

The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory:

A Critique

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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.

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."² 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."³ For Kenneth Waltz, anarchy is the first element of structure in the international system.⁴ 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?"⁵ He believes anarchy is especially relevant to international politics since "today nations interact without central authority."⁶ 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.⁷

Other scholars have used this analogy between anarchy and the Prisoner's Dilemma as well. In *After Hegemony*, Robert Keohane begins his effort to explain international cooperation by assuming that anarchy is the fundamental fact about 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 Prisoner's Dilemma, states can find cooperation to be in their narrow self-interest.⁸

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."⁹ 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 a Prisoner's 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.¹⁰

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,

Anarchy is one of the most vague and ambiguous words in language. George Cornwall Lewis¹

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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"¹¹ 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.¹² 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."¹³

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.¹⁴

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."¹⁵ 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. . . .

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 is not what most IR scholars mean by it. 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.¹⁶ In the *Cooperation Under Anarchy* volume, anarchy is also defined as a "lack of common government."¹⁷ . . . 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.¹⁸

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 Wright 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ The means for hierarchical role 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 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? . . . As Hobbes states emphatically, "A covenant not to defend myself from force by force is always void."²¹ 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.²²

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.²⁵

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.²⁴ 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 organization and is always the last resort when others have failed."²⁵ 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 con-forms 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 operat[er]s by means of legal mandates enforced by definite penalties."²⁶ . . . 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 government. Order exists in the international system; it is simply provided through different means. David Easton makes this point:

The fact that politics 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. . . .²⁷

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.²⁸

Legitimacy then appears to be the linchpin upon which conceptions of government rest. If, 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.²⁹ 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 Europe³⁰—enjoy high levels of legitimacy? Can and should we draw a rigid dichotomy between the two on the basis of anarchy defined this way?

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. . . . A second distinction flows from the assumption of anarchy. As a lack of centralized control over force, anarchy implies that world politics is a self-help system reliant primarily on force. This also distinguishes international from national politics. . . . Finally, international politics is seen as the only true "politics".³²

National 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.³³

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.³² 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 hierarchy. As Waltz notes, "The units—institutions and agencies—stand *vis-à-vis* each other in relations of super- and subordination."³³ 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. . . .

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.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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. . . .

The issue of the centralization of power internationally touches on another distinction between domestic and international politics. . . . 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."³⁷ Thus he acknowledges that states with different capabilities perform different functions; hence, they are not all "like" units. . . .

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 international 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.³⁸

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 in 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 declaiming about the relative use of force in the two realms.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ Again, this depends upon the perceived legitimacy of the government and the particular instance of use. Have the majority of people in the Soviet Union, Poland, Ethiopia, South Africa, Iran, or the Philippines—to name just a few—felt that the state's use of force serves justice (all of the time? some of the time)? Whether force serves justice domestically is an issue to be studied, not a given to be assumed. On the other hand, is it never the case that force serves justice internationally? Is it always, or most of the time, "for the sake of [the state's] own protection and advantage"? States have been known to intervene forcefully for larger purposes. The 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. . . .⁴¹

Similarly, Iris 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:

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."⁴²

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."⁴³ 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."⁴⁴ 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 she 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.⁴⁵ 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. . . .⁴⁶

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 primary 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."⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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 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."⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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.⁵²

This definition of interdependence also does *not* imply either that the actors' interests are in harmony or that power relations are unimportant. The assumption that interdependence implies harmony or cooperation is widespread.⁵³ 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.

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.

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.⁵⁴ 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. . . . 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.⁵⁵ 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 oligopo-

listic markets, periods of 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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. 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.

NOTES

1. George Cornewall Lewis, *Remarks on the Use and Abuse of Some Political Terms*, Facsimile of 1832 text (Columbia, 1970), p. 226.
2. Robert Art and Robert Jervis (eds.), *International Politics*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1986), p. 7.
3. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 7.
4. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass., 1979), p. 88.
5. Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (NY, 1984), p. 3.
6. Axelrod, *Evolution*, p. 4.
7. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, 1984), chs. 5, 6 esp. pp. 73, 85, 88. He later relaxes this restrictive assump-

- tion, citing various forms of interdependence which may mitigate this anarchy. See ch. 7, esp. pp. 122–23.
9. 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', *World Politics*, 38 (Oct. 1985), p. 1.
 10. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (NY, 1977), pp. 24–25.
 11. Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 8.
 12. Bull, *Anarchical Society*, pp. 15–16 and ch. 2.
 13. Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 42.
 14. Oye, 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', p. 226.
 15. Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 28.
 16. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 102.
 17. See Axelrod and Keohane in Oye, 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', p. 226.
 18. Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 103–4.
 19. Martin Wright, *Power Politics* (NY, 1978), p. 102.
 20. Oye, 'Cooperation Under Anarchy', pp. 1–2.
 21. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis, 1958), ch. 14, p. 117.
 22. Robert Dahl deals with this issue of monopoly by adding a new dimension to the definition of monopoly: He sees government as having a monopoly over the regulation of what constitutes the legitimate use of force. See his *Modern Political Analysis*, 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1984), p. 17.
 23. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 6th edition (NY, 1985), p. 34.
 24. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 88.
 25. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978), I, p. 54. Weber, unlike Waltz, emphasizes elsewhere institutions and legitimacy as well as force to explain politics.
 26. *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, p. 13. The *Dictionary of Political Science*, ed. Joseph Dunner (NY, 1964), p. 217, provides a similar definition: 'government is the agency which reflects the organization of the state (politically organized) group. It normally consists of an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch.'
 27. David Easton, *The Political System* (NY, 1965), pp. 137–8.
 28. Weber, *Economy and Society*, I, p. 231; see also I, p. 31.
 29. See, for example, Eckstein, 'Authority Patterns'; Easton, *Political System*, pp. 132–33.
 30. See Robert Jervis, 'Security Regimes', *International Organization*, 36 (Spring 1982), pp. 357–78 for a discussion of the legitimate order formed under this system.
 31. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 113.
 32. Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 115–16.
 33. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 81.
 34. Waltz recognizes this: see *Theory*, pp. 81–82. But it never influences his very sharp distinction between the ordering of domestic and international politics.
 35. See, for example, Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *Between Power and Plenty* (Ithaca, 1978).
 36. 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 also sees differences in systems over time. But his focus is on the divide between the medieval and the modern (post-seventeenth century) systems. See John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics* 35 (Jan. 1983), pp. 261–85.
 37. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 47.
 38. 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 dichotomous. See

- Theory*, p. 115. Moreover, he simply posits that the anarchic ideal is associated with international politics more than it is with domestic politics.
39. Melvin Small and J. D. Singer (eds.), *Explaining War* (Beverly Hills, 1979), pp. 63, 65, 68–69.
 40. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 103.
 41. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 39–40.
 42. Inis Claude, *Power and International Relations* (NY, 1962), p. 231.
 43. Claude, *Power and IR*, p. 231.
 44. Claude, *Power and IR*, p. 234.
 45. For Waltz this is the ultimate test of an assumption, see Waltz, *Theory*, p. 96.
 46. See, for example, Herbert Spiro, *World Politics: The Global System* (Homewood, IL, 1966), esp. ch. 1.
 47. Waltz, *Theory*, p. 72.
 48. Roger Masters, 'World Politics as a Primitive Political System', *World Politics*, 16 (July 1964), pp. 595–619; Ernest Gallner, 'How to Live in Anarchy', *The Listener*, 3 April, 1958, pp. 579–83; Chadwick Alger, 'Comparison of Intranational and International Politics', *APSR*, 62 (June 1963), pp. 406–19.
 49. W. T. R. Fox, *The American Study of International Relations* (Columbia, SC., 1968), p. 20.
 50. Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 5.
 51. 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.
 52. 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.
 53. See Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (NY, 1939). 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.
 54. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, 1970), and *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1976).
 55. A metaphor Waltz resorts to later, see *Theory*, pp. 129–36.
 56. The rules of thumb that Schelling discusses in *Strategy of Conflict* are one type of tacit communication.
 57. Solutions in oligopolistic markets are possible to identify if one assumes away strategic interdependence. For instance, Cournot-Nash and Stackelberg equilibria are identifiable if one holds constant the other's behaviour in price or quantity decisions.