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Incompatible Conceptions of Global Order? Empire, Hegemony, and Global Governance

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Paper prepared for presentation at the 6th Pan-European Conference of the Standing Group on International Relations in Turin, 12-15 September 2007

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Abstract:

In recent years, debates on two seemingly contradictory developments have gained a lot of attention in International Relations: The first development is the so-called transformation from a national to a postnational constellation. Processes of denationalization and globalization in different areas are said to create both the need and the opportunities for governance beyond the nation-state. At the same time, and this is the second development, the most powerful actor in international politics, the United States, is said to have embarked on a path of renationalization. These two developments manifest themselves in two different debates in IR, the broad debate on globalization and global governance and the empire debate. Both debates focus on global order as well as on relations within the “West”. Yet, so far they have largely been conducted separately. Seeing them in conjunction, however, raises interesting and important questions. Are global denationalization and U.S. renationalization compatible, or is one process bound to be stopped and reversed by the other one? Have globalization and the resulting need for more international and transnational governance beyond the nation-state progressed so far that any imperial aspirations by a single state, even by a state as powerful as the U.S., is bound to fail? Or has proclamation of the transformation to the postnational constellation been premature, since the U.S. is still capable of obstructing and even stopping developments toward global governance?

This paper contributes to tackling these questions by applying thoughts from the so-called agency-structure debate. By means of a structurationist heuristic, three possible ways of interrelating “Empire” and “Global Governance” are sketched out. The U.S. could be portrayed as (a) driving, (b) obstructing, or (c) being pushed by globalization and global governance. From a structurationist position, the extreme positions of a complete taming of the U.S. in a postnational world (the structuralist position) and of a complete control of processes of denationalization by the U.S. (the voluntarist position), are rather unlikely. The question, which position on the voluntarism-structuralism scale is most appropriate in this case, however, is not a theoretical but an empirical question. The paper provides some conceptual ground for tackling this question in empirical research.

1. Introduction

Global Order is back on the agenda. During the East-West conflict, it had been the competition between two models of political order that shaped global politics. With the breakdown of the Soviet bloc and the seemingly unstoppable triumph of capitalism and Western democracy, backed by the world's "sole remaining superpower", questions of global order appeared to be scarcely relevant any more. Some even proclaimed the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). This view has long since given way to the impression that the question of which positive and normative frame will shape international politics in the 21st century, is an open and central question. Many observers think that we are currently witnessing a period of transformation, where old descriptions like the one of a Westphalian system of nation-states are less and less adequate, while at the same time a new system of order has not yet fully emerged.

In this context, there are, among others, two debates that raise questions of a new global order. The first one is the debate on globalization, coupled with the ensuing debate on the necessities and contingencies of global governance. The second debate is the so-called empire debate, focusing on the role, function or the international strategy of the United States since the mid 1990s or at least since 11 September 2001. While the first debate is primarily (if by no means exclusively) focused on changes of global structures, the second one instead looks at the motivation and behaviour of what is still to be seen the most important actor in international relations.

In this paper, I will argue that both debates overlap but have so far scarcely been treated in conjunction. This is surprising since both debates have important ramifications for each other that should be kept in mind when dealing with questions of global order and of relations among Western countries. Which impact do globalization and global governance on the one hand and U.S. global policy on the other hand have on each other? In this paper, this question will be specified by differentiating the different scenarios of this relationship between global governance and U.S. policy. These scenarios depict the U.S. (a) as driver of developments that enable and call for global governance, (b) as slowing down or even preventing the emergence of global governance, and (c) as being pushed by developments towards global governance which are no longer under U.S. control.

The paper does not aspire to already give an answer to this question. Which of these three scenarios is most appropriate, or which combination may best provide an adequate answer, is an empirical question, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The paper will show, however, that both debates are more closely related than is usually acknowledged.

I will proceed as follows. First, both debates, on globalization and global governance (2.1) and on U.S. global policy (2.2) will be presented in somewhat more detail and be connected (2.3). In section three, I will briefly elaborate on how a structurationist perspective may be helpful in bringing these two debates together (3.1), followed by presenting the three divergent scenarios (3.2).

2. Global Governance in a Postnational Constellation and Imperial Tendencies in U.S. Foreign Policy – a Contradiction?

2.1. Globalization and Global Governance – a Structural Change?

“Globalization” captures a range of similar developments where (mostly national) borders lose much of their importance and limiting effect. Exchange of quite diverse kinds of goods increasingly transcend national borders. These goods comprise financial capital, other material goods, communication, as well as people, pollutants up to ideas and ideologies (see Beisheim et al. 1999; Held/McGrew 2000). As national borders become less important for the emergence but also for the regulation of these phenomena, we can speak of processes of denationalization.¹ At the same time, there is also the moment of transnationalization, because political exchange is increasingly being carried out not by states but by societal actors from different states. Private actors, from companies to NGOs become more influential as opposed to states (albeit without making them redundant). The talk of a privatization of world politics (Brühl/Debiel/Hamm 2001) is certainly exaggerated, but it is clear that private actors can have strong influence on the international and global level. Many of these actors are themselves transnational, such as globally operating NGOs like amnesty international, or multinational corporations that largely decide for themselves in which countries they pay their taxes. Many observers maintain that these developments also lend themselves to a new need of legitimizing politics beyond the nation-state. Nationally organized forms of legitimacy and of

legitimation, as foreseen by conventional theories of democracy are less and less in accordance with the actual substantive and spatial context of political decisions that have great ramifications for the governed.

These developments can be said to mark the crisis of governance by the nation-state. The different forms of denationalization and deterritorialization implicate that contexts of political decisions and actions are less and less in accordance with the actual problems. One response that states have found in addressing this crisis is growing inter-state cooperation through international regimes and international organizations. But the current form and density of inter-state governance may be insufficient to effectively cope with today's problems in diverse issue-areas, such as security, welfare, and environment. Most IOs are still too weak to facilitate effective governance. Besides, internationalizing governance may generally fall short of coping with processes of denationalization and transnationalization. "Global governance" (Messner/Nuscheler 2006) or "complex world governance" (Zürn 1998) entails more than inter-state cooperation. It also includes incorporating private actors, which assume governance functions together with states and sometimes even autonomously (see Cutler/Haufler/Porter 1999). In a normative perspective, the state-centered model with its Westphalian principle of sovereignty is being challenged by the establishment of global normative standards, such as human rights. Many theorists maintain that deliberative procedures beyond the nation-state are required in order to secure political legitimacy. The current trend of utilizing deliberative theories of democracy for International Relations fits very well in this trend (Nanz/Steffek 2004; Niesen/Herborth 2007; Schmalz-Bruns 1998).

2.2. From Hegemon to Empire – the Transformation of the World's Most Important Actor?

A seemingly completely different debate has been conducted on the question of whether the United States should by now be seen as an empire. There are several strands of discussion within this so-called empire debate. On the one hand, there is a more political debate to be found in journals such as "Foreign Affairs" or "Foreign Policy" (Cohen 2004; Ferguson 2006; Ikenberry 2002; Jervis 2003; Mallaby 2002; Nye 2003; Simes 2003). This is a debate focusing on U.S. self-identification as well as on the political implications of a possible imperial role of

¹ Michael Zürn generally prefers the term of societal denationalization to the term of globalization, even more so

the United States. It is striking that there are contributors who openly propagate an imperial role. While “empire”, “imperial” and “imperialist” had traditionally been terms with strong negative connotations, now the concept is used affirmatively by some authors (Mabee 2004; see also Fröhlich 2003). Both proponents and opponents of an imperial role often tend to view the U.S. as an empire against its own will – a state that has adopted the position of an empire without having ever aspired it (Bishai 2004; Cox 2005; King 2006). But there are also observers that do not share this view of an unintended empire (Bacevich 2002; Lipschutz 2002).

Next to this strand, there is another one that puts more emphasis historical comparison of empires. Most popular in this vein is the comparison of the U.S. with the Roman empire, in order to determine whether the U.S. has actually become an empire like Rome did, or in order to reflect on what would be the implications of a Rome-like U.S. (Auernheimer 2004; Bender 2005a; Bender 2005b; Münkler 2005).² To be sure, the idea of the U.S. as the new Rome has a long tradition in the United States. A mere look at the classicist architecture of most public buildings in Washington, D.C. already gives a hint that the young Union, with all its proclaimed distance to the nasty practices of the European powers, did not shy away from embracing the European idea of empire and from striving to gain legitimacy by alluding to Rome. At the same time, the U.S. in most of its history viewed itself as an anti-imperialist power, a state that, having once been a European colony, did not want to follow the misguided European path of imperialism and colonialism. Thus, the recent open and partly affirmative usage of the term of empire does mark an important change in the U.S. self-image as well as in the image of the U.S. that others formulate.

A closer look at the empire debate, however, reveals that there is little agreement in the usage of the term of empire as well as on related terms. Some authors view an empire as a form of international rule that is backed by a strong support of the ruled (Bender 2005b), while others stress the aspect of force and suppression of this form of rule (Czempiel 2003). Sometimes, “empire” is used as a synonym of „hegemon“ (Fröhlich 2003; Lundestad 1990; see also Schrader 2005). More common and in my opinion more useful is the differentiation of hegemony and empire (vgl. Czempiel 2003; Golub 2004, Lipschutz 2002). In this

since the pertinent processes are hardly global but mainly limited to the OECD world (Zürn 1998).

² The debate on Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s book „Empire“ (2000) touches upon this discussion. At the same time, Hardt and Negri have a very specific understanding of empire, which they do not apply to the U.S.. Instead, they have in mind something like a global phenomenon not restricted to a specific collective actor, without, however, actually explicating who or what this would be.

understanding, hegemony is a form of political, economic, but also ideological and cultural dominance of an actor (or a group of actors; see Puchala 2005) that is based on a strong consensus of those actors subjected to hegemonic rule. The hegemon leads by example and by intermediation of interests; it creates rules and institutions that also apply to the hegemon, and it carries a significant share of the burden of maintaining these institutions. An empire, by contrast is based on force. The imperial power subjugates others to its rules and laws but it remains above them.

Based on this distinction, it is possible to sketch out the change of the recent U.S. world policy compared to the one up until at least the mid-1990s, as a move from a hegemonic to an imperial policy, although this is, of course, a crude simplification. The Western Pax Americana, that appeared to become global after the end of the East-West conflict, was characterized by multilateralism (see Ruggie 1993) and stable international organizations as well as the promotion of universal liberal values. Furthermore, U.S. cooperation with its partners, especially the European ones, was carried out in a way that provided those partners with disproportional influence (in comparison with their actual power resources) (see Risse-Kappen 1995). Again, this is a vastly simplifying and in many details even misleading description. It is certainly more accurate in characterizing U.S. policy towards Western Europe than in characterizing U.S. policy vis-à-vis Central and Southern America. The recent change to a more imperial policy is marked by several developments ascribed to the foreign policy during the presidency of George W. Bush: the preference for ad-hoc cooperation (“coalitions of the willing”) instead of a more institutionalized cooperation based on universal principles; the strict opposition against all aspirations to strengthen the rule of law in international politics (see, for instance, the case of the ICC) as well as a more open breach of existing international law (see, for instance, the Iraq War); and last but not least the strong resort to military power at the expense of other, “softer” (see Nye 1990; 2002) forms of power (see the almost global drops of U.S. reputation as witnessed in recent years’ PEW polls). If the somewhat more cooperative policy of the U.S. administration during the second term of President George W. Bush together with the lack of success in the Iraq conflict have already marked the end of the imperial project (Mann 2004), remains to be seen.

2.3. Global Governance and Empire: a Contradiction?

What do these two debates, the one on global governance and the one on U.S. imperial aspirations, have to do with each other? It is obvious that in some sense, both debates are debates on central features of global order. At first sight, there appears to be a contradiction between the central theses to be found in these debates. How can new structures of international, transnational and global governance be established, that imply that nation-states may at least partly lose their privileged status, when at the same time the United States pursue global policies that undermine such a development? How can the United States move from a hegemonic to an imperial project right at a time when the problems that the U.S. like other states face would necessitate quite opposite policies of “complex world governance”?

The formulation of questions like these already suggests that a combination of the strands of research on these two problems could be a fruitful endeavour. Yet, with a few notable exceptions (Krahmann 2005; Mabee 2004; Zürn 2003), this has hardly been done so far. In the next section, I will try to show that the contradiction between global governance and imperial U.S. policy is only seemingly a contradiction, as it can be resolved conceptually in different ways.

3. The U.S. and Global Structural Change – Competing Scenarios

3.1. A Structurationist Heuristic

Structurationism is a sociological approach mostly associated with Anthony Giddens (1984). It aspires to view social structures and agent behaviour as linked in a way that neither gives agency nor structure primary ontological status. In International Relations, it has been introduced primarily by Alexander Wendt (1987) and David Dessler (1989). Walter Carlsnaes (1992) applied structurationist ideas to foreign policy analysis, thereby relying more on Archer (1982) than on Giddens. In the last decade, a number of mostly theoretical and meta-theoretical reflections on the agency-structure problem have been published (Jackson/Nexon 1999, Suganami 1999, Wight 2006). Empirical applications of structurationist ideas have remained rare so far (Cerny 2000, Baumann 2006; Hellmann 2006).

At the theoretical core of structurationist thinking there is a mediating position between structuralism and voluntarism. From a structuralist standpoint, social structures are ontologically primary. They constitute and shape the actions of social actors. In contrast, the voluntarist point of view stresses that agents and their actions “come first”. Structures are seen as important, but they are mainly the result of interaction. Thus, they may influence actors’s preferences but not their fundamental interests. From a structurationist point of view, both these positions are untenable, since they either reduce structure to agency or vice versa. For structurationists, the agency-structure problem is a chicken-egg problem. Instead of propagating the primary status of either structures or actions and actors, they think in terms of a co-constitution and co-determination of agency and structure.

The structurationist position thus does not present a “solution” to the agency-structure problem, but it raises our sensitivity for the mutual effect of both agency and social structure on each other. It is more of a framework than a rich social theory. In my opinion the critique of structurationism of being somewhat poor on substance is well taken. Giddens and his followers will not answer the question of whether emerging denationalized global political structures or a renationalized U.S. policy will prevail. This does not pose a problem for this paper, as the purpose of applying structurationism on the issue at hand is mainly a heuristic one. In the following section, I will formulate three scenarios for the mutual impact of globalization and global governance on the one hand and U.S. policy on the other hand. Two of those scenarios focus on the impact of behavior on structures (albeit with a different judgement of the core characteristics of U.S. policy). The third scenario gives greater weight to global structures. Thus all three scenarios are basically unidirectional and not structurationist in a strict sense; I will make use of the technique of bracketing, which has been suggested by Giddens to break up and analytically tackle the agency-structure conundrum.

3.2. Running the Show, Pulling the Brake, Being Forced to Adapt? Three Scenarios on the U.S. and Global Governance

The United States could be seen as an important driver of globalization and of more global forms of governance under two conditions. First, globalization is not seen as a quasi natural, self-generating process, but as a development that is being caused and driven by specific

actors. (This may but does not have to be intended.) In the debate on globalization, for instance, such a position of held by neogramscian authors. Second, the U.S. are held to be such an actor. In the field of economic globalization, this is more than plausible. In addition, the political role the U.S. has played in creating and maintaining many international and global institutions, from the UN family to the Bretton-Woods institutions to regional IOs, must not be underestimated either. The same applies to the central role the U.S. with all its military power has played in backing global principles and norms (Bosnia, Kosovo), regardless of how one likes to judge them. Finally, the U.S. has been quite open in incorporating private actors in processes of international governance. Given that many globally operating corporations are U.S.-based and that most globally acknowledged NGOs are U.S. American or at least Anglo-American in a broader sense, this may not come as a surprise.

Based on this first scenario, the imperial temptations of the current U.S. administration must be seen as a temporary aberration. The reasons are to be located mostly in domestic developments in U.S. society. From this perspective, it is well possible that the U.S., for instance after the next presidential elections, will move back on the driver's seat of globalizations and global governance. It is also possible, however, that the U.S. will not take up this position again any time soon. In this latter case, the scenario is likely to lead to the second scenario of the U.S. as pulling the brake when it comes to the establishment of structures and practices of global governance. In the former case the driver scenario may instead be amended by a scenario that pays more attention to the impact of international and global structures on actors like the U.S.. In the following subsections, I will take a look at these two scenarios.

The view of the U.S. as pulling the brake, as attempting to prevent and obstruct global governance is the one that has dominated at least the public debate in Europe in recent years. It could be said that it is not much of a surprise to see that a project aimed at weakening the positions of nation-states such as the "project" of global governance does not meet with too much enthusiasm from the most powerful nation-state. If states are key drivers of globalization and the strengthening of global governance, then it is most likely that we will not see much more of such global governance. Instead, the insufficient response of states to the growing necessities of governance (Zürn (1998: 294-306) speaks of the poverty of the nation-states's fragmentary reactions) is likely to remain. This would agency-oriented

scenario thus boils down to “U.S. renationalization trumps global denationalization”. It suggests to treat all prognostications of the global governance literature with great caution.

The third scenario, finally, views the U.S. as being pushed by structural developments. The U.S. may have been an (possibly: the most) important driver of globalization, thus having at least partially caused the growing need for new forms of governance. But now the U.S. is in a position like Goethe’s sorcerer’s apprentice, who had called the spirits but is now unable to stop them anymore – the striking difference to Goethe’s poem being that here there will probably no master returning to solve the problem in the end. In this third scenario, it is acknowledged that economic and to a large extent also social globalization has been driven by the U.S. and is beneficial to the U.S.. More effective mechanisms of governance beyond the nation-state, however, are a functional requirement that the U.S. will sooner or later have to acknowledge. With this background, it may well be that the talk about U.S. empire will prove to be premature, whereas the functionalist analyses of proponents of global governance may survive all debates on U.S. empire.

Only time will tell ... (well, and some empirical research based on these conceptual remarks might also be helpful...).

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