


The Politics of Pedagogy: The Problem of Order in the IR Classroom

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This is a tough time to teach an undergraduate introduction to international relations (IR) course. Giving students conceptual tools for understanding world politics feels vital at this political moment, with the current international order fraying, its normative power eroding, and widening anxiety about how it will end and what will replace it. IR seems to have such tools, given its orienting frame of the problem of international order, which suggests that IR concepts could help students navigate the changing world we are in. At the same time, part of the political moment is a heightened awareness of the limits of IR for making sense of world politics. As Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol point out, one of the deepest threats to the post-1945 international order comes from the multiple, diverse justice claims being leveled against it.¹ IR's West- and state-centrism, and the racism underlying its core concepts, limit our ability as educators to make sense of those threats in the language of the discipline. Indeed, Reus-Smit and Zarakol argue that one justice claim leveled against the current order is precisely the privileging of Western knowledge systems such as IR.

Prepping an introduction to IR course thus raises a larger question: To what extent am I, by teaching the problem of order and expecting students to demonstrate competence or mastery of it, socializing students into a problematic discipline that only reproduces the existing order? Claire Timperley and Kate

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*Many thanks to Laurie Georges for helpful comments and research assistance.

Ethics & International Affairs, 38, no. 2 (2024), pp. 180–188.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679424000170

Schick argue that as IR teachers we are not merely transmitting knowledge and skills: pedagogy is ontology; we make and shape the world for our students.² Additionally, teaching is where we (most of us, at least) as IR scholars reach the most people and have our greatest impact. It is one of the many ways that IR's scholarly knowledge becomes entangled with the political present and thus politically—*worldly*—relevant.³ Recognizing this entanglement, Christopher McIntosh calls for an ethic of responsibility toward our scholarly practices, including teaching.⁴

The distinction made by education theorists between socialization and education resonates with that ethical charge. Education aims to “prepare [students] not only for the worlds that are, but for those that ought to be as well.”⁵ Socialization, or “fitting” oneself into the existing sociopolitical order, while an important dimension of education, is a more limited goal. True, it is difficult to imagine one's way forward without being able to speak the language of the world we are in. But another purpose of education is what Gerd Biesta calls “subjectification,” the capacity to be “a subject of your own life” rather than an “object” responding to the demands of one's position in a social order. Education is about helping students develop a sense of their own freedom, by which he means the “possibility to say yes or to say no, to stay or to walk away, to go with the flow or to resist.”⁶ If socialization is in part a process of students coming to know who they are—that is, their identity in the social order—subjectification is about students coming to know how to live their individual lives. Education cannot be reduced to “insertion” in social orders but must also be about “ways of being that hint at independence from such orders.”⁷

In this brief essay, I consider the concept of the problem of order, which frames IR as a discipline, from the standpoint of this dual purpose of education: socialization and subjectification. As an example of the implications of framing, I focus on Westphalia—the Westphalian myth that accompanies IR's problem of order—in order to show how pedagogy affects ontology and the types of questions we can ask.⁸ It is easy to teach the problem of order without giving Westphalia much thought, but the routine invocation of 1648 hails both an international political world where questions of justice—what is morally right and what is fair—stop at the water's edge, and an academic discipline calling for explanatory rather than normative modes of analyses. The Westphalian myth contributes to bringing into being IR as a distinct discipline, focused on the explanatory questions of how to produce order (rather than war). Normative questions seem to belong to a

different discipline; namely, political theory. From there, rather than denounce IR's mythmaking, I suggest another version of the myth that reorients the problem of order, demonstrating how order and justice, the explanatory and normative, are entangled all the way down. I conclude by returning to the challenge of the classroom.

THE PROBLEM OF ORDER IN IR

The Hobbesian problem of order frames the syllabus I use in my classroom. The first section of the syllabus poses the question, how is international order possible? I make it clear to students that order does not mean peace or justice. It simply refers to stable expectations, knowing that when *A* happens, *B* usually follows. Order is what "allows a society to function as a society."⁹ IR, like most of Western liberal political theory, is defined by the following answer: For individuals, social order is secured by the state. Governments enforce authoritative rules and values. For states, however, there is no world government to secure international order. States are sovereign, final authorities and anarchy—lack of authority—characterizes the space between them. The anarchic environment means that states must provide for their own security. There is, in other words, no domestic analogy to be made between social order among individuals and social order among states. Anarchy defines international relations as a distinct domain of political action and IR as the discipline through which to study it.

With IR introduced in this way, my class moves on to the three generic logics of social order pulled from sociology: force/deterrence, price/instrumentalism, and membership/legitimacy, which scale up nicely to realism, liberalism, and constructivism.¹⁰ The logics readily translate from real life. In my classroom, for example, students are tasked with devising policies to prevent hooligan behavior at an Ohio State University (OSU)–Michigan football game. They come up with representative solutions: doubling the visible presence of armed cops; publicizing large fines for vandalism; amplifying messaging about being a good Buckeye. The goal is to get students to think about why people follow social rules in daily life. We then scale up to world politics to grapple with the difficulty of rule following among states in a system of anarchy.

Note that this exercise takes place in an explanatory register. My questions to the students are: How is order produced, and what social mechanisms can stabilize expectations and make social life possible? In this framework, constructivist approaches that focus on intersubjective meaning highlight that legitimate orders

are more stable than illegitimate ones. Applied internationally, if states accept the international institutions and their rules, the international order will be more stable and more long-lasting than if they do not. The focus is not on the rightness or fairness of the content of the rules. It is on assessing the degree of states' socialization to them. Legitimacy facilitates durability; when rules feel right, states are more likely to comply.

Putting the order problem together with the three mechanisms results in the following: Because anarchy means that a state's existence can never be assured ("self-help"), and there is no world government, state security is scarce. IR scholars focus on explanations for how order is nonetheless possible and how it is produced, and how it breaks down into war. IR has the social-scientific, meliorative goal of isolating social mechanisms with the hope of intervening in the social world in a positive direction. The production of international order is taught as existing in a world of facts, not values. When policymakers and world leaders use the language of "should," "ought," and "responsibility," we are told not to make too much of these rhetorical flourishes. Obligation talk is meant to persuade sovereigns that action is in their self-interest; it has no intrinsic claim on them premised on shared notions of what is good, right, or fair.

Except for the most materialist of realists, IR scholars acknowledge that anarchy is characterized by norms: Westphalian norms of sovereign independence and toleration of difference. Hedley Bull calls this "pluralism."¹¹ It could also be characterized as a communitarian international normative order. The primary sphere of obligation is inside the state, to fellow citizens, while between states there prevails a thin normativity of recognizing difference among states. The normativity of recognition enables states to cooperate, to function as a society or as a "practical association."¹² In other words, sovereignty does not preclude shared ideas about right and wrong. But international order begins from the factual premise of sovereign states in anarchy. And as Bull explicitly argues, and the discipline presupposes, order is the first problem. Questions of right and wrong and fairness can only be defined in the context of institutions that maintain political order.

Through learning about the problem of order, IR students are conditioned to be tough-minded. IR's Westphalian normativity makes its way into the classroom as mottos: anarchy is a "live and let live," "mind your own business" world. Order—nonwar among states—is superior to justice because conceptions of justice are rooted in values, which can never be universal.¹³ Anarchy requires the values of pluralism and toleration of diversity because different peoples might interpret

justice differently. There is a great deal of injustice around the world. But when face to face with such injustice, foreign policy decision-makers, even if using the language of obligation, reason instrumentally: What will it cost? How will it affect other goals? And so on. The question the IR scholar—and student—critical of such decisions must ask is whether the injustice they see warrants calling for decisions that risk disorder. Especially in a nuclear world, the answer is often no. For a state to pursue its conception of justice internationally threatens not just war but Armageddon. In this existential frame, justice is a luxury. The highest moral value is to ensure that the world survives.

Stepping back, in the IR discipline, teaching the traditional problem of order brings along, even if unwittingly, an ideology much like that of the white moderates whom Martin Luther King Jr. criticized, in that IR justifies having the right values yet doing nothing.¹⁴ Justice is something desirable to seek, but pursuing it is risky and always impractical given the existential threats arising from anarchy.

WESTPHALIA

One date underwrites this narrative: 1648. For IR, 1648 is a “shorthand”¹⁵ for an interpretation of the Treaties of Westphalia that has become IR doxa.¹⁶ The year 1648 saw the end of the Thirty Years War through the Treaties of Westphalia, marking the transformation from medieval to modern, from hierarchy to anarchy, and from multiple, overlapping authorities and loyalties to state sovereignty. It is one of a small handful of the discipline’s benchmark dates.¹⁷ IR teaches that the treaties were a political strategy to protect the independence of small states, “revolutionizing sovereignty” through the principle of *cujus regio, ejus religio* (He who governs the territory decides its religion). Giving princes the legal right to determine the religion of their subjects addressed what was seen as a key cause of the war; namely, the universalistic pretensions of the Habsburgs and the Pope.

Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John Hobson refer to it as the discipline’s “big bang,” representing the “ontological emergence” of sovereign states and anarchy.¹⁸ Indeed, understood in this shorthand way, Westphalia is crucial to the problem of order described above. Westphalia is the moment that creates IR’s unit of analysis, the sovereign state. Because that unit is an independent actor that can make its own decisions, it can be analogized to a human person. But because there is no world government, the domestic analogy falls short. Unlike individuals in a state, state decision-makers are their own final authorities. Having given us

the actors and the system—IR’s “facts”—Westphalia as sovereignty’s birthday rationalizes the problem of order as the central puzzle of IR. This, in turn, anchors IR’s three conventional explanatory approaches to solving it. That is, IR’s Westphalia supports a disciplinary self-understanding that expels justice from the discipline’s core concerns and places it in a different discipline, making it a secondary priority for world politics.

Many IR scholars and historians have shown that this myth is easily debunked by examining history.¹⁹ This scholarship exposes the falseness of the narrative; for example, by showing that the Westphalian Treaties were a step backward for princely authority relative to the Treaty of Augsburg the century before. These scholars relate the falseness of the account to the discipline’s historical blinders and analytic shortcomings. There is a story to tell about the consolidation of the myth and its relationship to the consolidation of IR. For now, it is sufficient to point out that historical scholarship shows that those treaties mark one moment in an extended and messy process, where, in a series of treaties, the balance and relationship among political authorities shifted as leaders attempted to define the central political actors and craft a European order that did not constantly erupt into war. As de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson put it, “The Treaties of Westphalia do not tell a clear-cut and neat story of transformation. Rather, they are better understood within a very complex story of advances, setbacks, and messy entanglements of feudal suzerainty with some rare elements of what we now call modern state.”²⁰ It was not a single moment, and it was not a linear process where sovereignty grew as empire and religion receded. Moreover, in this, as in each treaty-making moment, there were complicated political choices about who would be recognized as central political actors bound up in questions of how to restore order.

Such histories start to make IR’s disciplinary frame unravel. IR’s Westphalia, by creating states, anchors its central question: Given states, how can social order be produced? Historical Westphalia, in contrast, tells us that the political units did not precede the question of order—their construction and recognition as political actors were entangled with it. In historical Westphalia, who gets to be recognized is shown to be both an empirical and a normative question. It is empirical in the sense that rather than take states for granted, we can investigate the conditions under which actors with certain characteristics get recognized. But it is also normative, in that the choices to recognize or not are political choices that take place against the backdrop of normative considerations, which always implicate

conceptions of justice.²¹ Historical Westphalia suggests that questions of recognition are inseparable from the question of order.

This is not as much a point about teaching historical detail as it is a point about myth. Some of the scholarship on the Westphalian myth treats it as a wrong interpretation. But, strictly speaking, myths are not true or false. They are stories that communities tell themselves about themselves, their origins, and goals. Myths place events in the context of storylines or plots, to form narratives that give communities cognitive and normative maps for how to make decisions and orient their common life. Shared myths are a source of solidarity; learning the myths of a community is part of coming to belong to it. IR has told itself a story about states as people to create its problem of order. What if we emplot Westphalia somewhat differently, as one of several treaty-making events that mark the process of founding of political order in Europe? In this founding, European political order is produced as a relationship among subjects who themselves are defined by the order. Each treaty decision is a moment of recognition as much as a moment of ordering. This emplotment of events into a storyline produces a different cognitive and normative map for IR. Instead of beginning with the settled question of units and then searching for ordering mechanisms, this revised Westphalian myth urges us to think of recognition—a justice claim—as intrinsic to ordering decisions. Justice is implicated each time order is invoked, insofar as all notions of order entail recognitions (and nonrecognitions). From here, the sovereign state we know today is an ongoing effect of an order-justice entanglement, reproduced (or not) in each international political decision.

CONCLUSION: THE IR CLASSROOM

The pedagogical challenge posed at the start of this essay is daunting, and I do not presume to have an answer for it. Teaching IR through the problem of order can be productive. It provides a cognitive frame that enables students to connect their day-to-day knowledge about orderliness in their lives to IR knowledge about order in world politics.²² It also can be empowering, serving as an intellectual anchor in this potentially confusing and new-to-them domain.

But then what to make of the responsibility to cultivate an awareness of—or to not perpetuate ignorance of—the injustices baked into IR concepts and even its very disciplinary frame? Turning again to education research, Biesta reminds us that students are not passive repositories of what we teach them, with information

“flow[ing] into their minds and bodies.” They are active in the process of learning, making sense of and adding interpretations to what we teach them. As educators, the best we can do is orient our teaching toward “the modest task of not making it impossible to think otherwise” and of providing “ways of being that hint at the independence from [their social] orders.”²³

One way to do this is to foster dialogue on the limits of Westphalia and of IR, by enriching our syllabi with voices and perspectives offering different histories and revealing the Eurocentrism of IR’s frame.²⁴ In this essay, I have suggested the outline of another frame, which focuses on Westphalia as myth. My point is not to debunk the myth with history, which already has been done. Rather, I reread it, drawing on history and mythology to highlight the complicated politics of political ordering, to open space for new cognitive and normative maps in the discipline. IR’s problem of order relies on 1648 as the origin of the modern order. For IR, that year marked the creation of a world of states in which questions of political order are separate from and take precedence over questions of justice. But 1648 also can be read as one moment in a lengthy founding of the modern political order. In this moment, it is possible to narrate the Westphalian myth in a way that stresses the entanglement and co-constitution of order and justice.

Perhaps in the current world political moment it can be productive not to jettison our anchors but to cultivate a different relationship to the disciplinary knowledge we teach, to “reorient” our thinking—and our teaching—about it, aiming to cultivate or at least not preclude in our students the ability to think of order and justice together, as perpetually entangled parts of the political present.

NOTES

- ¹ Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, “Polymorphic Justice and the Crisis of International Order,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 1 (January 2023), pp. 1–22.
- ² Claire Timperley and Kate Schick, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Pedagogy and Power,” *International Studies Perspectives* 23, no. 2 (May 2022), pp. 113–28.
- ³ Christopher McIntosh, “From Policy Relevance to Present Relevance: Entanglement, Scholarly Responsibility, and the Ethics of Quantum Social Theory,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (July 2022); and Andrew R. Hom, “Forum: ‘A Bridge Too Far’? On the Impact of Worldly Relevance on International Relations: Introduction: ‘A Bridge Too Far’?,” *International Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (December 2017), pp. 692–721.
- ⁴ McIntosh, “From Policy Relevance to Present Relevance.”
- ⁵ Tomasz Szkuclarek, “Identity and Normativity: Politics and Education,” in Tomasz Szkuclarek, ed., *Education and the Political: New Theoretical Articulations* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2013), pp. 61–74, at p.67.
- ⁶ Gert Biesta, “Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited,” in “Symposium: Education and Risk,” special issue, *Educational Theory* 70, no. 1 (February 2020), pp. 89–104, at p. 93.
- ⁷ Gert Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (December 2009), pp. 354–62, at p. 356.

- ⁸ For a complementary essay on IR pedagogy focusing on the security dilemma, see Jennifer Mitzen, “One Concept, Many Worlds: Teaching toward the Future in an Imperfect Discipline,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (January 2023), pp. 1–5.
- ⁹ Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 16.
- ¹⁰ Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics,” *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 379–408; and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ¹¹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1977).
- ¹² Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1983).
- ¹³ Another way to say this is that in IR, nonwar, which Johan Galtung refers to as “negative peace,” is considered superior to “positive peace,” which Galtung defines as “social justice” or “the absence of structural violence.” Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969), pp. 167–91, at p. 183.
- ¹⁴ Ian Hurd, “World Order from Birmingham Jail,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2024).
- ¹⁵ Andreas Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth,” *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 251–87.
- ¹⁶ Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, “The Big Bangs of IR: What Your Teachers Never Told You about 1648 and 1919,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (2011), pp. 735–58, at p. 745.
- ¹⁷ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, “Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2014), pp. 437–62.
- ¹⁸ Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, “Big Bangs of IR,” p. 738.
- ¹⁹ See Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth”; Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, “Big Bangs of IR”; Stephen D. Krasner, “Westphalia and All That,” in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 235–64; Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998); Atsushi Shibasaki, “Myths in a Discipline: IR and the ‘Peace of Westphalia,’” *Journal of Global Media Studies* 14 (2013), pp. 41–52; and Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003).
- ²⁰ Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, “Big Bangs of IR,” p. 741.
- ²¹ Jens Bartelson, “Three Concepts of Recognition,” *International Theory* 5, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 107–29.
- ²² James M. Lange, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Hoboken, N.J.: Jossey-Bass, 2016).
- ²³ Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education,” p. 354.
- ²⁴ Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, “Big Bangs of IR,” pp. 757–58.

Abstract: The Hobbesian problem of order has been central to international relations (IR) pedagogy. What are the political implications of this pedagogy? Giving students conceptual tools to understand world politics feels vital in this moment of anxiety about the erosion of the current international order. But some of the deepest threats to international order are rooted in a multiplicity of justice claims. IR’s explanatory orientation, and the many biases underlying its anchoring concepts, limit our ability as educators to make sense of those threats in the language of the discipline. How do we teach IR, then, without socializing students into a problematic discipline that only reproduces the existing order? I propose that rather than jettison our disciplinary concepts and frames with their baked-in injustices, we can reorient our teaching about them. Drawing on history and mythology, I focus on the Westphalian myth that anchors IR’s central question: Given states, how can international order be produced? I suggest another version of the myth that foregrounds how order and justice, the explanatory and the normative, are entangled all the way down. This revised Westphalian myth urges us to think of recognition of political units—a justice claim—as intrinsic to ordering decisions.

Keywords: problem of order, pedagogy, Westphalian myth, recognition