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A History of Anarchy, a Critique, and Apposite Alternatives

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J.T. SEXTON, APR 16 2021

In 1979, the publication of Kenneth Waltz's seminal *Theory of International Politics* propelled the concept of anarchy into the central discourse of international relations (IR) theory, as he suggested that "international systems are decentralised and anarchic" (2010, p. 88). Waltz's *magnum opus* has had a profound, enduring influence on the contemporary discussion of theory development within IR, and this essay will consider whether or not anarchy is a compelling core concept – as is alluded to by its discursive pre-eminence. The essay will begin by briefly surveying the history of anarchy as a concept in IR theory, before comparing the competing realist approaches to anarchy. First, by examining the classical realist understanding of anarchy as a peripheral feature of the international system, and then engaging with Waltz's structural realist approach, where anarchy becomes the fundamental ordering principle of the international system (2010, pp. 88-89). Using Waltz's explanation, the essay will then consider three crucial implications of anarchy and its structural features, before exploring the challenges to these implications from constructivist and liberal institutionalist perspectives. Having weighed the merits of anarchy next to the charges laid against it, the essay will contend that a structural emphasis on hierarchy or on the social community of states may be better disposed to explain the actions of actors within the international system, concluding that anarchy is not a suitable core concept on which to build theories of IR.

To fully appreciate the extent of Waltz's influence on IR theory, it would be pertinent to examine the history and development of anarchy as a concept, as it "did not spring, full-grown, from the head of Waltz in 1979" (Donnelly, 2015, p. 400). John Mearsheimer has attributed the original use of anarchy as a technical term to G. Lowes Dickinson, a British idealist who, in his works, including *The European Anarchy*, "invented the concept of international anarchy" (2006, p. 234). Dickinson's understanding of anarchy had been shaped by his experience of the First World War; he argued that responsibility for the war lay with "the European anarchy" (1917, p. 101), as he referred to the emergence of the sovereign state in the fifteenth century as the tragic 'turning-point' from which "international policy has meant Machiavellianism" (1917, p. 13). To Dickinson, this meant "mutual fear and mutual suspicion, aggression masquerading as defence and defence masquerading as aggression" (1917, pp. 13-14), but Jack Donnelly (2015) has argued that Dickinson, alongside other earlier scholars, did not use the term to define IR or explain state behaviour in the international system. Instead, Donnelly contended that Lord Lothian was the first IR scholar to use the term in a context similar to Waltz, as he outlined Lothian's argument in *Pacifism is Not Enough*: "for Lord Lothian anarchy *arises from* the absence of international government but *means* avertible violent disorder" (2015, p. 400). Waltz's influence has been similarly illustrated by the prevalence of the terms 'anarchy' and 'anarchic' after the publication of *Theory of International Politics*: the terms have occurred, on average, 35.5 times in IR scholarship since its publication, as compared to a meagre 6.9 times per book between 1895-1978 (Donnelly, 2015, p. 395). Donnelly thus accepted that anarchy became the "defining feature of international relations" in the latter part of the twentieth century (2015, p. 401).

In classical realist theory, anarchy was – and remains – a peripheral feature. As its name would suggest, much of classical realist theory derives from classic texts, from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, and emphasises the influence of human nature – pessimistically assumed to be inherently egoistic – upon state actions within the international system. In *De Cive*, the seventeenth-century political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes described the concept of *bellum omnium contra omnes* (2004), in

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which war was a consequence of an anarchic system where “men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe” (1894, p. 64), as he explained in *Leviathan*. Classical realism grew in popularity after the Second World War – a particularly damning example of the destructiveness of human nature – and capitalised on the apparent inadequacy of “utopian” ideas (Carr, 2016), which had been prominent in the inter-war years. Hans Morgenthau was a leader in classical realist theory, alongside E.H. Carr, and drew heavily on Hobbes’ insights as he wrote that “politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” (2006, p. 4). To Morgenthau, the sovereign state was an independent actor whose collective behaviour reflected human nature, as its actions were primarily determined by an inherently selfish desire to survive within an anarchic international system, which he referred to as “interest defined as power” (2006, p. 5). Power, or the innate lust for it (*animus dominandi*), ultimately motivated state actions as it ensured survival in an international system in which there was an ongoing natural struggle for power whereas Thucydides wrote in the Melian Dialogue: “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (2008, p. 556). So, while Morgenthau recognised that the anarchic nature of the international system facilitates the pursuit of power, he maintained that state actions are primarily driven by man’s innate desire “to live, to propagate, and to dominate” (2006, p. 39).

In structural realist theory, however, the struggle for power is primarily determined by anarchy, in the form of the anarchic structure of the international system. Waltz was critical of the classical realists’ adherence to the notion that state actions were motivated by human nature, as it was based upon a philosophical concept which could not be empirically tested – he thus regarded it as little more than a reductionist explanation. Instead, he proposed that state actions could be explained by the structure of the international system itself, as the absence of a higher central authority to regulate interstate behaviour ensured that “self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order” (Waltz, 2010, p. 111). Waltz presented the state as a variable unit and ignored the individual characteristics which were traditionally stressed as being responsible for a state’s bellicose behaviour, such as culture, ideology, and regime type, arguing that they only differed “vastly in their capabilities” (2010, p. 105), intimating that the structural framework of the international system has remained fundamentally unchanged since the Peloponnesian War. As the variable unit, a state’s capability – and therein its security – could be empirically measured by its ‘power’, which Waltz loosely defined in terms of population, territory, economy, military strength and political stability (2010, p. 131). Waltz maintained, however, that the “first concern of states is not to maximise power but to maintain their positions in the system” (2010, p. 126). This is the basic premise of defensive realism, but it has been contested by John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist who has postulated that states should strive for hegemony because “the stronger a state is relative to its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it and threaten its survival” (2014, p. 33). Having discussed structural realist theory, the essay will now proceed to explain the implications of anarchy.

One immediate implication of anarchy is the ‘security dilemma’, as coined by John Herz (1951). While classical realists focused on states’ individual struggles for ‘survival’ within the international system, Waltz (2010) assumed that states were rational actors who collectively strived for ‘security’. In the anarchic international system, however, the absence of a higher central authority has engendered a sense of mutual mistrust between states, and since it is impossible for one state to be absolutely certain of another’s future intentions, Mearsheimer has argued that states have “little choice but to assume the worst about the intentions of other states and to compete for power with them” (2013, p. 80). This mistrust is responsible for the security dilemma, which has had a destabilising impact upon the international system, as Waltz stressed that “the means of security for one state are, in their very existence, the means by which other states are threatened” (2010, p. 64). So, while one state may arm purely for reasons of self-help, other states will naturally feel less secure in their own defensive capabilities in relation to that state and are forced to arm themselves – a move which will, in turn, be interpreted as a threatening action by other states. States are, therefore, engaged in a vicious spiral of competitive armament, fueled by insecurity, which “cannot be solved” and heightens the possibility of conflict (Waltz, 2010, p. 187). Defensive realists would, for example, consider the build-up to the First World War as a prime example of the security dilemma – particularly in the case of the Anglo-German naval race. As the Germans wished to augment their comparatively diminutive fleet while Britain adhered to the two-power standard, the insecurities of policy makers in London and Berlin escalated tensions between two powers who had more in common than not. At the time, US President Theodore Roosevelt had remarked that the naval race was “as funny a case as I have seen of mutual distrust and fear bringing two peoples to the verge of chaos” (Quoted in Collins, 1997, p. 14), which, in retrospect, appears to be a succinct, if somewhat flippant,

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observation on the potentially tragic consequences of the security dilemma as an implication of anarchy.

Another important implication of anarchy is that states are unlikely to cooperate with each other, despite being rational actors who may share common interests. Joseph Grieco has emphasised that states are 'positional' rather than 'atomistic', in that they are concerned with the relative gains of a potential partner just as much as they are with maximising their own absolute gains (1988, p. 487). If two states were to cooperate, hypothetically, *State A* would be concerned about the potential benefits of cooperation achieved by *State B*, as an increase in *State B*'s power could have a detrimental effect upon the power, and therefore the future security, of *State A*. Even if *State A* was satisfied with the intentions of *State B* in the present, in the absence of a central authority there would be no binding assurance that *State B* would remain cordial in the future, and cooperation could cease abruptly; "today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war", as Grieco noted (1998, p. 487). Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing (1977) have used the "Prisoner's Dilemma" to illustrate why states are unlikely to cooperate in an anarchic system. The scenario suggests that states fear their partners will defect, thereby persuading them to defect themselves in pursuit of their own self-interest, and despite being rational actors, each state will therefore "end up worse off than if each acted to achieve joint interests" (Waltz, 2010, p. 109). Similarly, in alluding to Rousseau's 'Stag Hunt', Robert Jervis emphasised that while it would be in the best interest of the hunters (states) to cooperate on the hunt, they cannot commit to cooperation while they harbour doubts about the intentions of the others, ensuring that they will, inevitably, "all chase rabbits" and subsequently the risk of war is heightened (1978, p. 167). Cooperation is thus rendered unlikely in an anarchic international system, as the absence of a central authority ensures that there is no guarantee that healthy cooperation between two states can be regulated and enforced, and since states are, ultimately, solely responsible for their own security, they will not willingly compromise this in cooperation with another state.

The third implication of anarchy, and the tragic consequence of the security dilemma and the inability of states to cooperate, is war. It has already been established that the absence of a central authority higher than the state is responsible for the security dilemma and prevents states from cooperating, and in the same fashion Waltz asserts that "wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them" in *Man, the State and War* (2018, p. 232). Although anarchy may not be *the* cause of war, it is, at the very least, a "permissive or underlying cause" in the sense that states in an anarchic system are necessarily engaged in a struggle for power (Waltz, 2018, p. 232), and when one state attempts to maximise its power it is likely that the other states will seek to restore the balance of power through conflict. Defensive realists would, for example, describe the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a series of wars within a multipolar system where seven great coalitions comprised of great powers were formed to counter the French aspiration of European hegemony. Britain's readiness to subsidise each coalition is popularly ascribed to the dominance of domestic counter-revolutionary attitudes coupled together with traditional anti-French sentiment, but when considered in the context of the anarchic system it becomes clear that, to use Waltz's terminology, an underlying sense of insecurity was the imperative motive; this is further illustrated by the emphasis of British foreign policy upon maintaining the Concert of Europe until the Second World War, after which its status as a great power rapidly diminished and it was no longer able to fulfill its role as an "offshore balancer" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 42). Although the probability of war is reduced in bipolar and unipolar state systems, Waltz holds that it is still inevitable, and due to the anarchic nature of the system "war may at any time break out" (2010, p. 102).

Although Waltz's emphasis on the influence of anarchy in the international system has, undoubtedly, shaped much of the contemporary discourse concerning IR theory, there are many scholars who would agree with Donnelly's critical assertion that anarchy "is neither a defining feature of international relations nor of any real analytical significance" (2015, p. 407). As in most theoretical refutations, the first broadside against anarchy is usually semantic in its form, as Waltz's omission of a definitive term for anarchy has ensured that critics of anarchy have contended that it is an "ambiguous concept" which is fundamentally flawed (Milner, 1991, p. 67). Helen Milner (1991) has stressed how prominent structural realists each possess different understandings of what is meant by anarchy: Waltz understood anarchy as a lack of government in the Weberian sense, where the lack of a central authority means that there is no monopoly on the legitimate use of force in the anarchic international system (Waltz, 2010, pp. 103-4), while Robert Art and Jervis placed greater emphasis on the absence of an "agency... above individual states with [the] authority and power to make laws and settle disputes" (2015, p. 1). Martin Wight of the English School – where anarchy is also a central tenet – likewise stressed that, in the absence of government, "in international politics law and institutions are governed and circumscribed by the struggle for power" (1995, p. 102). Definitions of anarchy thus fall into three

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groups, which Donnelly categorised as “absence of a ruler, absence of rule, and absence of rules” (2015, p. 410). While each understanding may appear, at a glance, to differ only slightly, the subtle differences in definition significantly alter the implications of anarchy, which has ensured that “anarchy can be misleading and may have heuristic disadvantages” (Milner, 1991, p. 68). That anarchy is such an ambiguous concept is a good indicator as to why it is a central concept in many IR theories, but the collective failure to define the key term suggests, ultimately, that it is an unsuitable central concept on which to develop theories of IR.

While structural realists have maintained that there is a limited scope for cooperation between states within anarchic international systems, this has been refuted by liberal institutionalists, who have contended, unsurprisingly, that international institutions are able to mitigate this particular implication of anarchy. Mearsheimer dismissively defined institutions as “reflect[ing] state calculations of self-interest” (1994, p. 13), and Grieco wrote that they “affect the prospects for cooperation only marginally” (1998, p. 488), but liberal institutionalists have reasoned that while inter-state cooperation may be impeded by the actors’ insecurities and assumptions of malign intent, these conditions of anarchy can be negated through institutions, as they facilitate “transparency, access, representation, and communication” between states in the absence of a central authority (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999, p. 186), thereby reducing the probability of conflict. Communication and understanding are crucial in enabling inter-state cooperation, but Robert Keohane has also suggested that “the prospect of discord creates incentives for cooperation” (1984, p. 215), as was exemplified by the cooperation between OECD members during the oil crisis of 1979, when in 1973 their competitive and uncoordinated response ensured that they had “foundered in the storm created by the Yom Kippur War” (1984, p. 224). Keohane also used the Prisoners’ Dilemma to explain why the OECD members all ‘defected’ in 1973, as each state feared the “sucker’s payoff” of oil shortages” (1984, p. 223), but in collaboration with Robert Axelrod he wrote that “both sides can potentially benefit from cooperation – if only they can achieve it” (1985, p. 231), as happened in 1979. International institutions can, therefore, be used to nullify the self-serving interests of states which prevail in anarchic international systems, thereby dispelling yet another important feature of anarchy.

Moreover, it has been convincingly argued that the implications of anarchy, if there are any, have no effect upon the international system and are little more than “rhetorical exaggerations” (Donnelly, 2015, p. 412). Robert Powell wrote that “the implications of anarchy do not really follow from the assumption of anarchy” as they “result from other implicit and unarticulated assumptions” (1994, p. 314), a point validated by the constructivists’ theoretical approach to international relations and their critique of anarchy. Constructivists have rejected anarchy as a core concept upon the notion that it is a subjective social construct, rather than an inherent ordering principle of the international system; “anarchy is what states make of it”, as Alexander Wendt famously wrote (1992, p. 424). A leading constructivist, in his formative article Wendt contended that Waltz’s emphasis on the anarchic structure of the international system was, in fact, very limited, as it failed to explicitly explain state behaviour, such as “whether two states will be friends or foes” or “will recognise each other’s sovereignty” (1992, p. 396). David Dessler and John Owen have similarly argued that “anarchy does not dispose actors to do anything in particular” (2005, p. 598), reiterating the constructivist assumption that state behaviour is determined by the actors’ individual identities and interests rather than the anarchic structure of the international system (Wendt, 1999) – the essay will go on to explore this in further detail when it considers the suitability of constructivism as a viable alternative to anarchy in theory development. If it is true that anarchy has no implications – as this essay holds – then Donnelly’s claim that “it is neither a defining feature of international relations nor of any real analytic significance” was entirely reasonable (2015, p. 407), thereby indicating that there must be alternative theories, focussing on other structural features of the international system, which are better disposed to explain and analyse IR.

The first structural alternative to anarchy is hierarchy which, according to David A. Lake (1996), sits at one end of the continuum of security relations, while anarchy sits at the other. It has already been established that in an anarchic system, there is no enforcing body greater than the state, but in a hierarchic system certain states will possess varying degrees of authority or hegemony over other states at regional and global levels, thus determining the behaviour of these states. Waltz, however, maintained that the ordering principles of anarchic and hierarchic systems were “contrary to each other” (2010, p. 88), and in doing so all but undermined his own argument, as an examination of the international system would indicate that it is hierarchic rather than anarchic. Consider, for instance, the international system since 1945: during the Cold War, it was a bipolar system in which the United States and the

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Soviet Union competed for dominance while lesser states traded their sovereignty for security (Butt, 2013), because “states [will] choose the relationship that minimises their costs of producing a desired level of security” (Lake, 1996, p. 12). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has been able to maintain its hierarchical dominance in a unipolar international system with a great deal of help from the international institutions it built in the immediate post-war period, such as the IMF and World Bank which, it has been argued (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal, 2001), have been engineered to institutionalise and reflect the hierarchy of the United States. To focus on hierarchy as the key structural feature would, therefore, certainly be beneficial for the future of IR theory development, especially from an institutional perspective, given the growth of China in the international system and how its own institutions have contributed to establishing Chinese hierarchy in the Global South, as was outlined by Ahsan I. Butt in a recent blog post (2016). However, it has also been suggested that in emphasising hierarchic structures scholars are adhering to a strictly Eurocentric perspective of IR (Hobson, 2007), and until this can be resolved it is unlikely that hierarchy will replace anarchy as the fundamental structural feature of IR theory development.

The alternative theory which might displace the dominant role of anarchy, then, is constructivism, a relative newcomer among the ‘-isms’ of IR theory. Constructivist theory is, above all, explicitly based upon metaphysics and social theory and, as has already been briefly covered, suggests that actors in the international system “know, think, and feel only in the context of and with reference to collective or intersubjective understandings, including rules and language” (Adler, 2012, p. 121). If this is the case, then states will all possess individual identities, which presuppose interests, and it is this individuality which determines an actor’s behaviour rather than the state of anarchy, as demonstrated by Marc Lynch’s attribution of the changes in Jordanian foreign policy from 1988 to 1998 to “the interplay of the regime’s preferences and identities and interests articulated by important segments of Jordanian society” (1999, ix). Lynch similarly intimates that a state’s identity and interests can and will change over time. Constructivists have thus contended that state individuality is a greater determinant of state behaviour than the anarchic structure of the international system, and a state’s interests “are constructed through social interaction” with one another (Finnemore, 1996, p. 2) – particularly through international institutions. Although structural realists have dismissed the importance of institutions in international relations, constructivists have maintained that they are crucial in constituting legitimate state behaviour and in shaping the individual identities of member states (Adler, 2012). Audie Klotz (1995), for example, has suggested that the global institutionalisation of racial equality as a global norm was greatly responsible for the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and allowed the state to return to the international system as a legitimate actor. Furthermore, Wendt has stressed the importance of these shared social norms, as he postulated that “500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than 5 North Korean weapons, because the British are friends of the US and the North Koreans are not” (1995, p. 73). If correct, this would dispel Waltz’s security dilemma. Constructivist theory thus implies that war is not inevitable in anarchic state systems and, while it has been accused of being too philosophical, it provides an alternative theory which accounts for the individual identities and interests of the actors who constitute the international system; above all, it is positive, plausible, and has the potential to have a profound influence on the future of IR theory.

In conclusion, the dominant role of anarchy in IR theory development is certainly overstated. Two of Donnelly’s criticisms of anarchy, in particular, have proven to be especially persuasive: first, that it “provides no significant payoff for the discipline as a whole” (2015, p. 413), and second, that it has “impeded understanding [of] the actual structure of real international systems” (2015, p. 418). Both criticisms allude to the ambiguity of anarchy as a concept and the subsequent impact that this has had upon its ‘implications’, which are uncertain if not entirely absent, and as such suggests that IR scholars must look elsewhere for a viable alternative to anarchy, as may be found in constructivist theory. While anarchy is and, undoubtedly, has been an important feature of international systems, it is difficult to comprehend that when considered as the primary ordering principle of said structures, it has been entirely dismissive of the influences of state individuality and international institutions upon state behaviour – especially in the twenty-first century. Future theory development within IR must be built upon these determinants and focus on the interactions and linkages between them. The scope of this essay, then, has been to demonstrate that anarchy is, fundamentally, an unsuitable foundational concept for IR theory development, and in doing so it was necessary to pre-eminently focus on the structural realist understanding of anarchy and the limitations of its ostensible implications, and if not for the constraints it would, ideally, have encompassed a greater discussion of the suitability of alternative theories, and would have considered the importance of domestic politics to IR theory development.

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