The Meaning(s) of Norms in a Post-Hegemonic World: Bringing Ambiguity and Polysemy into Global Governance Research

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Abstract: In this short article, we propose a research agenda on norm meaning in world politics. Norm scholarship in International Relations (IR), as it currently stands, remains underdeveloped regarding the ontological and conceptual foundations and the normative evaluation of contested norm meanings. To address this shortcoming, we problematize norm meaning and suggest a distinction between norm ambiguity and norm polysemy. Ambiguity is the built-in potential of norms to allow for different meanings. Polysemy is the actualization of this potential, in which norms are enacted against the background of different discursive contexts. Based on this reconceptualization, the meaning(s) of norms appear as eluding absolute control by actors. Instead, ambiguity and polysemy are inescapable conditions of contemporary global governance. This perspective makes it possible not only to theorize norm meaning and its practical repercussions, but also its normative implications in a post-hegemonic world. On this basis, we propose a three-tiered research agenda on norm meaning: (1) empirical research on the variety of meanings; (2) normative theorizing on the implications and desirability of norm ambiguity; and (3) innovative thinking about institutional designs which can realize the positive normative potential of norm ambiguity in global governance.

Keywords: international norms, meaning, ambiguity, ethics, global governance
Introduction

It is hard to quarrel with the claim that liberal hegemony is eroding, and that this trend tears at the normative fabric of global governance. While non-Western powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey are challenging liberal conceptions of global order by building alternative institutions and by contesting some of the paramount principles upon which Western hegemony has been built, the rise of anti-liberal forces inside the West means that the challenge comes from within as much as from without. To be sure, there is not a lot of evidence pointing in the direction of a complete overhaul of the normative architecture of global governance. Given the high degree of institutionalization and the multilateral anchoring of the liberal international order, it is unlikely that established norms will disappear completely and be replaced by entirely new ones. However, the decline of Western hegemony is accompanied by increasing contestation over the meaning of key international norms. That is, there is less and less certainty that all actors mean the same thing when they invoke individual norms such as the Responsibility to Protect, or norm sets such as those surrounding sovereignty, multilateralism, international law, or human rights. As a result, debates over the meaning(s) and interpretation(s) of norms will become a central issue for global governance and norm research in the years to come.

We suggest that norm research in IR is currently not well equipped to meet this challenge. The current debates on norm meaning(s) are underdeveloped regarding both the ontological and conceptual foundations and the normative evaluation of diverging norm meanings. With a few exceptions, all current theoretical approaches are based on an essentialist understanding of norms. By consequence, considerations of the politics of norm meanings have remained narrowly confined to questions of the instrumental value of norm determinacy and indeterminacy for the legitimacy or effectiveness of global governance. Legalist perspectives assume that ambiguous norms are problematic because they raise uncertainty about future behavior and stable expectations – the very condition norms are supposed to help overcome. Indeterminacy is considered a defect in need of remedy by means of the formalization of ever-more specific rules for social interaction. Other approaches see indeterminacy as a tool which

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actors can strategically deploy to realize their interests or forge consensus, or advocate norm contestation as a way of making world politics more democratic.

Our argument is that these views lack a coherent conceptualization of how norm meaning is constituted. By bracketing this question, IR norms research has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of norms in international politics. However, it has also narrowed the scope of norms research, foreclosing an investigation of certain aspects of norms and international norm dynamics. Most fundamentally, the very constitution of norm meaning has remained invisible, an omission which affects the conceptual core of the concept of norms – and therefore of the central object of study of norm research. As a consequence, norms research has occasionally (e.g. strategic ambiguity), and recently also more consistently (viz. contestation research), touched upon some of the symptoms of the semantic qualities of norms, but it has not systematically engaged with the conditions of norm meaning generation itself. Processes of meaning-making, the sources of divergent norm meanings – what we call norm polysemy and norm ambiguity – and the normative (in the sense of ethical) implications of the politics of norm meaning – including the role of power – have largely been neglected by norms research. This conceptual and ontological deferral has manifested in international norm theories that overestimate the degree of control international actors hold over the meaning of norms.

In order to address these shortcomings, we offer two reconceptualizations: first, at the ontological level, we draw on poststructuralist and postcolonial norm research to advocate an understanding of norm meaning that breaks up the dichotomy between norm clarity and norm ambiguity and shows that all meaning(s) of norms are inherently ambiguous. More specifically, we argue that the diversity and co-existence of different norm interpretations – what we call norm polysemy – is not (just) a matter of norm quality or dependent on linguistic precision. Instead, it results from two sources: first, a combination of the inherent openness of language, which induces an indeterminacy of meaning – what we call norm ambiguity – and second, a pluralization of interpretive contexts in international society. This perspective provides a profound skepticism regarding the extent to which norm ambiguity is a matter of choice, something that can simply be ‘governed away’ through the codification and specification of rules. The openness of norms to different interpretations is neither an occasionally occurring problem nor an instrument at the disposition of actors. Tracing norm polysemy to the interplay of the inherent ambiguity of norm meanings and structural conditions of international society enables norm researchers to accept ambiguity as an inescapable feature of global governance in a post-hegemonic world.
Second, building on these ontological clarifications, we recast the debate about the normative implications of norm ambiguity. We caution against both post-hegemonic angst, according to which norm indeterminacy will lead to disorder and ethical relativism, and the instrumental view of contestation as increasing legitimacy and effectiveness. Both these views ultimately see polysemy as problematic and defer the politics and power relations inherent in attempts to fix the meanings of essentially indeterminate norms. Our paper instead opens up analytical space to explore the positive normative potential of norm ambiguity. Because ambiguity is a fundamental ontological feature of all norms, it is neither good nor bad a priori. Instead, we suggest, the waning of liberal hegemony provides an opportunity to critically rethink how modes of governance can channel norm ambiguity productively in a way that accommodates normative disagreement and facilitates the agonistic enactment of difference.

Our argument proceeds in three steps: the following section recaptures existing International Relations (IR) literature on norm meaning and points to some important limitations. Section three develops our conceptual innovations, while the concluding section defines the central pillars of a research agenda centered on the meaning(s) of norms. This agenda is built on three pillars: (a) empirical research on the variety of meanings that different actors assign to nominally shared norms; (b) normative theorizing on the implications and normative desirability of norm ambiguity; and (c) innovative theorizing on institutional designs which can utilize the positive normative potential of norm ambiguity in global governance.

Recovering the meaning(s) of norms in International Relations theorizing

The question whether the ability of norms to induce cooperation is related to the clarity of their meaning has been one of the central issues within the IR debate about norms. The positions authors take in this discussion can be traced back to their meta-theoretical proclivities, with the main participants coming from either rationalist or social constructivist backgrounds. Within the rationalist strand of IR

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4 The former view is prevalent, albeit often implicit, in many contributions in the current debate about the potential demise of what is usually described as the liberal world order, see e.g. Michael J. Boyle, ‘The coming illiberal order’, Survival 58, no. 2: 35–66; Ulrich Speck, ‘The crisis of liberal order’, The American Interest, 12 September 2016, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/09/12/the-crisis-of-liberal-order/. The latter view is expounded in more detail in the following section.

5 Here, we refer to the ‘mainstream’ strand of constructivism, which generally assumes that an intersubjective consensus over meaning, over ‘adequate’ correspondence between concepts and empirical referents, is possible both in scientific inquiry and among the actors themselves. Insofar as this strand deals with international norms, it focuses on questions of norm emergence, institutionalization and compliance. For examples, see Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics and Political Change’, International Organization 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917; Thomas Risse, ed., The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). This interpretation is
scholarship, those adopting a (neo-)realist perspective usually see the question as meaningless because an essential feature of the anarchical states system is the uncertainty it produces, which cannot be remedied by norms at all. Power and hegemony, in this view, are the only forces which can induce cooperation.

By contrast, authors working within a rationalist but broadly neo-liberal institutionalist tradition frequently argue that norms facilitate cooperation because they constitute expectations about the behavior of potential partners and thereby reduce uncertainty. The more precisely norms are formulated, the better they will be at informing the calculations of international actors, stabilizing their expectations and directing them towards collaborative behavior. Imprecise norms, in this view, lead to imperfect information. They increase transaction costs and make enforcement through sanctions difficult because it is hard to determine whether a party has complied with agreements or not. By consequence, norm imprecision may lead to unintended effects, subversion and, ultimately, the breaking down of cooperation. To remedy these dangers, authors working within this tradition have treated legalization, understood as the specification and codification of binding rules, as an important prerequisite for international cooperation. In this view, norm precision (or determinacy) is and should be one of the defining features of international law and institutions. Any residual interpretative differences can and should be resolved by means of legal discourse and analysis, or by investing interpretive power in an independent judicial body, such as international courts and tribunals. Put simply, difference in meaning ought to be ‘governed away’.

Authors coming from a social constructivist orientation have challenged this position. Their basic argument is that the narrow technocratic approach taken by neo-liberal institutionalists only partly captures how norms – and, by implication, the international cooperation which builds on them – are reproduced as well as how they affect international politics and cooperation. They highlight that formal legalization is not the only or even necessarily the most important source of international law. In their

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view, informal practices, arguing and general beliefs about legitimacy and rightful conduct are important sources of international normativity.\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, norm-guided practice does not presuppose precision. To the contrary, precision can even have negative effects, for example by discouraging states from entering what they perceive as inflexible regimes or hegemonic frameworks imposed by powerful outsiders.\textsuperscript{11} Formulations that are open to different interpretations, by contrast, may foster consensus among actors with a range of different predispositions.\textsuperscript{12} This point of ‘constructive ambiguity’ is stressed, for example, in analyses of the European Union’s (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy\textsuperscript{13} and the European Constitution process\textsuperscript{14}, which both exhibit imprecise formulations – but precisely for this reason managed to integrate the different views of the EU member states under a common framework.

The vast literature on norm contestation, translation and diffusion, which emerged from a critical engagement with mainstream social constructivist norm research, has developed these ideas further. Rejecting the idea of a linear norm cycle, in which norms emerge through argument and persuasion are gradually formalized and diffused internationally until their regulative effects cause significant shifts in state behaviour,\textsuperscript{15} the starting point of these approaches is the observation of continuous disagreement over the meaning of norms.\textsuperscript{16} In this view, norms are contested ‘by default’.\textsuperscript{17} The underlying assumption is that the emergence of global governance has lifted rule-making and application out of the relatively homogenous cultural framework of the nation-state. International norms and their meanings are agreed upon in global elite communities but interpreted, negotiated and applied in the context of highly diverse cultural frameworks, which helps create a fit with local ideational predispositions. This process may drive norm diffusion, but also carries with it the potential for misunderstanding and resistance in global


\textsuperscript{11} Finnemore and Toope ‘Alternatives to Legalization’; Widmaier and Glanville, ‘The Benefits of Norm Ambiguity’.

\textsuperscript{12} Van Kersbergen, ‘The Politics of International Norms’.


\textsuperscript{15} Finnemore and Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics’.


governance. Rather than taking Western liberal interpretations of norms at face value, the contestation literature therefore suggests that norm research should look at the way in which norms and norm meanings are negotiated, translated and/or localized in ongoing interaction of state- and non-state actors on international and domestic levels. The normative core argument of this literature is that processes of norm building, socialization and application more inclusive - by increasing space for and access to contestation instead of relying on static interpretations - encourages continuous debate, which in turn may impact positively on their recognition and, by consequence, buttress the legitimacy of governance frameworks.

This distinction between neo-liberal institutionalists championing norm clarity and social constructivists as well as contestation scholars highlighting the benefits of interpretive openness is obviously a picture painted in very broad brush. On the one hand, some constructivist works also describe clarity and determinacy as an essential precondition for the legitimacy – and, by consequence, the effective functioning – of norm regimes. Vague norms increase the likelihood of contestation once they are adopted, which can be a challenge for governance structures and may therefore prompt actors to try and create more specific regimes to pin down a particular interpretation. On the other hand, authors working within a rationalist ontology have examined the phenomenon of ‘incomplete contracting’ – the inclusion of vague language or provisions which are open to re-negotiation in international agreements – and found that it may be conducive to cooperation because it better reflects actors’ preferences in complex environments and uncertain futures. Precision might also be detrimental from a rationalist


point of view, for it creates loopholes and leads to over-complex provisions, which are vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by those few experts who understand them.  

Despite their differences, however, all three approaches assume that actors can collectively determine the meaning of norms in more or less specific ways by opting either for a formal-bureaucratic approach to cooperation, which is supposed to eliminate interpretive differences, or a more flexible, political approach. Choosing the latter, actors may, for example, strategically include vague terms in international agreements. They may also create inclusive international institutions as a way to encourage deliberation. This perspective foregrounds the effectiveness of using ambiguity instrumentally as a way of maximizing either individual actors’ gains, consensus during negotiations, or general norm compliance. Insofar as there is a normative evaluation, it accounts for norms as a means for realizing other values such as cooperation, peace and consensus. As it were, the precision of norm meaning is merely an intervening variable or, from a normative point of view, a means to the end of increasing the legitimacy or effectiveness of global governance.

While work under this broad paradigm has generated invaluable insights into the connection between the meaning of norms and the legitimacy of global governance, it leaves open a number of important questions. Above all, if norm meanings can be collectively determined in more or less specific ways, does this imply that behind a layer of contested meaning, there is an ‘essential’ meaning to every norm that actors (as well as observers) can approximate to, or deviate from, as they wish? That certainly seems at odds with the constructivist ontological notion that meaning is a contingent social construction, that there is no meaning apart from meaning-in-use. If, on the other hand, interpretative openness is not simply the result of a conscious deviation from a given, ‘essential’ meaning, where does it come from in the first place? Critical norm research has highlighted that even the contestation literature, which is arguably most aware of the ubiquity of diverging norm interpretations, ultimately relies on an essentialist understanding of norms. As Niemann and Schillinger conclude in a critique of Antje Wiener’s pioneering work on norm contestation, “while the argument begins with an explicit rejection of an

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24 Chayes and Chayes, ‘On compliance’, 193. Those concerned with ‘strategic ambiguity’ would also argue that individual actors – though not the entirety of parties involved – can also benefit from an agreement with imprecise provisions because it allows them to reap the benefits of asymmetric information and realize higher relative gains than in cases of full transparency, see Karen J. Alter and Sophie Meunier, ‘The Politics of International Regime Complexity’, Perspectives on Politics 7, no. 01 (2009): 16; Kal Raustiala and David G. Victor, ‘The Regime Complex for Plant Genetic Resources’, International Organization 58, no. 02 (2004): 347.


26 This stance is developed comprehensively in Wiener, A theory of contestation.

ontologisation of norms as facts, the conceptual shift to cultural validation leads to a re-ontologisation of norms and a problematisation of contestation."\textsuperscript{28} By adopting the social constructivist definition of norms as shared standards of appropriate behavior, the contestation literature posits the researcher as an objective observer of the pre-existing identity of norms, and invites an epistemological stance that treats ambiguity as something problematic.\textsuperscript{29} To this epistemological point, we would add a conceptual shortcoming. That is, although the contestation literature emphasizes the dual quality of norms as structuring behavior and being structured by it, it fails to distinguish conceptually between the \textit{essential} indeterminacy or ‘contestedness’ of norm meanings (what we refer to as norm ambiguity) and contestation as a practice of \textit{enacting} meanings in different contexts (what we refer to as norm polysemy). This leads to a paradoxical stance which views contestation (in the sense of deliberating norm meanings in a Habermasian sense) as a means to overcome the conflictive potential of contestation (in the sense of stunted norm recognition and validation).

The postcolonial and poststructuralist critique concludes that mainstream norm research – in its legalistic, social constructivist and contestation variants – is epistemologically ill equipped to address the normative questions associated with the politics of ascribing, interpreting and negotiating norm meanings.\textsuperscript{30} In particular, it is incapable of exploring the potential normative value of ambiguity not just as a means to an end, but as something desirable \textit{in its own right}.\textsuperscript{31} Obviously, these epistemological blinkers are tied up with the specific explanatory and prescriptive orientation of mainstream theoretical engagements with norm meanings. The constitutive \textit{topos} defining their engagement with norms is the legitimacy and effectiveness of global governance, and the meaning of norms is always seen in relation to this principal concern. A foundational problematization of norm meanings as something inherently open could subvert this program and is therefore deferred by these approaches.

\textsuperscript{28} Holger Niemann and Henrik Schillinger, ‘Contestation “all the Way Down”? The Grammar of Contestation in Norm Research’, \textit{Review of international Studies} 43, no. 1, 29–49, pp. 39–40. Another example is the work of Krook and True, who list a number of potential effects of contestation, namely as expansion, deepening, misunderstanding, ignorance, reversion and emptying. All of them either presuppose or at least accept the possibility of norms having substantial – albeit malleable – meanings. See Krook and True, ‘Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms’, p. 109.

\textsuperscript{29} Finnemore and Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics’; Antje Wiener, \textit{A Theory of Contestation}; see the critique by Niemann and Schillinger, ‘Contestation “all the Way Down”?’.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{31} For a critique of the instrumental understanding of contestation, see Wolff and Zimmermann, ‘Between Banyans and Battle Scenes’.
To allow for a more critical take on these questions, Engelkamp and Glaab have called for a conceptual rethinking of norms “in a more reflective way that tolerates and even embraces normative ambiguity.”

The following section takes up this challenge, arguing that a coherent conceptualization of how norm meaning is constituted is necessary to lift the debate about the value of ambiguity out of its confinement to instrumentalist terms. To address this issue at the conceptual level and to open up new avenues in norms research, we propose an approach to norm meaning that is grounded in the distinction between norm ambiguity and norm polysemy.

**Conceptualizing norm ambiguity and norm polysemy**

Underlying most of the literature on the meaning(s) of norms in IR is the idea that the clarity of norm meaning depends on linguistic precision. However, philosophers of language and poststructuralist scholars from across the social sciences have challenged such an overly lexical approach to the construction of meaning from two angles. First, they point out that all meaning is principally indeterminate. Because all ‘signs’ (words, names, concepts) lack a definite ‘signified’ (empirical referent object), there is no objective and definite meaning hidden in language that actors could simply uncover through interpretation and deliberation. Instead, signs subsume multiple, equally valid meanings and can be understood to refer to different types of actions or practices. The meaning of linguistic concepts is only rendered actionable through their social enactment, in which actors temporarily ‘decide’ or ‘articulate’ its meaning – it is, in other words, always meaning-in-use beyond which no ultimate truth lies.

Since they are cast in language, this also applies to norms. According to the poststructuralist perspective, the ‘do’s and don’ts’ they entail can never be fully determined by an ‘essential’ meaning. Drawing on conceptual traditions in linguistics and the social sciences, we call this ultimate undecidability of meaning norm ambiguity. Borrowing from Wendt, an ambiguous norm is but a ‘potential’ (containing multiple potential meanings) and its concrete meanings – as well as the practices

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32 Engelkamp and Glaab, ‘Writing Norms’, p. 211; see also Niemann and Schillinger, ‘Contestation “all the Way Down”?'


36 Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, norms, and decisions: On the conditions of practical and legal reasoning in international relations and domestic affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

37 Alexander Wendt, *Quantum mind and social science: Unifying physical and social ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 216-217. Wendt makes this claim from a radically different, ‘physicalist’ perspective. To us, this shows that the approach to norm meaning we propose is not tied to any particular paradigm or ontology but, in principle, speaks to IR norms research across all IR paradigms.
they prescribe – cannot be determined independent from their actualization in practice. Consequently, enacting a norm contains an element of ‘decision’ which is not determined by the normative structure itself. By the same token, assessing norm-compliance under conditions of norm ambiguity is also never an objective practice, in which an impartial adjudicator determines whether an action falls within the perimeters of acceptable behavior as foreseen by the norm. Instead, assessing compliance always includes an element of deciding, and thereby actualizing – not simply interpreting in the sense of ‘clarifying’ – the meaning of an otherwise ambiguous norm.

The poststructuralist monition about the contingency and instability of all fixations of meaning provides a first reason for skepticism regarding the conceptualization of norm precision as being at the disposition of actors. Attempting to specify general principles through ever-more detailed prescriptions does not fundamentally alter, nor does it bring to a halt, the inherent ambiguity of normative language. Whilst technocratic rules and procedures can provide partial fixations of meaning, they still rely on contingent enactments in their application. Instead of ridding the international normative order from ambiguity, attempts at ‘governing away’ ambiguity through legalization will only give rise to new disputes over definitions and contestation. Efforts at resolving ambiguity by adding additional layers of norms are thus ‘both self-destructive and self-propelling’, since this only ever results in ‘yet more occasion for ambiguity’.

It is of course possible that legalization scholars contend themselves with the partial nature of such fixations. They may maintain that, notwithstanding the objections of poststructuralists, ‘governing it away’ as far as possible – i.e., suppressing polysemy by creating dominant interpretations and temporal fixations of meaning-in-use remains the best solution to the problem of norm ambiguity, even if these practices do not resolve the issue once and for all. After all, from a Western liberal perspective, this hegemonic approach to ambiguity has worked arguably well, for it has allowed the dominant powers to fix meaning according to their specific identities, interests and cultural experiences. Thus, acknowledging norm ambiguity as a fundamental condition of global governance does not per se alter the way in which we think about the meaning(s) of norms: the challenge posed by the waning of

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Western hegemony can simply be cast in terms of finding new hegemonic alliances to maintain – although in reinterpreted form – dominant meaning fixtures of norms.

However, besides indeterminacy following from the inherent openness of normative language, there is an additional way in which the meaning of norms is subverted. It stems from the fact that the enactment of norm meaning is not carried out in a social vacuum. Instead, it occurs in a discursive context; or rather contexts. These discourses provide cognitive frames or interpretive grids based on which actors can turn an ambiguous norm into meaning-in-use. If actors enact norms from within diverging discursive grids, this will result in norm polysemy, i.e. a plurality of meanings-in-use. Polysemy is therefore the parallel existence of different interpretations of a norm’s meaning. Ambiguity – the ultimate undecidability of norm meaning – in turn, is the condition of possibility of polysemy and it is a structural, to some extent inescapable, condition of global governance.

Adopting this contextual view of norm meaning is the second aspect of our reconceptualization. Its key implication is that when it comes to analyzing the structural consequences of the meaning(s) of norms in global governance, examining the social context of its institutionalization and enactment should assume priority over studying the supposed ‘substance’ of a norm or attributes such as its lexical precision. Indeed, the clarity meanings of a norm does not depend on the type of norm, that is, it does not decrease from fundamental principles to more specific rules and procedures, as most norm researchers assume. Rather, it depends on the degree of differentiation of the interpretive contexts within which actors enact norm meanings.

The de-centering of the global order, then, comes as a pluralization of discourses, and consequently of the interpretive grids that are available for enacting the meaning(s) of norms. This ‘cultural diversity’ of contemporary international society, and the implications for its normative fabric, is the main challenge for perspectives which see ambiguity as an instrumental tool at the disposal of actors. With the Western core no longer in a position to maintain hegemonic fixations of norm meaning, contemporary international society simply cannot draw on the kind of dominant cognitive frames that are necessary for ‘governing away’ ambiguity. The creeping fragmentation and regionalization of world politics inevitably increases norm polysemy.

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45 Cf. Wendt, Quantum mind and social science, 212-214.
Taken together, the concepts of norm ambiguity and norm polysemy open up new lines of investigation. The research agenda we have in mind puts the meaning(s) of norms at the center and, by adopting a contextual approach to norm meaning, it escapes the limitations imposed by the dichotomy of norm clarity versus ambiguity. We propose that norm scholars should be skeptical about the degree to which actors have control over norm meaning, whether norm meaning is ever fully at the disposition of actors. Instead, our perspective conceives of norm ambiguity and norm polysemy as inescapable feature of global governance in a post-hegemonic era.

Elements of a research agenda on norm ambiguity in global governance

From these conceptualizations follow three broad lines of investigation for a new research agenda on norm meaning and, necessarily, on the implications of norm ambiguity for global governance: first, and perhaps most obvious, there is a need to study norm polysemy empirically - we need more empirical research on the different meanings that old and new actors ascribe to specific international norms. In other words. The literature on norm contestation, in particular Wiener’s work on contested structures of meaning-in-use provides an important reference point for this endeavor in terms of both research design and conceptualization. For example, drawing on norm contestation approaches, Contessi has shown how China advocates a distinct reading of sovereignty and peacekeeping in international organizations,47 and Jose in her study of armed conflict norms has shown how the norms of non-intervention and civilian immunity are ‘prone to multiple interpretations’.48 Those studies are important

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first steps in understanding the different meanings of key international norms in play, but more cross-regional, multilevel and multi-actor comparison is required to map different interpretations of specific (sets of) norms by state and non-state actors across spaces, scales and time. We also need to know what happens when different norm interpretations clash. Note that the empirical research agenda on norm meaning we propose here goes beyond establishing the condition of polysemy: instead, it aims to explore also the implications of this finding, namely the pervasiveness of norm ambiguity as a fundamental condition of contemporary global governance.

Importantly, the empirical research agenda on norm meaning we have in mind is not confined to openly contested norms. Instead, it also calls for critical scrutiny of seemingly unproblematic norms, with the aim to question their ostensibly ‘shared’ meanings. How are they shared and by whom? This turn to seemingly unproblematic norms follows from considering polysemy and ambiguity as the default condition of norm meaning. Before this background, studies of seemingly unproblematic norms would contribute to our understanding of norm meaning by identifying and locating the processes by which norm meaning is stabilized, including the struggles involved and the (power) politics of norm meaning. In this way, the research agenda on norm meaning widens the focus from contestation as one particular practice to a wider array of social processes of meaning-making.

A second task, which follows from problematizing norm meaning ‘all the way down’ and acknowledging ambiguity as the default condition of norm meaning, is to develop the normative dimension of norm ambiguity. Discussions about the ethical implications and normative desirability of norm ambiguity are strikingly absent from the existing IR literature. Conceptually, this silence is a consequence of the ontological bracketing of norm meaning and the ensuing disregard of the politics of norm meanings. Inevitably, the latter entails relations of power and highlights the intimate connection between ‘rules and rule’

Although Wiener in A Theory of Contestation similarly declares contestation to be the default condition of norms, she eventually reverts to a treatment of contested norms as exceptional and of contestation as an anomaly. See Holger Niemann and Henrik Schillinger, ‘Contestation ‘all the way down’? The grammar of contestation in norm research’, Review of International Studies, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2016), 29-49, 47.


We argue that the re-conceptualized understanding of norm meaning entails a strong normative commitment to pluralism. By locating the source of indeterminacy surrounding norms in the combined effects of inherent ambiguity of norms and the pluralistic Weltanschauung of the actors that enact them, it assigns an intrinsic normative significance to the politics of norm meanings. In other words, human beings hold different values and different conceptions of what is good and just, which, in turn, influences their interpretation of norms. In this view, norm ambiguity and polysemy are not just structural features of a post-hegemonic international society, but fundamental expressions of the normative diversity of the world’s human communities. A perspective that problematizes norm meaning ‘all the way down’ acknowledges the diversity of beliefs and value judgements involved in the process of meaning-making. This sets it apart from contestation research, which locates differences of interpretation at the cognitive level – and therefore sees them as ultimately reconcilable. In contrast, when the ethical dimension of norm meaning-making is brought into view, the potential for conflict and the exercise of power become central themes of norms research.

Understanding norm ambiguity and polysemy as connected to the pluralistic nature of human life is helpful for developing this critical perspective, because it allows for grounding theorizing about the meaning(s) of norms in well-developed discussions in (international) political theory about normative disagreement and value pluralism, e.g. the works of Connolly, Mouffe, Williams and Wong. What unites these authors, despite their different subjects, intellectual backgrounds and perspectives, is a commitment to normative disagreement and human diversity as a fundamental condition of society. Based on this commitment, they explore how politics and institutions can preserve and promote the political, moral and legal agency of human beings instead of reducing them to mere functionaries of social structures. From this follows a normative preference for governance arrangements which harness this potential by promoting polysemy instead of attempting to ‘govern it away’ by fixing the meaning of norms as precisely as possible.

The normative argument in favor of non-closure reflects the constitutive effects of ambiguity, its capacity to sustain and foster human diversity. If norms and their meaning are constitutive of actors, their identities and actions, then norm ambiguity holds positive potential because it allows for the constitution of diverse actors and practices. Norm polysemy, from this perspective, is the actualization of a potential for difference that is made possible by norm ambiguity. Ambiguity offsets the homogenizing

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tendencies (i.e. socialization) otherwise attributed to norms and normative frameworks because the range of possible subject positions, of identities and agency that can be subsumed under a norm with ambiguous meaning is not reduced to a minimum, to any ‘essential’ Self. In this view, the viability of international norms and governance frameworks is not premised on the possibility of closing interpretive ‘gaps’ between essentially different actors.\textsuperscript{53} The normative question thus shifts from the strategic uses of norm polysemy to how the fundamental condition of norm ambiguity can be channeled in ways that not only accommodate normative disagreement and facilitate the agonistic enactment of difference, but also nurture the positive constitutive value of ambiguity.

The final, and related, research theme puts this question into the practical realm of global governance by investigating which modes of governance or, more narrowly, which \textit{types of institutional frameworks and rules} can productively channel the normative potential of norm ambiguity. This is a question about institutional design: can institutions square the circle of allowing for diversity in the interpretation of norms (i.e. polysemy) and creating frameworks that make co-existence, cooperation and shared rules for morally rightful conduct possible? In other words, we need to investigate the possibility of enacting difference in and through institutions without cultivating antagonism. Political theories of agonism may provide valuable insights in this respect. However, in contrast to the dialogical understanding of agonism as it can be found in the contestation literature\textsuperscript{54}, which ultimately seeks to escape from ambiguity and attempts to return to agreement by means of Habermasian deliberation, our reconceptualization of norm meanings suggests an interpretation of agonism and agonistic politics which sustains ambiguity and polysemy, is more accommodating of disagreement and conflict, and assigns a more prominent role to power.\textsuperscript{55} We therefore propose to explore whether Mouffe’s more radical interpretation of agonistic politics, Gregg’s ‘enlightened localism’, or principles derived from non-Western traditions of thought, provide a viable normative basis for global governance in a post-hegemonic world.\textsuperscript{56} If the answer is affirmative, then this linkage between norms research and political theory would enable us to formulate a critique of contemporary global governance without having to rely on liberal, Western-centric standards of the past – both in political practice and in IR norms research.

\textsuperscript{53} Cf. Wiener, \textit{A Theory of Contestation}

\textsuperscript{54} Wiener, \textit{A Theory of Contestation}

\textsuperscript{55} Mouffe, \textit{The democratic paradox, Agonistics.}

This consciously normative – and consciously critical – approach to norm meaning then provides the ground for normative positions in the debate on the future of global governance that neither give in to liberal angst and its restorative reflex, nor succumb to illusions about a new global normative consensus. These positions would instead try to provide answers to the questions of (a) whether institutions of global governance can be designed in a way that accepts the elusiveness of deep moral consensus while still providing grounds for an international society that, in the face of increasing heterogeneity, relies on mutual recognition and the development of shared standards of rightful conduct; if so, (b) how governance frameworks in areas such as climate, outer space, or the cyber domain should be designed; and (c) how existing governance arrangements such as the United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, or more specific regimes can be reformed. Answering these questions will push us to think much more innovatively about the structure of, and forms of participation in, global governance institutions, leading us away from static notions of standard setting and compliance towards more flexible, open, and dynamic arrangements for the post-hegemonic era. A better understanding of the social and political dynamics of norm meaning is a precondition for such a project.