

Narrating Global Governance

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Events exist in narratives, where time lines are crucial. At its simplest, chronology helps to structure memory, but things have to happen too, driven by actors who have a hold on the public imagination. What happened in L'Aquila or Pittsburgh, who did what? We may remember Seattle in 1999, as many do, but it was a meeting that didn't happen, a non-event in global governance terms, but it captured world headlines. Why, we might ask? The debut of the anti-globalization movement? I'll come back to that.

What drives the G20? Its dominant manifestation is as a feature of public culture. It is understood as such by country leaders too, working it for their images in national cultural space. Has it been able to occupy a distinctive global presence? Yes, when it is part of a genuine global public sphere not reducible to country interests, from which each can take, while also contributing.

Does that global public sphere exist? Yes, also as an institutional reality, practices referenced in the alphabet soup of the UN, IFIs, and all the multilateral agreements and alliances that deliver public goods worldwide, a hard reality, not reducible to a figment of the imagination as many radical critics would have it. This is how goods are delivered, people's lives changed. But the G20 meetings also occupy a place in a narrative reality. If we call it the narrative of global governance, it has many, many actors. Global concerns are a condition for a place, but there has to be impact, outputs and outcomes, and they have to make news. Who has heard of ECOSOC?

These kinds of questions are ones that are implicitly answered by addressing the legitimacy of G20 meetings, asking what kinds of arrangements would meet a test of effectiveness and representativeness, concepts drawn down from a centuries old story of the growth of liberal democracies. They belong to ideas of governance tried and tested in national settings, and which therefore, we suspect, might guarantee the longevity of the G20. But do they?

Let's take two recent leaders' meeting events for extreme cases of effectiveness and representativeness. The first is the UN Copenhagen climate change conference of December 2009, attended by 120 heads of state or government, widely representative of the world's population, and in its outcome generally regarded as negative for an effective response to global warming. By contrast, we can refer to the Obama nuclear security summit, single issue, 47 government heads, dominated by the powerful, unconcerned by representativeness, effective in its unanimity.

Well between a G193 and a G1, a G 20 might seem to occupy a handy in-between position, but if we are inclined to recognise an inverse relationship between representativeness and effectiveness, we also might feel the G8 has some life in it yet, or for some issues a G2. I don't want to labour this, but simply stress that there is no intrinsic

reason for the G20 to exist at all, at least in terms of the institutional arrangements for global governance. National and international officials will continue to conduct the business of the global state whether the leaders meet or not.

So what does the media focussed gathering of the G20 add to global governance that justifies efforts to consolidate its existence, and why are we not finding immediate answers in governance principles? More particularly when we are disappointed by 'representativeness' why are we not content with delivery by ad hoc convened meetings of the powerful?

I suggest we may find the answer to these questions by deconstructing 'representativeness' into its voice and value components, beliefs as opposed to membership. For, the reason we do not always trust the effectiveness of the powerful is that they may not achieve what we desire, often the very opposite. The many voices of the less powerful are more important for filling cultural space, gaining media attention, than the single hegemon.

If the intermittent meetings of the G20 are to become an enduring entity in public discourse, it will arise from the added value of expressing values, of adjudicating in the court of world public opinion over fundamental choices. Its membership will reflect the diversity of world civilizations as much as contributions to global GDP. The leaders who are present will represent not national interests, but will reach out to the 170 plus nations who are not there, and they will do this through the commonality of values with smaller or wider constituencies, not as a powerful oligarchy.

I emphasize the cultural component of the G20 as its potential added value. There is another, global society as such. National leaders have to emerge from, survive and manage the socio-economic conflicts of their own society. The more far-seeing ones recognise that the G meetings serve cognate functions for global society. Global civil society, as events surrounding G meetings show, looks to leaders' meetings as great opportunities for protest and advocacy of alternative futures. The future of the G20 will be determined by the extent to which it can institutionalise conflicts, as between cultures and classes, and can thus address issues of global social and economic injustice that transcend national boundaries.