

SYMPOSIUM
A GRIDLOCKED WORLD



GRIDLOCK? MAYBE

BY

RORDEN WILKINSON

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Rorden Wilkinson

Even the most casual of observers will have noticed how clogged with sand intergovernmental machineries have become. Negotiations on climate change, trade, finance and disarmament, among others, have stalled and the institutions charged with facilitating progressive agreement in each of these areas have struggled to deliver. Yet, while casual observers will have noticed what is going on, few serious attempts have been made to stand back and make sense of how the various pieces of this intergovernmental logjam fit together. Thomas Hale, David Held and Kevin Young's *Gridlock* is a notable exception.

Gridlock is an excellent book. It captures well patterns of inertia in intergovernmental global governance and provides plausible explanations for how this situation has arisen. It does, however, leave unresolved a series of issues that in combination lead to a retort of “maybe” when considering whether Hale, Held and Young are right. These can be characterized as: i) the “what if” issue; ii) the “it is all quite bad now” issue; iii) the “victim” issue; iv) the “behind the headlines” issue; v) the “what is gridlock doing” issue; vi) the “causal relationship” issue; and vii) the “solution” issue. In isolation none of these issues is big enough to nullify the authors' claims or to suggest that their analytical lenses are wanting. Together they are sufficiently bothersome to warrant further reflection and debate. My purposes in this short intervention are to underscore the need for further reflection and debate and to push Hale, Held and Young towards the further

development of the conceptual and policy tools required to produce better global governance.

I begin with a brief summary of their core argument to demonstrate why the issues outlined above are cause for concern. I then explore each of these issues in turn before offering my concluding comments. Like Hale, Held and Young, I share the view that the current state of multilateral governance is worrisome; that this state is the consequence of prior institutional design, development and operation (intentional or otherwise); and that serious thought needs to be given to where humanity goes from here. Where the authors and I depart is on the historical significance of institutional inertia, the role that periods of stasis play in institutional development and how they can be, and are, transcended.

I

Gridlock: Thesis, Method, Empirical Prosecution

Hale, Held and Young's central thesis is that global cooperation is in gridlock. By gridlock they mean a state of inertia wherein the productive capacity of the most visible intergovernmental aspects of contemporary global governance has ground to a halt. This general state of inertia has arisen because of increasing multipolarity, growing institutional stasis, the increased difficulty of the problems subject to negotiation, and processes that have led to institutional fragmentation. These tendencies are termed "pathways" or "roads" to gridlock.

Hale, Held and Young argue that the inability to provide global public goods has become evermore troublesome because gridlock has occurred at a time when demand for international cooperation is at an all-time high. The result, as they put it, "is

that the governance gap between the existing multilateral order and the public goods needed is now dangerously large.”¹ While they are clear to warn that “gridlock does not characterize every aspect of global politics,”² unless ways through this state of inertia are found, the gains of the post-war period may be rolled back and the state humanity finds itself in will become increasingly dire.

The authors draw their argument from a historical reading of the development of institutional capacity in three areas: security, the economy and the environment. In each area they show how the four pathways to gridlock are uniquely blended to create the inertia of today. In global security governance they find a logjam generated by complex networks of state and non-state actors, growing multipolarity, intergovernmental paralysis and new trans-border challenges. In the governance of the global economy they see widespread institutional stasis and fragmentation alongside harder-to-crack issues and changing power relations. And in global environmental governance they argue that institutional fragmentation and incoherence, tensions among established and “rising” powers, and the difficulty of resolving key issues are the principle drivers of inertia.

II

The “What If” Issue

One of the strengths of Hale, Held and Young’s analysis is its historicism. This enables them to argue with compunction that

¹ Thomas Hale, David Held and Kevin Young, *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

the “governance structures designed in one era do not necessarily fit the next.”³ Moreover, the global governance challenges of today are “necessarily contingent on preceding institutional developments.”⁴ Yet, their conception of history is also one of *Gridlock*’s weaknesses and it leads us to ask, “what if something else is going on?”

For Hale, Held and Young, comprehending why the evolution of intergovernmental global governance has generated a generalized state of inertia requires an understanding of the circumstances in which international institutions were forged and the manner in which they have evolved, along with the changed and changing nature of the world order. This is all fair and good. Yet, given this historical sensitivity, it is strange then that Hale, Held and Young should present contemporary institutional inertia as the endpoint rather than as the latest stage in an ongoing process of evolution.

A different version of historical institutionalism might have stood back and seen contemporary inertia—in both a generalized and institutionally specific form—as a catalytic moment and/or a normal component of any instance of institutional evolution. Here, Stephen Krasner’s punctuated equilibrium would not necessarily be an evolutionary trajectory comprising moments wherein “a mismatch between institutions and the conditions on which they depend” ultimately leads to the *destruction* of “existing institutions ... allowing a new set more attuned to the changed conditions to take their place.”⁵ Rather, it could simply be an evolutionary trajectory that is non-linear and which contains within it moments of innovation, stasis, change and development.

³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

In this understanding, gridlock might just be a natural stage in the development of our international institutions through which they will either pass or evolve in a manner that is reflective of the outcome of the confluence of the forces that come together at that moment in time, and not something that is necessarily destructive.

Two quick examples underscore this point. First, the demise of an international institution is a rare event.⁶ Clearly, international organizations have fallen by the wayside and they have done so precisely because they have proven unable to adapt to suit changed political and economic circumstances and/or they were poorly designed: the League of Nations is the most obvious example though we might also think of the Concert of Europe and Holy Roman Alliance. The corollary here is that either punctuated equilibria—as Hale, Held and Young understand it—are rare, or else they are part of many other processes that do not necessarily result in institutional destruction. Given that the latter is the more likely, we might want to conceptualize inertia as a component of an evolutionary process rather than a signal that it is ending.

Second, prominent examples exist of the kind of institutional adaptability that has enabled particular organizations to navigate troubling climes and transition across changes in the global distribution of political and economic power. Here, the innovation and adaptation of the International Labour Organization (ILO) is perhaps the most instructive. As Nigel

⁶ See Richard T. Cupitt, Rodney L. Whitlock and Lynn Williams Whitlock, “The (Im)Morality of International Governmental Organizations,” 21 *International Interactions* 4 (1996), pp. 389–404.

Haworth and Steve Hughes⁷ document, the enlightened leadership of several ILO executive heads enabled the organization to transition from League of Nations to United Nations when the former perished as well as to periodically reinvent itself in the face of challenges that threatened to render it an irrelevance in the period thereafter.

The question here is, “what if we are witnessing a momentary pause in institutional development out of which a new phase of evolution will emerge rather than an endpoint in a trajectory?” Perhaps what makes the current moment unique is that so many institutional trajectories are experiencing the same stage simultaneously, which is why we might consider this inertia to be gridlock. Maybe this should not come as a surprise precisely because we know that international institutions—irrespective of the area in which they operate—are subject to the same global political and economic context. Thus, it might be that it is only the number of institutions experiencing inertia that is unique and not the inertia itself.

III

The “It Is All Quite Bad Now” Issue

The reason the “what if” issue matters is because of the related “it is all quite bad now” issue. The latter results from the presentation of the current moment as one in which gridlock exists and which stands in contrast to seven preceding decades of steady progress in the provision of global public goods. Here, Hale, Held and Young are a little too selective in their use of

⁷ Nigel Haworth and Steve Hughes, *The International Labour Organization: Coming in from the Cold* (London: Routledge, 2011).

historical data and present too generalist a view of post-war institutional history as a result. Clearly, over the long run spectacular gains have been made in global public good provision. It is also the case, however, that other moments have existed wherein a generalized state of gridlock could have been said to occur and other moments where particular institutions have been rendered inert. The late 1940s to mid-1950s was a period of inertia for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and (what was to become) the World Bank. The late 1960s to early 1970s and the early to mid-1980s were also moments wherein various institutional processes ground to a halt. Moreover, institutions like the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and the GATT have all experienced several moments of stasis out of which it was thought they would not easily move.

It is not just that inertia and gridlock have been features of prior times that are important here. It is also that examples of major institutional progress and global public good provision are evident right now which disrupts the idea that we are in a period of generalized inertia. We might consider the surprising ease with which the post-2015 development agenda (*Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) was agreed, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) replaced with a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as one clear example. Other examples might include the process of institutional consolidation that resulted in the creation of UN Women, or the new forms of institutionalization that have resulted from growing multipolarity (of which the New Development Bank, formerly the BRICS Bank, is perhaps the most well known).

At issue here is not so much Hale, Held and Young's argument, but more the way the argument is made. *Gridlock* relies on tracing particular historical developments for the production of its argument. It does not theorise those developments, the

stages through which an institution's evolution may pass, or how change occurs therein. Equally, moments of crisis, stasis and inertia are not accounted for theoretically in how we might expect an institution/s to evolve. The result is the presentation of gridlock as a historical endpoint rather than a stage that will be passed through. Of course that does not mean we should be fatalistic about institutional development—periods of crisis should be worried about in equal measure with the celebration of the opportunities they bring to encourage change. It simply means that the uniqueness of contemporary gridlock might be better brought out theoretically as well as empirically, and the story they tell ought to be a little messier.

IV

The “Victim” Issue

There is a sense throughout *Gridlock* that international institutions are passive agents rather than machineries that are able to affect their evolutionary trajectory and apply pressure to overcome periods of stasis. There are at least two issues here. First, in constructing the pathways to gridlock, Hale, Held and Young present international institutions as rather distant and disconnected phenomena whose developmental path is observed and where corrections to that course are made largely exogenously. This underplays the role that institutions can and have been able to play in taking charge of their own institutional fortunes. I have already mentioned the effect that successive ILO executive heads have had on that institution's developmental path—a capacity that led Robert Cox to remark that “[t]he quality of executive leadership may prove to be the most critical single

determinant of the growth in scope and authority of international organization.”⁸ Examples of executive head agency can also be gleaned from the histories of UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Health Organization.⁹

The role of executive heads is only part of the story, however. Multiple instances of individual and group agency exist where a dramatic effect has been had on the development of international institutions in the post-war era. These include the compilation of negotiating texts that have resulted in agreements being made in times of turbulence and stasis, the arrangement of negotiations to overcome discord, populating key positions with likeminded characters, and the advising of political elites, among many others—all instances of action that might not be seen as being beyond the bounds of what an international civil servant is supposed to do but which could and can assist in overcoming periods of enervation. Of course, the capacity to affect change in an institution’s trajectory is not restricted to insiders. Many an external agent or agents have affected—sometimes profoundly so—institutional development. Hale, Held and Young are not insensitive to these qualities, but in making their argument gridlock is presented with the quality of a force of nature rather than one of our making.

Second, the obverse is also true. If the agency exercised by an individual or group/s of individuals inside or beyond an intergovernmental organization can have an effect on institutional

⁸ Robert W. Cox, “The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization,” 23 *International Organization* 2 (1969), p. 205.

⁹ See Richard Jolly, *UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund): Global Governance That Works* (London: Routledge, 2014); Katherine Marshall, *The World Bank: From Reconstruction to Development to Equity* (London: Routledge, 2008); Kelley Lee, *The World Health Organization* (London: Routledge, 2009).

development, it follows that these actors can also work to *generate* gridlock. The injection of inertia into an intergovernmental process is a well-understood strategy and one that could be at play today. In my own work¹⁰ I have shown how the construction of a crisis by key players has been used as a strategy for generating a particular kind of forward momentum in multilateral trade negotiations. This was clearly India's intention in the wake of the agreement of the "Bali package" at the WTO's ninth ministerial conference.¹¹ The withdrawals of support for particular processes (or agreements) in climate and disarmament negotiations are also salient examples.

The point here is that international institutions are not passive entities. Insiders and outsiders can and do affect the manner in which an institution evolves. Getting to grips with when, why and how that happens is also a necessary component of understanding gridlock, part of which requires a greater sensitivity to self-interested behaviour.

V

The "Behind the Headlines" Issue

Understanding agency in international institutions forces us to look beyond headline events to see what is going on under-the-radar. This helps us recognize whether what we are seeing is actually an instance of gridlock as well as to detect what hidden

¹⁰ Rorden Wilkinson, *The WTO: Crisis and the Governance of Global Trade* (London: Routledge, 2006) and *What's Wrong With the WTO and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

¹¹ Rorden Wilkinson, "Changing Power Relations in the WTO: Why the India–U.S. Trade Agreement Should Make Us Worry More, Rather Than Less, About Global Trade Governance," *Geoforum* 61 (2015), pp. 13–16.

processes might be underway that could drive an institution through a period of stasis. It is useful to return to the WTO for a moment. While the stuttering passage of the Doha round has dominated the headlines, organizational insiders and supporters have been at pains to point out that negotiating trade openings is only one aspect of what it is that the WTO does. The round may have so far failed to result in a grand commercial bargain,¹² but its administration, dispute settlement, surveillance, assistance and data-gathering roles have continued to function (and, for WTO supporters, have done so with aplomb). I have my own reservations about how significant this is in diluting the general view of WTO stasis but it is certainly the case that deadlock in the Doha round has unleashed a great deal of institutional activity that is attempting to drive the organization beyond its present circumstances. This includes not only the use of a variable geometry and “plurilateralism” in negotiations—attempts to find agreement among a smaller subset of members in particular commercial areas—but also via investment in “big data” programmes, public relations exercises and so on.

To overcome the “behind the headlines” issue requires that aggregate analyses of institutional processes be under-laid with forensic accounts of what sits behind these figurehead events. This means we should be more attentive to the “everyday” of international organizations than we might otherwise be.¹³ In turn, this enables us to reflect back on the conceptual tools that we

¹² The package of measures agreed at the WTO’s December 2013 Ministerial Conference is too limited to be considered a grand commercial bargain. See Rorden Wilkinson, Erin Hannah and James Scott, “The WTO in Bali: What MC9 Means for the Doha Development Agenda and Why It Matters,” 35 *Third World Quarterly* 6 (2014), pp. 1032–50.

¹³ Michele Acuto, “Everyday International Relations: Garbage, Grand Designs and Mundane Matters,” 8 *International Political Sociology* 4 (2014), pp. 345–62.

have when we come to analyse stasis, continuity and change in international institutions.

VI

The “What Is Gridlock Doing” Issue

One way to think about gridlock in international institutional processes is to characterize it as an inhibiting force in the production of global public goods. However, by treating gridlock only as an inert force we miss the outcomes that moments of deadlock can and do produce. I have already mentioned two examples of gridlock being a productive force—to push through an agreement and embark on the next phase of an institution’s development, and to encourage activities away from an area of blockage—with illustrations from the WTO.

Beyond institution-specific developments at least two other instances of gridlock as a productive force are noteworthy. First, there are instances of inertia that have been key drivers in the production of global public goods. For example, the East/West standoff during the Cold War and the paralysis it generated in the United Nations produced a global public good preventing planetary destruction arising from nuclear conflict—albeit that the “elements of stability” that this lent the international system, to use John Lewis Gaddis’s phrase,¹⁴ came at the expense of the considerable suffering inflicted by the proxy wars fought during this period. Second, there are also instances of generalized stasis nurturing processes of institution building. During the Cold War superpower deadlock fuelled the development a series of

¹⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements Of Stability in the Postwar International System,” 10 *International Security* 4 (1986), pp. 99–142.

opposing regionalisms: NATO and the European Economic Community in the West, Comecon and the Warsaw Pact in the East, and the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 in the South.

What is important here is that Hale, Held and Young leave out the productive capacity that gridlock can have, preferring instead to treat deadlock as an endpoint in itself. This is a problem when analytical tools that look at long-run developments are brought to bear on the here-and-now. To overcome this, Hale, Held and Young need to account in their argument for the productive energy that gridlock can have. This ought to be easy enough give that the creation of competitor institutions to the existing multilateral system—such as the New Development Bank and the Forum and China–Africa Cooperation¹⁵—will inevitably reinforce, rather than attenuate, system stasis.

VII

The “Causal Relationship” Issue

A further problem relates to the extent to which gridlock is a consequence of prior institutional development or whether it is just a reflection of world politics today. An argument could easily be made that world politics in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century is itself gridlocked so we should not be surprised that this is refracted through international institutions. A very different set of circumstances may prevail in a few short years’ time. These scenarios have occurred in previous periods. It is also the case that the broad turn to the right that has occurred

¹⁵ Ian Taylor, *The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)* (London: Routledge, 2012).

in domestic politics across the industrial countries has had an effect on the capacity of international institutions to get things done. This is not a function of gridlock *per se* but it certainly lends weight to the argument that the inertia may just be a function of timing.

It is tempting to take Hale, Held and Young's argument at face value nonetheless. The four pathways to gridlock—together and in isolation—certainly seem to explain the current state of intergovernmental global governance. But what is the causal relationship here? Is it that international institutions have assisted in the creation of a multipolar, highly interdependent, institutionally fragmented environment in which it is harder to find solutions to problems of coordination and which has led to contemporary gridlock? Or is it that wider political and economic developments have entangled international institutions in such a way that they have been rendered near inert? On this point *Gridlock* is a little too brief. Clearly, for Hale, Held and Young there is a symbiotic and mutually constitutive relationship that has developed between international institutions and the context in which they were created, evolved and have operated even though statements such as “[t]he postwar institutions helped to create this new world but they were not built for it”¹⁶ suggests a degree of unidirectional causality. The problem here is how to separate out clearly enough causal factors such that discrete solutions can be pursued and corrective action applied. Perhaps it is precisely because of the complex interrelationship of all of these factors—and many more—that few discrete solutions present themselves in such a way that gridlock can be meaningfully overcome (in the sense that new global public goods can be provided and global governance return to

¹⁶ Hale, Held and Young, *Gridlock*, p. 34.

something like the form that Hale, Held and Young previously saw). This leads us to the final, and ultimately the trickiest, issue.

VIII

The “Solution” Issue

The least satisfying part of this otherwise admirable book is the way it concludes. Rather than bringing the argument to a close with a set of statements—normative or otherwise—about what is required to resign gridlock and the undersupply of global public goods to the annals of history, Hale, Held and Young concentrate too much on reviewing the factors that are likely to reinforce gridlock in the coming years. In so doing they leave just twelve pages to discuss possible pathways through gridlock and the politics that might encourage them to be taken.

The lack of satisfaction results not just from the vague way that Hale, Held and Young specify what the pathways through gridlock might be, it is also because their analysis leads them somewhere else. If we are to take seriously their use of concepts like punctuated equilibrium then surely the only way gridlock can be overcome—beyond a resignation that the existing institutions will expire and be replaced with others that reflect changed global power relations—is to build a different type of global institution. Most logically this would be a world body that moves beyond piecemeal attempts to govern the inter-state system to one that is truly global.

If this is *not* the logical corollary of their argument then they should spell out how institutional stasis, multipolarity, increasingly difficult problems and institutional fragmentation are better overcome. It is only then that policy solutions can be distilled to make the most of the uniqueness of the current

moment and the potential that it holds to exercise meaningful leverage on intergovernmental processes. Otherwise, we will not be able to move beyond the gridlock we are in.

University of Sussex