Preface

The coronavirus pandemic is responsible quite literally for the preparation of this volume of reflections on the grand challenges of planetary governance in the 21st century and the future of the global order. For years, I have traveled the world delivering lectures, participating in conferences, working with colleagues on articles and books, collaborating in brainstorming exercises concerning the shape of new projects, and engaging in the development of international science programs. The onset of Covid-19 brought all that to an abrupt halt. I continue to engage with colleagues in various parts of the world on a range of activities via Zoom and other virtual platforms. But a year into living with the pandemic, I remain grounded. I have not traveled professionally since the imposition of restrictions in response to the virus in the United States during March 2020. That has left me with a substantial block of time that would normally be consumed by traveling to distant locations and living in hotels. Without making a conscious decision about the use of this time, I found myself during the time of Covid-19 motivated to pull together my thoughts on a range of issues pertaining to governance on a planetary scale and to articulate them in a series of papers. Somewhere along the line, it became apparent that the central thread running through the resultant essays is a concern for the future of the global order during a period that may well emerge in retrospect as a time of critical institutional transitions on a planetary scale. With a little effort, I realized, it would be possible to connect these reflections and assemble them into an integrated set of observations about the roles that social institutions play and more specifically about the institutional underpinnings of the global order representing my mature thinking about this subject. The product of this effort is the book you have before you.

Embedded in the central thread is a concern for the nature of change in complex systems. We tend to assume that the existence of international society understood as a society of sovereign states is a fact of life and that we are destined to operate within the confines of this system for the indefinite future. As a result, most discussions of world order focus on detailed analyses of the rise and fall of major powers and the complexities of varieties of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems that may emerge from the interactions of leading actors. Are we approaching the end of the American world order? If so, what is the shape of the world order that will replace it? Are the United States and China destined to fall into what prominent analysts call the Thucydides trap?

Whatever the merits of this line of thinking, I start from the proposition that international society is a complex system subject to nonlinear and sometimes sudden changes that may trigger critical transitions or bifurcations as opposed to oscillations. Of course, even when we know that such occurrences are possible, we are regularly taken by surprise when they occur in specific instances. In the case of the Earth's climate system, for example, we now expend much effort on thinking about tipping elements, thresholds, and triggers that may activate critical transitions. But this does not mean that we are able to predict whether or when a bifurcation will occur, much less what form a successor climate system will take following a critical transition.

Nevertheless, this does not preclude a disciplined effort to make use of this perspective to guide thinking about changes in the character of the global order and what they will mean for efforts to address specific needs for governance. I approach this topic from the perspective of thinking about the role of social institutions in meeting needs for governance on a planetary scale. It is safe to assume, I think, that we will not witness the emergence of anything resembling a world government in the ordinary sense of the term in the coming decades. At the same time, I believe it is perfectly possible that we will see major changes in the constitutive features of international society treated as a society of states. The challenge, under these conditions, is to envision alternative forms of order and to engage in innovative thinking about creating effective institutions to address major needs for governance and to avoid dysfunctional social traps in a setting in which biophysical and socioeconomic turbulence makes decision-making under uncertainty unavoidable. A requirement for success in this endeavor is an ability to create institutions that can adapt easily to changing conditions, while not losing their capacity to guide the actions of key actors effectively on a day-to-day basis. As our experience in seeking to come to terms with the problem of climate change suggests, this is likely to mean moving away from the traditional emphasis in the field of international relations on the central role of rules-based systems articulated in the provisions of international legally binding instruments. But crafting effective institutions will require a better understanding of alternatives to the conventional regulatory model of governance and a willingness to experiment with different sorts of arrangements to deal with a variety of specific needs for governance. A realistic goal in this setting, in my view, is to develop a well-stocked toolkit that includes a range of mechanisms for addressing needs for governance and to cultivate improved diagnostic skills making it possible to improve the fit between the critical features of specific problems and the key attributes of the governance systems we devise to address them.

Those seeking answers to specific questions, like how to strengthen the climate regime or what to do about misuses of cyber age technologies, may find the ideas I set forth in this book disappointing. It is not my intention

to offer concrete prescriptions regarding ways to address specific needs for governance. My goal is to build intellectual capital and to provide new lenses through which to look at problems of governance arising on a planetary scale. I seek to encourage readers to ask new questions about problems of this sort, to embrace fresh ways to think about them, and to consider a wider range of responses rather than to present detailed prescriptions for addressing current problems. If the result is to enrich thinking about the 21st century's grand challenges of governance and to broaden the range of options considered in responding to them, I will regard my effort as a success.

The restrictions imposed by Covid-19 have made the preparation of this book an unusually solitary task. But what I have to say reflects decades of thinking about the roles social institutions play in performing the function of governance in the course of which I have had the good fortune of interacting with a remarkable collection of people. I began thinking about these matters already as a doctoral student at Yale University in the early 1960s, where I learned a lot about institutions from my interactions with Robert Dahl and Myres McDougal and about systems from my interactions with Karl Deutsch. Since then I have been especially fortunate to have had the opportunity to refine my thinking about governance through interactions with a large number of talented students, both in the United States and in other parts of the world, the best of whom have become lifelong friends. While I have spent most of my career as a member of the research community, I have learned a lot also from a number of opportunities to apply my ideas to issues arising on policy agendas. Still, the social distancing required during the time of Covid-19 has proven beneficial in some respects. It has provided me with a rare opportunity for sustained reflection that is hard to come by in normal times. The result is a concentrated effort to move beyond immediate concerns and to focus on building the intellectual capital that will be needed to come to terms with the 21st century's grand challenges of planetary governance.

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