Societal multiplicity for international relations: Engaging societal interaction in building global governance from below

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Abstract
This article discusses the societal multiplicity proposition as a welcome conceptual proposition for IR. First, it argues that against the background of the discipline’s trajectory and especially Adler’s call for a turn towards ‘the social’ in the 1990s, Rosenberg’s proposition offers a nudge towards scrutinising concepts for a more concise and systematic appreciation of societal multiplicity as a source of knowledge production in a globalised world. Second, this is illustrated with reference to the challenge of building global governance from below as the international liberal order stands contested and alliances are re-negotiated. Third, it demonstrates why during this period of global change it is key to diversify sources of meaning-making and the conceptual categories to reflect this diversification. And fourth, it turns to practices of contestation as drivers of inter-societal negotiations that target both established fundamental norms of global governance (e.g. the rule of law, human rights, and democracy) and more recently, negotiated fundamental norms (e.g. climate justice, gender justice, or intergenerational justice). The article concludes that a conceptual shift from the agency of states and their representatives as carriers of knowledge and mediators of normative change towards engaging societal agency represents a welcome contribution.

Keywords
contestation, global governance, norms, practice, social contract, societal multiplicity

Introduction
As this special issue’s editors contend, ‘IR’s object must be the multiplicity of social entities, and in the first instance the relations between and through them rather than purely within them’ (Introduction, p. 5, this special issue emphasis in original text).

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While the point may seem obvious to some, overdue to others, or somewhat opaque to yet another group pending on one’s epistemological standpoint, the proposition deserves being addressed by International Relations (IR) for it proposes a welcome conceptual shift from state to societal agency. Following Emanuel Adler’s earlier programmatic call for a turn towards ‘the social’ in the 1990s, this proposition represents a nudge towards scrutinising IR’s conceptual tools with a view to a more concise and systematic appreciation of societal multiplicity as a source of knowledge production and a driver of knowledge diffusion. To illustrate this value, this article focuses on the challenge of building sustainable global governance from below at a time when the international liberal order and international law stand contested and global alliances are re-negotiated (Krieger and Liese, 2019; Lake et al., 2021). It is argued that this period of global change highlights the need for IR scholarship to diversify and broaden the sources of meaning-making and the relevant conceptual categories to reflect this diversification in applied research. The following illustrates this point with reference to practices of contestation that target both established fundamental norms of global governance (such as, for example, the rule of law, human rights, and democracy) and more recently negotiated fundamental norms (such as, for example, climate justice, gender justice, or intergenerational justice). Here, a shift from relying predominantly on the agency of states and their representatives as carriers of knowledge and mediators of normative change towards engaging societal agency conceived as ‘societal multiplicity’ represents a welcome contribution. The point will be detailed with reference to contestations of global governance norms.

In a nutshell, this article argues that the particularly welcome contribution of this invitation to explore the potential of societal multiplicity consists in highlighting a gap that is constituted by an over-emphasis on regulatory policy and an under-appreciation of bottom-up dynamics of building global governance from below. The argument will be illustrated with reference to norms research as a central off-spring of the Constructivist turn. Here, the societal multiplicity proposition carries especially potential for novel research on inter-societal (re)negotiations of the social contract as a core norm of sustainable global governance. This perspective on societal multiplicity puts less emphasis on Justin Rosenberg’s motivation to establish IR ‘as a field in its own right’ (Rosenberg, 2016: 128, emphasis in original text). Instead, it dedicates the attention to the invitation to further develop the concept of ‘societal multiplicity’ as a ‘singular ontological premise’ for IR (Rosenberg, 2019: 111). It argues that when viewed as a follow-up from the Constructivist move towards embracing the social more consistently, Rosenberg’s argument which this article calls the societal multiplicity proposition is more consistent with an epistemological than an ontological move.

The argument draws on norms research as a subfield that is particularly suitable to probe the societal multiplicity proposition, given the socially constructed quality of the field’s main object. Since norms are relational categories, the field centres on the inherent attention to interaction within a social environment as a sine qua non condition for the existence of norms. Due to this attention to the social environment, this subfield is particularly suitable to probe the societal multiplicity proposition. This perspective presents the proposition against the backdrop of previous propositions for IR theory-building such as, for example, Emanuel Adler’s concept of intersubjectivity. Both are perceived here as related moves which sustain the demand for more concise bottom-up theorising
in IR. This article elaborates on this argument with reference to practices of norm contestation which are considered as key drivers of both the social construction and the political effect of norms. In agreement with the ‘third move’ of norms research, the underlying approach rests on an ontology of practices which are partly material, and norms which are epistemic.³

To probe the potential of Rosenberg’s call for paying more explicit attention to societal multiplicity as a central object of IR, this article proposes a bottom-up perspective to develop a research programme on building global governance from below (i.e. through inter-societal interactions). In detail, it discusses building global governance through studying societal interaction with a view to renegotiating the social contract as a central organising principle.⁴ The remaining four sections explore this potential. Section ‘Unfinished business: the social, societal multiplicity, and a nudge towards a gap’ recalls Adler’s proposition to address the ‘social’. It argues that while this proposition has been taken up and generated sustainable change insofar as it succeeded in establishing Constructivism as a third mainstream, the task of theorising the social does remain incomplete. The societal multiplicity proposition should therefore be considered as an important reminder of the relevance of the social and relatedly the societal for IR. To elaborate and flag the benefits of this argument, section ‘Societal multiplicity as a wake-up call’ highlights a gap that followed from prioritising regulatory practices while bracketing customary practices of building global governance (Tilly, 1984; Tully, 1995) and sheds light on the constitutive effects of customary practices which have remained hidden while prioritising the effects of regulatory practices. The resulting emphasis on regulatory norms and political practices as setting the rules of engagement within a ‘liberal international order’ left localised knowledge production based on customary norms and everyday socio-cultural practices under-explored. Here, the focus on inter-societal relations will improve the understanding of how diverse normative meanings-in-use are socially constructed, negotiated, and transported between different scales of global governance. Section ‘Moving towards the centre: contested norms of global governance’ details the emergence of the gap with reference to the role of qualitative and quantitative drivers detailed by practices of contestation in norms research. It demonstrates the growing distance between fundamental norms (i.e. rule of law, democracy, and human rights) which have been transferred from nation-states into the terrain of global governance, as well as the contestation of compliance with or violation of these norms by affected stakeholders around the globe. Section ‘The global value crisis and sustainable normativity’ builds on the norm contestation literature’s concepts of ‘global multilogue’ and ‘access to contestation’ (Wiener, 2018) to fill the gap by systematic research renegotiating the social contract as a central organising principle of building global governance as a product of social multiplicity. Finally, section ‘Conclusion’ concludes with a summary of what the societal multiplicity proposition might hold in store.

Unfinished business: the social, societal multiplicity, and a nudge towards a gap

This section contextualises the societal multiplicity proposition in IR’s trajectory thereby providing the opportunity to bring back the incomplete Constructivist turn and address
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the normative leftovers, as it were. Bringing these back into focus matters especially because they point towards the gap that comes into novel focus by the second proposition. Notably, and ‘(D)espite early calls for more rigorous theoretical engagement with the contingency of intersubjective validity claims in norms research, constructivists have contributed more to de-coupling norms from their generation through practice than vice versa’ (Wiener, 2018: 28). This is where the proposal for building global governance from below connects. To demonstrate the point, this section begins by recalling Emanuel Adler’s earlier call for a turn towards ‘the social’ in IR (Adler, 1997) in order to highlight the definition, meaning, and impact of this special issue’s definition of ‘“societal multiplicity” as the unique premise of IR and shows that this is full of consequences for all the human disciplines’ (Introduction, this special issue, p. 5) for IR. This long-term perspective considers a related double-move towards the ‘social’ (Adler) and now, the ‘societal’ (Rosenberg). As will be shown, both share the view that a more rigorous and consequential conceptual discussion of ‘things social’ matters for advancing a common ground for IR as a discipline and both call for an ontological shift, that is, *intersubjective knowledge* in Adler’s case, and *inter-societal multiplicity* in Rosenberg’s case. Here, Rosenberg’s call has potential to scrutinise and probe IR scholars against their own theoretical assumptions. The following pitches the answer to this query against IR’s trajectory.

In the 1990s, Adler called for Constructivist IR scholarship to ‘seize the middle ground’ in one of IR’s flagship journals. The call reflected both strategic disciplinary concerns (i.e. situating constructivist theory between natural and reflectivist theoretical approaches), and scientific theoretical interests (i.e. shifting the ontological focus towards the ‘social’; Adler, 1997: 322). To address them, Adler suggested adopting a broader view of international relations-based a ‘conception of social science that is – social’ (Adler, 1997: 320). And he saw ‘(C)onstructivism’s importance and the added value for the study of International Relations [. . .] mainly in its emphasis on the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge’ (Adler, 1997: 322) to overcome the ‘ontological and epistemological dilemma of “the hermeneutical cycle”’ and its somewhat myopic perception of real politics. It was therefore time to generate more methodologically sound empirical research (Adler, 1997: 321). More than two decades later, Rosenberg (2019: 3) suggests adopting ‘societal multiplicity’ as a ‘deep ontology’ in another programmatic call equally motivated by both strategic disciplinary and science theoretical concerns. With regard to the former, Rosenberg’s (2019) call is concerned with a thinning out of IR’s core which he attributes to too much theoretical and conceptual import from other disciplines, while, at the same time, neglecting the opportunity to develop a common IR core: ‘The downside to IR’s wonderful openness to the other disciplines is that if we have no deep ontology of our own, we become in effect everybody’s subfield’ (p. 3). With regard to the latter, Rosenberg – like Adler – worries that IR scholarship is still influenced by its American state-oriented origins which are ill-suited to capture inter-societal relations. So, what are the societal multiplicity proposition’s potential promises?

An important conceptual distinction consists in identifying multiplicity as having a twofold effect: ‘the *quantitative* multiplicity of societies is also a *qualitative* one’ (Rosenberg, 2019: 5). In qualitative terms, multiplicity implies the recognition of ‘more than one kind’ (i.e. diversity). And, in quantitative terms, multiplicity implies accounting
for ‘more than one’ (i.e. plurality). It follows that ‘multiplicity generates the international itself as a many-sided dimension of the social world’ (Rosenberg, 2019: 5). This core argument suggests that societal multiplicity offers a novel lens on conceptualising and studying development and change in a globalised environment. The distinct quantitative and qualitative drivers are helpful for observing and evaluating two practices of contestation. That is, while the quantitative descriptive dimension addresses mapping ‘reactive contestation’ (who objects to a norm?), the qualitative normative dimension includes evaluating ‘proactive contestation’ (who has access to critically engage with a norm? Wiener, 2018: 16). Quantitatively, empirical data on reactive contestation help identifying the degree of societal objection vis-à-vis a given order and its rules of engagement. They shed light on specific problems with the local normative opportunity structure. In turn, qualitatively, evaluating access to proactive contestation helps identifying pathways towards normative change by drawing on societal capabilities that form part of the global normative structure of meaning-in-use. Notably, both are conducive for differentiating accepted ‘terms’ of global co-existence in relation to both interaction (reactive) and relational change (proactive) (see also Tallis, in this special issue).

It follows that practice-based norms research provides a nice angle from which to assess the added value of the societal multiplicity proposition for IR. For norm contestation research foregrounding ‘the presuppositions about the “reality status” (ontology) of the subject of study and about its “knowability” (epistemology)’ (Haverland and Yanow, 2012: 401) involves highlighting the research focus of studying practice-based norm(ative) change within a social environment that is (re-)constructed by societal agency. This practice-based approach to norm(ative) change does not begin from a given ‘liberal community’ (top-down) but from a socially constructed emerging set of orders (bottom-up). Accordingly, it studies the process of building and ordering of global governance through inter-societal engagements that involve a multiplicity of affected stakeholders in diverse publics, sectors, and cultures in a globalised societal environment (Acharya, 2018; Chakrabarty, 2008; Jasanoff, 2008). Conceiving societal multiplicity as a pre-condition for the ‘knowability’ of norm(ative) change would then hold the promise of making IR a much more inclusive and quintessentially social discipline.

It is here where Rosenberg sees great potential for societal multiplicity to trigger and facilitate IR’s move from a subdiscipline of political science to a lone-standing discipline within the social sciences. As he stresses, when applied in this way, societal multiplicity holds the promise of drawing out IR’s role as a discipline in its own right that makes a potentially significant and singular contribution to the wider social sciences: ‘IR’s disciplinary (and trans-disciplinary) potential is as great as any of the social sciences or humanities – if only it can be discovered and unlocked’ (Rosenberg, 2019: 1). To unlock and discover the conceptual potential of such a shift towards a multiplicity-ontology, five potential ‘consequences’ matter for the outreaching effect from IR towards other disciplines: ‘co-existence’ (of societies), ‘difference’ (in the nature of global development), ‘interaction’ (practices of managing external environment), ‘combination’ (interaction within societies), and ‘dialectical change’ (interactions of multiple social formations; Rosenberg, 2019: 6). Notably, however, in the global context, in which international relations are practised, consequences of multiplicity harbour both a ‘danger’ and an ‘opportunity’, while external interactions may
According to this special issue’s introduction, ‘IR’s object must be the multiplicity of social entities, and in the first instance the relations between and through them rather than purely within them’. According to the editors, this is captured better by the term ‘societal’ than the term ‘social’ ‘because it specifically references this co-existence of more than one entity’. It also entails the capacity to includes ‘the most important elements of “political multiplicity” (the relations between polities) while avoiding the narrower focus (and loss of e.g., non-state aspects) that would result from using that term alone’. Yet, as the editors note, ‘the problem remains: given what we have just said about the misleading model of the nation-state, how are these entities – or “societies” – to be defined? To this the answer must be: “not at this highest level of abstraction”’ (Introduction, this special issue, p. 10). This article’s argument about building global governance from below fully agrees with both the need and the challenge entailed in the project of reducing the level of abstraction. And it addresses the challenge by drawing on practice-based norms research.

As this section’s perspective on Adler’s proposition to address intersubjectivity as a pre-cursers of Rosenberg’s proposition to rethink IR from the perspective of societal multiplicity sought to demonstrate, connecting both captures and enhances a dynamic development. Thus, both propositions share the view that a more rigorous and consequential conceptual discussion of ‘things social’ matters for advancing a common ground for IR as a discipline and both call for an ontological shift (i.e. intersubjective knowledge in Adler’s case and inter-societal multiplicity in Rosenberg’s case). Two questions arise from this shared emphasis. Given that two decades have passed since Adler’s call, one might question its success. However, did it not lead to the establishment of what is today accepted as the third ‘grand theory’ in IR, and did it not produce a wealth of empirical research and methodological advancement? Against this success, Rosenberg’s proposition sheds light on Constructivist deviations where a statist logic paired with an obsession with methodological and empirical data led to a deviation from Adler’s erstwhile call. That is, the Constructivist move into the so-called mainstream did in fact not achieve to fully address Adler’s proposition for accounting for the ‘social’ understood as encompassing both the empirical and normative interpretation of material reality.

As the following will demonstrate in some more detail with reference to norms research the objective of normative interpretations has received significantly less attention in comparison with empirical observations. This has inadvertently led to the unintended consequence of most constructivist norms research working on (fundamental) norms without paying too much attention to their value-based origin, their societal roots, their political consequences, and ultimately their ‘unbound’ constitutional quality as global governance norms. Constructivism did a remarkable job in demonstrating the importance of the social for understanding and orchestrating international relations. Yet, it neither fully succeeded in seizing the middle ground in Adler’s terms, nor in exploring the potential of ‘intersubjective knowledge’ (compare also Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986). Rather than addressing empirical and normative interpretations, in the main, Constructivists prioritised methodological over normative issues. Two main developments point to these
failures: first, ‘seizing’ or ‘establishing’ a middle ground (Christiansen et al., 1999) has lost clout with Constructivism morphing into the mainstream and, second, and relatedly IR scholarship became increasingly fragmented as critical IR scholars settled around ‘campfires’ in distance from the mainstream, often closely inter-linked with other social science disciplines or in international law (Sylvester, 2013). Against this backdrop, Rosenberg’s call serves as an important and timely reminder to tackle remaining normative issues. And he does have a point in worrying about IR’s potential role as a lone-standing discipline with a solid – populated and communicating – centre where larger issues are addressed and advanced in common. What does this imply for the societal multiplicity proposition? The following zooms in on norms research in order to illustrate the potential benefits of this proposition especially with regarding issues of cooperation, conflict, and security.

**Societal multiplicity as a wake-up call**

This section discusses the societal multiplicity proposition as a welcome nudge towards noticing a gap between regulatory and customary practices of building global governance from below. It argues that what had been lost on an intersubjective (knowledge) ontology, might now be rescued by moving to an inter-societal (multiplicity) ontology. The path has already been paved by norm contestation research. In fact, going back to Adler, it has been argued that ‘(C)onstructivist norms research has everything to gain from a “practice-relational approach” that places norms within the practice, and which operates from the basic dictum that “all practice is normative”. The growing interest in norm contestation reflects this dictum’ (Wiener, 2018: 38, citing McCourt, 2016, Nexon et al., 2017, and Adler, 2017). Given that both programmatic calls share a concern for IR as a discipline and that both emphasise social inter-relationality, the point follows logically. Yet, and somewhat surprisingly, it has not been explored in detail so far. Two more substantive rationales underlie the argument. First, norms studies are central to the constructivist research programme. Against this development, the Constructivist turn can hardly be considered a failure. By contrast, second, the turn’s dynamic has been driven more by empirical research and methodological innovation than by the normative and theoretical issues of Adler’s two-tiered middle ground.

A – renewed – call for a deep ontology focussing on societal interaction and its political possibilities is therefore not only timely but overdue. For interpretations of the material world so far paid little systematic attention to the normative dimension. Indeed, the field is criticised for operating under assumptions of ‘crypto-normativity’. Yet, ascribing value to a norm based on its appropriateness constituted through habit leaves the underlying ethical values, let alone a rigorous and systematic account of their effect, to one side (Erskine, 2013; Havercroft, 2018: 161; Ralph, 2020; Wiener, 2020a). This bracketing misses out on the *problematique* that is generated by the gradual incorporation of fundamental norms (i.e. democracy, fundamental rights of individuals, sovereignty) into global governance and global order. It includes complex processes of multi-layered horizontal and vertical norm ‘transfers’ between states (Alter et al., 2012; De Burca et al., 2013). Of interest is therefore how and to which extent the norms literature allows for integrating a sensor for societal multiplicity which opens up better ways of capturing
both inner- and inter-societal relations including affected stakeholders and their struggles for recognition as the condition for making good the absence of social contracts that legitimate these norms.

It is here where a gap between global governance norms and the struggle for recognition of those governed by them comes to the fore. It is constituted by handling global governance norms as if they were legitimated through procedures, rather than acknowledging that these norms are negotiated and mediated by the few, and not the many who are ultimately affected by them. Effectively, fundamental norms are exported and uploaded onto ‘sites’ of political authority on the macro-scale of global order where they are increasingly contested. Given their key constitutive role for order, as international relations progressed fundamental norms that once were subject to social contracts in national societies (Pateman, 1988) were gradually bestowed with normative authority. The process has contributed to a growing alienation of the multitude of stakeholders that were subsequently governed by these norms. While there is no shortage of research on the contested legitimacy of global governance norms, the ‘agency of the governed’ with regard to negotiating the substance and meaning of the norms that govern them, remains under-researched in IR (Draude, 2017). And while there is a recent surge in contestation research in IR, the understanding that a norm’s value lies in the degree of contestation spurred by the multiple meanings-in-use it carries, has yet to become a common currency for assessing the legitimacy of normative orders. That is why viewing the societal multiplicity proposition as a nudge to addressing the gap is so important. For, the main interest is still dedicated to policymaking with regard to selected norms that matter to within an issue-area in global politics (consider, for example, foreign and security policy, or climate policy). Here, norm contestation and lacking robustness have received relatively more attention than the normative issue of using fundamental norms for purposes of order-building. The _quod omnes tangit_ principle (what touches all must be approved by all) pinpoints the issue (Owen and Tully, 2007); thus, by transferring fundamental norms from national societies where they are bound by constitutional agreements to represent a given society’s ‘social contract’ (Pateman, 1988) into the global realm where they work without such an agreement they have become ‘unbound’ (Wiener and Oeter, 2016).

The result is a normative gap which stands to be closed by more systematic assessment of societal interactions including as Rosenberg suggests, relations among a plurality of societies. Thus, it becomes possible to take diverse experiences and expectations within (local) societies into account for global order-building. This gap is constituted by the absence of social contract theories which would offer an angle on addressing the decontextualised meanings-in-use of fundamental norms when these norms are transferred or literally ‘moved’ out of their original national constitutional bounds and into the global realm. The proposed attention to inter-societal – and inner-societal – relations will prove helpful to fill that gap. The conceptual turn towards societal multiplicity, therefore, matters for the entire spectrum of IR theories, for the shift emphasises qualitative (‘more than one kind’) and quantitative (‘more than one’) drivers of international relations (practice) and International Relations (theory) alike. Both drivers’ interrelated and mutually reinforcing dynamics play out across societal boundaries and within societies alike.

Following Rosenberg (2019: 6) in detail, the promises of societal multiplicity (for norms) remain to be explored with reference to five potential consequences:
co-existence, difference, interaction, combination, and dialectical change. Against that backdrop, this potential lies especially in offering an additional layer to seminal practice and agency-based approaches to international ordering. And, as the norm contestation literature shows, in global governance organisations, possibilities for mediating normative values between scales of order are limited. Whether mediated by law or political procedure, norm acceptance depends on the social environment in which norms stand to be implemented (Finnemore and Toope, 2001). In turn, contestation therefore indicates lack disposition to compliance or opposition to norm violation. Both motives for contestation (i.e. opposition to norm compliance on one hand, and to norm violation, on the other hand) have been noted to rise, including instances in selected policy areas but also more generally a looming ‘crisis of international law’ (Krieger and Liese, 2019). To address these contestations, critical norms research has emphasised the limits of mediated value-transfer from domestic to global contexts and vice versa by pointing out the phenomenon of mismatching normative meanings-in-use. Norms do not travel well because they are relational categories that appear most appropriate to members of social groups with a given identity. They are therefore less recognised the further they are removed from their context of origin and everyday practice. In a globalised world, we therefore need to address a multiplicity of stakeholders each of whom carries their own and potentially quite distinct ‘normative baggage’ (Puetter and Wiener, 2009). In the absence of inter- and inner-societal negotiations, more norm contestation than untested norm-following stands to be expected.

The absence of elucidating inner-disciplinary dialogues leaves multiplicity as an under-explored resource. The next section follows up from the notion of a gap and proposes to fill it by exploring opportunities and constraints for renegotiating social contracts through inter-societal negotiations that play out across and through various different consequences. Social contracts would then become an organising principle to a bottom-up approach to building global governance. To demonstrate how, the following section takes both Rosenberg’s and Adler’s propositions as a backdrop against which it becomes possible to shed light on some ‘unfinished business’ such as, for example, an inherent statist logic which prevented bringing the promises of addressing the ‘social’ to fruition. It is argued that while Adler’s proposition addressed both empirical and normative interpretations of material reality, so far, normative interpretation has received significantly less attention than empirical observation by norms scholars. Against this background, the following section, therefore, presents the societal multiplicity proposition as an invitation to undertake more systematic research on inter- and inner-societal relations and their effect as a wake-up call which reminds us that global governance organisation represents just one dimension of ‘world making’ (Onuf, 1989: 201).

Moving towards the centre: contested norms of global governance

Referring to the norm contestation literature as an IR subfield where a turn towards societal multiplicity can make a difference also reveals an unintended consequence of constructivist norms research. Namely, much of this literature still prioritises fundamental norms and their diffusion or implementation while paying less attention to their
value- and fact-based roots and the meanings in-use attached to them through everyday practice. However, the litmus test of importing, exporting, and/or transferring norms from national societies into the global order depends on their interpretation in the social environment where they are used (Finnemore and Toope, 2001) or more precisely where they are re-enacted (Wiener, 2009). Empirically, therefore, we need to know more about the multiplicity of affected stakeholders’ and how they ‘use’ norms. This insight has long remained bracketed by state-centred research which derives the appropriateness of norms from the behaviour of states (and their representatives) rather than from affected stakeholders in global society. In the process, knowledge about cultural experiences and the specific ‘normative structure of meaning-in-use’ which guides and enables (or constrains) stakeholders when re-enacting norms is not considered (Wiener, 2009: 176).

In a globalised world where governance increasingly relies on and depends upon fundamental norms for guidance and success in everyday politics and policymaking, the fact that these norms are far-removed from their societal roots not only puts a critical distance between the local sites where social contracts are negotiated. It also points to a research gap in IR as local normative opportunity structures represent local rules of engagement which fail to convince stakeholders who are far-removed and who have not been a part of their constitution. Addressing the gap implies rethinking global ordering from below (Bueger, 2022).11

To illustrate the gap between governance norms and opportunities for societal negotiation this section turns to norms studies as a subfield in IR which has achieved a move towards the middle. It therefore serves as a welcome example in order to demonstrate how common research interests may be discussed from a plurality of conceptual standpoints. To demonstrate the point, key concepts are introduced as part of the subfield’s trajectory which represents a move towards the centre. As the subfield’s central category, the concept of norms represents a range of soft institutions including principles, rules, and standards that considered as valid to differing degrees of societal and normative validity. To analyse how norms work, why they are contested, and what this implies in terms of political or legal implementation, it is important to locate norms on a spectrum ranging from more general fundamental norms to more specific organising principles to even more specified standards and regulations. This is captured by the norm-typology which distinguishes between fundamental norms (type 1), organising principles (type 2), and standardised rules and regulations (type 3; Wiener, 2018: 60ff). Due to the dual quality of norms as structuring and socially constructed, the impact and role of a norm always depends on its societal acceptance and moral reach. As the following illustrates in more detail, this fact-based and value-based underpinning speaks to the two quantitative and qualitative drivers of societal multiplicity.

Consider fundamental norms and their central role as the glue of global governance – whether conceived as a ‘political system’, a ‘liberal order’, or a plurality of ‘diversity regimes’ (Hurrell, 2020; Phillips and Reus-Smit, 2020). These norms represent the quasi-constitutional core which morally frames governing beyond the nation-state. In recent decades, these norms have become increasingly contested culminating in mounting concerns about the ‘crisis of international law’ (Krieger and Liese, 2019). Their contestedness therefore serves an indicator of the rapidly advancing progress of globalised policy
areas and, relatedly, the emergence of regimes that are constituted by an ever tighter and complex web of institutions and norms and governed from sites that are situated beyond constitutional control or power of legal sanction. Cases in point are migration regimes, diversity regimes, security regimes, citizenship regimes, and so on. This said, despite their contestedness in international relations, in the absence of a constituted political system that can rely on a negotiated social contract and a constitutional frame, these fundamental norms do matter because they represent the core values that guide global governance in all sectors. Beyond that, this quantitatively defined conditionality of IR as a space which, per se, transcends the boundaries of (nation-)states, earmarking norm contestation as a research area for a multiplicity research programme is confirmed by a second observation which refers to the qualitative roots of fundamental norms. For, it is here that IR theory often works with what one might call a conceptual precision that remains wanting. Therefore, the interrelated qualitative and quantitative dynamics which are part and parcel of the proposed ontology/epistemology shift towards societal multiplicity hold considerable promise.

Recall the two leading observations of norms research: on one hand, fundamental norms have often been taken for granted (Henkin, 1970) as regulatory principles of international law (Koh, 2007). Yet, on the other hand, ‘contested compliance’ (Wiener, 2004) has become an issue which has proved hard to resolve. And subsequently, attention to the rootedness of these norms in everyday socio-cultural practices remains largely under-researched in IR. The rising dedication to instances of ‘contestation’ in norms research and beyond documents this very well. The issue at hand is then that fundamental norms have been incorporated into the political order of global governance through a political practice of international relations that has almost exclusively involved state representatives, and especially those from Western political orders at that (the latter adding a dimension of contested colonial and Eurocentric balance which has been receiving growing attention from recent IR scholarship). This view is widely accepted in 21st-century IR scholarship that seeks to counter the deficiencies of the modern liberal order through more inclusive approaches that account for plurality and cultural diversity in global society. In short, while IR theories about the global political system and/or global society frequently recur on selected fundamental constitutional norms, their legitimate role as contested and constituted through political struggles that manifest a social contract is much less pronounced. I suggest that it is here, where the reflexive research programme that comes with Rosenberg’s ontological shift of focus on societal multiplicity is well equipped to take IR forward.

Taking Rosenberg’s five consequences into account and here, especially, the practice-based inter-active inter-societal dimensions which they share, the focus on inter- and inner-societal interaction within the global context enables IR scholarship to incorporate research on the societal roots of fundamental norms of global governance based on social contract theory. As noted in the previous section, so far, IR scholarship has generated more insights on the quantitative ‘transfer’ of norms from national societies into global agreements, treaties, and documents, than on their contested normative quality (i.e. their meaning-in-use on site). A good example is the transfer of norms and institutions between different court systems such as the European Union (EU) and the Andean Courts (Alter et al., 2012). That is, in replacement of the rootedness of these fundamental norms in the
societal, political, and constitutional processes that facilitate the legitimation of norms based on each society’s own social contract, IR scholarship on global governance has focused on the role of either heads of state and/or government or principal as the mediators of legitimacy based on regulatory institutions.

Against this background of ‘thinly’ legitimised fundamental norms, their dual quality as structuring and socially constructed becomes even more vital. In turn, practice-based norms research in IR and International Law (IL), as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS) studies on governance have begun to turn the tide and identify the constitution of institutions, layers of knowledge and norms with a focus on ‘practice’ (Aykut et al., 2017; Brunnée and Toope, 2019; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, 2018; Hakimi, 2019; Jasanoff, 2008; Walsh, 2013). With regard to the effect on fragmentation of the discipline norms studies have experienced a reverse effect of boundary work. This is mainly due to the rise of contestation studies. While it is notable that the contestation literature predominantly addresses contestation in global politics, questions of the interplay between fact-based and value-based normative quality has generated in the dual quality of norms, in particular (Winston, 2018). The following explores the promises which the proposed societal multiplicity-ontology holds for the contestation literature with reference to the crisis of international law as a crisis of values with as yet undetermined effects on the system of international law.

The global value crisis and sustainable normativity

Current research on the contestedness of (fundamental) norms in international relations and international law points towards specific empirical cases that would be highly relevant for a research programme which takes Rosenberg’s call for a more sustained focus on societal multiplicity into account. While it has long been a shared dictum that ‘almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law and almost all of their obligations almost all the time’ (Henkin, 1970), subsequent norms research has revealed that in later decades, quite the opposite is true: fundamental norms are (a) pretty much always contested in international relations, and beyond that (b) their contested quality must be conceived as an opportunity rather than a constraint for IR and, indeed, international relations. As the two-tiered quantitative/qualitative effect of the multiplicity-ontology confirms, this contestation is expected both in principle (i.e. expectations of normative meaning-in-use diverge qualitatively among diverse stakeholders) and in practice (i.e. we observe a quantitative rise in contestations of global norms). For example, ‘current contestations of the liberal international order stand in notable contrast with the earlier rise of international law during the post-cold war period’ (Wiener, 2020a: 1). This generates an interest, ‘in reassessing the state and development of international law in our time. This involves asking whether there is reason to question certain widely-held assumptions about its general development, be they generally held (factual) expectations and (normative) aspirations’ (Krieger and Nolte, 2016: 5; emphasis added). More generally, this raises the question ‘(C)an we detect a metamorphosis while being part of it?’ (Krieger and Liese, 2019: 5).

By developing the concept of ‘sustainable normativity’ against the background of T.H. Marshall’s (1950) ‘Citizenship and Social Class’, Wiener (1998, 2018: 71–72) has
raised attention for the central question of ‘access’ to citizenship rights, and subsequently, ‘access’ to proactive norm contestation. To address unequal access conditions that shape the possibilities and constraints for political participation of the multitude of affected stakeholders in global society, she proposes drawing on the quod omnes tangit principle (what touches all must be approved by all) for framing central normative questions for norms research, such as ‘whose practices count?’ (observation) and ‘whose practices ought to count?’ (evaluation; Wiener, 2018: 1). Following this frame, empirical research begins from observing global norm contestations, and traces them to local sites, in order to evaluate affected stakeholders’ access to norm contestation. Following Marshal, this access is conditioned by the normative opportunity structure on site. Its qualitatively distinct realisation is identified by the following two distinctions. First, access to contestation is qualified with reference to political effect as (a) reactive contestation (i.e. objection) and (b) the politically far more effective proactive contestation (i.e. critical engagement with these norms’ substance). Second, and accounting for knowledge as value-based, three types of norm validation to which diverse and multiple stakeholders have access, are to be distinguished: the formal validation (in a position of political/legal power), social validation (in a position of a solid social group/community), and cultural validation (individually generated cultural knowledge aka normative baggage). The types of validation therefore provide a key to societally qualified access to the two practices of contestation in light of the normative opportunity structures that set the conditions for norm(ative) change locally. Both help mapping distinct degrees of sustainable normativity on site. To counter for unequal access – which is the given condition in global society – it then engages selected stakeholder groups’ respective discursive interventions in a global multilogue to identify norm(ative) change. Here, more systematic research on societal multiplicity would facilitate helpful and more detailed insights.

A starting point which takes account of inter- and inner-societal relations has been offered by norms research that seeks to reverse the ‘bracketing of a value-based perspective on norms’ and which sketches a ‘conceptual framework that centres on practice-based norm(ative) change’ (Wiener, 2020a: 1). This practice-based norms research centres on the contestation of norms at different scales of global order combined with distinct practices of formal, social, and cultural validation as indicators of ‘sustainable normativity’ (Wiener, 2018: Ch. 3). These degrees are read off empirical research on reactive and proactive contestation on locally defined sites. As long as both practices of contestation are in balance, the conditions for a modicum of sustainable normativity are satisfied. As soon as either reactive or proactive contestation develops the strong-hand, sustainable normativity is challenged, that is, an imbalance in favour of reactive contestation is expected to lead to political conflict (which may trickle across societal boundaries igniting conflicts elsewhere), and an imbalance in favour of proactive contestation may imply a decline in opportunities for political protest.12

The characteristic interplay between the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the multitude of affected stakeholders who take part in the practice is demonstrated, thus, while reactive contestation can be observed quantitatively with regard to agents, sites, and times where norm compliance or norm violation is objected, in turn, proactive contestation needs to be evaluated qualitatively according to the conditions that facilitate access to critical engagement with norms and their meaning-in-use. The
practices of contestation nicely pin-point Rosenberg’s point about consequences of multiplicity that potentially consist in either ‘danger’ or ‘opportunity’. For, if reactive contestation – expressed by the spectrum of political activities including the spectrum of ‘contentious politics’ to the more silent neglect of norms (Stimmer and Wisken, 2019; Tilly, 1993) – is not met by favourable conditions of access to proactive contestation, the necessary balance between both practices becomes lop-sided. The likely result is conflict which may represent a danger to societal stability, security, and so on. In turn, if reactive contestation is met by favourable conditions of access to proactive contestation, the diversity of voices is able to engage in deliberations to negotiate a compromise. The latter entails the potential of an opportunity, in so far as the political opportunity structure may be changed, for example, by offering access to previously neglected groups of stakeholders, establishing new pathways to participation for societal groups, or by revising normative substance. Taken together, therefore, both practices reflect the quantitative–qualitative challenge raised by a multiplicity-ontology. Reactive contestation highlights affected agents’ objection vis-à-vis a given order and/or its rules of engagement (i.e. the local normative opportunity structure). In turn, proactive contestation allows for shaping conditions for qualitative change of that order (i.e. reflecting the global normative structure of meaning-in-use). It is argued that reactive and proactive practices of contestation provide a helpful vantage point for framing the interplay between quantitative and qualitative multiplicity and its impact on international ordering.

**Conclusion**

In line with this special issue’s theme, this article discussed potential promises of the societal multiplicity proposition. It did this by reducing that complexity somewhat, for example, identifying distinct quantitative and qualitative drivers of societal multiplicity. With reference to norms research as a sample subfield in IR, it sought to flag how and where societal multiplicity can make a promising contribution. It suggested that research on norm contestation offers a helpful starting point because it distinguishes between a quantitative descriptive dimension that maps reactive contestation (who objects to a norm?), on one hand, and a qualitative normative dimension that evaluates proactive contestation (who has access to critically engage with a norm?) on the other hand. Here, reactive contestation highlights affected agents’ objection vis-à-vis a given order and/or its rules of engagement (i.e. the local normative opportunity structure), whereas proactive contestation allows for shaping conditions for qualitative change of that order (i.e. reflecting the global normative structure of meaning-in-use). It was argued that reactive and proactive practices of contestation provide a helpful vantage point for framing the interplay between quantitative and qualitative multiplicity and its impact on international ordering. Following the societal multiplicity proposition then, societal and political ordering in a globalised space does not begin from a given ‘liberal community’ (top-down) but from a socially constructed emerging set of orders (bottom-up). At the same time, of course, building global governance from below does not begin at the drawing board but within a populated global space that is structured by
an albeit temporary yet considerably stable organisational setting. So how does it begin then? As this article sought to show the beginning lies both with the where (local sites) and the how (practices of contestation).

As the illustration with reference to norms research and its driving practices suggests each of the five consequences stands to be explored in more detail. Norms research is merely one site of many within the wider discipline where the societal multiplicity proposition would offer an incentive to start fleshing out a research. Arguing that a shift towards societal multiplicity does bear potential for IR, this article first identified a gap with regard to the bracketing of inter-societal negotiation of global governance norms, and then highlighted the gap and potential ways to address it by research on the contested role and impact of norms in international relations. To illustrate the timeliness of Rosenberg’s programmatic call, the article recalled IR’s trajectory towards and away from the middle ground during the period ranging from Adler’s call for seizing the middle ground in the 1990s to the fragmentation of the discipline in the 2010s. From this vantage point, it then turned to norms studies for a sample case of an IR subfield in order to highlight potential promises of the proposed ontological shift. Here, special attention was paid to the quantitative and qualitative drivers of societal multiplicity argued that the proposed shift is likely to shed light on the inter-/societal contingency of international ordering as well as the intersubjective construction and (self-) knowledge of the entities involved. Its ultimate promise then lies in addressing the more detailed and specific societal dynamics, thereby strengthening the largely under-researched bottom-up perspective on contested global orders and global re-ordering through international relations practice. After all, ordering in a globalised space does not begin from a given liberal community (top-down) but from a socially constructed emerging set of orders (bottom-up).

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**Notes**

1. In the English original version of a paper published with *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* Rosenberg argues, ‘(T)he downside to IR’s wonderful openness to the other disciplines is that if we have no deep ontology of our own, we become in effect everybody’s subfield’ (Rosenberg, 2019: 3).
2. German original text: ‘In ähnlicher Weise entsteht die Disziplin der IB aus der Tatsache der gesellschaftlichen Multiplizität im menschlichen Leben. *Das ist unsere einzigartige ontologische Prämisse*’ (Rosenberg, 2019: 111; translation and emphasis, AW).
3. I thank Reviewer #1 for this helpful suggestion. For the introduction of three moves that advanced norms research over the past three decades, see Orchard and Wiener (2021).
4. I thank Reviewer #1 for flagging the point on building global governance form the bottom-up as a key benefit of this epistemological vantage point.
5. I thank Reviewer #2 for highlighting that ‘clarifying different meanings of “social” (and societal) and how the Rosenberg programme through this intervention can improve on an already productive and cumulative research programme like Wiener’s’ and follow this up by considering Rosenberg’s proposal as a meaningful addition to that research programme (compare Wiener, 2014, 2018, 2020b).

6. I follow Reviewer #1 with this suggestion.

7. I thank the editors for highlighting the importance of the political consequences here as well.

8. The call falls on fertile grounds against the backdrop of the recent call for a more pluralist Global International Relations (IR; Acharya, 2014; Hurrell, 2016; Tickner, 2016).

9. Compare that the majority of the norms scholarship targets norm conflicts and contestations in the area of foreign and security policy (Davies and True, 2018; Orchard, 2016; Puettet and Wiener, 2009; Ralph and Staunton, 2020; Rosert, 2019; Shepherd, 2016; Stimmer and Wisken, 2019; True and Wiener, 2019; Winston, 2018).

10. Adler defines Constructivism as ‘the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and empirical interpretations of the material world’ (Adler, 1997: 322; emphasis by AUTHOR).

11. The growing concern about the ‘crisis of international law’ is a case in point (Krieger and Liese, 2019).

12. For a possible way of framing empirical research on political practices of contestation as interactions with reference, see the cycle-grid model (Wiener, 2018: 23–24, 61).

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