



Centre for

# Global Cooperation Research

*Research Agenda > Research field*

## **Global cooperation and diverse conceptions of world order (2021–2024)**

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### **Conceptions of world order**

The broad question of conflicts over conceptions of world order has been a very traditional issue in international politics, which has operated on the basis of both systemic assumptions (clash of civilizations, unipolarity, ideological conflict etc.) and more actor-focused concepts (enemy images, alliance building, rising powers, power politics or soft power etc.). Rather broad, systemic questions are often posed in contexts of international politics, whereas actor-based concepts may turn to collectives in various contexts. Under current conditions of a multilateral order under attack from some of the most powerful states in the world, these issues have gained new relevance and open a variety of different questions with regard to their impact on global cooperation. Global cooperation as both practice and goal of global politics has different forms, which change according to actor constellations or shared objectives. World order conceptions are a central factor in deciding the chances for successful cooperation or conflict. Different world order conceptions, for instance, can also be described as collective identities that emerge in different arenas and through interactions at different scales. Such identities form around various things, such as cosmologies, shared goals or symbols. Conflict may arise when hierarchies are constructed between identities; cooperation can develop out of social interactions.

An important approach, which we pursue systematically in our research, to these different identities is thus by exploring their symbolic dimension, which means also

looking at arenas beyond politics, including art, sports or popular culture. Such fields have always been and further become battlegrounds for establishing and reproducing hierarchies that constitute deep structures of world order. South Korean pop culture, images of Finnish female leadership or Kenyan Marathon Olympic champions are not isolated traits of a singular field but can be seen in the context of nations competing for capital that can be used to improve their position in a hierarchical world order. Besides a focus on global events and arenas, more micro-focused research could add to the understanding of ordering practices. Exploring different forms of hierarchies between subjects of global politics that are not based in unequal distribution of material (i.e. economic, military) capital, but in new or emerging forms of symbolic, cultural and social capital, means understanding the entanglement of different macro- and micro-dimensions.

Therefore, various conceptions of world order and their relationality merit further exploration, not only with a view to the political order they imply, but also with regard to their underlying deeper assumptions and world views. We will map analytically distinct as well as related ideas and practices of *world-making* and of *ordering*. This includes the ways in which we make sense of the world, for instance, by storytelling, socio-spatial as well as temporal concepts, i.e. practices of *world-making*. Furthermore, research into conceptions of world order entails exploring not only the commonalities and differences between the respective visions of world order but also the relationships between them as they unfold in practices of global cooperation and non-cooperation, i.e. practices of *world-ordering*.

## **World-making**

The underlying epistemological and anthropological assumptions of world-making are decisive for the question of how different conceptions of world order can relate to each other. Among other developments, the reliance on positive science as a mechanism for the exploration of reality to the best of human abilities has been challenged. On the one hand, simple denial of the validity of scientific expertise has become commonplace. On the other hand, the one-sided reliance on positive science has been criticized as an ingredient of Western hegemony and the annihilation of Non-Western traditions of thought. Further research could map and systematize alternative approaches which go beyond this dichotomy and explore their consequences for visions of world order and the possibilities for cooperation.

While conceptions of world order are *prima facie* concerned with the (actual or desirable) order of space, the temporal dimension also plays a key role. It makes a difference whether world politics are seen through a lens of progress and regression, as a circular structure of eternal repetition or as a matter or (accelerating or preventing) apocalypse. The practice of referring to shared historical experience, often fictionalized in political stories, has played an ambiguous role in international politics.

Against this background, understanding the world as a shared ecological space presents an alternative to more traditional, geographic or civilizational conceptions. In an ongoing academic as well as political debate, broad visions of a sustainable future of humankind are being negotiated that weigh ecological against economic factors. While growth (in a material sense) is seen as instrumental for improving the lives of people particularly in the Global South, a contrary position would hold that sustainable human life is only possible under conditions of reduced consumption, respect for nature, clean energies etc., so that post-capitalist, post-growth goals must be realized. The divide between sustainability versus narrower economic goals has become a fault line in domestic politics, but has also reached the global level, where multilateral forums and cooperative agreements have been challenged. One variety of proposed solutions to such dilemmas relies on technology and technocratic governing. For example, it is hoped that “negative emissions technologies” will fix problems of climate-change and even human insufficiencies will be resolved with the help of genetic and other forms of human enhancement.

Thinking about conceptions of world order at an abstract, theoretical level, we identify four important strands that are currently debated on a global scale: (neo-) liberal globalisms; alternative cosmopolitanisms; communitarianisms; and religious and culturalist revivalisms. These approaches are by no means exhaustive, but encompass a variety of perspectives that are often seen as unrelated, while they share certain characteristics we find striking. The basic premise of liberal globalism is that the world should be ordered according to certain universal principles, which derive from the rational nature of humanity. In the neoliberal version of this conception of world order the universal assumption is of an individual drive for economic gain, which can best be served by the dismantling of restrictions to the market. The proponents of alternative cosmopolitanisms reject the liberal and market oriented forms of globalism and identify different sources of worldwide interconnectedness such as the idea of a shared planetary future. Partly in reaction to accelerated processes of economic, cultural and social globalization, we see the emergence of movements which aim at reestablishing the sovereignty of communities, sometimes in aggressively nationalist or even racist forms. Apart from a call to a return to “smaller” communities as sovereign units, there are conceptions which aim at the establishment of alternative (regional) hegemonies, as in the case of Pan-Asianism or Pan-Islamism. The ideational reservoir which such conceptions tap can, but need not necessarily become ground for conflict. This also points to the centrality of diverse anthropologies for conceptions of world order. For most varieties of liberalism, the rational actor is at the Centre. By contrast, certain alternative cosmopolitanisms are more concerned with the human capacity for empathy, both with the distant other and with non-human creatures and nature. It has been suggested to mobilize an (alleged) universal capacity for empathy in order to counter climate-change or achieve a more humane politics of migration and asylum. Indigenous, traditional, non-Western thought, is most

essential in this regard. The challenge, however, is to engage deeply with a variety of traditions without romanticizing or essentializing them.

## **World-ordering**

One highly central dimension to world order has been socio-spatial, concerning geography and territoriality, which resonate with geopolitics. Both the practice and academic enquiries into them have been revived and have new implications in a situation that is neither bipolar nor Cold War nor fully functional global governance. With large-scale projects of energy cooperation, exploitation of rare resources etc., geopolitics have partly been reframed recently as geo-economics. Particularly mutual perceptions, narratives and discourses to explore grand geopolitical/-economic schemes in their conception in different regions, also addressing new conflictive/cooperative constellations such as the Arctic region or Indo-Pacific counter-narratives to a Chinese sphere of influence, would be interesting to examine. One avenue for research concerns struggles and/or instances not between, but within formerly taken-for-granted blocs. Given the political preferences of nationalist governments such as the Post-Brexit Johnson cabinet and Trump's administration (and others), we could identify one emerging line of conflict within 'the West', including difficult Transatlantic relations, divisions within the EU or alliances with illiberal leaders beyond the West. These are possible obstacles to global cooperation. Conflicts arise, for example, as identity politics within one seeming bloc or as striving for normative dominance. In a similar vein, issues of South-South relations (both cooperative and conflictive) would be another avenue to pursue further, for instance studying initiatives in the global education sector, direct investments and the energy sector.

In a different vein, right-wing populism as an aggressive form of communitarianism, based on a revival of ethnocentric nationalism, aims at appealing to larger publics and has capitalized on transnational linkages. One way to approach them is through the visions of world order developed, defended and narrated by right-wing populists such as Duterte, Trump, or Bolsonaro, as well as movement organizations such as the *Identitarians*. In order to identify how conceptions of world order are being developed and disseminated it could be worth exploring the various narratives, visual and emotional techniques employed by actors to render their respective vision of world order appealing. Furthermore, the sites where struggles over different conceptions are fought have become more diversified and accessible for broader publics. For example, arenas like Facebook or Twitter have become battle-grounds of ideological groups competing with each other and are more than simple media of communication. The competition of images and symbols may already have become a structural obstacle to cooperation, as identities form around these symbolic representations and may further exacerbate thinking in blocs that have no common language or interest. Continuing ongoing research on narratives, visuality and emotions, different topics such as populism and anti-global

protest, the fight for global equality or the self-legitimation of organizations are fruitful avenues of further research.

Research projects in this stream will explore the commonalities and differences between the respective ideas and practices of world-making, as well as the practices of world-ordering between them that we can observe in global cooperation and non-cooperation. We welcome projects that help us to gain a better understanding of how different and often contested conceptions of world order shape, change, or obstruct global cooperation.

Themes for research projects under this common heading can include but are not limited to:

- ***World-Ordering through Geopolitics*** - How can we understand geopolitics, i.e. the strategic struggle for spheres of influence, beyond its form as a classic theme of international politics, and its new implications in the world of today? Can cooperation in new constellations that goes beyond ideological consensus be an outcome? Are new threats of interstate conflict, which seemed to have become obsolete, more likely? To answer these questions, projects on perceptions, narratives, and discourses could explore grand geopolitical/-economic schemes in their conception in different regions or circles and also address new conflicting/cooperative areas.
- ***World-Making through focusing on Humankind*** - Can conceptions of world order based on the unity of humankind be imagined without relying on essentialist and simplifying anthropologies and what are the implications for global cooperation? What can be expected of approaches which substitute the focus on human rationality with the emphasis on other human capacities, such as empathy or awareness of common vulnerability? What is the role of different conceptions of time and historical directionality?
- ***World-Making and World-Ordering through Sustainability*** - How have conflicts between largely irreconcilable conceptions of world orders (and political agendas) impacted global cooperation? For instance, while economic growth is seen as instrumental for improving the lives of people particularly in the Global South, a contrary position would hold that sustainable human life is only possible under conditions of reduced growth and consumption, respect for nature, clean energies etc. Can such guiding principles or even ideologies also pave the way for new ways in global cooperation, such as new alliances and forms, or will future conflicts arise from these competing views?