

Anarchy

Anarchy is the absence of government or, more generally, political authority over and between the units of a political system. As an analytic concept, the term does not imply a lack of political order or the presence of chaos, and thus differs from informal and colloquial use. The term also differs from anarchism, a normative and possibly utopian position that advocates minimizing the scope of political authority to maximize the domain of individual autonomy.

The condition of anarchy is widely understood to describe the modern international system in which states are the units of analysis, each is fully sovereign, and all are formally equal. It is this condition of anarchy, in turn, that separates international relations from other domains of politics and renders it, for many analysts, a distinct field of inquiry with different rules and patterns of interaction. Although other political arenas may also be anarchic, such as legislatures where vote trading between members cannot be legally enforced, the analytic concept has not been widely applied beyond the realm of international relations and, in a few cases, failed states.

Consequences of Anarchy

For most scholars of international relations, anarchy requires that all states must rely only upon their own resources and abilities -- a practice described as the principle of self-help. Lacking any authority that states can appeal to for protection, aid, or binding adjudication, each state must ultimately depend on its own efforts and wisdom. This further implies that any agreement made between states must be self-enforcing, or in the interests of the parties to carry out if and when actually called upon to do so.

Although the assumption that the international system is anarchic is widely shared, the meaning and consequences of this assumption are still vigorously debated. For realists, anarchy produces a zero-sum, competitive struggle between states. For political realists, anarchy did not feature prominently and was more a passive background condition; Hans Morgenthau, for instance, rooted the drive for power in the innate character of political man, not in the nature of the international system. For neo-realists (sometimes called structural realists), however, anarchy is one of the defining features of international structure with significant causal effects.

Even within neo-realism there are two prominent schools. For defensive realists, anarchy requires only that states seek security, although they may also pursue expansion, glory, or power for other reasons. Given that some states may possess aggressive tendencies, however, all states must be ever vigilant and prepared to defend themselves. Uncertainty over the motives of other states and problems of credible commitment, in turn, sometimes leads to bargaining failures and war. Offensive realists believe anarchy is such a challenging condition that states must pursue power at all times. Since states are always insecure, the fear that others will exploit them forces states to pursue all means necessary to impose their will on others. And as power is always zero-sum, anything that gives an advantage to one state must create a disadvantage for at least one other. In this view, anarchy implies that international politics are a perpetual and intense struggle for domination.

Neoliberal institutionalists see anarchy as a condition that can be mitigated if not fully resolved by voluntarily negotiated institutions between states. Unlike in neo-realism, anarchy does not define the goals that states seek but rather merely permits

dilemmas of collaboration and coordination to arise that thwart cooperation between utility maximizing states. These dilemmas, in turn, can be overcome in part by institutions that provide information or make commitments more credible. In a form of self-organizing order, states can avoid some of the harsher implications of anarchy by building institutions without necessarily subordinating themselves to any central authority.

Finally, constructivists see anarchy an open-ended condition filled by the social purposes of states, which are themselves constructed of socially appropriate and interpreted roles and norms that vary over time and space. Thus, within the condition of anarchy, states may represent themselves and others in ways that produce the Hobbesian world depicted by realism, a Lockean world that reflects important elements of neoliberal institutionalism in its focus on natural rights, or a Kantian world of greater peace and cooperation than imagined by either of the alternatives. In all of these different socially constructed world orders there is a potential for systemic transformation that is excluded by neorealism or neoliberal institutionalism.

Critiques of Anarchy

Although subject to continuing controversy, all three perspectives share a common focus on anarchy even while they debate its meaning and implications. Increasingly, scholars are criticizing the very concept of anarchy and the role it has played in the development of international relations theory. Too numerous to describe in detail here, many of the specific critiques can be grouped into two larger themes. First, the common notion of anarchy is derived from an overly narrow formal-legal conception of authority. Alternative conceptions of authority open up the possibility of many

different kinds of authority existing at the same time within the international system. Second, sovereignty is not indivisible, as commonly averred, but is a bundle of different authorities that can be disaggregated in ways that do not necessarily coincide with traditional nation-states. Divisible sovereignty permits a patchwork of sometimes overlapping, competing, or complementary authorities to exist simultaneously. Taken together, these critical themes suggest that many forms of global governance which have been ruled out by the common assumption of anarchy may have actually existed in the past and may yet expand in the future.

In formal-legal conceptions of authority, the person (or unit) in authority has the right to issue and enforce certain commands over a set of subordinates because of the lawful position or office that he or she holds. Authority does not inhere in the individual (or individual unit), but in the person as an officer who is duly appointed or elected through some lawful procedure. Elected by a majority of the Electoral College, for instance, a person becomes the president of the United States; by established rules of rotation, a country collectively holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Applied to international relations, since there is no lawful authority or procedure above states, no state or other unit can be authorized to govern over other states. As a result, the system and relations between states within that system must be anarchic.

Formal-legal authority, however, is simply one possible source of authority. The German sociologist Max Weber, closely identified with this formal-legal conception, also posited that legitimacy and authority could derive from charisma, tradition, or religious belief as well. Others argue that legitimacy and, hence, authority can arise from psychological principles of fairness and justice, socially constructed norms, or a

negotiated social contact between ruler and ruled. These other sources of legitimacy at least open the possibility of authority by states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other units over other similar units. While debate continues over who has authority over whom for what, a growing body of critical research suggests that international relations are not entirely anarchic but better described as a variegated system of multiple units in authority drawn from multiple sources of authority.

In turn, sovereignty has been traditionally conceived as indivisible or culminating in a single apex within each territorially distinct entity. Sovereignty was once vested in a king, emperor, or “sovereign.” Today, sovereignty typically resides in the “people,” which has itself evolved over time to include most citizens of a country. But in either case, there is assumed to be within each society a single, ultimate authority that cannot, even in part, be subordinate to any other actor. This assumption is codified in the notion of Westphalian or juridical sovereignty embodied in the United Nations Charter; today, states need not actually control their territory, as in the past, but only need to be recognized as sovereign by other sovereigns to be accorded that status.

Yet, there is an increasing awareness that states have never fit this idealized vision of Westphalian sovereignty. Indeed, even historically, sovereignty appears better described as a set of authorities that are disaggregated across units within a state, long recognized as federalism, or more importantly across states and third parties. This disaggregation is exemplified by multi-level governance in the contemporary European Union but reflected also in numerous international restraints on the freedom of action of states, including rights of protection or guarantee (e.g., the U.S. and the Federated States

of Micronesia), rights of economic and financial control (the U.S. and the Dominican Republic from 1904-1941), rights of servitude (the U.S. and Japan, under various status of forces agreements), and rights of intervention (the U.S. and Panama, under the neutrality treaty of 1977).

Combined with multiple forms of authority, the possibility of multiple sites of authority suggest that patterns of global governance are likely to be more varied, complicated, and dynamic than once assumed. Transnational non-state groups exercise authority over their members, whether this be religious orders, labor unions, or other collective bodies. NGOs earn authority over firms and even states in standard setting boards and international creditor cartels, and regulate behavior through monitoring and certification procedures. States exert authority over one another in spheres of influence, protectorates, or informal empires. International organizations possess authority as well, including the World Trade Organization and its dispute settlement procedures over trade, for instance, and the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency over nuclear facilities and programs.

The assumption of anarchy, critics charge, blinds scholars of international relations to this variegated system of global governance. The critique of anarchy and the expansion of global governance implies three essential challenges for the future: analysts must map the forms of global governance, identify where current authority is inadequate or itself unregulated (as in the so-called democratic deficit in the European Union), and propose reforms to improve human welfare; policy makers must accept and navigate between these multiple forms of authority while harnessing them to their national

purposes, when appropriate; and global citizens must work to ensure that global authorities act in the general interest.

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Cross references: anarchism; constructivism in international relations; governance, global; governance, multilevel; international organizations; legitimacy; neoliberal institutionalism; realism in international relations; sovereignty; state failure; Weber, Max; Westphalian ideal state

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