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Author(s): Helen Milner
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Cambridge University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097244
Accessed: 05/01/2012 21:27

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The assumption of anarchy in international relations theory: a critique*

HELEN MILNER

'Anarchy is one of the most vague and ambiguous words in language.' George Cornwall Lewis, 1832.¹

In much current theorizing, anarchy has once again been declared to be the fundamental assumption about international politics. Over the last decade, numerous scholars, especially those in the neo-realist tradition, have posited anarchy as the single most important characteristic underlying international relations. This article explores implications of such an assumption. In doing so, it reopens older debates about the nature of international politics. First, I examine various concepts of 'anarchy' employed in the international relations literature. Second, I probe the sharp dichotomy between domestic and international politics that is associated with this assumption. As others have, I question the validity and utility of such a dichotomy. Finally, this article suggests that a more fruitful way to understand the international system is one that combines anarchy and interdependence.

Many of the points made in this article have been made individually by other scholars, especially those in the early 1960s such as Inis Claude and James Rosenau. But today these points need to be reiterated, as recent theorizing focuses ever more on anarchy and divorces international politics and domestic ones. It is once again time for a reminder that anarchy is an ambiguous concept and that dangers exist when it is exaggeratedly seen as the central fact of world politics.

Critiques of the assumption that international politics is anarchic are not lacking. John Ruggie has argued against Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realist theory of the anarchic international system, claiming that it cannot explain change and that it must incorporate other variables—such as 'dynamic density'—to do this.² Richard Ashley has charged that Waltz’s structural model based on anarchy loses sight of politics and of the original insights of the realists; he has also attacked Waltz’s epistemology.³ For Hayward Alker, the conception of international politics as anarchic presents a

* I would like to thank David Baldwin, James Caporaso, Alexander George, Joanne Gowa, Stephan Haggard, Ted Hopf, Robert Jervis, Robert Keohane, Fritz Kratochwil, Kathleen McNamara, Henry Nau, Susan Peterson, Kamal Shehadi, and Jack Snyder for their helpful comments.


value-laden interpretation of the system. Despite the criticisms made by these authors, all of them have assumed that anarchy is a well-understood concept. Their attacks have not focused on what IR scholars mean when using the term. Moreover, while these authors have criticized the positivist epistemology used by neo-realists, they have not challenged the claim that the anarchy assumption is fruitful within a positivist research design.

This article addresses both of these points. It argues that the notion of anarchy is not so well understood as is commonly implied. It suggests that an emphasis on the assumption of anarchy can be misleading and may have heuristic disadvantages. Even within a positivist framework, this assumption may be degenerative, posing anomalies and inhibiting new insights by separating international politics too radically from other politics. Clarification of this central concept in international relations is important since such a key term should not be used without knowing what is meant by it.

Concepts of anarchy

Anarchy has been accorded a central role in international politics, especially in recent theoretical writings. Robert Art and Robert Jervis, for instance, assert that ‘anarchy is the fundamental fact of international relations.’ For them, any understanding of international politics must flow from an understanding of this fact. Robert Gilpin defines the fundamental nature of international politics as ‘a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.’ For Kenneth Waltz, anarchy is the first element of structure in the international system. It is for him the structural feature from which all other consequences derive. Recent studies of international cooperation have also started from the assumption that the international system is anarchic. Robert Axelrod defines his central question as being ‘under what conditions will cooperation emerge in a world of egoists without central authority?’ He believes anarchy is especially relevant to international politics since ‘today nations interact without central authority.’ The condition of anarchy provides the baseline for his game-theoretic analysis. As he concludes,

Today, the most important problems facing humanity are in the area of international relations, where independent, egoistic nations face each other in a state of near anarchy. Many of the problems take the form of an iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma.

Other scholars have used this analogy between anarchy and the Prisoners’ Dilemma as well. In After Hegemony, Robert Keohane begins his effort to explain international cooperation by assuming that anarchy is the fundamental fact about

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10 Axelrod, Evolution, p. 4.

11 Axelrod, Evolution, p. 190.
international politics. He describes the initial international environment as one peopled by egoistic, anomic states, pursuing their self-interests in a self-help system without any centralized authority. He shows that even in this environment, which resembles single-play Prisoners’ Dilemma, states can find cooperation to be in their narrow self-interest.12

This view of anarchy as the central condition of international politics is also apparent in the explanation of cooperation that emerges in Kenneth Oye’s edited volume, Cooperation Under Anarchy. As the title suggests, this volume’s fundamental premise about international politics is that it is anarchic. The first sentence of the volume asserts that ‘Nations dwell in perpetual anarchy, for no central authority imposes limits on the pursuit of sovereign interests’.13 Moreover, the authors view their central question as being ‘what circumstances favor the emergence of cooperation under anarchy’ and see the structure of the international system as resembling Prisoners’ Dilemma. Assuming anarchy to be primary, they then proceed to diagnose what factors make cooperation possible in such an environment. For all of these authors then—although less so for Keohane—anarchy is taken to be the central background condition of international politics. All their analyses flow from this assumption. But what do these authors mean by anarchy?

Anarchy has at least two meanings. The first meaning that anarchy carries is a lack of order. It implies chaos or disorder. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, lists political disorder as its primary definition. Such lack of order is often associated with the existence of a state of war. It is thus linked to the Hobbesian analogy of politics in the absence of a sovereign, which realists use as a model of international politics. As Hedley Bull describes the realist view,

The Hobbesian tradition describes international relations as a state of war of all against all, an arena of struggle in which each state is pitted against every other. International relations, on the Hobbesian view, represent pure conflict between states and resemble a game that is wholly distributive or zero-sum . . . The particular international activity that, on the Hobbesian view, is most typical of international activity as a whole . . . is war itself.14

In this view then, the international system is a chaotic arena of war of all against all.

But are chaos, lack of order, and constant threat of war what scholars mean by the anarchic nature of the system? It does not seem to be. Persistent elements of order in international politics have been noted by many. International order, defined in a strong sense as ‘a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of a society of states, or international society’15 is not lacking in international relations. Such order implies the existence of a common framework of rules and institutions guiding international practices, and some such framework has existed among states at many times.16 For Hedley Bull, order in the form of ‘international society has always been present in the modern international system because at no stage can it be said that the conception of the common interests of states, of common rules accepted and common institutions worked by them, has ceased to exert an influence’.17

12 Robert Keohane, After Hegemony, chs. 5, 6 esp. pp. 73, 85, 88. He later relaxes this restrictive assumption, citing various forms of interdependence which may mitigate this anarchy. See ch. 7, esp. pp. 122–23.
15 Bull, Anarchical Society, p. 8.
16 Bull, Anarchical Society, pp. 15–16 and ch. 2.
17 Bull, Anarchical Society, p. 42.
Others as well have noted the elements of order and society that mark international politics. Much of the recent literature on international regimes makes this point. Regimes serve to constrain and guide states' behaviour according to common norms and rules, thereby making possible patterned, or orderly, behaviour. Indeed, the authors of *Cooperation Under Anarchy* seek to explain such order. While initially seeing international politics in the Hobbesian image of a system marked by persistent war and lacking limits on states' behaviour, they eventually note that an international society—albeit a fragmented one—exists... To say that world politics is anarchic does not imply that it entirely lacks organization. Relationships among actors may be carefully structured in some issue-areas, even though they remain loose in others.\(^{18}\)

In this strong sense of a set of patterned behaviour promoting various goals or norms, order is not what the international system lacks.

In a weaker sense, order is also apparent. Discovery of the orderly features of world politics amidst its seeming chaos is perhaps the central achievement of neo-realists. For example, Gilpin points out that 'the relationships among states have a high degree of order and that although the international system is one of anarchy (i.e., absence of formal governmental authority), the system does exercise an element of control over the behavior of states'.\(^{19}\) Waltz also finds order in the regularized patterns of state behaviour that he observes. The timeless and recurrent formation of balances of power constitutes such a pattern. Balancing gives order to the system in two ways. First, if effected properly, it may prevent war. Here power is used to create a structure that inhibits war and thus provides a means for organizing the international system. Other realists also see power and its distribution as providing for order in international politics. Robert W. Tucker, for example, sees power differentials among Northern and Southern states creating a hierarchy of relations that make for an orderly system.\(^{20}\) Unlike Waltz who focuses on balances of power, Tucker emphasizes the inequalities in power. But both see the distribution of power as creating the means for producing order—i.e., regularized, predictable patterns of behaviour—among states.

Second, recurrent balancing by states suggests the order lurking in the seeming chaos of international politics. While states themselves may not realize it, like firms in a perfect market, their behaviour is being constrained into an orderly outcome. Again, the behaviour of states is being influenced to produce unintended order. In this case, however, states' behaviour is not guided by their norms or goals, but rather by structures beyond their control. In this weaker sense, then, as well, lack of order does not seem to be the distinguishing feature associated with the system's anarchy. Thus although anarchy may refer to a lack of order in international politics, such a conception is not what most IR scholars mean by it.

The second definition of anarchy is the lack of government. It is the first meaning of anarchy given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and is common among political scientists. Among the many uses Waltz makes of anarchy, the notion of an absence of government is central.\(^{21}\) In the *Cooperation Under Anarchy* volume, anarchy is also defined as a 'lack of common government'.\(^{22}\) Earlier writers concur in this; for

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instance, Martin Wight sees 'the international system [as] properly described as an anarchy—a multiplicity of powers without a government'.\(^{23}\) Frederick Dunn in 1948 also writes that 'international politics is concerned with the special kind of power relationships that exist in a community lacking an overriding authority'.\(^{24}\) Again, the analogy to Hobbese's state of nature is evoked. States in the international system are seen as being in a state of nature, in a state prior to the creation of Leviathan—i.e., without a common authority keeping them in awe. This meaning of anarchy then relates to the lack of something, this time to a common government or authority.

But what exactly is lacking? What is meant by government or authority? Many discussions in international politics fail to define government and/or authority or define them in very different ways. They tend also to use government and authority interchangeably. But the two are distinct concepts. Waltz, for instance, associates anarchy with lack of government, which deals with the means used to organize how and when force can be employed. Government, for him, has a Weberian cast to it; it implies a monopoly on the legitimate use of force:

The difference between national and international politics lies not in the use of force but in the different modes of organization for doing something about it. A government, ruling by some standard of legitimacy, arrogates to itself the right to use force . . . A government has no monopoly on the use of force, as is all too evident. An effective government, however, has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and legitimate means here that the public agents are organized to prevent and to counter the private use of force.\(^{25}\)

For others, government denotes something different. It is less associated with force than with the existence of institutions and laws to maintain order. Lack of government means the absence of laws, a legislature to write them, a judiciary to enforce them, and an executive to administer them. For example, Martin Wight notes,

Anarchy is the characteristic that distinguishes international politics from ordinary politics. The study of international politics presupposes absence of a system of government, as the study of domestic politics presupposes the existence of one . . . But it is roughly the case that, while in domestic politics the struggle for power is governed and circumscribed by the framework of law and institutions, in international politics law and institutions are governed and circumscribed by the struggle for power.\(^{26}\)

Others suggest that it is a particular function of government that the international system lacks. For the authors of 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', anarchy means the absence of a central authority to enforce states' adherence to promises or agreements.\(^{27}\) The means for hierarchical rule enforcement are missing. The emphasis in this volume is on institutions and authority, rather than force, as central to governance. Different definitions of government are thus used in the literature.

These three notions of government offer different visions of what is lacking in international politics. Which of these best fits standard notions of government? The definition of government as a monopoly over the legitimate use of force has three problems. The first involves the issue of monopoly. How much of a monopoly of


\(^{24}\) Frederick Dunn, 'Research Note: The Scope of International Relations', *World Politics*, 1 (Oct. 1948), p. 144.


\(^{26}\) Wight, *Power Politics*, p. 102.

\(^{27}\) Oye, 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', pp. 1–2.
force must a government have to exist? Most governments do not possess an absolute monopoly over the legitimate use of force. For instance, the US government does not; citizens have the right to self-defence and they have the constitutional right to bear arms. When the right to use force legitimately (under certain circumstances) is diffused to 240 million people, can a government in Waltz’s terms be said to exist? The difficulties with this definition are also apparent since it would not allow us to recognize even Hobbes’ Leviathan as a government. While individuals give up nearly all of their rights to it, even Leviathan does not possess a monopoly over the use of force. As Hobbes states emphatically, ‘A covenant not to defend myself from force by force is always void’.28 The right to self-defence through the legitimate use of force weakens any monopoly over legitimate coercion possessed by a government. A monopoly over the use of force then is probably not the distinguishing feature of a government.29

Perhaps the defining feature of government in this definition is the legitimacy of using force. This, though, raises the issue of what legitimacy means and how it is determined. A sense of legitimacy allows a government to use force without prompting the resistance of (or use of force by) society. Lack of such a sense is conducive to civil war. But does not the issue of the legitimacy of force arise internationally as well? The use of force in international politics is not always considered illegitimate; some uses seem legitimate to a majority of states. Even Morgenthau notes the range of legitimate and illegitimate uses of force in international politics:

> legitimate power, that is power whose exercise is morally or legally justified, must be distinguished from illegitimate power . . . The distinction is not only philosophically valid but also relevant for the conduct of foreign policy. Legitimate power, which can invoke a moral or legal justification for its exercise, is likely to be more effective than equivalent illegitimate power, which cannot be justified. That is to say, legitimate power has a better chance to influence the will of its objects than equivalent illegitimate power. Power exercised in self-defense or in the name of the United Nations has a better chance to succeed than equivalent power exercised by an ‘aggressor’ nation or in violation of international law. Political ideologies . . . serve the purpose of endowing foreign policies with the appearance of legitimacy.30

The use of force internationally then can be legitimate—or more or less legitimate—just as can its use domestically. This conception of what international politics lacks—a monopoly on the legitimate use of force—is not as clear as it seems, since governments lack such monopolies and since the legitimacy issue arises in international as well as domestic politics.

Third, this conception of government reveals a narrow notion of politics. It reduces both international and domestic politics to the use of force. Government ultimately depends on the threat of force, as does international politics.31 This is implicit in the Weberian definition of government. As Weber himself notes, ‘the threat of force, and in the case of need its actual use, is the method which is specific to political

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organization and is always the last resort when others have failed’.  
32 It is difficult in terms of this definition to see much distinction between international and domestic politics.

Other notions of government stress the existence of institutions and laws that maintain order. Government is based on more than coercion; it rests on institutionalized practices and well-accepted norms. Governments legislate, adjudicate, resolve Prisoners’ Dilemmas, and provide public goods, for example—all of which require more than mere coercion to accomplish. This broader institutional definition conforms more to standard notions of government than does the conception linked to force. The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences defines government as a system of social control which has ‘acquired a definite institutional organization and operate[s] by means of legal mandates enforced by definite penalties’.  
33 As a clarification, the entry states that ‘Whenever a group of human beings actuated by common interests and desires creates an organized institutional mechanism for the furtherance of these ends and for the adjustment and control of their relationships, there is government’.  
34 Similarly, in discussing why politics is not coterminous with government, Harry Eckstein defines government as ‘those formally organized structures of societies that specialize in the exercise of “sovereignty”, as that term has been understood since, roughly, the early seventeenth century: specialized organizations that make laws, implement them, and resolve conflicts arising under them, and have a uniquely “legitimate” right to do so’.  
35 Government in this standard definition centres on three notions: institutions, law, and legitimacy.

Institutions are valued in this definition not for themselves but for the functions they perform and the way in which they perform them. Governing institutions provide social order through their legal institutions and sense of legitimacy. But, as noted earlier, the provision of order is not unique to governments. Order exists in the international system; it is simply provided through different means. David Easton makes this point:

The fact that policies recognized as authoritative for the whole society must exist does not imply or assume that a central governmental organization is required in order to make decisions and effectuate them. Institutional devices for making and executing policy may take an infinite variety of forms. The clarity and precision with which the statuses and roles of legislators and administrators are defined will depend upon the level of development of a particular society. Societies could be placed on a continuum with regard to the degree of definition of such roles. Well-defined organizations, which we call government, exist in the national societies of western Europe; scarcely discernable statuses and roles of which a governmental organization is constituted exist in international society and in non-literate societies . . . not all [international] disputes are automatically settled through the efforts of individual nations along customary lines. As in the domestic sphere, the solution of differences is in large measure left to the individual national units through bilateral or wider

33 Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, p. 13. The Dictionary of Political Science, ed. Joseph Dunne (NY, 1964), p. 217, provides a similar definition: government is ‘the agency which reflects the organization of the statal (politically organized) group. It normally consists of an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch’.
negotiations...the general atmosphere or set of relations within which the individual national units are able to conduct then private negotiations about the distribution of values is dominated and supervised by the great powers. In the last resort, if any specific pattern of distribution of values, or if the general pattern emerging from individual private negotiations over time, does not accord with their conception of a desirable distribution of resources internationally, it has been normal for the great powers to step into speak with the voice of international society.36

The provision of order may not require formal institutions or laws. But supposedly the manner in which order is provided is what distinguishes the two areas. Within the state, law and hierarchy prevail; within the international system, power without legitimate authority dominates. Anarchy is equated with lawlessness.

But international governing institutions and a body of international laws do exist. It seems not to be their existence that matters, but their capacity for commanding obedience. This capacity depends much on their perceived legitimacy, as it does for domestic institutions. These institutions will have little influence internationally or domestically if they lack legitimacy. It is an actor's belief that an institution's commands or a law are binding or valid that gives them much of their force. As Weber recognized, an order that is seen as legitimate is far more likely to be obeyed than one that appeals only to self-interest or habit. 'But custom, personal advantage, purely affectual or ideal motives of solidarity, do not form a sufficiently reliable basis for a given domination. In addition, there is normally a further element, the belief in legitimacy.37 Many studying domestic politics have realized this. Dahl and Lindblom, for instance, note that there are many goals that cannot be achieved by command (i.e., threatening deprivation to get someone to do something) and that command is not the primary mechanism used to achieve almost any goal in politics.38 A sense of legitimacy is essential to the maintenance of any order.

Legitimacy then appears to be the linchpin upon which conceptions of government rest. It, more than institutions or laws, is what distinguishes domestic and international politics. Lack of legitimacy seems in the end to be what many IR scholars have in mind when they talk about anarchy. Anarchy as a lack of government is for them transformed into a discussion of lack of authority, or legitimacy. Both Waltz and the 'Cooperation Under Anarchy' authors end up here. But government and authority should not be conflated. Not all governments have de facto authority over their subjects. Authority is often tied to the notion of legitimacy; it implies a belief in the validity or bindingness of an order.39 It is not just laws or governing institutions that international politics may lack, but most importantly a sense of legitimacy.

But does the absence of authority provide a firm basis for the distinction between domestic and international politics? May not some domestic systems lack centralized authority and legitimacy, while certain international systems—e.g., the Concert of Europe40—enjoy high levels of legitimacy? Can and should we draw a rigid dichotomy between the two on the basis of anarchy defined this way?

37 Weber, Economy and Society, I, p. 231; see also I, pp. 31.
39 See, for example, Eckstein, 'Authority Patterns'; Easton, Political System, pp. 132–3.
Anarchy and the dichotomy between domestic and international politics

The renewed focus on anarchy in international politics has led to the creation of a sharp distinction between domestic and international politics. Politics internationally is seen as characterized primarily by anarchy, while domestically centralized authority prevails. One of the most explicit statements of this position is in Waltz’s Theory of International Politics. His powerful articulation of this dichotomy is interesting to examine closely since it is the clearest logical statement of the consequences of the anarchy assumption.

Waltz makes three separate claims about the distinction between the two areas. First, anarchy as a lack of central authority implies that international politics is a decentralized competition among sovereign equals. As he says,

The parts of domestic political systems stand in relations of super- and subordination. Some are entitled to command; others are required to obey. Domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic. The parts of international political systems stand in relations of coordination. Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey. International systems are decentralized and anarchic. 41

A second distinction flows from the assumption of anarchy. As a lack of centralized control over force, anarchic implies that world politics is a self-help system reliant primarily on force. This also distinguishes international from national politics.

Nationally, the force of a government is exercised in the name of right and justice. Internationally, the force of a state is employed for the sake of its own protection and advantage . . . Nationally, relations of authority are established. Internationally, only relations of strength result. 42

Finally, international politics is seen as the only true ‘politics’:

International politics is the realm of authority, of administration, and of law. International politics is the realm of power, of struggle, and of accommodation. The international realm is preeminently a political one. The national realm is variously described as being hierarchic, vertical, centralized, heterogeneous, directed, and contrived; and international realm, as being anarchic, horizontal, decentralized, homogeneous, undirected, and mutually adaptive. 43

A very sharp distinction is drawn between the two political arenas on a number of different grounds, all of which flow from the assumption of anarchy. While some societies may possess elements of both ordering principles—anarchy and hierarchy, the conclusion of many is that such a rigid dichotomy is empirically feasible and theoretically useful 44 In this section the utility of such a distinction is examined. Is it empirically and heuristically helpful? To answer this question, it is important to examine Waltz’s three distinctions because they represent the logical outcome of adopting the assumption of anarchy as the basis of international politics. While his views are the most explicit and perhaps extreme statement of this dichotomy, they do reflect the implicit understanding of neo-realist theory in general.

The first line of demarcation between domestic and international politics is the claim that centralization prevails in the former and decentralization in the latter. What is meant by centralization or its opposite? Centralization seems related to

41 Waltz, Theory, p. 88.
42 Waltz, Theory, p. 112.
43 Waltz, Theory, p. 113.
44 Waltz, Theory, pp. 115–16.
hierarchy. As Waltz notes, ‘The units—institutions and agencies—stand vis-à-vis each other in relations of super- and subordination’.45 Apparently, it refers to the number of, and relationship among, recognized centres of authority in a system. Domestic politics has fewer, more well-defined centres that are hierarchically ordered, while in international politics many centres exist and they are not so ordered. What counts as a centre of authority, however? Waltz resorts to the legalistic notion of sovereignty to make his count internationally. He also assumes that domestically a well-defined hierarchy of authority exists. While qualifying his point, he asserts that domestic politics is hierarchically ordered . . . In a polity the hierarchy of offices is by no means completely articulated, nor are all ambiguities about relations of super- and subordination removed. Nevertheless, political actors are formally differentiated according to the degrees of their authority, and their distinct functions are specified.46

Such a view of domestic politics is hard to maintain. Who is the highest authority in the US? The people, the states, the Constitution, the executive, the Supreme Court, or even Congress. De jure, the Constitution is; but, de facto, it depends upon the issue. There is no single hierarchy of authority, as in some ideal military organization. Authority for deciding different issues rests with different groups in society. Authority is not highly concentrated; it is diffused. This was the intention of the writers of the Constitution, who wanted a system where power was not concentrated but rather dispersed. It was dispersed not only functionally through a structure of countervailing ‘checks and balances’, but also geographically through federalism.47

Moreover, this decentralization is not unique to the US. One of the main concerns in comparative politics has been to locate the centres of authority in different nations and relate their different degrees of political centralization and decentralization along some continuum. Authority in some states may be fairly centralized, while in others it is highly decentralized, as in the debate over ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ states.48 But the central point is that states exhibit a very broad range of values along this continuum, and not all of them—or perhaps even the majority—may be more centralized than the international system.

A second issue is to what extent the international system is decentralized. The point made above that the concentration of authority in any system is best gauged along a continuum, and not a dichotomy, is relevant. Where along the continuum does the international system fit? The answer to this depends on two factors: what issue we are discussing (e.g., fishing rights, the use of nuclear weapons, or control of the seas) and what time period we have in mind. The first factor raises the issue of the fungibility of power. Curiously, Waltz assumes it is highly fungible: force dominates and a hierarchy of power exists internationally—i.e., ‘great powers’ are identifiable. This view centralizes power much more than does assuming it is infungible. The issue of change over time is also important. The international system may evince different levels of centralization and decentralization—e.g., the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe versus the post-World War II system.49

45 Waltz, Theory, p. 81.
46 Waltz, Theory, p. 81.
47 Waltz recognizes this; see Theory, pp. 81–82. But it never influences his very sharp distinction between the ordering of domestic and international politics.
48 See, for example, Peter Katzenstein (ed), Between Power and Plenty (Ithaca, 1978).
49 Waltz does note the differences in systems in terms of the number of great powers, or poles. He suggests the consequences of this are different levels of stability in the system. Ruggie in ‘Continuity and Transformation’ also sees differences in systems over time. But his focus is on the divide between the medieval and the modern (post-seventeenth century) systems.
To deal with these issues, Waltz has to relinquish his more legalistic notion of the international system as one of sovereign equals. At times, he indeed does this. In discussing anarchy, he posits that all states are equal and thus that authority internationally is highly decentralized. But when talking of the distribution of capabilities he recognizes that states are not equal and that only a few great powers count. In this latter discussion, he implies that capabilities are highly centralized in the international system. Waltz himself then does not find the assumption that all states are equal and thus that power is highly decentralized to be either empirically true or heuristically useful. As a ‘good’ realist, he focuses upon the few strong powers in the system.

John Ruggie argues that this apparent contradiction between the system’s anarchic structure and the distribution of capabilities is not real. He attributes to Waltz a ‘generative model’ in which the ‘deep structure’ of anarchy influences the more superficial structure of the power distribution. But Ruggie concludes that Waltz has failed to develop such a generative model, and Waltz agrees. It is unclear how Waltz intends to reconcile anarchy with its metaphor of a decentralized, perfectly competitive market and hierarchy established through the distribution of capabilities with its metaphor of an oligopolistic market. As the conflicting metaphors reveal, the two structural principles work against each other, and their impact on each other and their causal priority are unclear.

The issue of the centralization of power internationally touches on another distinction between domestic and international politics. Waltz, for instance, claims that

In anarchic realms, like units coact. In hierarchic realms, unlike units interact. In an anarchic realm, the units are functionally similar and tend to remain so. Like units work to maintain a measure of independence and may even strive for autarky. In a hierarchic realm, the units are differentiated, and they tend to increase the extent of their specialization. Differentiated units become closely interdependent.

The argument is that states are sovereign, implying that they are functionally equal and hence not interdependent. They are duplicates, who do not need one another. Domestically, the units within states are differentiated, each filling some niche in the chain of command. For many domestic systems, this is not accurate. For instance, in federal systems each state is functionally equal and no generally agreed upon chain of command between the states and the national government exists. On some issues at some times, states have the final say; on others, the central government.

On the other hand, there is the question of whether all nation-states are functionally equivalent. If states are all 'like units', why only examine the great powers? Waltz realizes this is a problem. He admits that 'internationally, like units sometimes perform different tasks'. Moreover, 'the likelihood of their doing so, varies with their capabilities'. Thus he acknowledges that states with different capabilities perform different functions; hence, they are not all 'like' units. Later he takes the point further:

Although states are like units functionally, they differ vastly in their capabilities. Out of such

50 Ruggie, ‘Continuity and Transformation’, p. 266.
52 Waltz, Theory, pp. 89–90, 129–36.
53 Waltz, Theory, p. 104.
54 Waltz, Theory, p. 47.
differences something of a division of labor develops . . . The division of labor across nations, however, is slight in comparison with the highly articulated division of labor within them.  

His position is that states do not perform the same tasks, that some international division of labour exists, but that this differentiation is empirically unimportant relative to that domestically. The dilemma is that two of Waltz’s three central assumptions/ordering principles conflict. It is difficult to assume both that all states are equal (principles 1 and 2) and that all states are not equal as a result of the distribution of their capabilities (principle 3). Waltz might claim that they are equal in function but not in capabilities; however, as he himself states, one’s capabilities shape one’s functions. The point is, as others have noted before, the distribution of resources internationally creates a division of labour among states; differentiation and hierarchy exist and provide governing mechanisms for states, just as they do for individuals within states. Most importantly, the distinction among different inter-national systems and within nation-states over the degree of centralization of authority as well as over the degree of differentiation among their units is variable and should be viewed along a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy.  

A second means of separating domestic and international politics is to differentiate the role and importance of force in the two arenas. For Waltz, domestically force is less important as a means of control and is used to serve justice; internationally, force is widespread and serves no higher goal than to help the state using it. But is the importance of force so different in the two realms? As noted before for theorists like Waltz, Carr, and Weber, the threat of the use of force—in effect, deterrence—is ultimately the means of social control domestically. Threats of sanctions are the state’s means of enforcement, as they are internationally. When norms and institutions fail to maintain social control, states internally and externally resort to threats of force. It may be that norms and institutions are more prevalent forms of control domestically than internationally. But this depends on the state in question. In some countries, belief in the legitimacy of government and institutions, being widespread and well-developed, might suffice to maintain control. However, the fact that more civil wars have been fought in this century than international ones and that since 1945 more have died in the former should make one pause when declaring about the relative use of force in the two realms. 

Since at times the frequency of violence domestically is acknowledged, perhaps the point is that force is legitimate and serves justice domestically and not internationally.  

Waltz admits that anarchy and hierarchy are ideal types. But he rejects their use as a continuum, preferring for theoretical simplicity to see them as dichotomies. See Theory, p. 115. Moreover, he simply posits that the an anarchic ideal is associated with international politics more than it is with domestic politics. 


Waltz, Theory, p. 103.
fight against Germany in World War II by the US, for example, helped serve justice regardless of whether America’s own protection was a factor. The distinction between international and domestic politics on this issue does not appear as clear as is claimed.

A third dichotomy between the two arenas asserts that power and politics operate internationally. Domestically, authority, administration, and law prevail; internationally, it is power, struggle, and accommodation. For some, the latter alone is politics. This distinction is the hardest to maintain. Disputes among political parties, local and national officials, the executive and the legislature, different geographic regions, different races, capital and labor, industry and finance, organized and unorganized groups, etc. over who gets how much and when occur constantly within the nation. Morgenthau recognizes this:

The essence of international politics is identical with its domestic counterpart. Both domestic and international politics are a struggle for power, modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place in the domestic and in the international spheres.

The tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations, to the state . . . Finally, the whole political life of a nation, particularly of a democratic nation, from the local to the national level, is a continuous struggle for power.59

E. H. Carr, another realist, also disagrees with Waltz. Like Morgenthau, he sees the national and world arenas as being based on the same principles and processes: power politics. In talking of domestic politics, he echoes Thucydides' Melian dialogue: ‘The majority rules because it is stronger, the minority submits because it is weaker’.60 He maintains that the factors which supposedly distinguish domestic politics—e.g., legitimacy, morality, ideology, and law—are just as political nationally as internationally.

Theories of social morality are always the product of a dominant group which identifies itself with the community as a whole, and which possesses facilities denied to subordinate groups or individuals for imposing its view of life on the community. Theories of international morality are, for the same reason and in virtue of the same process, the product of dominant nations or groups of nations.61

As an example of this, Carr notes that 'laissez-faire, in international relations as in those between capital and labour, is the paradise of the economically strong'.62 He points out that even law, another factor that is supposed to make politics within the nation different, is merely a manifestation of power: ‘Behind all law there is this necessary political background. The ultimate authority of law derives from politics’.63

Others would reject Carr’s insistence that law and morality spring from power, but would none the less agree that politics within nations and among them are similar. These authors see authority, law, and morality being as important to international relations as to domestic ones. For instance, Inis Claude holds that international order is maintained by a balance of power among opposing forces, just as it is domestically. In attacking the notion that governments maintain peace through some monopoly of force, Claude returns to Morgenthau to make his point:

61 Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, p. 79.
62 Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, p. 60.
63 Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, p. 180.
Morgenthau’s espousal of the concept of the state’s ‘monopoly of organized violence’ is contradicted by his general conception of politics: ‘Domestic and international politics are but two different manifestations of the same phenomenon: the struggle for power.’ In his terms, ‘The balance of power . . . is indeed a perennial element of all pluralistic societies.’

For him, as for Morgenthau, societies are pluralistic, and thus the role of government is ‘the delicate task of promoting and presiding over a constantly shifting equilibrium’. Politics domestically and internationally is about balancing power. To assume that a state has a monopoly of power and that this is ‘the key to the effectiveness of [it] as an order-keeping institution may lead to an exaggerated notion of the degree to which actual states can and do rely upon coercion’. Unlike Morgenthau and other realists, Claude sees factors other than coercion—such as, norms and institutions—as being more important both domestically and internationally to the maintenance of order, but like them he views the balance of power as fundamental to the two realms. Unlike Waltz, all of these authors find relations within nations and among them to be political and to be based on similar political processes.

Overall, the sharp distinctions between the two realms are difficult to maintain empirically. More importantly, any dichotomous treatment of domestic and international politics may have heuristic disadvantages. Two heuristic problems exist with the radical separation of international and domestic politics. First, the isolation of international politics as a realm of anarchy with nothing in common with other types of politics is a step backward conceptually. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, political scientists worked to incorporate international relations into the main body of political science literature. They strove to end the prevailing conception of international relations as a sui generis field of study and to apply methods of analysis to it from other branches of political science, mainly domestic politics. Writing in the early 1960s, James Rosenau decried the tendency to treat IR as a sui generis branch of inquiry:

We must avoid the widespread tendency to assume rather than to conceptualize the nature of the politics which occur at the international level. One reason for the lack of conceptual links is that most students in the international field have not treated their subject as local politics writ large. Instead, like advocates of bipartisanship in foreign policy, most students tend to view politics as ‘stopping at the water’s edge’ and consider that something different, international politics and foreign policy, takes place beyond national boundaries. Consequently, so much emphasis has been placed on the dissimilarities between international and other types of politics that the similarities have been overlooked and the achievement of conceptual unity has been made much more difficult. For example, because of their stress upon the fact that international political systems are lacking in authoritative decision-making structures, many analysts have largely overlooked unifying concepts developed in areas where the focus is upon sovereign actors.

Heeding the advice of these and other writers, scholars began applying techniques and ideas from other fields of political inquiry and asking new questions about

64 Inis Claude, Power and International Relations (NY, 1962), p. 231.
65 Claude, Power and IR, p. 231.
66 Claude, Power and IR, p. 234.
67 For Waltz this is the ultimate test of an assumption, see Waltz, Theory, p. 96.
68 See, for example, Herbert Spiro, World Politics: The Global System (Homewood, IL, 1966), esp. ch. 1.
international relations. The problem with reverting back to a situation where international politics is seen as unique is that one is less likely to use the hypotheses, concepts, and questions about politics developed elsewhere. International politics must then reinvent the wheel, not being able to draw on other political science scholarship. The radical dichotomy between international and domestic politics seems to represent a conceptual and theoretical step backwards.

A second and related heuristic problem is the tendency implicit in this separation of the two fields to view all states as being the same. Waltz, for one, wants us to conceive of states as like units and to avoid looking within them at their internal arrangements. His is a systemic level theory. But the issue is whether it is possible and/or fruitful to abstract from all of domestic politics. All states are not the same; and their internal characteristics, including their goals and capabilities, affect international politics importantly, as Waltz is forced to admit. This is reflected in the tension between his ordering principles, the first two of which give primacy to structural pressures while the third makes certain agents key. Using systemic theory, he wants to ‘tell us about the forces the units are subject to’, but he also notes that ‘in international politics, as in any self-help system, the units of greatest capability set the scene of action for others as well as for themselves’.70 The units do matter.

Moreover, the differences among states—even the strongest—are not trivial and may be useful to conceptualize for understanding international relations better. Developing continuums along which all politics—domestic and international—are understandable can be fruitful. Some, such as Roger Masters, Ernest Gellner, and Chadwick Alger have compared international politics with primitive political systems and developing countries and have produced interesting insights about the international system from this comparison.71 Using hypotheses and concepts from comparative politics can enrich international relations theory, while limiting this cross-fertilization is likely to hurt the field. As argued, politics in the two arenas are similar. William T. R. Fox stated long ago that

Putting ‘power’ rather than ‘the state’ at the center of political science makes it easier to view international relations as one of the political sciences. So conceived, it is possible for some scholars to move effortlessly along the seamless web which connects world politics and the politics of such less inclusive units as the state or the locality, and to emphasize the political process, group behaviour, communications studies, conflict resolution, and decision-making.72

The argument here concurs with those who would add to this focus on power a concern with norms and institutions, which also may play similar roles in the domestic and international arenas. Conceptions unifying, and not separating, these two arenas are heuristically fruitful.

The assumption of interdependence

The current tendency to over-emphasize the centrality of anarchy to world politics may not be the most useful way to conceptualize international politics. As other

70. Waltz, _Theory_, p. 72.
scholars have pointed out, such reductionism overlooks another central fact about international politics, namely the interdependence of the actors. This section explores the notion of interdependence, suggests why it is also a key structural feature of the international system, and notes some of its implications for world politics. Other scholars have made some of these points before, but in this time when anarchy reigns supreme in the discipline a reminder of the importance of other aspects of the international system can be valuable.

What do we mean by interdependence? There are two related notions of interdependence. First, the notion of ‘strategic interdependence’ implies, as Schelling puts it, a situation in which ‘the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make’. In this situation, an actor cannot get what s/he wants without the cooperation of other actors. This notion fits the conventional definition of the term, which refers to a situation in which the actors face mutual costs from ending their relationship. In other words, breaking a relationship means that each actor that was party to it can no longer obtain some value s/he wanted. Interdependence implies nothing about the degree of equality among the actors; it merely denotes a situation where all the actors suffer costs from terminating their relationship. Interdependence also implies that satisfaction of the actors’ utilities is not independent. The actors are still sovereign—that is, able to make decisions or choices autonomously. But to realize their goals they must be concerned with the choices other actors make.

Interdependence is not the opposite of anarchy as we have defined it—i.e., an absence of central authority. The two concepts represent different aspects of the international system. As with anarchy, the definition of interdependence says nothing about the degree of order, the likelihood of war, the inherency of conflicting interests, or the primary means used to achieve one’s goals in the international system. Links between these latter variables and either anarchy or interdependence are empirical, not conceptual, statements. Anarchy and interdependence do not conflict on these dimensions, as is often supposed, since neither concept says anything about them a priori. The two concepts are not opposite ends of some single continuum. The extent of hierarchical authority relations—i.e., of anarchy—does not necessarily affect the degree of interdependence present. Two coequal actors can be in a situation of strategic interdependence—i.e., can be unable to attain their goals without the cooperation of the other—just as easily as can two actors in a hierarchical relationship. A priori one cannot determine the extent of their interdependence from the degree of hierarchy/anarchy present in their relationship, and vice versa. The two concepts are logically independent.

This definition of interdependence also does not imply either that the actors’ interests are in harmony or that power relations are unimportant. The assumption

74 See David Baldwin, ‘Interdependence and Power: A Conceptual Analysis’, International Organization, 34 (Aut. 1980), pp. 471–506. This conception of interdependence does not include the notion of sensitivity, as employed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in Power and Interdependence (Boston, 1977). The notion of vulnerability is the most well-accepted definition.
75 Waltz is confusing on this point. He sees the two as opposed but linked; however, he cannot decide which way the linkage runs. Anarchy for him implies equality, sameness, and hence independence of actors, on the one hand. On the other, he claims interdependence is highest when states are equal. If this is true, then anarchy may well be characterized by very high levels of interdependence, since all states are equal.
that interdependence implies harmony or cooperation is widespread. In part this is a consequence of the links between international trade theory and interdependence. An interdependent situation is seen as one where an extensive division of labour exists so that each party performs a different role and thus has complementary interests. Everyone gains from such a situation; it is a positive-sum game. But, as Schelling, among others, has pointed out, interdependent situations are really mixed-motive games. Both conflicting and harmonious interests are evident. Each gains from continuing the relationship, but the distribution of these gains involves struggle. Harmony is not the result of interdependence; rather, a mix of conflict and cooperation is. A priori it is impossible to tell which will prevail.

Interdependence does not imply that power is unimportant. Indeed, as analysts like Hirschman, Keohane and Nye, Schelling and Baldwin have shown, power is an intrinsic element of interdependence. An actor involved in such relations can manipulate them in order to prompt the other actors involved to do what s/he wants. For instance, relations involving asymmetric interdependence provide an essential means of exercising influence; the less vulnerable side can threaten, however subtly, to end the relationship in order to induce changes in the other side’s behaviour. Relative gains and losses from ending the relationship are here the central means of exercising leverage. But interdependence need not refer only to asymmetric relations. A symmetric relationship between two actors may also be interdependent and allow each to exercise power over the other, often through anticipated reactions as the US-Soviet nuclear deterrence relationship since the 1950s has shown. Power, in fact, is much more evident in interdependent relations than in situations where actors are independent or autarkic. To return to our market metaphor, power is a constant in oligopolistic or monopolistic markets, while it can be depicted as absent from purely competitive ones.

Reasons why interdependence is a central feature of the international system are connected with its implications for the system. Empirically, the international system has structural features that imply interdependence is important; moreover, viewing the system as interdependent may generate useful theoretical insights. Two important points can be made. First, interdependence means that the actors are linked. While states remain sovereign, their actions and attainment of their goals are conditioned by other actors’ behaviour and their expectations and perceptions about this. In a situation of strategic interdependence, one’s best choice depends on the choice others make. Thus the game is about anticipating others’ behaviour. One’s expectations and perceptions of their behaviour shape one’s own choices. Scholars using game theoretic models of international politics recognize this. For instance, authors in ‘Cooperation Under Anarchy’ use the image of an iterated Prisoners’ Dilemma to explore international interactions, but they tend not to note that this implies that strategic interdependence is as fundamental to the actors as is anarchy.

76 See Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, for example; also see the discussion of neoliberal institutionalism in Joseph Grieco, ‘Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation’, International Organization, 42 no. 33 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–508.
77 Albert Hirschman, National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade (Berkeley, 1980); Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Power and Interdependence (Boston, 1977); Schelling, Strategy of Conflict; Baldwin, ‘Interdependence and Power’.
78 Richard Little makes this point about symmetric relations and suggests that this is an understudied area; see ‘Power and Interdependence: A Realist Critique’, in R. B. Barry Jones and Peter Willetts (eds.), Interdependence on Trial (London, 1984), pp. 121–6. Waltz claims that only symmetric relations can be interdependent, but this position seems untenable; see Theory, pp. 143–6.
Much of international relations involves this type of strategic game. One's best choice of how to spend one's resources—e.g., on guns or on butter—depends on one's expectations about how others are spending theirs. This understanding of international politics leads to a focus on states' expectations about and perceptions of others, as seen in Robert Jervis' works.79 Structural imperatives—such as changes in some objective distribution of capabilities—are not the sole guide to behaviour. Furthermore, this strategic focus leads to an interest in factors that shape expectations and perceptions—factors like past behaviour patterns, institutions, and cognitive processes. Finally, emphasizing interdependence draws attention to issues involving communication and information. In situations of strategic interdependence, the more one knows about the true preferences of other actors, ceteris paribus, the better off one may be. The gathering of reliable information and the reduction of costs associated with this then become key problems for states, a point Robert Keohane among others has made.80 Additionally, control over communication becomes imperative in this situation. How one's preferences are revealed and to what extent they are become very important in obtaining one's goals because of the influence this process has on the other side's expectations of one's behaviour. If, on the other hand, some set of objective structural factors shapes states' behaviour, then issues of communication and information exchange among states are relatively unimportant. Viewing the international system as a web of interdependencies necessitates a focus on the linkages among actors; it directs attention to their perceptions and knowledge of each other and their communications.

Second, if the international system is viewed as characterized by structural interdependence, then the mechanisms of the system look different from those in the neo-realist model. For this model, the anarchic international system is like a perfect market. Many similar actors coact in such a way that some equilibrium results. Communication, concern about other actors' likely behaviour, institutionalized practices, none of these matter. The structure of the system, through some invisible hand, selects behaviour appropriate for the states. This metaphor can be misleading for international politics. As Waltz's third ordering principle argues, at any time only a few states count—the great powers. The number of important actors, or the number of important actors each state interacts with, in international politics is small. The metaphor that is more relevant, then, is not a perfectly competitive market but an oligopolistic or monopolistic one.81 These markets are defined as having only a few large actors. Such markets are characterized by extensive interdependence; how each firm maximizes its profits depends on the choices (about price and quantity produced) other firms make. The behaviour of others then shapes the best strategy for each, as is true for states in the international system.

A second interesting feature of these markets is that they tend to be unstable. They bring forth a mixture of conflictual and cooperative behaviour. Periods marked by stable collusive monopoly pricing where all are enriched tend to be followed by bitter competitive price wars where some may be ruined. Such unstable, mixed behaviour seems more characteristic of international politics than does the steady-state equilibrium of a perfectly competitive market. In these oligopolistic markets, periods of

80 Robert Keohane makes this point in After Hegemony.
81 A metaphor Waltz resorts to later, see Theory, pp. 129–36.
cooperation depend upon the establishment of various means of tacit communication as well as of norms and institutionalized practices that elicit cooperative behaviour by signalling and/or constraining the behaviour of others. On the other hand, periods of price warfare are usually the result of attempts to manipulate the relationship in order to redistribute the gains from it. Fights over cheating and ultimately who gets how much are commonplace. The mechanisms by which cooperation is established and the reasons that conflict occurs in these markets appear very similar to those in international politics.

In addition, these markets feature a subtle balancing mechanism. No firm wants to let any other gain so much it can become dominant and drive the others out of business; relative gains matter. Survival dictates that the attempts of any one to dominate be met by cooperative behaviour on the part of others to prevent this. Balancing behaviour is thus engendered, much as in international politics. These imperfect markets, which are characterized by strategic interdependence, may then function more like the international system than do perfect markets. Furthermore, the study of these types of markets is likely to contribute to our understanding of international relations.

A final point about imperfect markets is that they produce indeterminate outcomes as well as unstable ones. They are rarely single-exit situations; a unique solution is not structurally given. Instead, outcomes depend upon the interaction of different actors, each making different assumptions about the others’ likely behaviour. Some range of outcomes is, however, possible to identify; it lies between the outcomes predicted by perfect markets and monopoly. This indeterminacy may be frustrating, but it too may more adequately represent politics. Focusing on actors’ interdependence can alleviate the strong structural determinism associated with metaphors using perfect markets, such as Waltz’s. Politics seems ultimately to be about choice—choice in the presence of uncertainty, incomplete information, and guesses about the intentions of other actors. Seeing the international system as one characterized by strategic interdependence among sovereign states and thus modelled on these imperfect or oligopolistic markets can provide many empirically and heuristically useful ways of looking at international politics, as some of the recent work using game theory has shown.

Conclusions

The recent tendency in international relations theory to view anarchy as the fundamental background condition of international politics underestimates the ambiguity of the concept and lends it an exaggerated important. While anarchy is an important condition of world politics, it is not the only one. Strategic interdependence among the actors is at least as fundamental. An exclusive focus on anarchy may be overly reductionist. A reminder of the complexities involved in the notion of anarchy and of the dangers involved in over-emphasizing it—namely, the radical separation between domestic and international politics and the aura off over-simplification it creates—seems worthwhile repeating in this period when anarchy reigns.

82 The rules of thumb that Schelling discusses in Strategy of Conflict are one type of tacit communication.
83 Solutions in oligopolistic markets are possible to identify if one assumes away strategic interdependence. For instance, Cournot-Nash and Stuckleberg equilibria are identifiable if one holds constant the other’s behaviour in price or quantity decisions.