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Claims and Recognition: A Relational Approach to Agency in World Politics

Matthias Hofferberth & Daniel Lambach*

Abstract: »Anspruch und Anerkennung. Ein relationaler Ansatz für Handlungsmacht in der Weltpolitik«. One of the central assumptions of global governance is that “problems without borders” require collaboration among multiple stakeholders to be managed effectively. This commitment to multistakeholderism, however, is not a functional imperative but the product of potentially contested agency recognition in the past. As such, we contend that a reconstruction of agency dynamics must be at the core of understanding global governance since global governors. We draw on a relational framework to lay out the basics of how to reconstruct the agency of global governors as it emerges through relations. Through these relations, entities-in-the-making advance agency claims or are ascribed agency by relevant others. Equally important from a relational perspective are recognition acts, which those claims trigger. We theorize in this paper that different types of agency claims paired with different recognition dynamics determine the outcome as to who is accepted to “sit at the table” for a particular issue. This theorization is required to (a) better understand current manifestations of global governance in their historical emergence and (b) discuss conditions of agency from a normative perspective to determine who should be the global governors of our time.

Keywords: Collective actors, agency, recognition, relationalism, global governors, global governance.

1. Introduction

One of the central assumptions of global governance – arguably both normative and analytical – is that “problems without borders” require collaboration

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between multiple stakeholders to be managed effectively (Weiss 2014).¹ Accordingly, various entities beyond the state have been identified and studied in Global Governance, which Avant, Finnemore, and Sell call “global governors” and define as “authorities who exercise power across borders for purposes of affecting policy” (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010, 2). We connect to this research and expand it by arguing that global governors are not simply *there* but have to emerge as such. In other words, current manifestations of global multistakeholderism and the respective entities involved are not a consequence of functional imperatives but rather the product of potentially contested agency recognition in the past (Murphy 2015). Following Finnemore’s (2014, 223) call, we theorize “the causes and character of proliferating new actors” and treat it as “a major research question – not something we want to just notice and describe as we analyze other problems, but something we treat as an object of research and want to understand conceptually and theoretically.” Aware of the ambitious nature of such an endeavor and the conceptual challenges that come with it, in this paper we outline the contours of a substantial framework that *reconstructs how agency of global governors emerges through the relations they find themselves in*. We do so because we contend that a reconstruction of agency dynamics has to be at the core of understanding global governance, specifically in light of populist backlash against the idea and its cosmopolitan nature (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Zürn and de Wilde 2016).

Our focus on agency in global governance is based on a relational ontology. First picked up in International Relations (IR) by Jackson and Nexon (1999), relationalism has recently been hailed as the “new constructivism” (McCourt 2016) and as a cosmology to revolutionize IR (Kurki 2022). We draw on these discussions and argue that agency as the ability to act and make choices in political contexts is not an inherent quality entities simply possess. Rather, it constantly emerges from relations as entities, stabilized enough through prior interaction in any given new situation, claim the capacity to act or are ascribed with it by relevant others. These agency claims need to be recognized by other entities equally stabilized through prior interaction. As Bartelson puts it in the context of state recognition:

If sovereignty claims best are understood as speech acts, and if we admit that such speech acts are constitutive of political and legal reality, then a state would become a state by virtue of its *successful* claims to sovereignty, the benchmark of that success being nothing less than these sovereignty

¹ Just like the distinction between *international relations* and *International Relations*, we speak of global governance in lower case letters when we (primarily) refer to real-world practices and utilize Global Governance in capital letters when we address academic reflections of these practices. That said, we are aware of the fact that (a) the term is inherently ambivalent since it often interchangeably refers to practice and reflection as well as (b) it serves as a “floating signifier” meaning rather different things for different scholars in different contexts (Hofferberth and Lambach 2020; Hofferberth 2015).

claims being recognized as such by other similar entities. (Bartelson 2013, 116, emphasis in original; see also Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending 2018)

For such claims, we cannot imagine a pre-social condition or a state of nature in which there are no relations. Instead, agency claims and recognition always take place in sedimented structures of relations. These “yoke” entities and their agency into existence and make them appear as actors in a specific context for the time being (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 313-6; see also Abbott 1995). For example, when the permanent and non-permanent members of the UN Security Council debated whether non-state actors should be heard in this body or not, the Council-members’ agency was stable enough to determine that NGOs should be recognized and allowed to “sit at the table” to discuss rules of war and humanitarianism (Boli and Thomas 1997, 185). Simply put, their agency emerged from the relations of others which are thus the basic unit we need to consider to understand the outcome that the UN Security Council opened itself to such consultations.

We expand on this relational argument by contending that different agency claims, together with different forms of recognition, lead to different actor configurations in global politics. In other words, we argue that agency is a dynamic consequence of claiming it or being delegated and the response to such claims and grants by relevant others. Against this background, we move beyond a simple and static dichotomy of agency/no agency. By theorizing agency as a fluid, open-ended consequence of relations which are always situational and context-specific, we naturally embrace that entities in one context might not be accepted as “full” global governors in a different context. Agency is thus more fluid and less absolute than authority, yet more fundamental (Krisch 2017). It rests not so much on the assumed legitimacy of an entity and whether this “exerts a force on its hearers greater than simple influence, but less than that of command” (Lincoln 1994, 2). Rather, agency rests in conscious attempts to claim or be granted the capacity to act in a political context. As such, any authority in a particular context or situation has agency, while not every agent has authority in a given context or situation. By focusing on agency, we can reconstruct the dynamics of who gets to sit at the table without overlooking how this is a result of power.² Corporate agency in human rights governance, for example, remains highly contested and few would grant multinational enterprises moral authority (Mende 2021). At the same time, however, their agency has been recognized to the extent that we find enterprises involved in many different governance arrangements such

² Antje Wiener has made a similar argument – who gets access to contestation – for research on international norms (Wiener 2014). We further distinguish our approach focused on agency from research on authority since more often than not “authority is made an attribute of the actors under analysis, and these attributes are said to emerge from these actors’ access to ideal typical ‘sources’ of authority” (Sending 2017, 312). In other words, authority presupposes and substantializes agency.

as the UN Global Compact and other initiatives (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022).

To substantiate our theoretical framework, we first elaborate how it draws on relationalism and spell out how such relations establish structure and unfold in situation. Second, we define what agency claims are and theorize and distinguish different ideal-types. Third, we look into different dynamics of recognition as relational responses to agency claims and theorize their different ideal-types. Bringing these together, we develop propositions on how and when agency emerges. Anecdotally illustrated throughout the piece, we hope to provide the contours of a substantial framework that will help us to (a) better understand current manifestations of global governance in their historical emergence and (b) discuss conditions of agency from a normative perspective to determine who should be the global governors of our time.

2. Relational Agency

We employ a relational framework to “endogeniz[e] actor creation into our understandings of global governance” (Finnemore 2014, 223). This grounding in relationalism provides important insights into what constitutes agency in world politics, where it resides, and how it emerges and evolves (Burkitt 2015). It also allows us to define basic terms we advance within the framework. To begin with, we conceptualize agency as the ability of an entity to act in and through the relations with others to make choices in political contexts. As such, agency in our framework is not an individual, let alone stable disposition. Rather, agency rests on three relationally constituted dispositions: (a) the capacity to reflect on or reactivate past patterns of behavior, (b) the ability to evaluate choices based on an idea of the future, and (c) the forward-looking awareness of what consequences might follow from action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970-1).³ While this definition highlights the role of agency *as capacity*, agency also implies *status*, i.e., a recognition of the actor as such. In IR terms, power, authority, and interests of any actor follow “from their position in networks,” which is why we need to “shift the focus from individual actors to the relationship between actors” (Scobie et al. 2020, 36-7). Given the dynamic nature of such relations on a global scale, agency remains a potentiality to emerge between global governors (Kärger, Kursawe, and Lambach 2017).

³ We recognize a clear connection between relational approaches and postcolonial and feminist works which have long pointed out that agency is dynamic and ubiquitously entangled in global structures. Practices of claiming and recognizing agency are therefore deeply political and imbued with questions of ethics, inclusion/exclusion, and justice (see Zanotti 2017; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Kapoor 2002; Kaber 1999).

Our commitment to relationalism has three important implications. First, agency is ‘dynamic in nature’ and emerges in ‘unfolding, ongoing processes rather than [as] static ties among inert substances’ (Emirbayer 1997, 289). As such, any entity recognized by relevant others can become a global governor in theory (Ringmar 2016). Consequentially, any attempt to provide a definitive list of global governors is doomed from the beginning since we need to study actors-in-the-making and their embeddedness in specific structures and situations. Against these structures and in these situations, as discussed below, agency can be fleeting and its effects may remain limited. Nevertheless, any entity momentarily stabilized enough and recognized as such can act against existing hierarchies, power relations, socially stratified contexts, and limiting boundaries. Second, agency is (re-)produced and enacted through practice. We can think of these as the micro-politics of meta-governance reflecting, reproducing, and potentially recalibrating structures and relations. Without practices, there would be neither actor nor agency (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 23). Hence, we need to capture agency emergence beyond formal, declarative action by considering every day, small-scale practices of exclusion and inclusion, which constitute global governance and determine who gets to be involved. For example, following protocol might not seem to be “real” action, yet addressing participants of a formal meeting in certain ways recreates their agency as global governors in this particular setting. Third, in methodological terms, reconstructing agency in global governance needs to be firmly grounded in empirical research (see Hofferberth et al. 2022 for a sketch of the empirical possibilities). While this paper spells out its relational commitment and its theorizations of agency claims and recognition dynamics, the ultimate value of any endeavor to reconstruct agency emergence in global governance can only be cashed out through dedicated research re-tracing particular governors in specific contexts.⁴

Our main interest is how entities gain agency in formal arenas of global policy-making.⁵ This applies both to internal constitutions of collective actors (e.g., member states transfer agency to an international organization) as well as external recognitions between different actors (e.g., different organizations recognize each other). Compared to other contributions in this HSR Special Issue (see, in particular, Gehring and Marx 2023), we bracket out how entities come into existence prior to the interaction we are interested in simply because we think of them as a product of ever-evolving relations. Consequentially, while our theoretical approach views actors in their situatedness in relations and structures, distinctions between the “inside” and “outside” of an

⁴ Such research exists but mostly focuses on individual actors or categories of actors (e.g., NGOs, business) instead of the relations that makes them.

⁵ This represents a lower bar than other conceptualizations of agency which refer to an actor’s capacity to exert influence in political arenas (e.g., Gehring and Urbanski 2023). To us, such approaches make agency difficult to distinguish from power.

actor remain inevitably fuzzy. While individuals in relations are the basic ontological unit of our theory, these have been engaged as corporate actors in agglomerations of relations since beyond the scope of our immediate empirical interest. In other words, sets of individuals working together in the pursuit of collective goals develop a sense of shared agency and these corporate actors are organized and nested in multilevel structures (Franke and Roos 2010). For example, a German municipality has a certain agency in German federal politics and in European regional policy but is subsumed into the agency of the German federal government when it comes to international politics at the UN. It matters less to us which of these dynamics remain internal or external to the respective actor since both are driven by the same relational dynamics of claiming and recognizing agency, which ultimately remains fractal. By employing a framework that allows us to zoom in and out of multilevel structures, we can theorize the patterns of how agency is claimed, from the level of individual citizens joining together in the founding of an NGO to the level of states enacting recognition of each others' agency in the UN General Assembly.

The basic logic of how we think agency emerges is that at any given time i) there is a set of entities with a pattern of relations sedimented from past interaction, ii) one entity among them makes a situational agency claim on behalf of itself (self-agentification) or on behalf of another entity (ascription), and iii) other relevant entities either recognize or reject this claim.⁶ This is, of course, a stylized process which will be difficult to isolate in real-world application. For one, claims and recognition may well be very subtle, embodied acts rather than explicit (see below). For another, ontologically embraced in relationalism, there is permanent iteration and mutuality – entities recognize each other constantly by engaging in interaction. Entities are not simply *there* in one context to then make claims on a larger scale in another. Rather, these contexts overlap and are often nested into each other as entities may make global claims at a very early stage before they are even fully consolidated at a given time. In fact, claiming as such may well be one of the causes of their recognition later on (see below). In some cases, even individual acts may lead to collective agency, such as Greta Thunberg's relentless activism kickstarting the *Fridays for Future* movement. However, most importantly, while the three-step process theoretically suggests equality among entities, we are aware of the considerable inequality in practical politics and would be naïve not to take them into consideration when applying the framework empirically.

Beyond agency, entities thus also have power and resources, which are relevant for our theoretical propositions. Power means the ability to achieve one's goals. As agency, this plays out relationally. Getting others to follow

⁶ This is similar to the theoretical logic of how expert authority is assigned as elaborated by Liese et al. (2021).

one's preferences always remains a situationally dependent quality. We assume that actors are both agency-seeking, in that they want to be recognized as global governors in policy-making arenas that are relevant to their interests, *and* power-seeking, in that they want to influence outcomes in these arenas. In fact, both feed into each other – recognition impacts outcome and vice versa. Furthermore, both are based on resources, which we conceptualize as assets relevant for a particular issue that actors can mobilize and control (e.g., moral authority, public legitimacy, expert knowledge, and funding, to name but a few). Which resources are considered relevant for an issue depends on prevailing norms and practices within the field. For instance, in climate policy, scientific expert knowledge is accorded higher importance than in global security fields. That said, the distribution of resources is neither equal nor random but rather determined by structural inequities created by past interaction. In any given situation, certain entities already enjoy stabilized agency and higher status while others are newcomers and advance new claims. These dynamics are thus driven by but also reproduce deeply uneven playing fields in global governance. Entities-in-the-making need specific capacities before they can even entertain an agency claim but whether these are even considered as capacities is predetermined by relevant others and structure as such. However, since capacities are not endogenous qualities of any entity but themselves the result of prior relations and the consolidation of networks within an entity, their relevance can shift over time. Understanding these shifts situationally will help us understand why particular entities succeed in claiming agency and others are rejected.

3. Structure and Situation

Any context of global governance is defined by a specific structure sedimented through past action and plays out in transitory situations in which entities can advance agency claims and recognize those of others. With these two dimensions, we intend to capture both the *longue durée* of agency emergence as well as spontaneous emergence. As to the first, we think of *structure* as institutions, rules, norms, and conventions which exist independent of the entities engaged in relations in a particular situation. Structures frame agency emergence by determining social roles, institutional positions, and social expectations for entities to enact their agency even before they begin to do so. As Archer (1995, 106) puts it, social relations “constitute structures [which] pre-date occupants of positions within them, thus constraining or enabling agency.” Moreover, structures broadly govern situations and determine the distribution of resources and capacities available for potential global governors to draw upon. Entities-in-the-making can either reconfirm and follow the rules and norms considered appropriate or explicitly oppose

them. As such, while sedimented and predetermining, structure is not static. Rather, it plays out in *situations* which we understand to involve transitory configurations of actors, relating structurally pre-established governors with those in-the-making. Simply put, situations translate structural conditions into concrete social settings of dense interaction. As such, situations are defined by relations between entities already constituted which serve as gatekeepers and, potentially, those actors-in-the-making who are as yet unstructured and need to be established in the first place, yoking new entities into existence (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 313-5). This can be immediate and temporally confined (e.g., in meetings) or mediated and unfolding over a longer time (e.g., in discourse). Taken together, it is *against* structure but *in* situations that entities emerge through stabilizing their various connections “so that the resulting entity has the ability to endure as a persistent thing in the various ecologies in which it is located” (Abbott 1995, 872). Perceived as social facts, structure prefigures any situation. At the same time, social facts are being interpreted and negotiated in situational interactions, reproducing but also potentially changing structure over time. It is thus the interplay of structure and situation which “gives rise to new terms of structure and agency” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 295).

To make our relational framework more tangible and indicate potential cash-outs, we think of global governance as a whole consisting of complex structures in which particular issues are situationally addressed. An abundance of established entities that enjoy fairly stabilized agency exist within to provide governance (e.g., states, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, transnational rating agencies, civil society groups) (Zürn 2018, 139-40; Andonova 2017).⁷ However, in any given situation, due to the lack of final authority in global governance, there is also indeterminacy – and sometimes conflict – as to who *is* involved and who *should* provide governance (Lake 2021). Since governance is never a solo act, different entities strive to “get a seat at the table,” advance different values, appeal to different rules, and offer different material and immaterial assets such as funds, expertise, status, or moral authority, to name but a few. In other words, the initial determination of who should be amongst the global governors against the backdrop of a particular structure in a particular situation is the very first act of global governance and fundamentally shapes the ensuing provision of order. Against functional needs and political realities, however, this initial meta-governance often remains unreflected as much of global governance scholarship and practice simply commits to multistakeholderism and arguably is biased

⁷ We sympathize with the popular notion to break down global governance into various fields or issue areas, e.g., health governance, environmental governance, security governance, etc. Some parts of structure would hold true across various fields while others might be more specific to a particular context. Situational dynamics may be likewise general or specific across fields.

towards non-state actors since these fit easily into the “global village” narrative (Franke and Hofferberth 2022).⁸

To summarize our discussion so far, agency emerges in relations shaped by structural constraints and situational dynamics. The overall balance between change or stasis ultimately remains an empirical question that we will pick up below. Of particular importance for us in this are agency claims, the recognition dynamics they trigger, and the outcomes that are produced between those. We contend that theorizing different types of agency claims and relating them to various recognition dynamics will provide us with theoretically informed propositions of why and how global governors emerge and sustain their agency. In other words, we argue that specific types of agency claims are likely to trigger specific types of recognition, which, taken together in their interplay, result in specific types of agency. Before theorizing these differences in more detail, it is important to emphasize that there is an ongoing interplay of claims and recognition practices. Understanding this relational unfolding helps us expand our understanding of global governance beyond the simple observation that certain entities now matter more as they have become global governors. Simply put, a particular agency claim and the recognition that follows lead to a particular manifestation of agency and determines the respective global governors for a particular issue or within a field. The remainder of this paper substantiates and spells out this postulate.

4. Agency Claims

For new agency to emerge or established agency to evolve, there must be a claim. A claim articulates an idea that the issue at hand should be addressed and governed in a particular way by stating who should be involved and in which capacities. In other words, agency claims are normative speech acts related to which entities should deliver governance. More often than not, they express a desire for change to what is currently done.⁹ Given that we are less interested in social agency in a broad sense, we focus on politically relevant claims of who should (and should not) be involved in governance. We

⁸ While our framework can be applied to global governance in its entirety, in this paper we will mainly focus on global policy-making within formal, at least somewhat institutionalized contexts. Empirical references thus are international organizations and their various committees and sub-organizations, global partnerships, or deliberative multistakeholder fora. However, we include not just the work done *within* these contexts but also those done *in relation to* them – street protests and “counter-summits” are well-known examples of uninvited actors making agency claims outside the confines of a formal meeting, while media reporting plays an important role in communicating agency claims and acts of recognition.

⁹ From a big-picture perspective, the normative agenda of global governance as elaborated by actors like the UN Commission on Global Governance could also be considered as encompassing macro-level agency claims towards multistakeholderism and involving new actors beyond the nation-state.

conceive these claims to be expressed in practices – while advanced, negotiated, and ultimately decided in relations, claims as such are made through acts.¹⁰ What is required to stabilize and sustain agency beyond a given situation are the three components introduced above: (a) the capacity to produce or at least influence outcomes, (b) the ability to evaluate choices based on an idea of the future, and (c) the forward-looking awareness of what consequences might follow from action. For corporate actors, this means some aggregated capacity to make decisions as well as some form of reflective evaluation of themselves, their environment, and the impact of their actions.

In this section, we discuss the concept of “agency claims” through a series of questions: who makes claims on whose behalf and are these empowering or restraining (author & target)? Are claims explicitly articulated or implicitly performed (modality)? Which responsibilities and capacities for which contexts are claimed (scope)? How are claims justified (legitimacy)? As to the first of these questions, agency claims can initially be differentiated on whose behalf they are advanced. Here, we distinguish between the two motifs of *self-agentification* and *ascription* (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022, 6-7).¹¹ Self-agentification refers to all claims an entity makes on behalf of itself. Arguably, such claims need a well-argued justification or at least a susceptible audience since they are intended to change the composition of the table in one’s own favor. This can be achieved by fielding unique resources and providing reasons that precisely these resources are needed in the given situation, although even an abundance of resources still requires recognition (Dingwerth and Eckl 2022, 202). Ascription conversely includes all claims advanced on behalf of another entity. This can be supportive and empowering, for instance by inviting a hitherto excluded entity and bestowing new capacities upon it. This can be done through formal delegation as well as in informal ways in which organizations, through orchestration or other forms of inclusive engagement, broaden the list of involved entities (Vabulas and Snidal 2013). Ascription, however, can also be hostile and restraining if an established actor denies agency to an entity-in-the-making.¹² Firmly established actors in particular can deny the agency of an entity-in-the-making, e.g., by arguing for participation restrictions or by denying an actor the right to speak. Whether empowering or restraining, ascriptive claims are more likely to succeed if they are shared and advanced by multiple pre-established

¹⁰ Following basic speech act theory, we think of acts here as including the “mere” rhetorical expression of an act as well as the actual carrying out of the act since in a public, abstract realm like global governance these practically converge (Searle 1969).

¹¹ It is important to note that by our distinction between self-agentification and ascription, we recognize the imbued power realities of global governance which, at any situation, features a list of pre-defined actors and thereby is full of hierarchies (Viola 2020).

¹² We conceptualize these practices of exclusion also as agency claims since they also relate to which entities should deliver governance, albeit in a negative fashion.

actors, expressing a consensus or at least majority to either have a new entity join at the table or not.

Agency claims can further be distinguished by their degree of explicitness. Explicit claims involve some form of communication wherein an agency claim is expressed, either through speech or text. Consequently, explicit self-agentification claims, among others, include requests, appeals, demands to participate as well as formal applications, offers of resources, and even protest and counter-governance in the form of alternative summits. Explicit ascriptive claims on the other hand may take the form of invitations and formal delegation as well as publicly arguing in favor of including new entities or communicating such expectations. An example of this is that “international agencies have actively mobilized or brokered transnational coalitions with entrepreneurial states and nonstate actors” in global partnerships (Andonova 2017, 3). If meant to restrain agency, explicit ascription would reflect the open denial of agency through invoking protocol to exclude entities or public requests to limit access.¹³ Implicit claims are expressed performatively rather than openly. An actor may implicitly claim agency by simply showing up to a meeting uninvited or creating a new initiative to address the issue elsewhere. Another way to implicitly self-agentify is to embody roles and fulfil granted duties to the extent that established actors realize the value of the entity-in-the-making in general. As to ascription, established actors may tacitly acknowledge a new entity or continue to ignore it by refusing to respond. This can also come in the form of restating general rules and expectations about access towards other entities as a fundamental and long-term approval or denial of agency at the institutional level. Figure 1 summarizes examples of explicit and implicit agency claims on behalf of self and other through the motifs of self-agentification and ascription.¹⁴

¹³ Arguably, with strong ideas of multistakeholderism and inclusion of entities as a defining characteristic of global governance, explicit denials through exclusionary claims are unlikely. That said, institutionalized rules such as membership and voting rights reflect such exclusionary practices and power realities of world politics on a daily basis (e.g., the P5 in the UN Security Council).

¹⁴ Note that we are initially just theorizing the claiming. Without recognition discussed in the next section, none of these claims will move past the explicit or implicit, expressed or performative act that advances them and by itself result in agency.

Figure 1 Modalities of Agency Claims

	Self-Agentification	Ascription
Explicit	Public demands & appeals for participation Applications for membership, observer status, etc. & offering resources for problem-solving protest, counter-governance & hosting alternative summits	Invitations & formal delegation Arguing in favor or against inclusion of particular actors Invoking protocol to exclude
Implicit	Showing up to meetings and events Creating new initiatives to address issue Embodying roles and fulfilling granted duties	Tacitly acknowledging or ignoring entities Restating general rules & expectations towards other entities

Some of these claims reflect fundamental disagreement and outright contestation as to who should be involved. These are often advanced in crisis situations, where the established order and its rules are challenged. Others, however, are marked by little to no conflict and are simply part of the everyday governance of an issue. More specifically, in many governance initiatives and fora, claims are simply expressed and confirmed through competent performance and consensual agreement or at least the absence of opposition (Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019). By acting in line with expectations expressed towards them, entities embody and reproduce the structures that gave rise to their agency in the first place – and thereby also stabilize and sustain themselves (Greve 2018). By regularly showing up to meetings in the UN General Assembly and its various committees following their respective rules of procedure, for example, member states’ delegates claim agency within the context of the UN, stabilize the UN system as a structure, and thereby sustain themselves as the relevant actors within (Weiss, Carayannis, and Jolly 2009). Such uncontested everyday performances of agency in world politics are harder to study, methodologically speaking, which is why explicit claims arguably receive more attention than the everyday mechanisms of order maintenance.

In a third heuristic to theorize agency claims, we distinguish claims in terms of the scope of issues for which agency is claimed (i.e., general or situational) and the scope of capacities sought through the claim (i.e., broad or narrow). Figure 2 spells out the different combinations that follow from these two types of agency claims, the likelihood of their acceptance, and the agency they potentially result in. In the first dimension, agency claims either postulate agency in a generalized fashion across and independent of the specific situation (i.e., broadly claiming legitimacy as a global governor *in general*) or they are limited to the particular issue areas and the situation in which they are expressed (i.e., claiming agency vis-à-vis pre-established entities to address a given and immediate issue only). Arguably, situational, issue-specific

agency claims are more likely to be recognized since these are limited in their implications for global governance. The second dimension in Figure 2 speaks to the capacities to be conferred upon the agent-in-the-making and focuses on the rights that are claimed or granted. The distinction between claiming full membership in a decision-making body, which includes privileges to vote, speak, and suggest agenda items, versus aiming for observer status, which might only grant the privilege of being present during meetings, or any other perceivable role with limited impact, illustrates the difference between broad(er) and narrow(er) agency claims and their scope in terms of capacities (similar to Tallberg et al. 2013, 26-7). Agency claims in this distinction are likely to be justified in functional terms, in a sense that agents wish to be empowered to take up specific tasks and duties and then enjoy a certain latitude therein. For instance, the Financial Action Task Force is only mandated to set standards against money laundering and evaluate compliance for narrow sets of cases. As such, it does not police the integrity of the global financial system broadly nor does it claim agency beyond the immediate issue. Having said this, broad agency claims on average are less likely to be recognized than narrow ones and it should be kept in mind that both dimensions are continuous, not dichotomous, in scale.¹⁵ While we expect actors to prefer broader and more general agency, Heimann and Paikowsky (2022) argue that actors may sometimes take a more gradualist approach, starting with limited claims and expanding them later.

Figure 2 Scope of Agency Claims

	General	Situational
Broad	<i>Unlikely</i> to be recognized but results in <i>stable</i> and <i>comprehensive</i> agency if granted (i.e., entity becomes global governor with broad capacities, serving as potential future gatekeeper)	<i>Average</i> likelihood of recognition, resulting in <i>limited</i> agency tied to a specific issue (i.e., entity recognized only in specific situations as agency remains contested outside of it)
Narrow	<i>Average</i> likelihood of recognition, resulting in <i>limited</i> agency tied to a specific capacity (i.e., entity recognized in general terms but limited in its governance contributions)	<i>Likely</i> to be recognized but results only in <i>specialist</i> agency for a specific issue (i.e., entity remains interloper with limited capacities and only heard in specific situations)

¹⁵ Whether agency is more or less stable depends on the degree of recognition and contestation within. Stable agency implies that the presence of an actor is taken for granted within a particular setting but also beyond. Limited agency might raise more eyebrows and even engender resistance as other actors speak out if the entity is perceived as an interloper for either claiming agency for other issues or claiming other governance capacities than originally granted. Limited agency in such contexts is likely to become unstable and lead to re-evaluation. However, such claims are likely in newly constituted settings or for actors that have undergone internal reform to reposition themselves as either being relevant for the issue at hand or having unique governance assets.

Actors make claims for multiple reasons, most obviously to exercise influence and pursue their interests. But agency claims are also about status and recognition – stable agency goes hand-in-hand with ontological security (Mitzen 2006; but see Wolf 2011). Explicit agency claims have to be justified in some way. For this, actors typically invoke widely accepted norms of justice, fairness, or efficacy, and these are more likely to trigger a response than claims that remain implicit. Newcomers may make self-agentification claims by arguing that they represent a marginalized stakeholder or bring certain forms of legitimacy or expertise to the table, for example, requiring those already involved with the issue to respond (Sändig, von Bernstorff, and Hasenclever 2018). For instance, the agency of civil society organizations rests on the claim that they represent the voices of otherwise underrepresented groups, especially marginalized populations (Sénit and Biermann 2021). Gatekeepers may be concerned with how the inclusion and exclusion of particular actors may affect the constitution and efficacy of a formal institution going forward, while actors more open to a new agency claim may be disenfranchised with the institution or have other ties to the entity-in-the-making they seek to strengthen in the new context. For example, the persistent support from Arab nations towards Palestinian membership in UN bodies indicates both the frustration of these states with the organization as well as the connections they have with Palestine (Elgindy 2011). Furthermore, while claims can be issue-specific and thus primarily addressed to a set of established actors within a field, there are also those who go beyond and impact all actors – those involved within a field and those beyond. Media can be used to amplify and spread the claim to other publics, which may influence the responses and recognition dynamics within a situation or a series of interactions.

In summary, we differentiate and categorize agency claims along different criteria, each implicating different likelihoods of being recognized and leading to different types of agency:

- Author & Target: who makes claims on whose behalf? Are these empowering or restraining?
- Modality: are claims explicitly articulated or implicitly performed?
- Scope & Capacities: which responsibilities and capacities for which contexts are claimed?
- Justification & Legitimacy: how is a claim justified? What is the normative quality of the justification (i.e., references to universal or particularistic values; functional or political)?

As argued above, we expect that self-agentification claims on average are less likely to change the setup of actors than ascriptive claims. The reason for that is quite simple: power. Self-agentification claims are often put forward by weaker actors or by those initially left out in a given situation. In contrast,

ascriptive claims are made by established actors, some of them acting as gatekeepers, who have far greater influence. Calling on other actors to participate in governance might also be perceived as a commitment to multistakeholderism rather than strategic self-interest, very much reflecting the *Zeitgeist* of global governance (Baumann and Dingwerth 2015). However, since no structure is completely hermetic and no hierarchy immune to critique, there is always room for creative claims of subversion and resistance, specifically when there is a perceived crisis. Such situations occur in many contexts of world politics, especially where structures and established actors are new or unsettled. For example, it remains contested who the actors of internet governance are, at least compared to the governance of trade or human rights. More broadly, every political setting defines access rules and, in doing so, creates opportunities for the performative breaking of said rules, offering the role of the dissident and interloper to those who would criticize the system. In other words, while global governors are defined through their agency, there is also always agency among “the governed” (Wiener 2017). To provide another example, early non-governmental organizations were creative and pugnacious in their self-agentification: “If NGOs were not invited to multilateral conferences they would invite themselves and simultaneously air their views through the press” (Reinalda 2011, 13). Similarly, protests surrounding G7/G8/G20 summits, with their tightly controlled access rules, indicate how marginalized and excluded groups can still make their voices heard. Over time, the G20 created engagement groups with organized civil society, business, and academia to defuse the likelihood of protests by granting limited agency to those who might otherwise disturb the meetings or overshadow its messages. These and other practices of recognition and their implications will be discussed in the following sections.

5. Practices and Dynamics of Recognition

Practices and dynamics of recognition are central to our relational framework as they occur between different entities, either already pre-established or in-the-making. In other words, relations are key to recognition and vice versa. We are specifically interested in which kinds of agency claims are likely to be recognized by whom and which outcomes follow. While claims articulate ideas of who should be involved in which capacities, it is through recognition that these capacities are acknowledged and confirmed to allow the entity-in-the-making to participate in governance.¹⁶ Such acknowledge-

¹⁶ In a philosophical sense, recognition refers to the cognitive ability to *distinguish* and *identify* something as being itself and not something else (Ricoeur 2005, 25). In other words, recognition reflects practices of categorizing and classifying and as such reflects agency itself, meaning that

ments, however, might only relate to certain parts of the original claim, do not necessarily grant the entity-in-the-making equal rights, nor do they have to be formal and explicit. Rather, following Visoka (2022, 143-4), we assume recognition to play out “through everyday acts of writing, talking and performing,” much of which is “ritualized, habitualized, repeated, and performed diplomatic discourses and practices.” As such, recognition is not a singular act performed once but an iterative and mutual process through which entities reconfirm each others’ agency. Such recognition and its constitution of agency likely remains partial, subject to situation and the actors involved, and hence unfinished unless recognized continuously over time (Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending 2018). Absent such continuous recognition, agency can and will fade away. As examples, we might point to European nobility and papal envoys, who used to be recognized as independent diplomatic actors in what passed for global governance in the 19th century but whose recognition as such disappeared as the power of the Catholic Church and the monarchy waned. Beyond such broad de-recognition of entire actor types, we can also find instances of specific actors losing recognition. An example from authoritarian domestic politics is the selective stigmatization and criminalization of troublesome civil society organizations under “foreign agents” laws. On the international level, there are examples where NGOs had their consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council withdrawn.¹⁷

Recognition dynamics are triggered by agency claims and reflect the responses of situationally stabilized entities seeking to appropriately classify “newcomers”:

Since recognition in the sense of acknowledgement presupposes a prior *identification* of the actor to be recognized, and since such identification in turn presupposes the possibility of *distinguishing* those actors that are fit for recognition from those who are not, actual practices of recognition will always depend on underlying schemes of classification. (Bartelson 2013, 121, emphasis in the original)

Just as agency claims, recognition can be distinguished according to its *modalities* and *scope*. For the first, we initially distinguish whether a particular claim is acknowledged and confirmed or rejected and denied. In other words, the most important distinction is between practices of recognition from those of non-recognition. Simply put, acknowledgment is an affirmative response to a particular agency claim while rejection reflects a negative response and likely leads to the denial of agency or at least limits its emergence (i.e., when

entities of world politics which recognize others as global governors sustain their own agency at the same time, for example when the UN invites business actors to join the UN Global Compact (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022).

¹⁷ E.g., <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/withdrawal-un-consultative-status-two-ngos-could-have-chilling-effect-civil-society/> (Accessed May 3, 2023).

one actor insists on non-recognizing while others accept the claims). This distinction initially plays out in dyadic relations, implying that any given actor can recognize or not. Given that much of global governance occurs between multiple actors, in a second step, these individual responses are aggregated into a collective response. Whether a new actor emerges within a situation is then a consequence of aggregated dyadic relations. Kyris (2022), for example, discusses limited recognition in terms of certain states not recognizing the existence of other states while Holzscheiter (2016) highlights situations in which non-state actors are only recognized by some of the established states. The more actors are involved and required to acknowledge a claim, e.g., by rules and procedures of a body, the more difficult the process becomes. That said, acknowledgment does not have to be unanimous to have sticking power and ultimately result in agency. Comprehensive non-recognition as “the structural impossibility of actors being recognised in the ways that they want to be” (Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending 2018, 787) is a consequence of power and hierarchy in global governance and reveals how established actors are privileged when it comes to granting or rejecting the agency of others.

In a second dimension, similar to practices of claiming agency, (non-)recognition can also be explicit or implicit in the way it is expressed. In other words, whether they affirm or deny, established actors can voice their response to an agency claim in expressive terms for all involved to see or let their actions speak. As argued above, an explicit agency claim is more likely to trigger an explicit response and those explicitly acknowledging are more likely to lead to new or sustained agency.

Figure 3 Modalities of Recognition

	Acknowledgment	Rejection
Explicit	Confirming agency claims directly with the intention to grant at least partial competencies	Denying agency claims directly with intention to limit competencies to the extent possible
Implicit	No direct response but treating entity as actor, attempting to grant at least partial competencies	No direct response but denying entity as actor, limiting competencies to the extent possible

In real-world terms, practices of recognition in world politics include all forms of approval of agency claims such as confirming and bestowing membership or issuing invitations. Practices of non-recognition, on the other hand, are intended to deny such claims or at least restrain the agency-in-the-making. Whether it is through denying access by invoking restrictive protocols, leaving a meeting when an unwelcome agency claim is articulated, or simply ignoring such statements, non-recognition is how boundaries of global governance and its ambitions of multistakeholderism are established. That said, both explicit and implicit (non-)recognition can be formal and informal, invoking existing rules or assuming the appropriateness of unwritten

ones. Methodologically speaking, explicit (non-)recognition is immediately visible and easier to study. Explicitness also allows the entity-in-the-making to follow-up and further engage with the powers that are. As such, an explicit response, whether affirmative or rejecting, already implies some recognition of the entity claiming agency and potentially initiates a discourse on its status. A more fundamental rejection is thus likely to remain implicit and chooses to ignore the initial claim altogether, unless the established actor denying access can field strong arguments why others should not participate. Whether (non-)recognition is explicit or implicit also influences the responses of other established actors waiting to see who responds first. For example, the explicit acknowledgement of a powerful entity puts the onus on other actors to eventually respond as well and likely approve the original claim, too.¹⁸

As mentioned above, (non-)recognition does not come as either/or since agency can partially or selectively be acknowledged or rejected. Established actors might interpret the original agency claim in their own ways or choose to confirm it only to a certain degree, i.e., affirming parts of the claim while rejecting other claimed competencies. Equally important, once considered beyond dyadic relations, we need to theorize whether there is a consensus (or at least a majority) to accept a claim or whether it outright remains contentious. If certain established actors, especially powerful ones, reject a claim, the agency-in-the-making will ultimately remain limited. We capture these dynamics as to whether the recognition scope is comprehensive, where competencies claimed are broadly granted (or rejected), or selective, granting (or denying) only limited access.

Figure 4 Scope of Recognition

	Comprehensive	Selective
Consensual	Actors mutually consent on claim and sustain it over time, resulting in <i>stable</i> and <i>broad</i> agency	Actors mutually consent on partial recognition of claim, resulting in <i>limited</i> agency
Contested	Actors are deeply divided on claim, resulting in agency that is both <i>limited</i> and <i>contested</i>	Actors are divided on whether to even grant limited agency, resulting in <i>contested</i> agency

Any global governor was initially recognized as such within a particular situation. Its agency probably was limited at first and but unfolded through recurrent recognition. This way, NGOs and civil society groups as well as multinational enterprises were recognized beyond immediate contexts and became constant features of global governance (Sending and Neumann

¹⁸ We accept that distinguishing between claims and recognition arguably becomes empirically messy since it rests on a stylized distinction between action (an agency claim) and reaction (recognition) that may be difficult to pin down in continuous interaction. Instead, recognition could conceivably be reframed as just another ascriptive agency claim. We nevertheless maintain the conceptual distinction, since recognition turning into a claim is still a response and hence reactive in the sequential unfolding.

2006). This opened the gates for other entities representing these actor types as well as other actor types such as experts, academic institutions, and cities, to name but a few more recent entities discussed as global governors. In other words, agency is contagious – if initially granted, it will disperse. That said, different types of agency follow, which will ultimately affect how and whether the respective entities can inform governance in the long term. Through recognition, agency can thus be stable and broad, remain limited, or even become contested. In the sequential unfolding that continues to follow, it is also important to emphasize that continuous claims have to be dealt with time and again and are likely to be recognized eventually, specifically if there are supporters among the established actors. The dynamics that follow from the interplay of claims and recognition will be further theorized in the next section and discussed as propositions about how agency of global governors emerges through the relations they find themselves in.

6. Theoretical Propositions of Agency Emergence

It has been argued so far that agency in global governance emerges when a claim is recognized. Such claims can be made on behalf of oneself (self-agentification) or on behalf of other entities (ascription) and aim at rearranging the actors involved in governing any particular issue. Such rearrangements can be a more inclusive approach that brings in new actors or a gatekeeping effort to limit the involvement of outside entities. Whoever is the author of a claim and whether it is empowering or restraining, its normative assertion of who should be involved needs recognition. In a dialectic cycle, the specific modality and scope of a claim thus determines its recognition which in turn not only stabilizes agency (for the time being) but also enables and structures the modality and scope of future claims. In other words, an ongoing interplay of claims and recognition determines why and how global governors emerge. An initial claim is needed, whereas recognition elevates said claim and raises the stakes for others to respond as well and brings new actors into the conversation. Non-recognition, specifically from a powerful gatekeeper, can stop an entity dead in its emergence. We argue that different forms of agency emerge, either more or less stable, more broad or more narrow, based on how claims are advanced and how they are received. Breaking down the different dimensions of claims and recognition thus helps us bring their potential outcomes and normative foundations to the fore. More bluntly, the dynamic between claiming and recognizing agency is at the core of global governance and provides us with a window into its most basic question: which entities should be considered as global governors.

It is important to emphasize that all our dimensions are continua and not to be understood in absolute terms. As has been argued above, agency is not an

either/or property. Rather, the specific combination of claim and recognition determines its precise form. This can range from *proto agency*, which leaves the entity in jeopardy of losing its new-found capacities again in the next instance, to *limited agency*, which accepts the entity as such but limits its capacities and/or the issue where it has a voice, to *full agency* granting the entity the status of global governor. The respective manifestation of agency is thus a function of the claim and how it is recognized. This can range from grudging reservations to ardent backing of a claim, from invoking restrictions to lobbying for involvement. Given the path dependent nature of agency, any initial recognition, especially if made publicly, is unlikely to be withdrawn at later cycles, implying that agency is likely to diffuse and grow once out of the bottle. For example, we have seen the partial agency of NGOs grow into something more powerful and comprehensive over time despite individual examples to the contrary (Florini 2000). This is the case because much of the agency was self-claimed based on a strong normative assumption of being a force for good.

From the previous discussion, we make several theoretical propositions which make the overall framework amenable to empirical tests. These propositions are drawn from the assumption that established actors are, in general, unwilling to share or dilute positions of influence. In other words, there is the assumed desire to limit access in ways that one's own influence is not diminished, because by limiting the number of actors at the table, actors preserve their own status and privileges. At the same time, we recognize exceptions to this general rule of thumb. On the one hand, actors representing the same actor type or identifying with similar values may support each other's claims (i.e., NGOs asking for more NGO representation within a committee). On the other hand, sharing an interest in addressing the issue together, global governance has a strong tendency towards multistakeholderism based on an underlying functionalist logic of different actors bringing different resources to the table. If an entity-in-the-making can advance its claim on such functional necessity in a focused way, it is more likely to be recognized.

- 1) Narrow claims are more likely to be recognized, broad claims less so.
- 2) Claims based on unique resources are more likely to be recognized.

Our third and fourth propositions are drawn from considerations of leverage. Assuming that established actors are generally predisposed against inviting additional actors into their circles, we expect that agency claims made by insiders are treated more favorably than those by outsiders.¹⁹ In our framework, we thus postulate that self-agentifying claims are potentially more difficult to pull off but, if backed up by strong assets and unique resources

¹⁹ Although, as Hasenclever and Narr (2018) point out, gatekeepers can strategically support the inclusion of weakly organized actors to undercut agency claims of functionally similar but better organized actors.

deemed relevant for governance, can rearrange the tables more profoundly. On the flipside, ascription, specifically in delegative, principal-agent relations, often leaves the entity-in-the-making with limited agency, stuck between limited resources and overbearing expectations. The UN being interchangeably perceived as nothing but a tool of the powerful and world government comes to mind, simply because it cannot free itself from the intergovernmental mandate of its member states (Mingst, Karns, and Lyon 2017).

- 1) Self-agentifying claims are less likely to be recognized than ascriptive claims.
- 2) Self-agentifying claims, if recognized, are more likely to lead to greater changes of the set of actors than ascriptive claims.

Such consequentialist rationalities are bounded by considerations of social norms. Making claims and acting out recognition publicly raises the stakes of the interaction and forces actors and entities-in-the-making to commit to certain positions. Implicit interactions, which can be explained away with a bit of duplicity and hypocrisy, can be used to test the waters, but if an aspiring actor wants an explicit response, they might have to put established actors on the spot.

- 1) Explicit claims are more likely to be recognized or at least must be dealt with.²⁰
- 2) Non-recognition, especially comprehensive non-recognition, will remain implicit as long as possible to avoid giving even the minimal recognition of a formal response.

Other propositions emerge once we move past the dyadic level, where the interaction among established actors, especially those powerful actors we call “gatekeepers,” determines outcomes. The more gatekeepers are involved, the more complex the recognition dynamics become. Depending on the situation, recognition does not have to be consensual let alone unanimous to have sticking power and ultimately result in agency, but it certainly helps. The explicit recognition of a claim by a powerful actor puts pressure on their peers to follow suit, especially with ascriptive claims by gatekeepers.

- 1) Ascriptive claims made by powerful actors are more likely to result in agency.
- 2) Agency claims that are recognized by a majority of, but not all gatekeepers result in limited agency that remains contested until unanimity is reached.

An example that supports the latter proposition is the recognition of Kosovo’s claims for sovereign statehood. Kosovo is currently recognized as an

²⁰ Although there is some circularity here: actors-in-the-making are more likely to make explicit claims when they see a chance of recognition in the first place.

independent country by 97 countries, almost exactly half of the United Nations' membership. Other states have rejected the claim, either through overt statements or by simply not issuing a formal note of recognition. A few states have also withdrawn earlier acts of recognition following Serbian diplomatic overtures. Kosovo has been accepted as a member into a variety of international and regional organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and sports federations like FIFA but it is, notably, not yet a member of the United Nations. Its 2015 application to UNESCO failed to generate the sufficient two-thirds majority.²¹

Beyond “gatekeepers,” recognition by “counter-agents,” i.e., those who initially rejected the agency claims, also matters. For instance, when it came to the recognition of business as a legitimate actor in United Nations circles, it was arguably not so much the invitation of states or the UN that established business actors as global governors but the fact that NGOs accepted them as such, seeing an opportunity to hold business accountable by making them engage in politics publicly. Once the idea of corporate agency was accepted by influential NGOs, for example through initiatives such as the UN Global Compact, a new normative space for making claims and responding to them opened up for business with all the potential pitfalls and failures (Hofferberth 2019). The idea of gatekeepers further indicates that we believe that – real or perceived – differences in power, hierarchy, and positionality matter an awful lot when it comes to who emerges as global governors.

Structures also matter in other ways beyond the distribution of power, e.g., through the rules formally governing a situation. Actors will try to leverage these rules in their own interests, with the United States for example seeking to influence votes for non-permanent members to the UN Security Council (Balci 2022). In less institutionalized situations, where structures only weakly govern behavior and access rules are unclear, self-agentification becomes easier (Heimann and Paikowsky 2022). Long-term structural factors, however, play out situationally which is why claims are more likely to succeed if the situation is one of perceived crisis. “Crisis,” as we understand it, is a circumstance where structures are weakened and situations therefore less predetermined. The concurrent crisis of statist and intergovernmental governance of the 1980s and its neoliberal unraveling captured in the 1995 Commission on Global Governance Report marked a situation where doors opened for entities to argue for stronger representation. This manifested itself, for example, in the unprecedented presence of civil society at the 1992 Rio Summit but also allowed established actors to bring in others as well. More specifically, “following the lead of governments, which in Rio in 1992 had embraced the private sector (along with civil society) as a key actor” (Pingeot 2016, 194), the private sector became ascribed with new agency and

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-unesco-idUSKCN0SY1CW20151109> (Accessed May 3, 2023).

multinational enterprises were discussed in terms of corporate social responsibility rather than profitability only (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022). As anecdotal evidence, this seems to suggest that agency is dispersed episodically as crisis situations are being interpreted as moments in which new answers, new forms of expertise, and new sources of legitimacy are required.²²

- 1) When structures are unsettled (“crisis”), agency claims – whether self-agentifying or ascriptive – have a greater chance of being recognized.
- 2) It is generally easier to self-agentify in less institutionalized situations without formalized access rules.

These propositions are, as yet, untested although they are in agreement with a variety of literatures. If they are broadly true, we might infer that agency is both path-dependent and historically contingent. Agency arrangements typically remain constant for extended periods of time due to structural constraints and actors’ preferences. When the structures governing situations become unstable, however, opening the door for an episode of change, we are likely to see claims being advanced and negotiated among established actors and those in the making. The outcome of these complex interactions, however, are difficult to forecast since they reflect situational interpretations, power relations, and the ability to justify one’s claim convincingly. In other words, the why and how of global governors and their agency emerging is both patterned and structured as well as situationally fluid and unpredictable. These and other ideas are brought together in the following conclusion to discuss what this means for global governance as such and our current manifestation of it.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

In this paper, we have outlined the contours of a theoretical framework to reconstruct how global governors attain their agency. We use a relational approach to capture the interplay of agency claims and the dynamics of recognition out of which agency emerges, changes, or decays. While this paper represents an expansion of previous work (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022), it is more than a mere intellectual exercise. We think that refocusing work in Global Governance on a more agency-centered perspective will be helpful in several ways. First, briefly, we argue that the expansion of global governance and the emergence of multistakeholderism has still not been adequately explained, certain IR work notwithstanding (Kacowicz and Mitrani 2016; Murphy 2014). Our theoretical framework provides the necessary tools to

²² Note that such a functionalist logic at the core of our current manifestation of global governance makes for a rather poor normative justification and arguably makes the notion very vulnerable to contestation as we have seen in recent waves of anti-cosmopolitan populism.

reconstruct this process instead of taking its outcome for granted. As a core analytical concept, agency reminds us of the historically contingent and unfolding nature of any manifestation of global governance. Understanding its diffusion among different actors is key to understanding global governance as such.

Second, and building on the first point, our approach – and the results of a historical reconstruction – allows for a critical reassessment of contemporary global politics. For instance, our preliminary assessment is that the “broadening” of global politics to involve additional actors was conditioned by the historical context of the 1990s and 2000s, a “liberal moment” (Gleditsch 2008) underpinned by American hegemony. It is questionable whether this expansion can be sustained against the major power shifts currently unfolding. While the story so far has been that agency has been shared more and more between a diverse set of actors, we should not take their agency for granted as claims need to be sustained over time. Given that the complexity of governance is likely to remain high with multiple crises and issues overlapping at the moment, we also need to be open to the idea that other actors might assume agency. In other words, the list of global governors, in analytical as well as in real-world terms, will remain fluid and subject to change. Global governance tomorrow might look very different from global governance today and we should be open for multiple futures competing with each other (Weiss and Wilkinson 2022). It may just be that we are currently witnessing the rise of new categories of actors, such as oligarchs or infrastructure providers, which may even displace other, more established actors in a kind of “post-global governance” (Hofferberth and Lambach 2020).

Our third and arguably most ambitious aim is to help revitalize global governance itself, which used to capture the imagination of both scholars and practitioners of world politics for a good few decades but currently seems to have lost some of its momentum. Lately, our theoretical tools have diversified to the point that the very meaning of global governance is stretched to the extent that it mainly serves as an “empty signifier” for a discipline uncertain what its contributions should be. At the same time, the very order that manifested as global governance since the 1990s experiences existential crises and is challenged from all sides (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Zürn 2018). Focusing on agency and relating it to existing structure, we hope to revitalize both academic as well as real-world debates on global governance. On the one hand, this is about addressing liabilities of the global governance paradigm. Problematizing agency reminds us that while comprehensive and compelling, global governance emerged as a political order and needs critical self-reflection and permanent adjustments to legitimate and sustain itself in the long run. On the other, opportunities emerge by reframing governance in agential terms. For instance, it allows for a critical reflection on the parameters under which new claims are recognized or should be recognized. In other

words, a theoretically guided reconstruction of the why and how of global governors restates the normative question of who *should* be a global governor. We contend that a relational take on agency, agency claims, and recognition promises to reveal some of the underlying practices and fundamental building blocks of global governance needed to even consider discussing this question.

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