

Multilevel Global Governance: Assumptions, methods, shortcomings and future directions *

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Multilevel governance as a research approach has mostly been applied to explain governance problématiques surrounding the European Union or international organizations. As a general research framework in the area of IR theory, however, multilevel governance has widely been underutilized, despite the many advantages the approach offers in the empirical investigation of an increasingly complex international or global system. This is especially true in regard to the investigation of dynamic aspects and processes of global governance. This paper provides an overview of some of the core assumptions and methodologies of a multilevel global governance framework and provides examples, how existing research programs and traditions can benefit from including this approach and its methodological toolkit.

Introduction

The theoretical concept(s) of global governance and multi-level governance have co-evolved in recent years and benefitted from each other's theoretical, epistemological and empirical development. The term "multilevel governance" (MLG) has first been introduced by Gary Marks conceptually in 1992 (Marks, 1992) and nominally a year later (Marks, 1993) to analyze developments in EU structural policy following major EU structural reforms. Given its strong connection with EU studies, MLG so far is not widely perceived as part of the established political science methodological toolkit. This is hardly surprising, given that the field itself is not sure where best to place EU studies. From a mainstream political science perspective, EU studies are comparative politics territory, pushing international relations (IR) research on this subject "very much to the margins of the EU studies enterprise" (Rosamond, 2007, p. 236).

As authors such as Weiss & Wilkinson (2014) have challenged the IR community to put questions surrounding global governance more into the central focus of IR scholarship, however, MLG theories in their various gestations have increasingly become attractive as an analytical framework for IR scholars focusing on questions of governance in areas other than the EU as well. Some writers, for example, identify an institutional convergence of governance systems characterized by their "polycentric sovereignty" forms of governance and characterized by "compound models of democracy" (Fabbrini, 2007), requiring different analytical tools than previously employed in IR studies of governance.

MLG theories are attractive as a framework for IR scholars because they span different analytical levels and because they point to inherently dynamic arrangements of governance involving a—at times shifting and evolving—set of actors and structures. By now, MLG studies have acquired an abstract and authentically theoretical body of work (Piattoni, 2010, pp. 22–23) and produced attempts at general theorizations (Bache & Flinders, 2004b; Enderlein, Wälti, & Zürn, 2010; Marks, Scharpf, Schmitter, & Streeck, 1996; Ongaro, 2015; Piattoni, 2010; Scharpf, 2001) that makes MLG a serious research framework contender for IR scholarship issues in areas such as

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global governance, security studies or international political economy (IPE). This text pursues three main goals: first, it briefly sketches the core assumptions and typologies of MLG theory seen from a more general IR outside-perspective rather than from the inside of EU studies. Second, the text then focuses on some core—and contested—assumptions in the IR literature relevant to central elements of MLG, namely: sovereignty and the (nation) state, anarchy, what constitutes the “international system,” and agency therein and across what levels of analysis. Third, we look at the empirical challenges involved in the application of MLG as an analytical tool for IR issues and areas.

Multilevel Governance (MLG)—Key concepts, assumptions and definitions

At its core, MLG is an attempt to develop an interdisciplinary paradigmatic bridge to connect theoretical and empirical models and tools drawn from a variety of interrelated disciplines and subdisciplines (Bache & Flinders, 2004a) in order to overcome a—presumably—false or too simplistic dichotomy of domestic versus international politics that does not reflect the realities of governance in our world.¹ The necessary authority required for any institutional arrangement to govern effectively—that is, to enable binding decision-making in the public sphere (Marks & Hooghe, 2004, p. 15)—has long been centered on the nation-state (see further discussion below). This centralization of governance authority has seen challenges from many directions.

From above, intergovernmental and multilateral governance forms with formal supranational bodies or informal governance arrangements such as networks have emerged (Stephen D. Krasner, 1981; Moravcsik, 1995; Ruggie, 1993b; Warning, 2009).² From below, regional, municipal and other non-nation-state centric arrangements sidestepping traditional vertical hierarchical governance arrangements have emerged as important units and governance actors (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2003; Ewen & Hebbert, 2007; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Mattli, 1999; Rosenzweig, Solecki, Hammer, & Mehrotra, 2011).

One response in the literature to address these challenges theoretically and empirically was to broaden the governance focus onto issue-specific interactions, rather than to continue the analysis of specific actors or predefined units of analysis (Lake & Powell, 1999). Others highlighted the importance of regimes (Drezner, 2008; Hasenclever, Mayer, & Rittberger, 1997; Stephen D. Krasner, 1983; Moravcsik, 1997; Yu, Chow, & Kao, 2010) and other new institutional arrangements of governance that included non-state actors in their analysis (Helen V Milner & Moravcsik, 2009; Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). A commonly accepted, single research framework, however, has so far not emerged from these controversies and debates.

MLG is so far the most comprehensive approach aiming to analytically frame the issue of governance in IR. Broadly, MLG can be defined as “a set of general-purpose or functional jurisdictions that enjoy some degree of autonomy within a common governance arrangement and whose actors claim to engage in an enduring interaction in pursuit of a common good” (Enderlein et al., 2010, p. 4). Far from simply basing its analysis on a state-centric assumption of governance, the concept of MLG seeks to explain “the dispersion of central government authority both *vertically*, to actors located at other territorial levels, and *horizontally*, to non-state actors” (emphases added; Bache & Flinders, 2004b, v). So rather than basing their analysis “on the two level game assumptions

¹Other terms such as *fragnegration* (Rosenau, 1990, 2000), *polycentric governance* (McGinnis, 1999), *multi-tiered governance* (Jessop, 2004), *multi-perspectival governance* (Ruggie, 1993a), *functional/overlapping/competing jurisdictions* (FOCJ)(Frey, 2003; Frey & Eichenberger, 2004), *spheres of authority* (SOA) (Rosenau, 1997), and *compoundness* (Fabbrini, 2007) have also been used to describe an approach to break away from a state-centric focus. For a discussion, see Marks & Hooghe (2004).

²For a critical view on network governance, see e.g., Mattli & Woods (2009).

adopted by state centrists, MLG theorists posit a set of overarching, multi-level policy networks” (Marks, Nilsen, Ray, & Salk, 1996, p. 41). The two central elements of the concept—levels and governance—need further explanation for a full understanding of MLG and will be discussed subsequently.

Levels

In order to study and empirically analyze governance boundaries and thus the resulting “levels” that form the basis of MLG, it is important to have an understanding of the underlying assumptions about key actors, forms of agency, interactions and relational structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Wendt, 1999).³ Levels must be seen as legitimate by a collective and governable. Actors interacting on a respective level must also be “able to act,” that is to possess some degree of autonomy that allows them agency within the level and share a level-specific understanding of the collective good. They must also acknowledge each other as legitimate governing actors. Whether the trend away from mostly state-centric forms of governance to additional governance structures can—or indeed should—be viewed as legitimate is an active point of discussion and seen as both, an increase in and as an erosion of legitimate representation of actors and interests (DeBardeleben & Hurrelmann, 2007; Hurrelmann, Schneider, & Steffek, 2007). That this shift occurs when one applies a non-state-centric lens, however, is largely uncontested (Mattern & Zarakol, 2016).⁴

In recognition of the loss of centralized forms of authority and the subsequent dispersion of governance across multiple jurisdictions, most state-centric governance discussions have focused territorially on suprapstate, state, regional, local, and individual levels of governance. Hooghe & Gary (2003) differentiate between two main ideal types of MLG, Type I and II (see Table 1). Type I forms of MLG can broadly be understood as “federalism,” in which power-sharing among governments takes place across just a few levels and the unit of analysis is the individual government, rather than the individual policy. Type I forms of MLG are characterized by general-purpose jurisdictions with non-intersecting memberships and a system-wide architecture. In contrast, Type II forms of MLG are governance structures in which jurisdictions are flexible, task-specific, and often operate at numerous territorial scales. Type II forms of MLG have no inherent limit to the number of jurisdictional levels and are characterized by a flexible design.

Table 1: Ideal-types of MLG (based on Hooghe & Gary, 2003, p. 236)

Type I	Type II
General-purpose jurisdictions	Task-specific jurisdictions
Non-intersecting memberships	Intersecting memberships
Jurisdictions at a limited number of levels	No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels
System-wide architecture	Flexible design

This typology allows for a more broadly conceived jurisdictional space, both in terms of its territorial reach and issues and actors involved in the governance process.⁵ Type II forms of governance normally coexist with Type I governance forms in the same overarching polity they are

³For an early critique, see Bull (1966).

⁴For a counterargument, see Drezner (2008).

⁵For an alternative general typology, see e.g., Pierre & Peters (2005).

embedded in (Hooghe & Gary, 2003, p. 238), so it is important to have a good understanding of the governance structures that form the basis of Type I and II MLG governance forms for any consequential analysis.

Governance

Governance is often contrasted with government (Pierre, 2000). Whereas government is defined more by its institutional structure, governance is understood as a form of governing in which a wider variety of public and private actors is involved in policy making through policy networks and a variety of formal and informal processes. Enderlein et al. (2010) suggest a definition of governance that seeks to escape the biases of a state-centric, centralized authority focus to broaden the scope of analysis of governance and its application across a wider range of levels than the historical inside/outside of the nation-state focus of IR and comparative politics scholarship. For them, the term governance denotes generically “the sum of regulations [including policies, programs and decisions] brought about by actors [public and private], processes as well as structures [making up a collective course of action] and justified with reference to a public problem [excluding private solutions to private problems]” (2).⁶ In this view, multi-level systems can also be composed of non-political, functional jurisdictions with only task-specific authority dominated by private actors. What remains essential, however, is a focus on public problems with participating actors claiming to act in the name of a collective interest or the common good and doing so with some justification in the eyes of the collective.

Table 2: Typology of legal multi-level governance layers
(based on Warning, 2009, p. 60)

Type	Creator	Addressees
Supranational law	International organizations (IOs) and states	States, societal actors
International law	States	States and IOs
National law	State institutions	State institutions, societal actors
Soft law	States and IOs	IOs, states, societal actors
Transnational private law	Societal actors	Societal actors
Transnational public law	Transnational bureaucracy networks	Public actors, societal actors

Applying a functional perspective on the legal foundations of governance, Warning (2009) identifies six legal layers that provide the functional legal corset for governance in a multi-level context (see Table 2). (1) Supranational law is being created and legitimized by states and/or supranational institutional bodies, such as international organizations (IOs), addressing the governance needs of states and societal actors alike. Historically more established and entrenched, states also institutionalize their interactions in (2) international law, which in turn provides the basis of and regulates the delegation of power to supranational forms of governance actors. Of course, the state also provides a set of (3) national laws that form an important layer of legal and

⁶For additional and alternative approaches, see also Benz & Dose (2010); Whitman (2009); Rosenau & Czempiel (1992). For a critical view and the argument of a conceptual overstretch of governance, see Plattner (2013); Offe (2009).

regulatory frames. These layers are reflective of “the predominant mode within national polities” and a “hierarchically ordered system of multi-purpose governments” (Skelcher, 2005, p. 94) and thus form the core legal structures of Type I MLG forms.

The next layers reflect especially the changes the growing interconnectedness of people and social systems—whether in the form of “globalization” or other, similar and related processes—have wrought on an international system previously dominated by the nation-state as its core actor. Warning adds (4) “soft law” to the legal layers that can be analytically distinguished as a layer in its own right. Even though the contracting parties lack the will to be legally bound by an agreement, international lawyers refer to them as legal instruments nonetheless, as they conclude agreements resembling legally binding accords in many ways (Warning, 2009, pp. 49–52). (5) Transnational private law and (6) transnational public law both are characterized by systems that, while connected to national and international legal orders, have established autonomous legal orders separate from them as the place where the norms become obligatory and can be enforced (Calliess, 2002; Tietje, 2002). Whereas transnational private legal orders are created by and focus on societal actors, their public counterparts capture the orders established by transnational bureaucracy networks, tying public and societal actors together in an additional layer to that dominated and set by states. In contrast to the previous layers (1) to (3), these layers provide the legal structures necessary to form Type II forms of MLG where “mainstream governmental organizations are unable to respond flexibly to policy issues that intersect their jurisdictions” (Skelcher, 2005, p. 94). In a practical sense, Type I forms of governance are representative of the conventional forms of nation-state ruling, whereas Type II forms are far less pronounced and clear in their shape and structure.

This necessarily very brief discussion of core MLG concepts and frameworks highlights the core arguments put forth by proponents of MLG approaches in comparative politics, IR, or global studies: the need to analytically broaden perspectives on how governance is arranged and conducted in a more complex, interconnected world, regardless of the analytical levels observed and the issue of the underlying legitimacy of governing structures and processes. The following sections present a discussion of the issues and challenges involved in applying an MLG framework to investigative topics in the IR literature.

Global governance (and beyond)—application of MLG to IR

Governance issues have increasingly gained prominence in IR and comparative politics research. In part this is a reaction to the challenges prompted by new transformative challenges of increased internationalization, transnationalization, globalization yet also regionalization and emergence of governance networks above and below the state-level of analysis so prominent in IR and comparative politics research frameworks. The failure of existing frameworks to adequately capture and explain these transformation processes has prompted the need to look into adapting or developing new research frameworks (e.g., McGinnis, 1999) and to explain “governance without government” (Rhodes, 1996; Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992).

Whereas MLG has been most prominently applied in EU studies, the potential to apply the framework to other areas in IR and comparative politics research has become apparent. Methodologically, the MLG framework is attractive because of its interdisciplinary nature, and its ability to connect central-state or government models of governance with decentralized organizational and geographical hierarchies. The k-adic and multilevel focus of MLG studies contrasts with the often predominantly dyadic relationship structure of IR analyses and also seems attractive for questions of governance in terms of security analyses as part of IR research. The established mainstream IR view dominated by realist and liberal approaches has been challenged increasingly in

the last decades, resulting in new analytical frameworks that apply an altogether different set of lenses to look at what “makes the world” and what “makes it hang together” (Ruggie, 1998b), as well as the form and agency of the (nation-) state as a (in some views former) core constituent element of “the world” (Cerny, 2010; Dreyfus, Rabinow, & Foucault, 1983; Ferguson, 2015; McCourt, 2016; Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992; Solomon & Steele, 2016; J. Sterling-Folker, 2015; Tickner, 2005; Wendt, 1999). The following sections outline the discussions regarding core concepts relevant to any application of MLG to IR, namely sovereignty and the nation-state and their role in constituting the “international” system and its conceptual variants; anarchy as the core systemic logic; the agency of actors within polities transcending traditional boundaries of governance; and the levels of analysis under investigation when studying particular issue areas, followed by brief introduction to examples of the application of MLG to concrete issue areas in IR of particular interest to students of governance.

Contested IR concepts of “what makes,” “the world,” and “hang together”

IR as a field has seen various challenges to its two dominant schools of thought, realism and liberalism and their respective “neo” variations, in the past decades. John Ruggie provided early in the debate a still relevant discussion of the core differences in assumptions of the schools, arguing for a basic divide of “neo-utilitarianism” and its social constructivist challenge⁷ in his question of “what makes the world hang together” (Ruggie, 1998a). A common understanding of the drawing of formal and informal boundaries—and thus structures—is essential for any application of MLG approach to IR in light of the “levels” that apply in IR as well as the respective actors partaking in the governance of the collective under scrutiny. Yet, even seemingly broadly uncontested IR concepts such as “sovereignty” or the “international system” have been challenged in recent decades from various epistemological sides. Therefore, it is necessary to draw a rough—if naturally incomplete—sketch of the main aspects of conceptual discussions that influence the assumptions various IR analysts make in determining “what makes” (i.e., the underlying processes) “the world” (i.e., the vertical and horizontal conceptual boundaries of a polity) “hang together” (i.e., assumptions about basis of agency of actors and institutionalization in a broader sense).

All of these contested concepts in the analysis of particular issue areas such as global governance, security or the interaction of actors in the global economy challenge mainstream realist/liberal IR approaches and their analytical tools at the very basis: what constitutes “the world”; how this world is established in the first place (“what makes”); and how it is institutionalized (“hang together”). Authors who are interested in questions of governance mainly focus on the last part in their analysis in trying to determine how a particular polity is structured and consequently how agency unfolds within it. However, it is critical to establish a common ground and understanding of the first and second parts in order to have a good empirical grasp of the polity under study. MLG as an analytical framework potentially provides the possibility to establish such common analytical ground for IR students particularly well, as it addresses all of the contested concepts with an analytical toolbox that helps students to investigate issue areas beyond the

⁷Ruggie argues that both, liberalism and realism “share a view of the world of international relations in utilitarian terms: an atomistic universe of self-regarding units whose identity is assumed given and fixed, and who are responsive largely if not solely to material interests that are stipulated by assumption” in contrast to constructivism, which “attributes to ideational factors, including culture, norms, and ideas, social efficacy over and above any functional utility” probing the identity as well interests of actors, allowing for their agency as “reflective acts of social creation, within structured constraints” (Ruggie, 1998a, pp. 3–4). For a broader discussion on constructivism, see Guzzini & Leander (2006); Wendt (1999); McCourt (2016). For a discussion on the development of the “neo” variants of realism and liberalism, see Keohane (1986); Nye (1988). For a general discussion on IR theory and its development, see J. A. Sterling-Folker (2013); C. Elman & Elman (2002).

limited levels of analysis and conceptualization of agency in IR while sharing its epistemological and methodological base.

Sovereignty

IR theory has long treated the concept of sovereignty as a binary, fixed, and constant assumption. Sovereignty has commonly been used in four different ways in the literature: (1) within a state as *domestic sovereignty*; (2) across states as *interdependence sovereignty*; (3) the foundation of its legal construct through mutual recognition of states as *international legal sovereignty*; and (4) the basis of the notion of exclusion of external actors from domestic authority configurations, the *Westphalian sovereignty* (Stephen D. Krasner, 1999; Stephen D Krasner, 2001, pp. 6–7). This view of sovereignty has since been challenged for quite some time now, arguing that sovereignty should be viewed as a variable rather than as a constant and therefore that the state as a basic analytic unit should be scrutinized in international relations theory (Barkin & Cronin, 1994, p. 108). In this view, sovereignty as a legal-political concept may perhaps best be described along a continuum of the various aspects the concept aims to capture, such as a set of legal rights toward both the peers and the subjects of the polity; sovereignty as power or control, whether envisaged in political, economic, or symbolical terms; sovereignty as legitimacy, especially since the rise of debates on popular sovereignty; and sovereignty as personality, entailing a certain number of duties and obligations for those claiming it (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Adler-Nissen, 2008, p. 3). The one thing most authors can agree on is the contested nature of sovereignty, both in conceptual terms and its practice and the importance of the state as its primary vessel. The MLG framework provides by now a thoroughly developed framework needed for the analysis of a system that features new “forms” or “facets” of sovereignty beyond a state-based, anarchical view.

The state

The (nation-) state has subsequently been and for many observers still is viewed as the core for determining units of analysis in IR theory for a long time, as previously discussed (Drezner, 2008; Stephen D. Krasner, 1999). Max Weber’s classic separation of sovereign “territorial states” over which institutional authorities exercise legitimate control and “nations” as “communities of sentiment” (M. Weber, 1980, Kapitel 8, §5) has been unified in the concept of the nation-state in IR theory. The Western nation-state now dominates both in theory and practice as a model of an organizational principle that constitutes the core of the “international system” viewed from mainstream IR theory. It is based on the two distinct historical processes of *state-building*, the construction of public institutions through which to exercise public authority on a given territory; and *nation-building*, the formation of a popular identity through which to create a sense of belonging among that territory’s inhabitants (Fabbrini, 2007, p. 21). The concept of the state as a unit of analysis in this context, however, is far from enjoying common analytical agreement (Claude Jr, 1988; Shaw, 2000; D. A. Smith, Solinger, Topik, & University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, 1999; Spruyt, 1994; Tilly, 1990). The state in its multiple gestations as the basis of “public” agency in contrast to that of “private” or “society-centered” actors might be a better suited distinction when applying MLG to IR analysis.⁸

⁸For a broad discussion of the concept of the state that includes multiple paradigmatic lenses, see Hay, Lister, & Marsh (2006). For a more traditional IR view, see Claude Jr (1988). For a long-term historical perspective on the development of the modern state that also makes this case, see Fukuyama (2011); Fukuyama (2014).

The international system

What constitutes “the world,” viewed from an IR perspective, has been constantly evolving as part of development of IR theory in the last decades, with the perception of the rise in importance of additional actors such as IGOs, transnational networks (e.g., regions, municipal) from the public side (Haas, 1964; Hasenclever et al., 1997; Hurrelmann, Leibfried, Martens, & Mayer, 2007; Stephen D. Krasner, 1983), as well as multinational firms, NGOs, transnational activist groups and networks and even individual actors (Colaś, 2002; Hansen & Mitchell, 2001; Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner, 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Helen V Milner & Moravcsik, 2009; Rodman, 2001; Stopford, Strange, & Henley, 1991; Strange, 1996) from the private side.

All three elements—“what makes,” “a world,” and “hang together”—have been challenged by what is generally described as globalization (Bröchler, Lauth, & Simonis, 2008; Cerny, 1995; Hurrelmann et al., 2007; Jessop, 2002; Mann, 1997; Mittelman, 2000; Wight, 2013). In this view, globalization weakens the dominance of the territorial nation-state while at the same time empowering non-state actors and their possibility for agency in a transforming global—rather than “international”—system with new boundaries and hierarchies no longer mostly drawn and/or controlled by states. Consequently, the centrality of the nation-state as the core determinant of the level of analysis—and subsequently other/alternative levels—has been challenged from various directions, arguing for a recognition of the changes in the role and shape of nation-states, the introduction of new levels of analysis and focus on new actors up to the need for the development of new theoretical paradigms entirely (Andersen, 2012; Cerny, 2010; Clark, 1999; Gill & Mittelman, 1997; Mittelman, 2004; Rosenau, 2006; Shaw, 2000; Solomon & Steele, 2016; Wendt, 1999). An MLG framework with its ability to synthesize interdisciplinary debates seems ideally suited to provide a common framework for the development of such a new paradigm.

Anarchy

Closely related to the issue of the centrality of the state in IR theory is the issue of anarchy—understood as a lack of legitimate and/or legal governing authority beyond the nation state within the international system—as the principal force shaping the agency of states and therefore a central element of the issue of “what makes” that world or the structure of the “international” system. The main point of contention and discussion between realist and liberal authors have been the assumptions both schools make regarding anarchy and the ability of processes and institutions to mitigate the presumed effects (or lack thereof) of constraining cooperation between states (Grieco, 1988; Lake, 1996). Whereas realists argue that anarchy produces a system of self-reliant states and therefore allows for only limited forms of cooperation between them, liberals have argued that such cooperation can be possible even in an anarchical system.

Alexander Wendt’s early critique of both schools’ reliance on anarchy as exogenously given rather than consensually constructed (Wendt, 1987, 1992) has been further refined and extended and resulted in a challenge of the centrality of anarchy as a core structural determinant of the international system not just from a constructivist perspective but others as well (Hobson & Sherman, 2005; Hurd, 1999; Lake, 2009; Mattern & Zarakol, 2016; Onuf & Klink, 1989; K. Weber, 2000). If one makes the assumption that “what makes” a world is the result of a negotiated process, the degrees of actors’ stakes in the negotiations and ability to consent or abstain from a consent of others become crucial questions that need to be addressed prior to investigations into governance. Seen from this viewpoint, the application of MLG to IR provides plenty of opportunities to investigate issue areas such as global and other forms of governance (see section “Issue areas of MLG application in IR” below).

Agency

The “agent-structure” problem has long been a source of contention in IR theory development and its empirical study (Klotz, 2006; Wendt, 1987; Wight, 1999). Questions about empirical agency are concerned with the degrees of freedom human beings have in concrete social systems (Thalos, 1999) and Ortner (2001) offers a useful distinction between agency as intention—agency as a process that is intrinsically goal-directed or purposive—and agency as power—the sense in which agency depends on the ability to realize one’s goals, to control outcomes in a certain direction—which are essentially different and can vary independently. Agency in this view can stem from both, individual and collective agents (Wendt, 2004) and therefore MLG as an approach has much to offer to IR analyses that aim to go beyond a state-centric view of agency in an extended “international system” that includes more actors along both vertical and horizontal scales of conceptual and empirical boundaries.

Levels of analysis

The most common levels of analysis accepted in the IR literature are the individual; state; and the international level, based on the Waltzian “three images” of “the man, the state, and the state system” (Waltz, 1979, 1959/2001). Today most authors would accept the inclusion of additional levels, such as group (e.g., firm) as a layer between the individual and state, and global/planetary level as an extension of the international level to allow for an inclusion of a broader set of actors. The main determinant of this hierarchy remains the sovereign nation-state, however, and which is used to determine both, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of polities that make up the “the world.”

Shifting from the more established actor-centered hierarchical levels of analysis to the three main levels of “politics, policy, and polity”, Piattoni (2010) argues that traditional IR/comparative theory focuses its analysis on three main “policy arrangements”: (X_1) center–periphery, (X_2) domestic–international; (X_3) public–private. MLG as a framework offers instead the following policy arrangements (Piattoni, 2010): (1) mobilization of subnational authorities at international level (combining X_1X_2); (2) mobilization of civil society at the international level (combining X_2X_3); (3) mobilization of civil society at subnational level (combining X_3X_1). Piattoni thus introduces two different kinds of “levels” into the analysis: levels of analysis as separate from levels based on territory and jurisdiction as governance levels (the “L” in MLG). This shift in perspective is important for a recognition of new types of agents and their type of agency that broadens the scope of traditional IR analyses when applying MLG as a framework for IR analysis.

The next section will discuss such applications to a set of issue areas that to varying degrees are grappling with issues of governance beyond the domestic domain. Global governance naturally sticks out as the most important one that directly lends itself to an MLG approach. Yet security as an issue domain provides also multiple opportunities for MLG applications especially when taking into account the conceptual broadening of conflict in IR that increasingly acknowledges the importance of non-state actors. IPE with its traditional focus on issues of regulation and the interplay between private and public actors and their agency also provides plenty of opportunities for an application of MLG. Even though some observers might argue that it merely represents a subset of issues that really are part of questions of global governance, it is included here as it represents an important section in the IR literature.

Issue areas of MLG application to IR

In aiming to “clarify” MLG conceptually in order to be able to better apply it as an analytical framework, Tortola (2016) argues that MLG has the largest potential outside of EU studies as a theory of state transformation and as a theory of public policy. Welch & Kennedy-Pipe (2004) while also highlighting the ambiguity of a fruitful application of MLG to IR, identify five issue areas in which MLG has been applied: (1) “the international system” (i.e., the coexistence of a plurality of states as well as the distribution of power among them); (2) “the role of supranational organizations;” (3) “international civil society” (consisting of social movements and non-governmental organizations); (4) “international civic norms” (global norms such as democracy and humanitarianism); and (5) “transnational threats and risks” (e.g., trafficking and terrorism). When divided up into the more traditional IR subfields, these five issue areas can broadly be divided up into the areas of global governance; security; and IPE.

Global governance

Perhaps the most common theme amongst students of global governance is their acknowledgment that even after more than twenty years after the introduction of the concept to the body of IR by Rosenau & Czempiel (1992), the field, as Hofferberth (2016) points out while featuring high “situational density” at the same time lacks “situational consensus” (Kaufer & Carley, 1993, pp. 204–5) and is heavily divided in terms of its foci, methodologies and even core conceptualizations of what global governance actually *is*, should be, and/or pertains to investigate (Finnemore, 2014; Hameiri & Jones, 2015; Sinclair, 2012).⁹ One definition provided by Weiss (2009) captures the understanding of global governance as a policy notion. Global governance in the words of Weiss refers to “collective efforts to identify, understand, or address worldwide problems that go beyond the capacities of individual states to solve; it reflects the capacity of the international system at any moment in time to provide government-like services in the absence of world government” (Weiss, 2009, p. 257) and thus for Weiss and others global governance has come to mean “world governance without world government and not a more generic analytical tool for understanding how the globe is organized” (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 208). In contrast, Dingwerth & Patberg (2006) constrain the meaning of global governance to be used conceptually as an analytical tool rather than as world government in disguise, whereas Karns, Mingst, & Stiles (2015) understand global governance as an empirical condition to track the transformation of the international system, contrasting it with global government, emphasizing it is not a single world order or a top-down, hierarchical structure of authority but rather the multilevel collection of governance-related activities, rules, and mechanisms, formal and informal, public and private, existing in the world today.

As Zürn (2010) points out, what is common to all uses of the term global governance is the notion that it is distinct from international anarchy and thus specific to IR. Global governance through the lenses of MLG, however, according to Zürn, requires two further conditions: (1) an autonomous global level that is more than just intergovernmental coordination with no delegation of powers to spheres outside the member states; and (2) it needs to be shown that the governance system includes either functional and/or stratified differentiation in which the global level must be part of a system that is characterized by the interplay of different levels rather than work independently from other governance levels (Zürn, 2010, p. 81). Once these conditions apply, MLG provides an attractive framework of analysis especially in contrast to ones solely or mostly fix-

⁹For conceptual critiques of global governance from a variety of directions, see Latham (1999); Finkelstein (1995); Weiss & Wilkinson (2014). For a broad review of the evolution of the concept in IR theory, see Hofferberth (2016).

ated on sovereign state-centric governance or institutionalization-oriented variants, being able to take into account, both, the continued significant role states play in many circumstances while also placing additional actors and their agency in a comprehensive analytical framework. This is especially important to distinguish global governance as an empirically identifiable and unique form of governance based on “authority relationships” (Scharpf, 2009) as it lacks a fully institutionalized central policy coordination locale or institution.

Analyses of internet governance such as Rioux & Fontaine-Skronski (2015), Mueller (2010), or Raymond & DeNardis (2015) provide good examples of the need for and potential of the application of explicit MLG frameworks in this part of global governance. Drezner (2004) for example raises the importance of the need to include both, public and private actors without discounting the advantages and divergent interests public governance actors hold over non-public ones in this area (see also Epstein, 2013; Nocetti, 2015; Shen, 2016).

Security

The importance of incorporating a multi-level analysis of the governance of security—acknowledging perhaps the drawbacks of an previously strong state-centric bend—has long been established in the IR literature. Knopf (1993) for example has demonstrated the utility of such a framework in his analysis of U.S.-Soviet negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in the 1980s. Colaš & Mabee (2010) provide a good example of the long-standing issue of private forms of organized violence and how it is intertwined with public forms. Especially Abrahamsen & Williams (2010) make the case that “far from being ‘illicit,’ security privatization as a form of private authority is at the heart of networks of global governance and is crucial to an understanding of contemporary international politics” (235). The authors point out that for a proper analysis of these networks, the key is to recognize the complex relationships between private security and public authority, and the way in which the authority of these various networks arises from a combination of different sources, both public and private and the need not just to focus on formal institutional forms of authority but also informal ones and their normative basis of legitimacy.

Another example is the multilevel governance of maritime security (e.g., Hameiri & Jones, 2015; Kern & Löffelsend, 2008). The increasing importance of cyberwar (Christou, 2016; Cordesman, 2002; Eun & Aßmann, 2016; P. Shakarian, Shakarian, & Ruef, 2013)¹⁰, outer-space activity (Aganaba-Jeanty, 2016; Garretson, 2008; Gupta, 2016; Hebert, 2014; Launius, 2009) and digital technology-related security issues (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Dunn, Mauer, & Krishna-Hensel, 2007; Heintze & Thielbörger, 2016) also highlight the need to cast a broader net to capture a wider set of actors and hierarchal levels for a thorough understanding of the governance of security in these realms. MLG is an ideal framework for such an analysis as it allows for an explicit and empirically-based inclusion of the various authority levels, jurisdictions, as well as governance system architecture and membership.

IPE

The issues under study in IPE lend themselves especially well to the use of MLG as a framework as they often involve issues of governance and by definition beyond the domestic realm of a singular political economy. A good example is a new study by Newman & Posner (2016), in which the authors highlight the importance of “soft law” on the regulatory frameworks not only guiding, but also structuring behavior and norms (and thus agency) in global finance. While explicitly employing a “New Interdependence Approach,” the analysis presents an application of MLG in all

¹⁰For a critical view on cyberwarfare as a “new” form of security threat, see Rid (2011).

but name and demonstrates the possibilities of explicitly employing a MLG framework that unites a diverse body of theoretical and methodological research tradition with a common focus on issues of governance. The authors acknowledge the success of the existing literature in regard to the analysis of the impact of soft law on the creation of formal and informal governance structures but aim to address the underestimation of the “political impact and transformative potential of international soft law over time” (2).

The MLG framework as presented here (see the MLG section on “Governance” especially) would allow them to investigate this political and transformative impact, connecting not only the diverse literature strings in soft law but also tying to the existing literature(s) in IR that focus on agency. Keohane (2009) has previously alerted to the development of a “new IPE” that is more “rigorous” in its approach, integrating comparative and international political economy into a common framework (Cohen, 2008; see also Germain, 2009). MLG thus has the potential to connect an existing yet diverse body of literatures that emphasize either hierarchy or a broader set of actors of relevance in the IPE literature previously unconnected under a common analytical framework.

Environmental governance analyses such as Bache, Bartle, Flinders, & Marsden (2015) or Kern & Bulkeley (2009) are good examples of the potential of applying MLG frameworks to the analysis of this issue area common in the IPE literature. Early on, Litfin (1997) or Keohane & Ostrom (1995) have highlighted the need to extend frameworks that study the governance in this area beyond the established and state-centric models common in the IR literature, arguing for an inclusion of soft and hard law and multi-stakeholder participation and agency in the governance process that a MLG framework explicitly aims to capture. Other fruitful areas include, as highlighted above, financial regulation (Baker, Hudson, & Woodward, 2005) and also the study of social movements (Marks & McAdam, 1996).

In order for MLG frameworks to be successfully applied to existing IR fields of inquiry a number of important empirical considerations arise, however. The following section discusses some of the main common methodological issues involved in applying MLG frameworks to IR and which tools already exist or need to be further developed for a successful application of MLG frameworks beyond EU studies to other governance issues in IR and comparative politics research.

Empirical considerations — methodologies and tools

An important aspect of any attempt to apply a MLG approach to IR analyses is the ability to use widely accepted methodologies and analytical tools that are compatible and consistent across existing IR and MLG frameworks. Early attempts in doing so have provided some basis for such applications, albeit in a modular fashion (Heinelt, Getimis, Kafkalas, Smith, & Swyngedouw, 2002; F. W. Scharpf, 1999). Scharpf (2001) for example argues that even the main focus of MLG, the EU and its polity, are too complex as a multilevel institutional configuration to be adequately represented by theoretical models that are generally used in IR or comparative politics, let alone “based on holistic concepts,” instead proposing “a modular approach using a plurality of simpler concepts representing different modes of multilevel interaction which are characteristic of subsets of European policy processes” (20). Such criticism of MLG as a single-bodied significant research framework to study the EU, let alone its applicability as an IR framework, has been argued most forcefully by Jordan (2001) who states seven key criticisms of multi-level governance as applied to the European Union—(1) MLG is nothing new, but an amalgam of existing theories; (2) descriptive rather than theoretical; (3) overstating the autonomy of subnational actors; (4) adopting a top-down model of subnational actors; (5) limited subnational actor focus; (6) confusion of mobilization with influence; (7) ignores the international level of interaction—that also render the applicability of MLG as an IR framework of little value. Echoing this critique, George (2004), in

a discussion of Jordan's seven criticisms of multi-level governance, argues that "multi-level governance is identical to neofunctionalism in the hypotheses that it generates, because it is nothing more than a partial restatement of neofunctionalism without the functionalism" (p. 116). At the same time, however, George acknowledges the modularity ("an amalgam of existing theories") of MLG as research approach not as a critique, per se, but as a "true comment, although scarcely a criticism" (p. 125) and disputes most of Jordan's critique in his discussion of MLG models, except for the missing inclusion of international interaction processes and the limitations of inclusion of subnational actors. Partially as a response to this critique, more comprehensive MLG models have been put forward that aim to specifically integrate MLG and IR models (e.g., Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen (2012); Zürn (2013); Enderlein et al. (2010); Piattoni (2010); Bartolini (2007)).

Problems of measurement persist, however. Fukuyama (2013) raises an important issue in his discussion on poor state of empirical measures of the "quality of states." He argues, that it is necessary to develop measures that aim to capture the interaction between capacity and autonomy as measure for quality of government. Yet, the challenge here is not to find some measure of governance output, but rather to aim to capture "the attributable incremental contribution of the service to the outcome" (Atkinson, 2005, p. 42) as a measure of the contribution of the governance actors. In addition, it is important to aim to capture both, agency intent as well as power when measuring the contributions of respective actors. Whereas agency as intention must be judged *ex ante*, by the content of an actor's goals, agency as power can only be judged *ex post*, after completion of the intention (Wendt, 2005). What are needed, then, are measures that allow to differentiate the "incremental contributions" of all governance actors both in terms of intent and ability to implement.

Extending Fukuyama's argument, Holt & Manning (2014) argue that the best way to measure state capacity is to center attention on internal measures rather than what government achieves, with a focus on five core management systems: (1) procurement; (2) public financial management; (3) tax administration; (4) public administration; and (5) civil service and public information. Employing these measures within a MLG framework and—if necessary—extending the agency beyond public agents, it is thus possible to capture a more accurate picture of both elements, capacity (in the interaction with different-level public agents and/or public-private networks or in some cases even private governance bodies for public problems) and autonomy (again looking at the interaction of different-level public agents and/or public-private networks) in an interdisciplinary manner using established measures. What follows is a discussion of examples of common pools of data and commonly employed methodologies that could help establish MLG as a single research framework employed by a range of interdisciplinary scholars to help establish a common IR research paradigm.

MLG datasets—measuring governance

There certainly is no lack of different government performance measures (e.g., Kárpáti (2012); Giselquist (2014)). For the purpose of establishing a comparable and replicable measurement tool for governance in a multilevel context, the Indicators of the Strength of Public Management Systems (ISPMS)¹¹ as one of the pillars of the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP)¹² and established by the World Bank in partnership with a range of other public and private stakeholders are good examples of how a set of indicators similar to those available in other IR research can be established. From a MLG perspective, the ISPMS and EIP are especially attractive, as they allow for the inclusion of activity across the various governance levels and thus different governance agents rather than just on the outcome as well as the possible inclusion of and compatibility with non-public

¹¹For further information on the ISPMS and the dataset, see ISPMS (2016).

¹²For further information on the EIP, see Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) (2016).

civil-society agents performance measures and have a relatively wide range of acceptance in the literature and by practitioners themselves.

Network-analysis, games, and multilevel analysis

Methods beyond the “standard fare” of political science research (quantitative/qualitative/mixed methods; case studies) and employed in IR that can be well integrated as methodologies as part of an MLG framework include network analysis (Blatter, 2003; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, & Montgomery, 2009; Kahler, 2009), rational choice approaches using n-level games (Knopf, 1993; König, Tsebelis, & Debus, 2010; Lake & Powell, 1999; Scharpf, 1997), and multilevel analysis (Lazega & Snijders, 2016). Mann (1997) serves as a good example of applying a network-analysis methodology that features many elements of an MLG approach without explicitly mentioning the framework itself, whereas Curry (2015) specifically includes the methodology in his MLG framework. Poast (2016) is a good example for the need to expand existing methodologies when the research question demands it and aims to capture a more pronounced picture of agency-structure interaction using network-analysis methodologies in IR even if the focus remains on states as core actors. The analysis of the EU’s FTA strategies by Ki-Sik Hwang & Hyun-Jung Kim (Spring/Summer 2014) or Patterson (1993) early study of European agricultural policy development provide good demonstrations of the application of multi-level games, extending the original method put forth by Putnam (1988) and applied in earlier examples such as Collinson (1999).

Conclusion

Albeit lacking a common systematic and methodological core, MLG frameworks have increasingly found their way into the regular IR literature beyond their main area of application in EU studies. The MLG approach is attractive as a framework for IR scholars because of its ability to span different analytical and geographical levels and because they make it possible to capture dynamic arrangements of governance involving a diverse, at times evolving and shifting set of actors and structures. This makes MLG an ideal framework for issues of governance especially in the areas of global governance, IPE, but also has shown potential for its application in security studies.

This increased use of MLG in IR research might also be a result of the increased issue-framing in IR as a governance problem that previously were seen as, say, a technology/science issue in IPE or as a regulatory issue that was better observed using a legalistic perspective. The increased use of interdisciplinary approaches and the resulting need for new, theoretically and methodological more inclusive analytical frameworks has made MLG an attractive option for scholars from all epistemological traditions—positivist, structuralist, and constructivist—alike.

The attractiveness of applying a MLG framework to the issue of global governance is easily apparent. With its newfound prominence, however, the now widely used concept of global governance in the IR literature is in danger of becoming an umbrella-term under which many disparate phenomena are subsumed and as a result may lose all denotative precision and therefore become conceptually “over-stretched” (Sartori, 1970), especially if pursued outside of a common “rationalist research paradigm” that has unified previously paradigmatically distinct research programs that differentiated the study of politics within and outside of the state (Helen V. Milner, 1998). Applying a MLG framework to the study of global governance could help remedy this problem.

It would be overstating the reach of MLG to describe it as an established IR concept outside of comparative politics and especially EU studies, especially in light of the fact, that even some applications today do not explicitly frame their analysis as such. In other words, it has not garnered

enough common critical mass to be considered a full, single IR paradigm alongside the established mainstream realist and liberal approaches. Given the trends of increased use of interdisciplinary and methodologically more diverse research outlined above it certainly has the potential to develop into one, however.

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