Four Conceptions of Authority in International Relations

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Abstract   There is increasing agreement that states and other political actors on the world stage sometimes achieve international authority. However, there is less agreement about the nature and functioning of international authority relations. What determines whether an actor will be recognized as an authoritative actor? And what are the effects thereof? In this essay, we identify four distinct conceptions of authority in the study of international relations: *authority as contract*, *authority as domination*, *authority as impression*, and *authority as consecration*. Consideration of the typology leads to two important insights. First, the phenomenon of authority has an essentially experiential dimension. Subordinate actors' emotional experience of authority determines their response to authority and thus also has a fundamental impact on the stability of authority. Second, the emergence of forms of international authority does not entail, at least not necessarily, the weakening of the sovereignty of states, but can equally be argued to strengthen it.

Michael N. Barnett, *Paternalism Beyond Borders* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Hau Books, 2017)

David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2009)

Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (University of Michigan Press, 2015)

Ayşe Zarakol, *Hierarchies in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford University Press, 2015)

Authority has always been a crucial concept in the study of politics, but it has long played a less important role in international relations. Emphasis on the assumption of anarchy by many international relations scholars in the 1980s invited little attention to the existence of relations of authority beyond those that bind people to the sovereign states to which they belong.[1] By the end of that decade, however, scholars

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1. For important exceptions, see Bull 1977; Wallerstein 1984.

voiced complaints about the inadequacy of the anarchy assumption.[2] These complaints have increased in recent years; again there is increasing recognition that the reification of the concept of anarchy impairs our understanding of world politics.[3] The books reviewed in this essay share this belief. They center on concepts—hierarchy, hegemony, paternalism, and authority—intended to capture the nonanarchical aspects of international relations. Their authors show persuasively that these notions apply to relations among and institutions above states too.

In this essay, we focus on the idea of authority in particular. The concept plays a prominent role in all of the books that we review, including those that foreground a different concept. Barnett identifies authority structures as foundational to the practice of paternalism.[4] Zhang relates fluctuations in Ming hegemony to fluctuations in the authoritativeness of the Chinese emperor.[5] In Zarakol's volume, Donnelly explains that hierarchy is an unwieldy concept and recommends a more specific focus on international authority relations.[6]

If these scholars all agree that international authority exists, they disagree about its nature and functioning. A shared point of departure is that authority is a relational phenomenon: actor A has authority only to the extent that other actors recognize its authority.[7] Beyond this starting point, as we will show, theoretical disagreement is on ample display, with scholars holding divergent views about what determines the original achievement of authority and how stable that achievement is.

We make three main contributions to this debate. First, we document systematic disagreement on these issues, by developing a typology of four conceptions of authority: *authority as contract* (interest-driven bargaining leads subordinate actors to conditionally grant authority to dominant actors); *authority as domination* (subordinate actors misrecognize the arbitrariness of standards of excellence that dominant actors champion and purport to embody); *authority as impression* (subordinate actors gladly accept the leadership of actors with superior skill or of particularly virtuous disposition); and *authority as consecration* (subordinate actors recognize, with some reluctance, that the preeminence of dominant actors adds gravitas to their common endeavors). We show that these distinct conceptions result from divergent understandings of the locus and sources of authority and thus find their origin, at least partly, in divergent social-theoretical commitments.

Second, we emphasize that the four conceptions of authority have different expectations about how subordinate actors will respond to authority because they have a different understanding of the experience of authority by subordinate actors. The emotion-laden experience of authority informs subordinate actors' recognition of

2. Donnelly 2015; Milner 1991; Onuf and Klink 1989.
3. E.g., Hobson 2014; Mcconaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018.
4. Barnett 2016, 11.
5. Zhang 2015.
6. Donnelly 2017.
7. Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010, 9–10; Lake 2009, 8; Sending 2015, 7.

authority and thus also has an impact on its stability.[8] The importance of emotions in social life has received sustained attention in international relations,[9] but it has played only an implicit part in the study of international authority. We foreground that dimension.

The presentation of *authority as consecration*—espoused by few in international relations—constitutes a third contribution. In tune with Andrew Ross's emphasis on the ubiquity of "mixed emotions,"[10] this conception acknowledges the ambivalence of subordinate actors' experience of authority. As such, it cautions against unequivocally positive and unequivocally negative interpretations of the value of international authority. It reduces the risk of bias in our moral assessments of the phenomenon, although that risk may be difficult to avoid altogether.

The essay develops in five steps. First, we define authority as *power taken to be legitimate*. Second, we identify two elements of theoretical contention: whether to conceive of sources of authority as quasi-objective or as socially constructed; and whether to locate authority in a dyadic relation or in society more broadly. Their combination leads to the identification of four distinct conceptions of authority. Next, we discuss the four conceptions in detail, paying particular attention to each conception's understanding of the experience of authority by subordinate actors. Fourth, we assess the purchase of our typology by probing the international authority/sovereignty nexus from the perspective of the four conceptions. They lead to different insights, with *authority as contract* concluding that international authority keeps state sovereignty intact, *authority as domination* assuming that international authority renders state sovereignty chimerical, and *authority as consecration* (and also *authority as impression*) believing that international authority can strengthen state sovereignty. We illustrate these claims with reference to the Bandung Conference and the process of decolonization, a crucial episode in the history of state sovereignty.[11] Fifth, in the conclusion, we reflect on the relationship between the four conceptions and emphasize the difficulty of avoiding the intrusion of political and normative biases in sociological analyses of international authority.

A Definition of Authority

We propose to define authority as *power taken to be legitimate*. The definition needs elaboration because its two constitutive elements—power and legitimacy—have multiple meanings.

We define power in agent-centered terms as *the ability of an actor A to influence other actors and to direct their common affairs*.[12] Authority, then, describes the

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8. Sennett 1980.
9. E.g., Crawford 2000; Mercer 2010.
10. Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Ross 2014.
11. Philpott 2001.
12. Guzzini 1993, 443.

situation in which those other actors consider it legitimate that actor A guides them and their common affairs. They do not simply tolerate, but accept A's influence.[13] With this definition, we approach authority as a social fact. It is not our primary concern whether other actors should accept the power of actor A, but only that, at least sometimes, they do.[14]

When we define authority in agent-centered terms, we do not mean to deny that it interacts with more structural forms of power.[15] As we will see, some theorists insist that the authority of particular actors does not depend on these actors' personal ability or virtue but on their position in a social structure and the reification of background knowledge.[16] They insist that the authority of a particular actor depends on the actor's position in a historically sedimented authority structure and thus on structural forms of power. This may or may not be the case. What matters for us, at this point in the essay, is that one should not equate the two notions. Whereas authority structures illustrate the idea of structural power, authority itself is a modality of agentic power.[17]

We should also clarify what we mean by legitimacy. As mentioned, we adopt a sociological approach to legitimacy and associate it with acceptance. We signal our commitment to a sociological approach by defining authority as power *taken to be* legitimate (not "legitimate power"). We do not want to prejudge the basis of other actors' acceptance of actor A's authority. This acceptance can be grounded in a normative belief,[18] or equally in what Max Weber called "devotion."[19] We do not assume a priori that considerations of normative legitimacy feed into the socio-logical process of recognition.

Unlike us, Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt have proposed a strict separation between authority and legitimacy.[20] They define authority as the competence to decide or implement a policy. They explain that the power entailed by such compe-tence can be exercised more or less legitimately and can be experienced as more or less legitimate. An increase in authority, they insist, *can* lead to a decrease in legit-imacy. Without the conceptual distinction between authority and legitimacy, they argue, one cannot make sense of these kinds of empirical divergences. We think that this is a matter of semantics only, with Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt equat-ing authority with "formal authority" (juridical-administrative competence) while we focus our attention on actual authority or "authority over" (a position of preeminence and corresponding influence).[21] Cases that Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt catalogue

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13. Arendt 1961, 92.
14. Haugaard 2018, 116.
15. Barnett and Duvall 2005.
16. E.g., Pouliot 2017.
17. This way of delineating the concept does raise the question of how one should name "structural power taken to be legitimate." We would propose to call this "order," although we are aware of alternative understandings of that notion.
18. Zürn 2018, 11.
19. Weber 1978, 215; compare Sennett 1980, 22.
20. Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 72.
21. Compare Raz 1979, 19.

as authority without legitimacy, we would describe as formal competence without authority. There is no substantial difference here.

The Sources and Locus of Authority

As soon as definitional work gives way to explanatory endeavors, things become more contentious. First, consider explanations that invoke the concept of sources. This idea plays an important role in Barnett and Finnemore's analysis of the autonomous power of international organizations. Here they "identify several sources of IO authority":[22] their bureaucratic form, their superior morality, and their expertise.[23] But there is ambiguity in their text about how sources of authority lead to the achievement of authority. Do actors simply possess such a source, and does their possession lead automatically to the achievement of authority?[24] Or do actors have to put work into being seen as possessing a source of authority and into having it recognized as a source of authority at all?[25]

We should not skate over this distinction.[26] Irrespective of what one takes the sources of authority to be, or whether one assumes them to vary historically and culturally, any theory of authority must decide how it conceives of their ontological status. One can choose to dissolve such sources into the processes of interaction that sustain a person's or a society's belief in their existence. Or one can stress their quasi-objective status and insist that it matters that people generally presume that dominant actors tap into a source of authority that is not of their own making. In a maximalist version of the first argument, all references to pre-existing sources of authority are done away with, and processes of interaction (say, bargaining) themselves become the source of authority. In a maximalist version of the second argument, on the contrary, the claim is made that the achievement of actual authority depends on access to a source that, in the eyes of all people involved, lies outside the reach of human artifice.[27] As an obvious example, take those accounts of authority that have its achievement depend on divine blessing.[28]

Now consider approaches that explain the authority of dominant actors with reference to the benefits that their dominance offers to subordinate actors. In this view, actors accept the control power of another actor because that actor provides goods that would otherwise not be available.[29] This idea is also not without its ambiguities. Do dominant actors provide goods first and then get recognized as authorities? Or do

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22. Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 16.
23. See also Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010, 9–14.
24. Compare Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 24.
25. Ibid., 23.
26. Costa López 2020; Sending 2015.
27. Arendt 1961, 111.
28. For historical examples, see Kantorowicz 1957.
29. Lake 2009.

subordinate actors endow dominant actors with authority first, at which point they become responsible for the provision of any goods promised? And just how publicly must such goods be distributed in order to buttress the achievement of authority?[30] Is it sufficient that goods be provided? Or is it necessary that goods are *seen* to be provided?

We believe that how one answers these questions is determined by how one conceives of the locus of authority: whether one situates authority in a dyadic relation between two actors only or in society more broadly. In the latter case, authority remains a relational phenomenon, but the relation is one between a dominant actor and the diffuse collective entity that is "society." Adopting a dyadic conception of the locus of authority does not preclude recognition of the importance of generosity—of providing goods beyond what has been negotiated and possibly prior to negotiation—but theorists who espouse a societal conception of the locus of authority will recognize more readily the importance of public displays of generosity.[31] Different understandings of the locus of authority, that is, lead to different understandings of how particular factors and processes contribute to the achievement of authority. As indicated, the same observation applies to how one conceives of the ontological status of the sources of authority.

The combination of one's understanding of these two dimensions determines how one explains authority's emergence and its subsequent dynamics. Their combination leads to four conceptions: *authority as contract, authority as domination, authority as impression*, and *authority as consecration* (Table 1).

TABLE 1. *Four conceptions of authority*

		Locus of Authority	
		Dyad	*Society*
Sources of authority	Interaction	Authority as contract	Authority as domination
	Outside	Authority as impression	Authority as consecration

Four Conceptions of Authority

Authority As Contract

This first conception of authority has been developed primarily by David Lake in *Hierarchy in International Relations*. It is the conception that scholars in our discipline love to hate, with many contributions showing themselves critical of Lake's

30. Mauss 2002, 89.
31. Lederman 1990.

approach.[32] *Authority as contract* holds that a subordinate actor will recognize the authority of a superordinate actor when it judges that subordination is in its own interest. The subordinate actor estimates that subordinating itself to a dominant actor will bring more security or wealth.[33] The motivation of the dominant actor is thought of in similar terms. It judges that the cost of maintaining order and providing goods to subordinate actors will be lower than the cost of being in competition with them.

Authority as contract situates authority in the dyadic relation between two states. This transpires in the empirical work done by scholars adopting this approach, with Lake himself plotting the bilateral relations of the United States with its various allies in terms of how much authority each ally has granted, separately, to the country,[34] and Cooley and Spruyt detailing, *inter alia*, "the … contracts between the Netherlands and Indonesia" and the "French agreements with Algeria and Tunisia."[35] They situate the dominant state's authority in specific bilateral relations and thus conceive of the locus of authority in dyadic terms.

Admittedly, a dyadic conception of the locus of authority is out of tune with the social contract tradition in political theory, which would situate authority in the relation between the various members of society and the ruler or government that they decide to submit to or institute.[36] In principle, Lake accepts the point.[37] However, as he transposes this idea to the international realm, he does not imagine a dominant state's authority to be conferred by a collective of states, but rather argues that authority exists in the relation between a dominant state and one subordinate state, insisting only that that subordinate state itself consists of a collective of subjects.[38] An explanation for this wavering stance is that, in terms of intellectual resources, *authority as contract* builds more on the theory of economic contracts than on that of social contracts.[39]

In terms of the sources of authority, *authority as contract* holds that authority comes about through interaction. More particularly, it explains that subordinate actors "confer the right to rule" on dominant actors at the conclusion of a process of bargaining.[40] Through a process of negotiation, the two states involved decide what the scope of the authority of the dominant state will be and what goods it will have to provide. The resulting agreement is sealed with a contract that both states promise to respect. However, any agreement is always provisional.[41] States

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32. E.g., Pouliot 2017; Sending 2015, 11–20; Zhang 2015, 6. Note also that Lake's *Hierarchy in International Relations* is very well cited, with 1,000-plus citations in Google Scholar.
33. Lake 2009, 7.
34. Ibid., 79.
35. Cooley and Spruyt 2009, 16.
36. Hampton 2012, 114–31.
37. Lake 2009, 19.
38. Ibid., 19.
39. Cooley and Spruyt 2009, 20; compare Kratochwil 1994.
40. Lake 2009, 15; see also Cooley and Spruyt 2009, xii.
41. Lake 2009, 11.

are constantly calculating their options: dominant states stretch the limits of their authority; subordinate states question the value of the security or wealth received.[42]

This first conception imagines the experience of power to happen in a strictly utilitarian mode. Actors are portrayed as monitoring their social relations with a calculative attitude—hence the assumption that the scope of authority is constantly in danger of being transgressed and that recognition of authority is constantly in danger of being revoked. Power is considered legitimate only in the thinnest sense of that term. It is consented to, but that consent is not assumed to be informed by any deeper normative or emotional belief. This raises the question of whether people actually experience the world in such cold utilitarian terms. By adopting a utilitarian conception of experience, *authority as contract* hollows out the notion of experience, ignoring its value-ladenness and emotionality.[43] From the perspective of the other conceptions, this also leads it to mischaracterize the nature of authority.[44]

Authority as Domination

This second conception informs Ole Jacob Sending's *The Politics of Expertise* and some of the contributions to Zarakol's and Barnett's edited volumes.[45] It maintains that authority results from the imposition of what are ultimately arbitrary standards of excellence and explains that historically dominant groups are in a favorable position to impose such standards. By imposing their standards, these groups manage to dominate society without the need for physical force. When the imposition succeeds, subordinate groups no longer recognize the arbitrariness of the dominant group's domination. They come to "respect, admire, [and] love" those who dominate them.[46] Subordinate actors, explain theorists of *authority as domination*, are often "complicit in the maintenance of their own position of subordination."[47]

From a sociological perspective, the legitimacy of the power of dominant groups appears secure (until it is challenged—but that is, supposedly, a rare, typically intra-elite, occasion).[48] However, from a normative perspective, their legitimacy appears questionable.[49] Theorists of *authority as domination* do not deny that authority can be put to morally commendable use, but they doubt that the benevolence of such acts outweighs the symbolic violence that underlies them and express a clear normative preference for relations of solidarity among equals over hierarchical relations of authority.[50] All in all, *authority as domination* shows itself skeptical about the moral value of authority.

42. Compare Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 44, 160–61; Tallberg and Zürn 2019.
43. Dewey 1980, 35–56; Johnson 2008.
44. See Kratochwil 1994, 477.
45. E.g., Fassin 2016; Hobson 2016; Pouliot 2017; Sjoberg 2017.
46. Bourdieu 2002, 40.
47. Sending 2015, 20.
48. Ibid., 37.
49. Haugaard 2018.
50. Barnett 2016, 316–44.

Authority as domination considers society the locus of authority and treats processes of interaction as its source. And it is that combination, we argue, that leads it to conceive of authority as fundamentally a mode of domination and a cause of discontent among those who recognize its (allegedly) oppressive, symbolically violent nature.

To consider society the locus of authority means to hold that authority does not define a relationship between two actors only, but describes a position that an actor—or group—holds within a certain society or social space. Consider the "great powers" in nineteenth-century international society. The great powers of the time—who congregated in the Concert of Europe and were recognized by the smaller states, collectively, as having special responsibilities and special privileges —were vested with authority in the social space that was European diplomacy *and thus not primarily in their bilateral relations with particular small states*. English School scholarship tells us that the members of international society generally agreed that the great powers were great powers, that they were entitled to give direction to European affairs.[51]

The choice to situate authority in society affects one's assumptions about how subordinate actors relate to authority. Individual subordinates who taunt authority run a great risk of being taunted themselves. In the first two decades after the Cold War, for instance, those who taunted the United States or showed contempt for international rules were sidelined by an international community—not just the United States, but its subordinate allies too—that designated them rogue states.[52]

Theorists of *authority as domination* also insist on the constructed nature of the sources of authority. Sending maintains that "a 'source' of authority is not just there for an actor to draw on but must itself be constructed, nurtured, and made effective in particular settings."[53] This happens through a process of interaction. Sending explains that, to achieve authority, dominant actors "put forth claims" and mobilize categories justifying why they ought to be seen as particularly authoritative.[54] He presents this as an (at least potentially) competitive process, with various elite groups putting forth rival claims with reference to alternative "sources" of authority. Eventually, one or the other claim to authority emerges victorious, and its source of authority loses its inverted commas. It is now naturalized.

Notice two aspects of the argument. First, in this view, any challenge to authority comes from rival elite factions. Subordinate actors—"the many"—do not enjoy much agency in this account. Second, the form of interaction that functions as the source of authority is presented in different terms than in *authority as contract*. Rather than a rational process of negotiation or bargaining, *authority as domination* imagines the achievement of authority as resulting from a rhetorical-discursive process.

51. Clark 2007; Zala 2020.
52. Kustermans 2013.
53. Sending 2015, 5.
54. Ibid., 21.

Dominant actors achieve authority when they "put forth claims" that resonate with their audience. Indicatively, in the work of Evelyn Goh, which explains the preservation of (American) hegemony in East Asia in terms of the shifting institutional bargains that ensure its continued legitimation, the processes through which these bargains come about change depending on their relational context. When she discusses a dyadic relation, such as between the United States and China or Japan, the process is one of negotiation and bargaining, but when she describes the interaction between a hegemonic United States and "the rest" of East Asia—as a collective—she draws attention to more explicitly rhetorical processes of justification.[55] It is striking that in Goh's account, the more the authority of the hegemon is situated in the East Asian order overall (in *society*), the less the alleged process of "negotiation" and "bargaining" takes on the form of actual negotiating and bargaining, and the more it becomes a "discursive contest" in which authority is "discursively … forged."[56] The more emphasis she puts on society as the locus of authority, the more her analysis shifts from *authority as contract* to *authority as domination*.

Notice also that some of the arguments of *authority as domination* have been articulated by social contract theorists, too. Most obviously, social contract theorists situated the authority of the state in society. Less obviously, some of them recognized the crucial role of rhetorical action in achieving authority. While they primarily argued that the normative legitimacy of the authority of the state depended on the consent of its subjects,[57] an author such as Thomas Hobbes also understood that, from a sociological perspective, rhetorical action, often geared to the cultivation of fear, was more important to ensure the authority of the state than balanced arguments about the merit of the social compact.[58] But while these insights are part of the social contract tradition broadly conceived, we would insist that they take social contract thinking to the very limit of what its key metaphor, *contracting*, can carry.

To the extent that authority is interpreted as a form of domination, it comes as no surprise that the experience of authority, by subordinate actors, is painted in negative terms. Vincent Pouliot, in his contribution to Zarakol's volume, writes about "the heavy weight" of social hierarchies,[59] and Barnett's volume draws attention to the perceptions of arrogance that Western humanitarianism evokes.[60] Subordinate actors are portrayed as suffering the authority of dominant actors. As mentioned, theorists of *authority as domination* accept that subordinate actors can come to "admire, respect, [and] love" figures of authority,[61] but they interpret such demeanor as the result of a fundamental "misrecognition" on the part of subordinate actors of the symbolic

55. Goh 2013, 8.
56. Ibid., 11.
57. Riley 1973.
58. Jakonen 2011.
59. Pouliot 2017.
60. Autesserre 2016; Feldman 2016; Richardson 2016.
61. Bourdieu 2002, 40.

violence that sustains authority relations.[62] When they become aware of this aspect of authority, *authority as domination* holds, they typically feel negatively about it.

Authority As Impression

This third conception features in Feng Zhang's *Chinese Hegemony*. One also finds it at work in scholarship that presents "expertise" or "morality" as indisputable sources of authority.[63] The model assumes that when people are confronted with actors of superior skill or truly virtuous disposition, they will accept their leadership. *Authority as impression* captures an important aspect of the experiential dimension of authority: that subordinate actors do not necessarily suffer authority, but that authority can likewise be experienced as "a creative, a cultivating force."[64] Unlike *authority as domination*, *authority as impression* does not dismiss actors' positive experience of authority as the expression of false consciousness. Instead, it takes those experiences at face value. But neither does it reify the positive experience of authority. Impressions wear off, and when subordinate actors start to experience dominant actors as unimpressive, they will no longer recognize their authority.

This interpretation of the positive, but transitory, nature of authority results from the combination of a dyadic conception of the locus of authority and an insistence on the quasi-objective nature of the sources of authority. Consider the locus of authority first. *Authority as impression* agrees with *authority as contract* that authority exists foremost in the context of a dyadic relation between two actors. Feng Zhang defines hegemony (which he uses as a synonym for authority) as the "social recognition by other states that the leading state's material dominance and its consequent international rules and behaviors are broadly legitimate."[65] But he further explains that every subordinate state decides for itself whether to consider the power of the dominant state legitimate.[66] In the case of the Ming dynasty, Zhang shows in three *separate* case studies that Korea, Japan, and the Mongols related independently from each other to China, with Korea being more inclined to recognize the authority of the Chinese emperor than Japan and the Mongols were. A consequence of this dyadic conception of authority is that subordinate polities do not feel trapped by authority. Zhang documents how recognition of Ming authority waxed and waned, also within the Sino–Korean relation. If an actor, at a certain point, makes a favorable impression, that impression can also wear off and lead the other actor to withdraw its earlier grant of authority. The dominant actor may respond unpleasantly—Zhang mentions Chinese punitive expeditions[67]—but that only indicates that authority has been lost. Otherwise no punitive expedition would have been necessary.

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62. Sending 2015, 23–25.
63. Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010.
64. De Grazia 1959, 328.
65. Zhang 2015, 6.
66. Ibid., 10.
67. Ibid., 41.

Authority as impression's understanding of the ontological status of the sources of authority explains its intuitions about the creative, cultivating character of authority. It presumes that the source of authority lies outside of interaction. There are two versions of the argument. A first version locates the source of authority in the individual: certain people simply make an impression. They enter a room and people pay attention. Some people simply get things done. They were born with or have developed a superior capacity for appropriate decisions and decisive action. They breed confidence in others, who want them to take the lead.[68] Historically, in international relations, one finds the idea animating leadership decisions among Mongol tribes. Genghis Khan, for instance, was vested with authority when he proved supremely successful in leading a band of tribesmen on their looting expeditions.[69] In social theory, one encounters the idea in the notion of "charismatic authority"—authority grounded in the charisma of the dominant actor—with Max Weber defining charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary."[70]

But there is a second version of the idea of an outside source. When people show themselves to be of superior skill or uniquely virtuous disposition, so runs this version, they owe this to their "association with" or "embodiment of" a truly *outside* source: a source that neither dissolves into interaction nor is lodged in the individual. Consider again Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Weber emphasized that the charismatic person is typically seen, by those who are impressed, as having been divinely blessed. Weber's archetypal example is Jesus of Nazareth.[71] If Jesus impressed bystanders and soon gathered a following, this was due to his skill (in rhetoric, in healing) and to his disposition (supremely virtuous but for a streak of impatience)—but that skill and disposition were due, it was believed, to his association with the most outside of outside sources.

However, the idea of an outside source does not depend on a belief in a transcendent God. A culturally grounded conception of the "morally good" or even the very notion of "knowledge" can likewise serve as a source of authority.[72] To fit within the third conception, it is crucial that such sources be conceptualized as *social facts*—impervious to easy manipulation by weak and strong actors alike (*pace authority as domination*)—and their validity as practically uncontestable. In Feng Zhang's account of Chinese hegemony, Confucian thought figures as the outside source of the Chinese emperor's inter-polity authority.[73] Zhang explains that subordinate states "identified" with China when they felt that China was acting in accordance with the "superordinate obligations of grace and

68. Kojève 2014.
69. Ringmar 2019, 102.
70. Weber 1978, 241.
71. Ibid., 630–34.
72. Compare Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 20.
73. Notice that Weber (1978, 1113) illustrated his argument about charismatic authority with reference to the authority of the Chinese emperors.

humaneness."[74] In that case, they would "accept their subordinate roles vis-à-vis China, identify themselves as China's hierarchically differentiated outer vassals and fulfill their obligations of loyalty and integrity toward China."[75] Zhang maintains that such recognition was informed by "a passionate and sincere belief in the positive, transformative power of Chinese civilization."[76] In this view, it was not directly China's behavior—its acts of benevolence—that explained its authority, but rather the belief that those acts resulted from China embodying "civilization"—an outside source in the same way that "the morally good" and "knowledge" can function as outside sources.

If *authority as impression*'s dyadic understanding of the locus of authority leads to the insight that subordinate actors must not feel trapped by authority, its understanding of the source of authority as lying outside of interaction explains its conclusions about the experience of authority. Zhang writes about authority as an "ethically and emotionally endowed relationship," about the "affective obligations" that actors have within such a relationship, and about dominant and subordinate actors acting according to a logic of "expressive rationality."[77] Crucially, all of these are positively connoted. This makes sense. To know oneself to be led by an actor embodying "civilization" (or "morality" or "knowledge") breeds trust. Notice, though, that trust is conditional: if the subordinate actor suspects that the dominant actor no longer embodies the source, the authority relationship is assumed soon to come to its end. It may remain hierarchical, but it will no longer be a relation of authority.

Authority As Consecration

This fourth conception animates *On Kings*, a book by anthropologists David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins. In international relations, one finds elements of it in Iver Neumann and Einar Wigen's historical reconstruction of Turkish and Russian great power practices and the response to those by other polities in the region.[78] In political theory, Hannah Arendt hinted at the importance of *authority as consecration* when she pointed at the concept's etymological roots in the Latin verb *augere*: to augment.[79] Authority augments power. In Arendt's interpretation, this did not mean that the powerful became more powerful still, but rather that authority added "gravitas" to the doings of the powerful and the common endeavors of a community.[80]

Theorists of *authority as consecration* hold that authority typically inspires mixed emotions. Richard Sennett captured this ambivalence when he wrote that the

74. Zhang 2015, 35.
75. Ibid., 36.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 36, 37–38, 190.
78. Neumann and Wigen 2018.
79. Arendt 1961, 121.
80. Ibid., 123.

"authority figure is feared, but even more the subject fears he will go away."[81] This sounds contradictory, but theorists of *authority as consecration* believe that it describes a common experience. Their understanding of the locus and sources of authority explains that belief.

In this fourth conception, society figures as the locus of authority. Neumann and Wigen, for instance, observe that among nomadic polities a particular polity would be recognized as the "top dog."[82] They draw a parallel with English School interpretations of great-power-hood. Much as the great powers had authority across European international society, so did the "top dog" have authority across the Eurasian steppe. In the same way, Graeber and Sahlins discuss the societal position of stranger-kings and the place of dominant polities in galactic orders, as exemplified by the international order of precolonial Southeast Asia.[83] A core–periphery structure marked these orders, especially in cultural terms.[84] A core polity stood at the center, and the peripheral polities hovered around it, some close by (spatially and culturally), others further away. The authority of the core polity did not primarily exist in the dyadic relation with a specific peripheral polity, but in the region more broadly. Its authority "radiated from the center"[85] across the constellation, although diminishing with distance.[86]

Authority as consecration combines this societal conception of its locus with an acknowledgment of the quasi-objective nature of the sources of authority. Neumann and Wigen explain that "[success] in warfare by the head of the steppe empire, the *khagan*, was ascribed to *qut*, a combination of 'dynastic charisma' and 'mandate from heaven.' The one conferring such a mandate was Tenggri, a shamanistic sky entity."[87] The idea is even more apparent when Graeber and Sahlins observe that, in the societies they study, those with authority were those who had "*absorbed* more divine powers"[88] or had "a privileged relation to the metapersonal rulers of the human fate."[89] At least from the perspective of the actors themselves, the source of authority is taken to lie outside of interaction.

The particular combination of theoretical presuppositions about the locus and ontological status of the sources of authority matters. We argued earlier that, from the perspective of *authority as domination*, considering society the locus of authority implied that individual opposition to authority will be futile and that those individual actors who do taunt authority risk exclusion.[90] Theorists of *authority as consecration* tend to attribute more agency to subordinate actors. Neumann and Wigen, for

81. Sennett 1980, 40.
82. Neumann and Wigen 2018, 209.
83. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 5, 365–76; Tambiah 2013.
84. Spruyt 2020, 253–83.
85. Ibid., 509.
86. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 355.
87. Neumann and Wigen 2018, 46.
88. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 59 (emphasis added).
89. Ibid., 3.
90. Hall 1997, 602.

instance, represent the Eurasian steppe as a competitive realm. The "top dog" always had to reckon with "aspiring top dogs."[91] The same observation applies to galactic systems. Graeber and Sahlins stress their "unstable, competitive character" and draw attention "especially [to] the challenges to the center from the margins."[92] About stranger-kings, finally, they explain that host societies did not simply submit themselves to a foreign prince, but ensured that a stranger-king's power was contained—oftentimes literally, by confining him to his palace.[93] These scholars clearly do not agree that subordinate actors cannot but *suffer* authority.

It is important to know, in this regard, that theorists of *authority as consecration* accept that the sources of authority lie outside of interaction. This leads them to estimate that the experience of authority may be less oppressive than *authority as domination* assumes. A first reason is that the outside source is often seen as a productive force. The risk of oppression is counterbalanced by the promise of revitalization. A second reason is that the association of an authoritative actor with an outside source is contingent. Continued recognition of authority depends on continued association of the dominant actor with the outside source. If that association becomes less apparent, subordinate actors may withdraw their recognition. A final reason is that an outside source can come to be embodied by a subordinate actor, too. A subordinate actor can claim to have superior access to a source of authority and thus challenge the authority of the dominant actor. An outside source is not of anybody's making, and therefore neither is it in anybody's control. This is the mechanism that Graeber and Sahlins witness when a peripheral polity challenged a core polity in a galactic system.[94] It is also the mechanism that Russia and some Central and East European countries appear to rely on when they present themselves as the guardians of European values at a time of alleged moral corruption in EU countries.[95]

Much as *authority as consecration*'s understanding of the sources of authority influences its assessment of the implications of society being the locus of authority (less oppressive), so does its understanding of the locus of authority influence its reading of the significance of the quasi-objective nature of the sources of authority (less positive). It was the argument of theorists of *authority as impression* that dominant actors who are seen to embody an outside source achieve an aura of trustworthiness and that the common endeavors those dominant actors initiate achieve an aura of worthwhileness. Theorists of *authority as consecration* hold a more ambiguous view of the experience of subordinate actors.

An important reason—in addition to plain and simple envy, known to accompany admiration[96]—concerns the locus of authority. *Authority as impression* assumes that

91. Neumann and Wigen 2018, 209.
92. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 354.
93. Ibid., 187–96.
94. Ibid., 365–76.
95. Holmes and Krastev 2019.
96. Kierkegaard 2004, 118.

individual subordinate actors can turn away from authority when they feel that the dominant actor has lost touch with the outside source. In this view, subordinate actors benefit from authority, but they do not depend on it. However, if authority exists *in* society, and certainly when it is assumed to exist *for* society, the situation changes. Society without authority can hardly persist, maintained Friedrich Kratochwil, as it will succumb to centrifugal tendencies.[97] Society will not hang together, and it will certainly not flourish. Such is also the assumption of Graeber and Sahlins. Most societies, they find, including societies that we have grown used to thinking of as egalitarian (such as hunter-gatherer societies), accept the necessity of authority of some kind.[98] This is a reason to appreciate authority, but it is also a reason for reluctance about it. Society welcomes authority, but it knows it has no other choice than to welcome it. The situation is shot through with ambiguity.

At the same time, *authority as consecration* observes that societies do not simply dwell in that ambiguity but handle it self-consciously. About stranger-kings, we have mentioned that host societies often confined them within their palaces. They sacralized the stranger-king—setting him apart, keeping him occupied with ritual duties—and thus benefited from his productive powers while rendering him practically impotent.[99] Graeber and Sahlins further explain that stranger-kings were obliged to marry the daughter of a local noble family, which increased the probability they would use their powers for the common good.[100] This is a way of reining in the power of the stranger-king by means of the creation of a situation of mutual dependence. They observe a similar element in the organization of diplomacy in galactic systems, which centered on the practice of tribute bearing—a ritual practice, Graeber and Sahlins explain, that served to acknowledge the contribution of subordinate polities to the authority of the dominant polity (because the local products they brought with them were considered outside sources in their own right: carriers of life-giving powers).[101] Graeber and Sahlins call these elements the "contractual aspect" of the phenomenon.[102] But this does not mean that for them the notion of a contract sums up the nature of authority. The main difference is that with *authority as contract*, the contract lies at the origin of authority, whereas with *authority as consecration* the contract serves to rein in figures of authority, who are taken to have achieved their authority through noncontractual means.

International Authority, State Sovereignty, and Decolonization

We noted in the introduction that scholars are increasingly abandoning the "presumption of anarchy" as a starting point for their analyses of international relations.

97. Kratochwil 1989, 95–129.
98. Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 23–64.
99. Ibid., 8.
100. Ibid., 70.
101. Ibid., 367.
102. Ibid., 169.

Instead, they explore concepts that capture the non-anarchical aspects of world politics. Authority is one of those concepts, and the books that inspired this essay demonstrate persuasively that the notion applies to relations among states too. At the same time, it cannot be denied that sovereignty remains a core principle of international society and a key concern of states.[103] This raises the question of how the existence of international authority relates to state sovereignty.

We engage that question in this section, not with the ambition to settle it but with the purpose of probing the analytical purchase of our typology. Each of the four conceptions sheds alternative light on the international authority/sovereignty nexus. *Authority as contract* explains that the emergence of international authority leaves state sovereignty intact. *Authority as domination* explains that the consolidation of international authority renders state sovereignty chimerical. *Authority as impression* and *authority as consecration*, for their part, believe that international authority may strengthen state sovereignty. We illustrate the argument with reference to the interplay of international authority and state sovereignty at the Bandung Conference of 1955, a crucial moment in the process of decolonization and thus a crucial moment in the history of sovereignty.[104] Comparing their interpretations of Bandung, we discover an additional difference between the four conceptions, as each foregrounds a different aspect of the phenomenon (jurisdiction, authority structures, authoritativeness, or preeminence) which informs their reading of the international authority/sovereignty nexus.

The conception of *authority as contract* finds reflection in the argument that international authority comes about through the exercise by states of their sovereign authority. The idea is that states delegate part of their authority to a dominant state or international organization.[105] They *authorize* them to manage certain issues on their behalf. Doing so, the other actor achieves jurisdiction, but the delegating state does not cede the right to rescind its grant of authority. As Oona Hathaway writes, "states remain free from external control in any meaningful sense, for they are controlled by the decisions of the international body [or dominant state] only so long as they agree to be."[106] In this view, acts of delegation, and thus also the creation of international authority, leave the sovereign authority of delegating states intact, at least in theory.[107]

Another argument holds that sovereignty is a status that depends on recognition by international society.[108] Certain polities may perform all of the functions that one associates with sovereign statehood, but if international society does not grant them that status, they will not benefit from the rights and privileges associated with it. It can be added that recognition of a polity's sovereign status depends, in

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103. Paris 2020.
104. Philpott 2001.
105. Lake 2017; Zürn 2018.
106. Hathaway 2008, 122.
107. Krasner 1995, 134, agrees with the theoretical argument but doubts its practical applicability.
108. Aalberts 2014.

large part, on that polity abiding by shared norms of legitimate membership and legitimate conduct.[109] These arguments resonate with *authority as domination*, which would put particular emphasis on the contingency of those norms and the decisive influence of dominant states in setting them and in guarding and often blocking the access of polities to international society as equal members.[110]

These two arguments do not necessarily contradict each other. If they seem to be in contradiction, it is at least partly because they use the same notion—authority—to refer to distinct yet related aspects of the empirical reality that the concept refers to: *jurisdiction* in the case of *authority as contract*, and (stratified positions within) *authority structures* in the case of *authority as domination*. The other two conceptions emphasize yet another aspect of the empirical reality of authority: *authoritativeness* in the case of *authority as impression*, and *preeminence* in the case of *authority as consecration*. Thus they offer yet another account of the international authority/sovereignty nexus.

The process of decolonization can serve to corroborate that claim. Our observations will have to be brief, but will hopefully be suggestive of the relevance of the other two conceptions. Our observations are also preliminary, drawing extensively on Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain*, a contemporary report on the proceedings at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Wright's report is still considered a major resource by historians of the Bandung Conference and decolonization.[111] The insights we draw from *The Color Curtain* will nonetheless have to be validated in future work by means of more extensive empirical research.

Admittedly, a good part of what Richard Wright wrote corresponds to the insights of *authority as domination*. The participants at Bandung—the delegations of twenty-nine recently decolonized and still-colonized polities—were rebelling against the authority structures in which they had been caught and kept down, which Wright, and many of the conference participants, identified as the global racial order.[112] Participants exposed the arbitrariness of skin color as a source of authority, and thus exposed the groundlessness of the authority claims of their (soon-to-be) erstwhile colonial masters.[113] Wright recognized that the racial order had been internalized by many people in colonized societies, and he presented Bandung as an opportunity to try to overcome their false consciousness. Participants at Bandung rejected the racial order which had legitimated their subordination, and claimed their right to sovereignty instead. However, Wright did not consider success a foregone conclusion.[114] In line with *authority as domination* and with the findings of more recent postcolonial scholarship, he knew that the achievement

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109. Reus-Smit 1999.
110. Bartelson 2014; Inayatullah 1996.
111. Muppidi 2016, 23.
112. Wright 1994, 127–52.
113. Ibid., 152.
114. Ibid., 220–21.

of sovereignty could prove chimerical if the global racial order—the reigning authority structure—was not dismantled.[115]

But this does not tell the whole story. In line with *authority as contract*, one could remark that former colonizers and newly sovereign states renegotiated their relationship when independence was declared, with postcolonial states regularly accepting continued foreign presence on their territory and foreign control over strategic resources.[116] But this was not an aspect that participants in Bandung wished to emphasize, and neither did Richard Wright.

What does come across strongly from the report is the *preeminence* certain participants in the conference enjoyed, especially Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru.[117] Naomi Shimazu interprets their prominence during the conference as a function of their personal charisma. "Nehru … and Zhou Enlai easily won the popularity poll," she writes. "They were the biggest crowd-pullers and crowd-pleasers."[118] Jürgen Dinkel, however, suggests that these leaders enjoyed *preeminence*. They took the lead in organizing the conference and enlivening and concluding its proceedings, as well as in instituting the Non-Aligned Movement as an organizational structure for future joint diplomacy. Indicative, in this regard, was the practice, at subsequent meetings of the movement, to "print memorial stamps and coins" that "depicted [them as] 'founding fathers' of the … movement."[119] Their authority *consecrated* the movement and its joint endeavors.

At the same time, a crucial message at Bandung was that the newly and soon-to-be independent states demanded recognition of their sovereignty.[120] From the perspective of *authority as domination*, that desire appears incompatible with the simultaneous recognition of the preeminence of a select few among them. From that perspective, one would expect resentment rather than celebration of these father figures. But while the scholarship on the Bandung conference recognizes elements of policy disagreement among the participants and a touch of envy vis-à-vis the founding fathers,[121] it does not document deep resentment among the delegations. Quite the contrary. It appears that Zhou Enlai's and Nehru's preeminence boosted the other participants' self-confidence about their countries' claim to sovereignty.[122] Their superior dignity appeared to rub off on the other participants. Participating in the conference, witnessing the skillful performance of both leaders, they felt their own "sovereign agency" strengthened.[123]

115. Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015.
116. Cooley and Spruyt 2009, 48–99.
117. Wright 1994, 157–73.
118. Shimazu 2014, 254.
119. Dinkel 2014, 215–16.
120. Wright 1994, 13.
121. Shimazu 2014, 227. Muppidi 2016, 36, hints at a subtle game of status competition in Bandung.
122. Wright 1994, 159.
123. Shimazu 2014. For the concept of sovereign agency, see Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending 2018.

Conclusion

The crux of our essay has been the identification of four conceptions of authority. We showed that each conception is premised on a particular understanding of the locus and sources of authority and that each expresses a different intuition about the experience of authority by subordinate actors. These divergent intuitions result, we argued, from their particular understanding of locus and source. A short section on the international authority/sovereignty nexus served to probe the analytical purchase of the typology.

We have defined authority as *power taken to be legitimate*. This is a variation on the definition of authority as *legitimate power*, meant to signal a deliberate focus on the sociological analysis of authority. We have not engaged normative analyses of the phenomenon. However, as we developed this essay, we discovered that the intrusion of political biases in sociological analyses of authority is difficult to avoid. Authority is a social fact, but it is also a political concept. Scholars of international authority should show more awareness about this dual nature of the notion. Fostering such reflexivity could begin by exploring the affinity between the four conceptions and broader philosophical traditions. Is *authority as contract* inspired by liberal philosophy? Is *authority as domination* inspired by radical philosophy? Is *authority as consecration* inspired by conservative philosophy?[124] Divergent social-theoretical intuitions and commitments explain the articulation of different conceptions of authority to a large extent, but we should not disregard the influence of political-theoretical priors on our understanding of authority.[125]

There are three other questions our account might have raised. These questions keep us within the remit of sociological analyses of authority, but they are not therefore less important.

1. Is the typology exhaustive?

Based on our reading of the literature, we do not think that we ignored a crucial dimension of conceptions of authority. One option would have been to add a more explicit distinction between approaches that assume stability and approaches that posit the fundamental instability of all manifestations of authority.[126] However, adding this third dimension would not deliver fundamentally new insights. Our conceptions already differ in how stable they assume authority to be, with *authority as contract* and *authority as impression* sharing a presumption of instability and *authority as consecration* and certainly *authority as domination* one of stability.

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124. *Authority as impression* is more difficult to catalogue, but that does not invalidate the basic idea.
125. Guzzini 2017, 99–101.
126. Krisch 2017.

2. How do the four conceptions relate to each other?

In our discussion of the international authority/sovereignty nexus, we have treated the four conceptions as complementary models. Their combination yields a more or less comprehensive picture of what authority in international relations is or could be about. At the same time, there is an aspect of rivalry among them. Especially the various assessments of the experience of authority by subordinate actors appear to be incompatible. They raise the question of when a positive or ambivalent experience will prevail and when it will turn negative.

Time could be a crucial variable, as Weber also believed.[127] A simple hypothesis would be that new authority impresses, while old authority oppresses. However, *authority as consecration* suggests that old authority can continue to impress. In sociology, scholars have theorized this possibility in terms of the persistence of a "charismatic element" in sedimented authority structures.[128] Characteristics of the broader environment could be a crucial factor here. In changing or otherwise uncertain environments, new authority can emerge more quickly, but also old authority has more opportunity to reassert itself and to convince subordinate actors of its continuing relevance. Uncertain environments offer the opportunity for old authority to initiate, and also consecrate, collective plans and projects. This prevents old authority from growing stale. In a less uncertain environment, the chances of old authority being experienced as oppressive become much higher. But *authority as consecration* would still insist that that outcome is not inevitable. In addition to recognizing the influence of time and environment, it points at the crucial role of (joint) ritual action, amply on display in Bandung,[129] in ensuring the continued acceptance of authority.[130] Theorists of *authority as domination* are correct to think that discursive claims to authority always run the risk of being exposed as false or fabricated. Ritual action, because of its embodied nature, does not run that risk to the same degree.[131] The performance of ritual should therefore play a central part in sustaining old authority.

The validity of these propositions will need to be established by means of empirical research, with an emphasis on the experience of subordinate actors. This leads to a last question, which we know to matter greatly, but which we do not yet have a solid answer to.

3. Is it possible to study emotional experiences in international relations?

Among scholars who study emotions in world politics, there is a methodologically motivated tendency to prioritize the study of emotional discourses and performances

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127. Weber 1978, 1121.
128. Shils 1965, 200.
129. Shimazu 2014.
130. Rappaport 1999, 324.
131. Ibid., 146–47.

rather than attempt to register emotional experience directly.[132] To the extent that we recommend the inclusion of ritual action in our accounts of international authority, we too propose to study emotional performances. However, we simultaneously insist on the attempt to capture emotional experience more directly—by means of ethnographic methods, for instance. If we abandon that empirical ambition, we risk reproducing biased interpretations of the nature of international authority.

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132. Hall 2015.

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