and many more issues could not be done efficiently if all the tasks were in the hands of a single body or regime. Governing a world as large and complex as the current one on a large multiplicity of issues requires different institutions and rules.

A major confusion when we consider the strength and importance of the currently existing global institutions derives from comparing them with the archetypical model of a sovereign national state. If the existence of world government were to be measured by the capability of a global central body to directly raise taxes and sustain its own permanent powerful army, as is essential in the building of a new state, certainly, the verdict would be negative. Such a global state does not exist and it is not likely that will ever be built and will endure. Yet, the current global institutions are extremely effective in making decisions on war and peace and on fiscal policy, among many other issues, decisions which are enforced by themselves or by the member-states' apparatuses.

The confusion comes from the ignorance that “state” is not the only form of political community. Other forms, such as the city, empire, federation, and international and global institutions, can and do efficiently manage collective affairs at different levels and in different contexts. In contrast to other forms of polity, the state is defined by its sovereignty,

which implies a single source of legitimacy over a population within a fixed territory with stable borders. In this sense, the form “state” has existed mostly in Western Europe within a historical period that began only about 300 years ago. Yet, even where the original experience of statehood took place, the model of the state as the only monopolistic provider of public goods has reduced relevance, as many of its fundamental endeavors are now largely superseded by the multinational European Union. Most of North America, Russia, and Asia have historically been unacquainted with the West European model of sovereign states, as broad empires and federations have incorporated most of the population in those continents. In many of the former European colonies in Africa, the Arab region, and Latin America, attempts to build sovereign states with closed borders imitating the former metropolis have largely failed, since some of the newly created governments have not actually attained internal monopoly of violence or external sovereignty.

Rather than successful new state building, it is regional integration in very large size areas of economic, security, and political cooperation that have been spreading across the world during the most recent period. The most relevant case is, of course, the building of the European Union, which has reached the point of becoming a permanent, regular member of top global institutions such as the G-8 and the G-20. Other, smaller experiences at different stages of development include the Organization of American States, the African Union and the League of Arab States. They are paralleled by more limited, but robust agreements, including security alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), or the Southern African Development Community. Global arrangements—partly relying on states and regional structures—are also increasingly numerous and over time more effective on many issues, as we will review in the following chapters of this book.

All these processes involving ever larger areas of human exchanges have been made possible by crucial technological innovations, especially regarding war, transports, and communication. The skeleton of traditional empires was formed by roads, canals, ships, harbors, railways, and highways. But more recently, aviation, telegraphy, telephony, and the Internet have enlarged the territorial scope of military operations, trade, migrations, and information. The art of government at a distance has multiplied the size of viable public institutions.

Several authors have extrapolated the tendency toward increasingly larger sizes of governments and found only a 50 percent probability of

a single world government by a date placed between 2200 and 3800 (depending on the author), if size is measured by territory, and as late as 4300 if size is equated to the proportion of the world's population.

Yet, while these exercises assume that, like the typical state, all collective issues can be handled up by a single centralized institution, the efficient provision of public goods actually requires diverse territorial scales. The provision of collective goods and rules for security, communication, markets, climate change, can be very large, indeed global, as it actually is already, much earlier than predicted by those exercises in projection, while other goods such as public education, health policy or personal services may still be provided at smaller scales.

Global governance implies that each public good can be provided in an area of efficiency encompassing its consumers, which contrasts, of course, with the traditional model of the sovereign state pretending that one size fits all, and, as in the Greek myth of Procutus, those not fitting the one-size bed are amputated.

In the framework of multiple levels, overlapping institutions all across the world, no authority rules with exclusive powers. Each level of government and each specialized global institution deals with different sets of issues and can make final decisions on some of them.

The different levels of government also cooperate and share power. Most relevant for the democratic legitimacy of the rulers of the world is the fact that the existing local and state democracies support the selection of high officers in global institutions. The other way around, global institutions also rule, in part, indirectly through large regional organizations, multinational federations and unions, and state and local governments. In this way, representatives and officers based on competitive elections do participate, albeit indirectly, in the actual ruling of the world.

Institutions Matter, Also at Global Level

Institutions indeed do matter, at the global level as much as they do at domestic levels. The main challenge for the efficient provision of public goods and effective governance at global scale is the design and choice of the appropriate institutional rules and procedures, which is the focus of this book. Institutions define the territorial areas in which markets can develop, public goods can be provided, and democracy can be exerted. They also establish the rules for selecting leaders and for making collective, enforceable decisions.

It was the lack of suitable global institutions that contributed the most to the failure of the so-called first globalization, which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. A little more than 100 years ago,

the relative levels of transnational circulation of persons, goods, services, and capital were not very different from the current ones. By that time, an inhabitant of, say, London could order by telephone any quantity of the various products of the whole earth to be delivered upon his doorstep, adventure his assets in new enterprises of any quarter of the world, and travel to any country or climate without passport or other formality while bearing coins or bills of almost any currency without expecting any grievance or interference.

The first globalization took place under the protection of the Pax Britannica, that is, the control of routes, territories, and population by the first imperial power of the time, rather than within effective inter-governmental organizations or formal rules. But the larger European states were colonial rivals and unilaterally sought the conquest of large populations and protected markets both in the continent and in the rest of the world. The atrocious First World War, the destructive Russian Revolution, the failure of the League of Nations—which will be analyzed in chapter 3—the subsequent outburst of rival state nationalisms and economic protectionism, the rise of violent Fascism and Nazism, and the devastating Second World War, were successive episodes of global collapse.

A new period of increasingly larger human exchanges and globalization of affairs has developed since the mid- and especially the late twentieth century, this time in a more institutionalized setting favoring stability and efficiency. Although the outcome of the Second World War, as well as the end of the Cold War created the image of a new Pax Americana, most successes have been attained by means of broad multilateral cooperation. While the United States has asserted itself as “the indispensable nation”—an expression that was popularized by US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, in the 1990s—in the current world most successful global endeavors require the collaboration of multiple, no less indispensable partners.

The main focus of the following analyses is the internal rules and procedures that global institutions use for decision-making. In order to assess the institutions’ performance, several indicators are taken into account, including, in particular: (1) broadness of membership, (2) level of activity, and (3) the frequency and importance of outside deals. More precise measurements of institutional performance should be the subject of further research, but for now we have to rely on less systematic, although sufficiently compelling assessments.

Whether this practical model of global governance involving multiple institutions and a variety of procedural arrangements is compatible with some acceptable notion of democracy is more disputable, although indeed

a question to discuss. Nowadays, we tend to think of democracy first and foremost in terms of competitive political party elections with universal adult suffrage. By that definition, global democracy looks pretty hopeless. Yet, this and other definitions with similar attributes are not the only possible ways to make sense of the democratic form of government.

Actually, the cradle of democracy in ancient Athens, to refer to the most prominent example, did not make use of elections. Ancient, local democracy was based on people's direct decisions on policy alternatives and the subsequent selection of delegates (typically by lots or turns) to implement the agora's mandate.

The alternative notion that democracy must be based on parties and competitive elections is heavily linked to the modern notion of state, which has been addressed above. Most modern states are relatively large and complex in comparison with ancient and medieval cities, which discard direct democracy as a regular way to make decisions. Many states have drastically reduced people's diversity of interests and values by building relatively homogeneous nations. State democracy has been largely based on the presumption that, under a sufficient degree of national homogeneity, aggregative mechanisms such as parties and elections can produce enforceable decisions on a single sovereign body. Yet, the building of federations based on various states or nations already implied the acknowledgement that multiple levels of government and indirect selection of some upper rulers may be needed to make broader aggregations feasible.

Thus, democracy already scaled up before, from direct democracy in ancient and medieval cities, to representative democracy in modern nation states and federations. That change of scale implied paramount changes of institutional rules. Likewise, democracy can be scaled up in the current world to the global level, which also requires the adoption and acceptance of new rules and procedures to make this new upper level of governance effective and legitimate.

Wide-Ranging Institutional Diversity

Many global organizations have attained relatively high rates of success by using specific combinations of institutional rules and procedures. Only a few of them respect the notion of state sovereignty and give each state the same seats or voting rights independent of their size, population, or amount of resources to contribute to global governance. Alternative, more efficient formulas of representation at the global level include rotation of countries in councils and boards, the allocation of weighted votes to every country, and the formation of multi-country coalitions.

Most global institutions are not ruled by professional politicians or traditional diplomats. Most global bureaus providing standards and network goods, as well as major economic organizations dealing with finance and development, rely on independent bodies of nonelected experts to make decisions on major issues. Many officials are recruited with criteria of political independence, technical expertise and honest behavior. Generally, global institutions tend to make policy by consensual knowledge, rather than by voting on political party alternatives.

Yet, world politics displays huge institutional variety. In order to make sense of this, it is important to realize that the fundamental activities of international organizations entail the provision of large-scale collective goods involving different degrees of interstate conflict of interest, whether security, justice, financial stability, economic promotion, communication networks, standards for weights and measures, or others. The effectiveness of international organizations in fulfilling their aims strongly depends on the fit between the type of collective goods they are intended to provide and the formulas chosen for their institutional design.

Several types of global collective goods can be distinguished for the different coordination and cooperative efforts that their provision may require. First, “network” goods provide higher potential benefits to each user the higher the number of users; they do not involve significant conflicts of interests among states. This happens, for instance, with standards such as the calendar or weights and measures, as well as with agreements for a number of communication media, including the post, aerial travelling or the Internet, which will be reviewed in chapter 2.

This type of global goods is served by simple bureau-type organizations. The assembly composed by all member-states holds infrequent meetings in which decisions are made by near-unanimous consensus. The main body is the permanent professional secretariat, which implements the decisions consistent with the assembly’s mandate and the achievement of the institution’s goals. In fact, the specific organizational forms for the provision of this type of goods are relatively indifferent, as the technical solution is a focal point—such as a standard for a measure or a medium of communication—on which everybody can converge. As we will see with a few prominent cases, great powers, neutral countries and small gatherings of scientists and technicians efficiently provide global standards for time, weights, measures, and communication networks.

Due to the importance of the services provided and the relative ease in agreeing on standards, these are the oldest and some of the more durable international organizations currently existing, some for a few centuries already. Cooperation is more likely to be initiated by larger

potential partners, but even a smaller state can found an organization of this type, as happened, for instance, with the creation of the International Meteorological Organization in Belgium or the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunication Union in Switzerland in the late nineteenth century.

Second, some “competitive” global goods, typically dealing with economic issues, can clearly grant net benefits to all users, but they also imply some asymmetry and conflict of interests. This is the widely observed case of employers and workers regarding the regulation of labor conditions. But it is also the case of international financial institutions: they can reduce market instability, but debtors and creditors may pay different costs for making that collective good feasible. Likewise, global free trade agreements can produce positive returns for both producers and consumers, but exporters and importers can expect different benefits and different producers may exploit the different comparative advantages of their products. The provision of this type of collective good involves a mixture of conflicting and complementary interests which may make allocation and redistribution matters relevant in the design of institutional rules.

A relatively more complex type of institution, involving weights and balances among its members, tends to be efficient for this type of goods. The IMF and the WB, as well as their specialized branches and regional banks, work along these lines. In the founding constitutional agreements of these organizations, as negotiated between the United States and the United Kingdom at meetings in Bretton Woods, New Jersey, and Savannah, Georgia, during the last period of the Second World War—as we will document later on—there is a neat distinction between the legislative assembly of all members or Board of Governors and the Executive Board. The former delegates substantial powers to the latter. A relatively powerful and operational Executive Board includes a few permanent members, holds very frequent or permanent meetings, and uses weighted votes and qualified majority rules.

Finally, the provision of some “conflict” global goods may bring about winners and losers with even more clarity. The dilemma between war and peace is the most obvious example of this type of situation. Every state can be an attacker and a defender regarding others, but there can be enormous differences in military potential between states. Although the collective good of peace can certainly provide net benefits to everybody, the great powers always have to deal with the temptation to undertake unilateral initiatives addressed to dominate or exploit weaker or smaller states.

In practice, the great powers tend to impose their directorate for the provision of these highly conflictive goods. A directorate is the product of

unilateral decisions over institutional rules by relatively powerful actors, reflecting their privileged availability of resources. In these arrangements, the core council includes a few permanent members and make most legislative and policy decisions. The enlarged assembly is rather submitted to the council, as it tends to ratify its decisions or deal only with issues not previously included in the council's agenda.

This was the profile of the agreements between the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union in meetings at Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington, and at the summit conference in Yalta, Crimea, during the last months of the Second World War. These agreements were merely ratified at the inaugural conference of the United Nations in San Francisco, as we will explain in chapter 4. Regarding this type of conflict good, the great powers may always have an attractive “outside” or “exit” option, leading them to take some unilateral initiative with strong factual decision-making power. We will also recount the frequency of this type of choice away from the United Nations, especially during the Cold War, but also in the more recent period.

Similarly, the finance ministers and the chief executives of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan established the bases for the G-8 and the G-20 at a series of meetings in Washington several decades later, as we will also review. The G-8 system includes a threefold set of concentric circles of decision-making: the small core G-8 with the largest democratic economies, the broader G-20 involving some world regional balance, and the implementation of agreed initiatives through universal institutions. The G-8 and the G-20 have expanded the scope of their agenda to deal not only with financial or economic matters, but also with global security and many other issues, as I have remarked from the very first page of this book. Rather than reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the G-8 chose to replace it by its own action, although it has achieved collaboration with the United Nations as well.

If we observe the type of public goods that are served by every type of institution, a “heterogeneity/complexity” relationship appears.

Network and communication goods with high homogeneity or harmony of interests all across the world can be efficiently provided through simple institutional formulas largely relying on bureaus of experts.

The higher is the degree of heterogeneity and interstate conflict of interests on the issue, as happens with most economic and social matters, the more complex the structure of the organization must be for efficient performance. In particular, equal votes for every sovereign state independent of its size can be replaced with weighted votes based on financial contributions or on the intensities of interest in the activity that

defines the institution, as is the case of the IMF, the WB, and other global institutions.

At the peak, high conflict issues like global security and related matters tend to be dealt with by hierarchical directorates in which the most powerful states occupy salient institutional positions and prevail in decision-making, as in the UNSC or the G-8.

We will also see how some organizations underperform because their institutional design turns out to be inappropriate for providing certain types of collective goods and some of the potential partners choose outside options. This is the case in particular, of the World Trade Organization, which tries to deal with a relatively conflictive issue with an extremely simple organizational model. All in all, different performances of international organizations can be explained by different degrees of institutional fit with the aims for which they have been created and exist.

The Importance of Foundational Moments

Institutional innovation is usually feasible at some critical moment, when unanticipated events—such as a world war or a deep and broadly spread economic crisis—shake the previously existing rapport of forces among states and open room for creativity. But some basic rules and procedures chosen at the foundational moment of a global institution may continue to exist even beyond the context that can explain their initial adoption. Institutions have the capability to reinforce themselves and make their reform or replacement difficult, which can explain how some inefficient institutions survive. Nowadays, certain well-established decisions regarding institutional formulas can be difficult to change in the absence of a major conflict at a new critical juncture.

The endurance of certain rules can reflect their own success at permitting effective decision-making and sufficiently satisfactory outcomes in comparison with the benefits that can be expected from acting in the outside world. But for actors with the possibility to obtain some amount of collective good outside a global institution, remaining in it can be a rational decision only if the costs of leaving are higher than the disadvantages of playing by the existing rules.

It has also been observed that some institutions that start with one mission wader away from their original mandate and into new terrains and territories to form more complex “regimes.” Notorious examples include the United Nations moving way beyond the initial aim to “maintain international peace and security”; the WB becoming involved in an assortment of issues directly or indirectly related to the promotion of development; the IMF establishing that its initial goal of monetary

stability may require regulations of a broad set of macroeconomic policies; or the G-8/G-20 feeling the need to be implicated not only in economic crises, but also in issues of security, energy, or even climate change.

A well-established postulate in the academic literature in international relations is that some multipurpose global institutions can perform relatively well, as long as there is “issue linkage.” This means that different issues can be submitted to efficient management by the same institutions if they are sufficiently compatible, because they bring about complementarities and similar degrees of interstate conflict of interests. Under this condition, the same institutional rules can favor exchanges, promote increasing demands for global action, and foster sustained cooperation, which eventually feeds loyalty to the institution.

However, the institutional and organizational costs involved in reconciling distinct objectives may rise with the number of issues and the variety of actors’ preferences. For instance, different states can have different relative intensity of preferences or interests and different availability of resources to deal with security, finances, or trade. It is not difficult to realize that, for example, the heavily armed China, the fiscal paradise of Switzerland, and the very open city of Singapore have very different intensities of interests in the three issues just mentioned. That is why a compact, global institutional regime pretending to deal with several disparate issues at the same time can be highly inefficient in making acceptable decisions and providing collective goods. Those countries with more intense preferences on an issue need to be given more decision power in the institution dealing with that issue.

Let me remark that it is not only that different territorial scales can exist for the efficient provision of collective goods. This is the well-known, traditional problem addressed by federalism and multilevel governance, as local governments can deal more efficiently with traffic or schools, state governments can manage larger scale transports or safety nets, and continental or global institutions can address trade, financial, or security issues more appropriately. But the point here is that even within the same territorial scale of efficiency, multiple issues with different degrees of conflict of interests and redistributive implications may require different institutional solutions. Peacekeeping, climate change, and telecommunication standards, just to mention three more disparate issues with worldwide scope, present very different degrees of difficulty to be addressed by agreement and consensus among most countries of the world. A number of institutions, each with different decision-making rules to deal separately with disconnected global issues, such as those just mentioned, can do better and potentially generate efficient provisions of a variety of collective goods.

Most global institutions have shown their capability to select competent and honest rulers and favor effective decision-making, as we will discuss later. The additional, crucial criterion that should be satisfied in order to make them compatible with a pertinent notion of democracy is the capability to make the rulers accountable. Decision-makers in global institutions are held to explicit goals and policy mandates for whose compliance they must be controlled, made responsible and sanctioned if necessary.

I will hold that, in fact, many global rulers are accountable, and in some respects they are more accountable than most rulers of democratic states, as the latter are not submitted to imperative mandates and have, thus, more room for discretionary behavior. Global rulers render counts, though, by different means than those by which representatives at state level can be subject to scrutiny and control. In the absence of direct global elections, the basic mechanisms of accountability at the global level include information and transparency, critical evaluation and revision of policies for their results and consequences, and the use of standards to judge and sanction rulers and officers according to specific institutional norms and codes of conduct. We will return to this important question in chapter 13, near the end of the book.

There is still much to do to attain an efficient multilevel, multipurpose, and responsible world government. But most global institutions have greatly improved their effectiveness, increased their transparency and expanded their mechanisms for democratic accountability during the last few decades. With institutions able to provide the appropriate incentives at global level, the fundamental tenets of democratic governance can be respected by the actual rulers of the world.

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