

The discourse of anarchy in IR

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Contemporary International Relations (IR) typically treats anarchy as a fundamental, defining, and analytically central feature of international relations. Furthermore, it is usually held that IR since its inception has been structured around a discourse of anarchy. In fact, however, until the 1980s anarchy was rarely employed as a central analytical concept, as I show by examining 145 books published between 1895 and 1978. The conceptual and analytic centrality of anarchy is not imposed on us by international reality. Rather, it is a recent and contingent construction. Given the shortcomings of standard uses of ‘anarchy’ – especially the facts that there is no clear, generally agreed upon definition, that ‘the effects of anarchy’ are not effects of anarchy (alone), and that anarchy is not the structural ordering principle of international systems – I argue for returning to earlier practice and putting anarchy back in the background of IR.

Keywords: anarchy; history of IR; structure

Contemporary IR typically treats anarchy as a ‘fundamental’ (Milner 1991, 67; Schmidt 1998, 1; Miller 2002, 10; Holmes 2011, 291) feature of international relations; ‘the defining characteristic of international politics’ (Krasner 1992, 48). ‘Virtually all scholars agree that relations between states are anarchic and that this is one of the most unique, important, and enduring features of world politics’ (Lake 2009, 2). It is also commonly held that ‘the field of international relations has, from its earliest years, been structured by a discourse about anarchy’ (Schmidt 1998, 41).

Actually, however, until the 1980s IR rarely employed anarchy as a central analytical concept. Part One shows that anarchy, rather than a constant and objectively necessary feature of the study of international relations, is a recent discursive construction.

Part Two argues that American IR’s construction of anarchy as both demarcating the discipline and a major structural and explanatory variable *cannot* succeed. Any definition that plausibly makes anarchy a feature of (nearly) all international systems has no interesting substantive implications. Any definition that gives ‘anarchy’ determinate effects or makes it a plausible

structural ordering principle, however, renders anarchy a feature of a subset of international systems.

Part Two shows that (American) IR uses ‘anarchy’ in multiple, shifting senses; that anarchy has no effects; and that anarchy does not structure international systems. I conclude by further explicating the idea of the construction of anarchy and arguing for putting anarchy (back) in the background of the discipline.

Part one: the construction of anarchy in contemporary IR

I begin by demonstrating a fundamental discursive transformation following the publication in 1979 of Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*.

The pattern of usage

This section lays out the evidence, looking quantitatively at more than 200 books published between 1895 and 2013; surveying the general pattern of usage before 1979; and examining six interwar books that make central reference to anarchy.

Quantitative evidence

I begin by counting occurrences of ‘anarchy’ and ‘anarchic’ in 92 books published between 1895 and 1945, 53 published between 1946 and 1978, and 62 published between 1979 and 2013.¹ Appendices 1–3, which for reasons of space are available online,² list the books and the number of occurrences per book. (Works cited in this essay – a third of the total – have the author’s name in small caps in the reference list and the number of occurrences in square brackets at the end of the entry.) Appendices 1 and 2 also quote all electronically available passages in pre-1979 books that use the terms less than 20 times, allowing interested readers access to most of the ‘raw data’ for the pre-1979 period.

Table 1 shows a striking pattern. Before 1979 the median number of uses of ‘anarchy’ or ‘anarchic’ is 2. After 1978 the median is 24. Before 1979 three-fifths of the books use ‘anarchy’ or ‘anarchic’ three or fewer times. After 1978 four-fifths use these terms 10 or more times. Moreover, the

¹ In selecting pre-1979 sources I relied primarily on Schmidt (1998), Olson and Onuf (1985), and Long and Wilson (1995). The choice of later works reflects my own judgment.

² See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

Table 1. Occurrences of ‘anarchy’ and ‘anarchic’ in selected books

	1895–1978 (N = 145)		1979–2013 (N = 62)
Average	6.9		35.5
Median	2		24
Three or fewer	60%		8%
10 or more	24%		79%
	1895–1945 (N = 92)	1946–78 (N = 53)	
Average	7.3	6.4	
Median	2	2	

pattern is essentially the same for 1895–1945 and 1946–78. A sharp transition occurs around the publication of *Theory of International Politics*.

This transition is nicely illustrated in ‘handbooks’ of the discipline. The IR volume of Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby’s (1975) *Handbook of Political Science* contains 11 occurrences of ‘anarchy’ or ‘anarchic,’ six of which are in the chapter by Waltz, with a seventh in the index (which references only pages in the Waltz chapter). The *Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons, (2002, 2013) contains 86 occurrences in both its 2002 and 2013 editions. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal’s (2008) *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* has over a hundred.

The same pattern is evident in James Dougherty and William Pfaltzgraff’s *Contending Theories of International Relations*, a well-known IR Theory textbook. The 1971 and 1981 editions use ‘anarchy’ and ‘anarchic’ five and seven times, respectively. The 1990 and 1997 editions use them 20 and 56 times.

‘Anarchy’ was not even widely employed in pre-Waltzian realism. For example, the term occurs only twice, in passing, in E. H. Carr’s (1964 [1946], 28, 162) *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, in George Kennan’s (1951, 33, 149) *American Diplomacy*, and in Henry Kissinger’s (1957, 17, 25) *A World Restored*. None of the seven editions of Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations* contains an index entry for anarchy.³ *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (1946, 117) refers once to ‘the international anarchy of our age,’ not international relations in general; *In Defense of the National Interest* (1951, 102, 103) uses the term twice, both times indicating disorder.

³ Furthermore, most of the passages in the first edition associate anarchy with disorder and violence (Morgenthau 1948, 138, 174, 210, 310, 311, 361, 378, 431).

The pattern of usage in pre-1979 IR

A quarter of my pre-1979 books do not use ‘anarchy’ or ‘anarchic’ at all. Another quarter use them only once or twice.⁴ Moreover, of those that do employ the terms, almost half (52 of 107) use the ordinary language sense of disorder in half or more of the total occurrences.⁵

This largely explains the relatively infrequent use of anarchy. As ‘anarchy’ lacked a well-established technical sense there was little reason to use it often.

In a few, usually isolated, passages anarchy is presented as a general feature of international relations.⁶ The most common ‘technical’ sense, however, indicates the external juridical consequences of state sovereignty.⁷ ‘Sovereignty was a doctrine of legal anarchy’ (Fenwick 1934, 47). ‘Juristically speaking, there exists a condition of anarchy’ (Hill 1911, 15, cf. 140). Most strikingly, Frank Russell (1936, 540) writes of ‘an “anarchy of sovereignties”’.

Sometimes, though, anarchy is presented as the condition that exists in the *absence* of a system of sovereign states. (Sovereignty is here understood to involve mutual legal recognition and restraint that puts an end to anarchic lawlessness (Hill 1911, 140, 173; Walsh 1922, 123, 221; Herz 1959, 59–60.) For example, medieval (but not modern) international relations is described as anarchic (Walsh 1922, 57; Hodges 1931, 57 [sic])—because there were no sovereign states. Some authors draw a similar distinction between the early and later modern periods (Lawrence 1898 [1895], 35; Follett 1920, 269; Potter 1922, 40, 457; 1929, xiii, 25; Potter and West 1927, 4; Hodges 1931, 48; Schuman 1933, 39; Fenwick 1934, 49, cf.; Russell 1936, 90; Earle *et al.* 1943, 33; Herz 1959, 43–44; Wright 1964 [1942], 180).

Finally, a disparate residual set of uses contrasts sharply with contemporary usage. For example, Quincy Wright argues that when defense predominates ‘international anarchy has sometimes resulted’ and that

⁴ See Appendix 4.A, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

⁵ See Appendix 4.B, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

⁶ ‘The only alternative to anarchy is government’ (Woolf 1916, 312). ‘The power which prevents anarchy in intra-group relations encourages anarchy in intergroup relations’ (Niebuhr 1932, 16). See also Lawrence 1898 [1895], 19; Hobson 1902, 174; Mackinder 1919, 6; Hicks 1920, 117; Mowat 1931, 13; Simonds and Emery 1935, 138; Sharp and Kirk 1940, 397; Burton 1965, 45–46; Osgood and Tucker 1967, 13.

⁷ In addition to the works cited in the remainder of this paragraph, see Willoughby (1896, 196), Leacock (1906, 89, 95), Mahan (1912, 2), Woolf (1916, 125), Politis (1926, 6), Mitrany (1933, 165), Simonds and Emery (1935, 28, 563), and Hinsley (1963, 326, 327). See also the sections Anarchy, states systems, and international relations and Words and concepts.

‘universal empire or anarchy has usually followed balance-of-power periods’ (1964 [1942], 63, 127, cf. Follett 1920, 307). Morton Kaplan argues that bipolar war leads to ‘a hierarchical international system if one side wins or international anarchy if both sides are exhausted. Almost any kind of system may replace this state of anarchy’ (1957, 49). Both Alfred Zimmern (1936, 40, 62) and F. H. Hinsley (1963, 220) contrast the rise of international conferences in the nineteenth century to the anarchy of the eighteenth century. Nationalism (Angell 1921, 98; Woolf 1940, 76), the will to power (Niebuhr 1932, 18), and ‘the backwardness of weak states’ (Lippmann 1915, 127, cf. 114) are presented as sources of anarchy. For Mary Parker Follett ‘anarchy means unorganized, unrelated difference’ (1920, 35, cf. 305). For Frederick Hicks ‘international anarchy ... implies absolute disrespect for law on the part of all states’ (1920, 7). Before 1979, such passages, rather than infrequent oddities, comprise a sizable portion of total uses that do not simply indicate disorder.

Earlier authors did, of course, address issues that today are considered matters of anarchy. It was uncommon, though, to view them through the lens (or as manifestations) of anarchy. Moreover, ‘anarchy,’ which had several meanings, rarely defined international relations or explained behavior in international systems in general.

Anarchy, states systems, and international relations

Six (7%) of my pre-1946 books do employ anarchy as a major explanatory variable: G. Lowes Dickinson’s *The European Anarchy* (1916) and *The International Anarchy* (1926), Frederick Schuman’s *International Politics* (1933), Philip Henry Kerr (Lord Lothian)’s *Pacifism in Not Enough* (1935), Nicholas Spykman’s *America’s Strategy in World Politics* (1942), and Edward Vose Gulick’s *The Balance of Power* (1943). (This set, fortuitously, includes two ‘idealists’ (Dickinson and Kerr), two ‘realists’ (Schuman and Spykman), and a pacifist (Gulick) who seems pulled in both directions.) Only one book, though, understands anarchy as the absence of government or a defining feature of international relations.

Dickinson, according to John Mearsheimer (2006, 234), ‘invented the concept of international anarchy’. Andreas Osiander argues that ‘whether or not [Dickinson] actually coined the term, he contributed greatly to its popularity’ (1998, 413, cf. Long 1995, 314). Dickinson also figures prominently in Brian Schmidt’s *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*, the best-known early history of the discipline.

Dickinson’s explanations of state action are regularly embedded in a system of anarchy (1917 [1916], 14, 19, 26–27, 42, 71, 73, 80, 96–98, 127–29, 136–37). He insists, even in the midst of World War I, that although Germany

bears considerable responsibility for the outbreak of fighting ‘the real culprit was the European anarchy’ (1917 [1916], 101, cf. 144; 1926, 325, 471). Most strikingly, Dickinson argues that ‘whenever and wherever the anarchy of armed states exists, war does become inevitable’ (1926, v).

His aim, however, is to analyze the ‘general situation’ that results from ‘the juxtaposition of a number of states, independent and armed. This was the condition of civilization in the three periods of European history that are most studied – ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, and modern Europe; and *under that condition* war is not an accident’ (Dickinson 1926, 3–4, emphasis added). Dickinson, in other words, addresses not international relations in general but states systems.

More particularly, Dickinson’s topic is ‘the European anarchy’ that produced World War I.⁸ His book by that name begins ‘in the great and tragic history of Europe there is a turning-point that marks ... the definite acceptance of international anarchy. That turning-point is the emergence of the sovereign State at the end of the fifteenth century’ (1917 [1916], 13). In the final sentence, he concludes that ‘the European anarchy is the real cause of European wars’ (1917 [1916], 144).

Furthermore, ‘the international anarchy’ for Dickinson includes much more than sovereign states interacting in the absence of overarching law and authority.

States armed, and therefore a menace to one another; policies ostensibly defensive but really just as much offensive; these policies pursued in the dark by a few men who, because they act secretly, cannot act honestly; and this whole complex playing upon primitive passions, arousable at any moment by appropriate appeals from a Press which has no object except to make money out of the weakness of men – that is the real situation of the world under the conditions of international anarchy (Dickinson 1926, 47, cf. Dickinson 1920, 17, 34–36, 49–52, 63–81, 82).

‘The international anarchy’ identifies a particularly perverse, historically contingent form of power politics. ‘What was wrong? Germany? England? No. The European tradition and system’ (Dickinson 1917 [1916], 78).

This thick definition of anarchy also explains Dickinson’s (to our ears awkward) use of the definite article in both the titles and the text of his books. He addresses not international anarchy (in general) but the (very particular) ‘international anarchy’ of his time.

⁸ Even the apparently more general *The International Anarchy* is largely an expanded version of *The European Anarchy*. It is subtitled 1904–1914 and identifies ‘the special subject of this book’ as ‘the series of events and situations which led up to the Great War’ (Dickinson 1926, 3).

Schuman, Spykman, and Gulick also address systems of sovereign states – and the modern western states system in particular.

Schuman argues that ‘if anarchy involves the absence of government, the pursuit by each of his own ends, and the use of violence in the service of such ends, then the practice of international politics can indeed be described accurately as “international anarchy”’ (1933, 514). This passage, however, concludes a paragraph that addresses ‘Sovereign States’ interacting in ‘a State System’ (1933, 514).

For Schuman, state sovereignty, not anarchy, defines modern international relations. ‘The sovereignty of the territorial State remains in the twentieth century, as in the sixteenth, ... the most characteristic feature of the entire Western State System’ (1933, 53, cf. 502). ‘The concept of State sovereignty, the principles of international law, and the politics of the balance of power may be regarded as the three cornerstones upon which the Western State System has come to rest’ (1933, 49, cf. 52).

Furthermore, as these passages suggest, Schuman’s subject is not international relations in general but the Western state system. (The book’s subtitle is *An Introduction to the Western State System*.) He addresses ‘western civilization and the systems of international politics which that civilization has developed’ (1933, 536), aiming ‘to describe the Western State System realistically and objectively in terms of its cultural origins, its institutionalized forms, its dynamic forces, and its apparent prospects’ (1933, xiii, cf. 831).

In Spykman’s *America’s Strategy in World Politics*, a number of passages do sound strikingly similar to Waltz. ‘The international community is without government, without a central authority to preserve law and order’ (1942, 446, cf. xiii, 7, 18). ‘The so-called sovereign independence of states, the absence of higher authority, and the freedom from external restraints ... give to interstate relations their peculiar character of anarchy’ (1942, 16).

This last passage, however, continues ‘This historical state system consisting of sovereign independent units ...’ (Spykman 1942, 16). Spykman, like Schuman and Dickinson, sees anarchy as characteristic of a particular contingent configuration. ‘War is unpleasant, but it is an inherent part of *state systems composed of sovereign independent units*’ (Spykman 1942, 25).

Gulick similarly argues that international anarchy, understood as ‘the absence of any over-all authority,’ is the ‘central’ and ‘outstanding characteristic’ of ‘the system of sovereign, independent states’ (1943, 12, 34, 38). He addresses not international relations in general but ‘an anarchic system of sovereign, independent states’ (1943, 55). *This* type of international system is characterized by balance of power politics, which is the particular subject of Gulick’s book. ‘The ancient Chinese had a taste of

it, as well as early middle-eastern State-systems, the Greek City States, and others. Moreover, it has been consciously applied by European statesmen for the last four hundred or more years' (Gulick 1943, 1, cf. 11–12, 14, 15). In the eras of Rome, Charlemagne, and the Holy Roman Empire, however, 'the absence of a State-system meant the absence of the Balance of Power' (Gulick 1943, 14).

Lord Lothian's *Pacifism is Not Enough* is the one book in my pre-1946 sample that uses 'anarchy' very much like contemporary IR does. Lord Lothian speaks repeatedly of the 'anarchy of sovereign states' (Kerr 1935, 13, 16, 23) and the anarchy 'inherent in state sovereignty' (Kerr 1935, 14, 37, 47–48). Moreover, unlike most others in early IR, he neither understands sovereignty and states as juridical concepts nor considers states systems to be historically contingent constructions. By 'state' Lord Lothian means, roughly, polity and by 'sovereignty' statehood (Kerr 1935, 8ff.). Furthermore, like Waltz, he sees anarchy and government as binary terms that exhaust the range of political possibilities (Kerr 1935, 40–42).

Lord Lothian, however, in sharp contrast to contemporary IR, emphasizes the connection of anarchy with war, lawlessness, and disorder (Kerr 1935, 8, 10, 11, 18, 23, 24, 26, 34–35, 37–38, 41, 48–49). The term, in fact, seems chosen precisely for its negative connotations. For Lord Lothian anarchy *arises from* the absence of international government but *means* avertible violent disorder.

The rise of a discourse of anarchy

'Anarchy,' of course, did not spring, full-grown, from the head of Waltz in 1979. Important precursors in my sample include Martin Wight's *Power Politics* (1946), Waltz's *Man, the State and War* (1959), Herbert Butterfield and Wight's edited volume *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966), and, at the very end of the period, Robert Jervis' *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976) and Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (1977).

These precursors point to the sources of contemporary IR's discourse of anarchy: Waltz, social-scientific rationalism, and the English School. What follows tells (only) the American side of the story, partly for reasons of space but also because of the rapid embrace and continuing predominance of a particular discourse of anarchy in American IR.

Waltz's role was decisive. *Man, the State, and War* laid the foundation for placing 'anarchy' at the heart of structural theory. His 1975 *Handbook* article which was well known at the time, outlined the argument of (and created considerable anticipation for) *Theory of International Politics* – the impact of which would be hard to overestimate.

Three elements seem to me to go a long way in explaining American IR's embrace of Waltz. He endorsed a vision of social-scientific theory that was in the early stages of establishing its hegemony in the mainstream of the American discipline. (The first chapter of *Theory of International Politics* lays out his conception of theory. A later essay is pointedly titled 'Realist Thought and Neo-Realist Theory' (Waltz 1990).) Waltz aspired to general theory; theory of *international politics* (in general). Furthermore – and I think decisively – he employed anarchy at the heart of a seemingly elegant and powerful substantive theory (structural realism) that appeared to explain some important features of international systems (states in anarchy balance and pursue relative gains). That this theory breathed new life into realism and systems approaches probably was also significant.

Rational choice analysis more or less simultaneously picked up on anarchy,⁹ especially in the wake of Robert Axelrod's work on the prisoner's dilemma (1981, 1984, cf. Gowa 1986). The October 1985 Special Issue of *World Politics*, published in 1986 as *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Oye 1986), placed the fusion of anarchy and rationalism at the heart of the American discipline.¹⁰ It also can be seen to mark the adoption by neo-liberal institutionalism (the other leading substantive research program of the era) of the Waltzian account of the anarchic structure of international relations.¹¹ The publication in 1986 of *Neorealism and Its Critics* (Keohane 1986) signaled a reorientation of American IR Theory around a Waltzian discourse of anarchy.

The spread of anarchy was also facilitated by the fact that Waltz presented it not as a substantive assumption of neorealism but as an analytically neutral demarcation criterion. 'Anarchy' quickly replaced 'politics among nations' as the defining feature of international relations – and was almost unthinkingly accepted as the structural ordering principle of international systems.

We can chart these changes in the spread of the language of 'the effects of anarchy.' A Google Scholar search for 'effects of anarchy' or 'effects

⁹ Taylor (1976) was influential, explicitly linking anarchy to the question of cooperation (although not in an international context). Snyder and Diesing (1977) was an important early application of game theory to IR. (It is not included in my sample because I cannot find an electronic edition.) See also Young (1978).

¹⁰ Earlier 'scientific' IR, I would suggest, did not adopt anarchy because it is not operationalizable in any way that leads to substantively interesting conclusions. Moreover, if anarchy really is a feature of all international systems, it is correlated with *any* pattern that one finds in any set of international systems – making it an inappropriate explanatory variable for correlational methodologies. Only in a rationalist nomological-deductive conception of social science does anarchy become an attractive master explanatory variable.

¹¹ For example, Keohane and Nye (1987, 745) explicitly adopt 'the neorealist sense' of structure. A decade earlier, though, in the book that this article updates (Keohane and Nye, 1977), they do not use 'anarchy' or 'anarchic.'

of international anarchy' and 'international relations' yields only three insignificant results from 1900 to 1974.¹² There is one result for 1975–79: Jervis's influential article 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma' (1978, 173).¹³ In the 1980s, 'effects of (international) anarchy' appears in seven works, including major articles by John Ruggie (1983, 284), Harrison Wagner (1983, 385), Michael Doyle (1983, 232), and Joseph Grieco (1988, 502).¹⁴ In the 1990s, however, there were almost 100 results; almost 250 in the 2000s; and more than 200 for 2010–15.

Many early constructivists, being focused on other issues, left Waltz's anarchy-centric conception of international relations unchallenged even as they rejected his neorealist account of the effects of anarchy. For example, Friedrich Kratochwil, whose *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* was a major early constructivist work, limits his criticism to the idea that anarchy implies the absence of norms (1989, Ch. 2). Even Alexander Wendt's classic 1992 article 'Anarchy is What States Make of It,' while emphasizing the variety of types of anarchy, leaves anarchy's central place untouched.¹⁵

By the mid-1990s, anarchy had become 'naturalized' across much of the discipline; treated as a taken-for-granted foundational assumption. Neorealism and neoliberalism, the leading research programs of the era, even incorporated anarchy into their 'hard core' that no contrary evidence or argument can be permitted to challenge (Elman and Elman 2003, x, 19, 25–27, 61–62, 73, 75, 80).¹⁶

Words and concepts

One might argue that I have focused on the word 'anarchy' but ignored 'the concept.' I am suspicious of the underlying account of the relationship

¹² Two are works in IR: Duggan (1919, 27) ('here and there some voice was raised against the almost intolerable effects of anarchy') and Lijphart (1974, 52) (Woodrow Wilson 'feared the effects of international anarchy even among democracies'). The third is in a history of the growth of the United States.

¹³ In addition, Jervis' *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* is the first book that I can find by an American author other than Waltz that makes central use of 'anarchy' in the Waltzian sense (1976, 20, 62, 63, 67, 68, 75, 76, 83, 273, 340). In private correspondence, Jervis recalls first encountering anarchy through the teaching of Glenn Snyder at Berkeley (who was strongly influenced by Waltz, who had not yet moved to Berkeley).

¹⁴ The other references are in Murphy (1983), Snyder (1988), and a law review article on Grenada and Realpolitik.

¹⁵ There were, of course, exceptions. Ashley (1988) is perhaps the leading example. See also Onuf (1989, Ch. 5) and Walker (1993, 33–43, 63–74, 150–52, 172–76).

¹⁶ Andrew Moravcsik (2003, 190) goes so far as to argue that anarchy is part of the 'hard core' of 'nearly all major IR theories.'

between words and concepts, which seems to suggest that anarchy is an 'objective' 'thing' 'out there' to which a variety of labels can be more or less arbitrarily attached.¹⁷ Nonetheless, this argument merits attention. (Readers convinced by the argument above, however, might want to skip to the subsection A discourse of sovereignty (not anarchy).)

Searching (electronically) for the concept of anarchy

We can begin with a modified version of the search strategy used above. In my pre-1979 books for which electronic full text is available,¹⁸ I searched for 'absence' and 'government,' separately (to capture references to lack of government that did not use the word 'absence'). To avoid an overly narrow focus on the word 'government,' I also searched for 'central authority' and 'higher authority.' Based on my reading of early works that did refer to anarchy, I looked as well for 'sovereign,' 'sovereignty,' and 'state.' Finally, on hunches, I searched for 'state of nature,' 'lawless,' and 'lawlessness.'

This procedure, for all its limitations, should reveal any substantial discourse of anarchy. The broad sweep of these searches, though, makes simple counts of little interest. I can thus report only my qualitative assessment of the relevant results.

In books that do not make significant use of 'anarchy,' searches for absence, government, and central or higher authority produced only scattered references with uses even close to those of contemporary IR (see, e.g., Lawrence 1898 [1895], 159; Leacock 1906, 103, 104). Conversely, books that do make significant reference to anarchy produced numerous hits (e.g., Spykman 1942, 16, 18, 446; Gulick 1943, 6, 12; Wight 1978 [1946], 101, 105, 184; Waltz 1959, 5, 11, 35, 96, 188; Bull 1977, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 57, 59, 62, 69, 110, 125, 126, 129, 182). This strongly suggests that the concept of anarchy was not regularly referenced independent of the word.

Arguments for the necessity or possibility of international government were fairly common.¹⁹ This, however, is no more evidence of a discourse of

¹⁷ Cf. the section Anarchy as a constructed concept.

¹⁸ This includes only a little more than a third (52 of 145) of these books, two-thirds of which were published before 1923. (For the books in this subsample, see Appendix 4.C.) I cannot see, though, that any systematic bias is introduced. If anything, one would expect better-known books to be overrepresented. And I know of no argument that usage changed significantly anywhere between 1923 and 1978.

¹⁹ In addition to the passages in the following paragraph, see Trueblood (1899, 3, 125, 126, 130, 135, 137), Lippmann (1915, 129–30, 142–45, 185, 187), Hicks (1920, 117), and Kerr (1935).

anarchy than talk about the possibility or desirability of peace is a discourse of war. Such arguments treat anarchy not as defining international relations but as a contingent and alterable feature of some international systems. Moreover, they focus not on the absence of government but on the possibilities of establishing its presence.

Furthermore, several authors argue that twentieth century international relations is characterized by the *presence* of international government (Trueblood 1899, 138, 142; Hobson 1915; Lippmann 1915, 130–31, 145; Woolf 1916, 141–43, 149, 153–55, 267, 312; Smuts 1918; Potter 1922, 12–14, 23, 269, 369, 381; Mitrany 1933). As Schuman puts it, ‘the net result of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the emergence and development of habits and institutions of cooperation between States to which it is now customary to apply the terms “international organization” or “international government”’ (1933, 231). A significant portion of the discipline – including realists like Schuman – denied the ‘fact’ of anarchy.²⁰

The other searches likewise provided no significant evidence of a concept of anarchy expressed in other terms. (I was surprised to find almost no references to absence of a sovereign. Moreover, ‘state of nature,’ which is used with moderate frequency in discussions of origins and theories of the state, rarely has the sense that international anarchy does in contemporary IR.²¹) As it seems highly unlikely that other words were used but not my search terms, I conclude that anarchy was not an analytically central concept in pre-Waltzian IR.

An early political discourse of anarchy?

A critical examination of Schmidt’s *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*, a leading example of the argument of continuity, suggests the same conclusion. Schmidt insists that ‘the concept of anarchy employed in this book is not an externally or retrospectively imposed theme ... but instead represents an indigenous construct around which discussions about the subject matter of international relations have continuously evolved’ (1998, 1–2, cf. 16). However, in the three principal chapters, which cover more than a hundred pages, Schmidt quotes only eight passages from authors other than Dickinson that employ the language of anarchy (1998, 94, 113, 172, 182, 186, 204, 208, 210). He thus must be implicitly advancing a concept-without-the-word argument.

Characteristic of Schmidt’s account are his claims that Stephen ‘Leacock articulated the theoretical limits of the concept of sovereignty for examining

²⁰ See footnote 31 for a more precise formulation of this point.

²¹ Raymond Aron (2003 [1966], especially 339) is the principal exception.

the external relations of states and, in doing so, outlined one of the main props of the political discourse of anarchy' and that Westel Woodbury Willoughby's 'reference to the international milieu as being analogous to a state of nature is a major component of the political discourse of anarchy' (Schmidt 1998, 84, 90). As Schmidt's further discussions indicate, though, Leacock and Willoughby actually address sovereignty, independence, authority, the state, and the state of nature – which have common meanings and uses entirely independent of anarchy. However, Schmidt presents no evidence that Leacock and Willoughby understood these notions in terms of anarchy. And, a look at their books indicates that they did not.²²

Willoughby examines the nature of the state, addressing international relations only briefly, near the end of the book (1896, 404–06ff.).²³ Moreover, his discussion does not even note the absence of international government (or any other marker of 'anarchy'). Quite the contrary, Willoughby begins by claiming that 'the most obvious fact is the increasing inter-nationality of interests that attends advancing civilization.' He then goes on to argue that 'the principles of international conduct that are generally accepted by all civilized peoples already constitute a very considerable body of procedure' and 'in many cases common administrative procedures have been established' (1896, 404).

Leacock does devote a chapter to 'Relation [sic] of States to One Another.' It begins by noting that 'theoretical isolation is the prime condition of [a state's] existence as a state' and that 'viewed in a purely theoretical light, every state is an absolutely independent unit. Its sovereignty is unlimited, and it renders political obedience to no outside authority' (Leacock 1906, 89). Immediately, though, Leacock goes on to argue that 'it is nevertheless the case that in actual fact different states stand in close contact with one another in a variety of ways ... [that] bring separate states into permanent relations demanding some sort of regulation' and that 'the action of modern states shows an increasing tendency to conform to a generally recognized usage' (1906, 89). Moreover, Leacock presents Westphalia as putting an end to 'the anarchy of the state of nature' to which 'the savagery of the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' had reduced Europe (1906, 93).

For both Leacock and Willoughby the absence of an international government serves as a background condition that sets a context for

²² Each uses 'anarchy' or 'anarchic' six times, always to indicate disorder (except for two passages in Willoughby that reference anarchism) (Willoughby 1896, 71, 85, 90, 318, 320, 340; Leacock 1906, 93, 101, 112, 114–15, 289, 374).

²³ The word 'international' appears less than 30 times in more than 400 pages, usually in reference to international law.

analyses that focus on the presence of international governance. A discourse of anarchy is Schmidt's anachronistic imposition.

A discourse of sovereignty (not anarchy)

Schmidt does demonstrate that 'the most important theme that structured the early study of political science can be termed the *theoretical discourse of the state*' and that 'of all the issues that the theoretical discourse of the state encompassed, none was more weighty than the concept of sovereignty' (1998, 44, emphasis in original, 30). His further argument, though, that 'since state sovereignty is the constitutive principle of international anarchy,²⁴ the theoretical discourse of the state was also tacitly laying the groundwork for the political discourse of anarchy' (1998, 45) both misrepresents early IR and elides important differences between anarchy and sovereignty.

As we saw above, several early scholars did closely associate sovereignty with anarchy (Hill 1911, 15, cf. 140; Fenwick 1934, 47).²⁵ Others, though, saw sovereignty as *ending* anarchy, making 'anarchic systems' and 'systems of sovereign states' opposites. Both ancient (Walsh 1922, 57; Hodges 1931, 57 [sic]) and medieval (Potter 1922, 40, 457; 1929, xiii, 25; Potter and West 1927, 4; Hodges 1931, 48; Russell 1936, 90; Schuman 1933, 39; Wright 1964 [1942], 180; Herz 1959, 43–44, cf. Follett 1920, 269) international relations, *in contrast to modern international relations*, are presented as anarchic. T. J. Lawrence and Charles Fenwick, in addition to Leacock, see the Peace of Westphalia putting an end to (rather than codifying) anarchy (Lawrence 1898 [1895], 35; Fenwick 1934, 49, cf. Earle *et al.* 1943, 33). Wright sees the anarchy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries replaced by state sovereignty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1964 [1942], 191–92). John Herz opposes sovereignty, which provides 'agreed upon standards and rules,' to 'real "anarchy"' (1959, 59–60). Schuman fears that 'Fascist nationalism ... would return with a vengeance to the conditions of international anarchy' (1933, 293) by eliminating the constraints and protections of sovereign statehood. Moreover, the substantial majority of my pre-1979 authors, it must be remembered, offer no evidence that they saw any analytically significant connection between anarchy and sovereignty.

²⁴ Note that this is *not* the standard Waltzian understanding. (Absence of either international government or hierarchy has many sources in addition to the presence of state/national sovereignty.)

²⁵ See footnote 9 and the section Anarchy, states systems, and international relations.

Schmidt replaces a particular account in terms of sovereignty – and in which there was no consensus on the relation between sovereignty and anarchy – with a general and discipline-wide account in terms of anarchy. However, as Schmidt (rightly) notes, ‘the concept of anarchy is more a function of internal disciplinary debate than a self-referential empirical fact of the external world’ (1998, 231). How we refer to ‘things’ like the absence of an international government – the terms of discourse – matter, sometimes decisively. And, the terms in early IR were sovereignty and the state, not anarchy.

Finally, to the extent that anarchy is a consequence of sovereignty, it is neither a defining feature of international relations nor of any real analytic significance. (Any ‘effects of anarchy’ are reducible to effects of sovereignty.) The discourse of sovereignty thus further explains the absence of an early discourse of anarchy.

Part two: the false promise of anarchy

So what? Disciplinary history may be interesting. Certainly, though, the crucial question is whether IR’s turn to anarchy has been analytically fruitful.

I argue that it has not.

The transformation of American IR involved much more than introducing the word ‘anarchy’ to refer to the absence of an international government. Anarchy became a demarcation criterion, a master explanatory variable, and the structural ordering principle of international systems. Contemporary (American) IR claims that anarchy both identifies and structures international systems and explains some fundamental features of their functioning. The following three sections challenge these claims.

Defining anarchy

Most in IR today, I suspect, would agree with David Lake that ‘scholars of international relations do not differ in their conception of anarchy’ (2009, 2). This is suggested by the fact that in many (perhaps even most) uses, the term is not defined or glossed,²⁶ its sense being taken to be obvious. In fact, however, there is deep definitional disarray, both in Waltz and in the discipline generally.

²⁶ For example, of the 35 articles published in *International Organization* between 2000 and 2012 that use (international) ‘anarchy,’ only two (Snyder 2002, 7; Donnelly 2012, 620) define it explicitly. Similarly, only 1 of 29 articles in *International Security* between 2000 and 2012 (Taliaferro 2000–2001, 128) defines (international) ‘anarchy.’ More broadly, in August 2013 I searched Google Scholar for ‘anarchy’ and ‘international relations’ and then examined the first, eighth, and fifteenth sources on the first seven pages of results. 12 of the 21 works in this sample used ‘anarchy’ with no definition or explication of any sort.

Waltz, government, and hierarchy

Waltz, in the first paragraph of the subsection on ‘Ordering Principles’ in Chapter 5 (Political Structures) of *Theory of International Politics*, writes: ‘Domestic political structures have governmental institutions and offices as their concrete counterparts. International politics, in contrast, has been called “politics in the absence of government”’ (1979, 88). He then asks ‘if international politics is “politics in the absence of government,” what are we in the presence of?’ (1979, 89). The answer, of course, is anarchy.

In the remainder of the chapter, however, Waltz opposes anarchy not to government but to hierarchy (1979, 93, 97, 100, 101). Similarly, in Chapter 6 (Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power) he begins by speaking of ‘anarchy, or the absence of government’ and ‘the distinction between anarchy and government’ (1979, 102, 103). After that, though, Waltz contrasts anarchy to hierarchy nearly a dozen times (1979, 104, 113, 114 [twice], 115 [five times], 116 [twice]). Absence of government makes only one additional appearance (Waltz 1979, 114) – at the beginning of the subsection on ‘Anarchy and Hierarchy.’

The obvious problem – although a problem that is widely overlooked – is that hierarchy and government are very different things. (For example, government is only one possible source or form of hierarchy.) All international systems may lack government. Most, however, have hierarchy (e.g., Hobson and Sharman 2005; Donnelly 2006; 2009, 55–71; 2012, 622–23; Lake 2009; Hobson 2014), in the sense of a stratified system of differentiated social positions arranged ‘in relations of super – and subordination’ (Waltz 1979, 88). For example, great power states systems are *defined* by the formal hierarchical superiority of states over nonstate actors and the (at least informal) rights, liberties, and responsibilities of great powers.

Waltz was an extraordinarily careful writer, with a strong aspiration to (and a considerable reputation for) analytical rigor. The explanation for this systematic conceptual slippage, I want to suggest, is that it is required by the Waltzian project of theory of international politics.²⁷

Waltz aimed to reveal ‘a small number of big and important things’ (1986, 329) about international systems. To do so on the basis of anarchy, anarchy must be both a demarcation criterion (allowing him to speak about international systems in general) and a major explanatory variable

²⁷ Without overstating the point, it seems to me important to highlight the systematic nature of this slippage. Waltz defines international relations in terms of absence of government. He explains international behavior, however, by absence of hierarchy. I am suggesting that this reflects neither conscious dissimulation nor accident but is an unintended consequence of a particular theoretical orientation and project, facilitated by the ambiguity of the word ‘anarchy.’

(allowing him to say some big and important things). Any particular definition, however, can fulfill (at most) one of these roles.

Anarchy plausibly demarcates international relations only if defined as absence of a government (or a comparable institution). This, however, has few if any interesting implications. (For example, a system without a government may or may not have higher authority, rules, or enforcement and may or may not generate self-help balancing and the pursuit of relative gains.) Conversely, although various other absences have analytical bite – for example, systems without hierarchy do have very particular characters – they comprise only a subset of international systems. Waltz seems to have been deceived by the word ‘anarchy’ into believing that he could have it both ways.

In criticizing other arguments, Waltz complains that ‘anarchy is taken to mean not just the absence of government but also the presence of disorder and chaos’ (1979, 114). He, however, takes anarchy to mean not just the absence of government but also as the absence of hierarchy. And by failing to appreciate that absence of government and absence of hierarchy identify very different sets of ‘anarchic’ systems, Waltz illegitimately extends substantive conclusions about systems without hierarchy, which are rare, to systems without government (i.e., international systems in general).²⁸ This conceptual and analytical blunder, it seems to me, would be inconceivable were it not obscured by ‘anarchy.’

Waltz’s account, it is important to emphasize, is *not* an ‘ideal type’ in the Weberian sense of an analyst-created model that may (or may not) be more or less closely approximated in the world. Waltz claims not that some international systems resemble this model. (Anarchy thus understood would be a feature of a subset of international systems, not international systems in general – which Waltz insists is his referent.) He really does argue that, as a first approximation, (nearly all) international systems *do* lack not only government but also hierarchy.

This, however, is not even close to true – as Waltz himself acknowledges. ‘Inequality is what much of politics is about’ and ‘internationally, inequality is more nearly the whole of the political story’ (Waltz 1979, 142, 143). ‘The inequality of nations is ... the dominant political fact of international life’ (Waltz 1979, 144). I can think of no more striking example of the unfortunate impact of anarchy on contemporary IR. The core concept of the discipline has been constructed in such a way that it not merely ignores but denies the existence of what its leading proponent calls the dominant political fact of international life.

²⁸ For example, although systems without hierarchy may be ‘horizontal, decentralized, homogeneous, undirected, and mutually adaptive’ (Waltz 1979, 113) this is not true of (all) systems without a government (e.g., great power and hegemonic systems, cf. footnote 44).

Anarchy over 'anarchy'

Waltz, however, is just the tip of the iceberg of conflicting definitions. Appendix 5, available online,²⁹ identifies 20 definitions of anarchy, each documented by five citations (most from the past two decades).

Most of these definitions, which focus on the absence of various types and sources of authority, differ from many others only in minor ways. As a set, though, they cover a *very* wide range of senses. They fall into three broad groups that, with a bit of mnemonic license, I label absence of a ruler, absence of rule, and absence of rules.

Absence-of-a-ruler definitions identify an authoritative *institution or actor* that is missing in international systems. Standard examples are a central, higher, common, or overarching authority, an enforcer (of rules or agreements), and a sovereign.³⁰ Absence of a government also falls here.

Absence-of-rule definitions identify a missing *function or kind of authority*. Common examples are enforcement and higher, overarching, central, common, superior, and superordinate authority.

Absence of an institution (a ruler), however, does not entail the absence of 'rule;' that is, the absence of either a function characteristically performed or a type of authority characteristically held by that institution. For example, government is but one possible source of any of these kinds of authority and only one mechanism to provide enforcement.³¹

Finally, anarchy is also regularly defined as the absence of 'rules;' of authority *simpliciter*. For example, Lake claims that 'the core assumption of the discipline of international relations is that the international system is anarchic or devoid of authority' (Lake 2009, ix). Stephen Krasner contends that 'the defining characteristic of international politics is anarchy, the absence of authority' (1992, 48).³² Waltz's absence of hierarchy also falls here.³³

²⁹ See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

³⁰ Citations for these senses – and those in the following paragraphs – are in Appendix 5, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

³¹ We can now more precisely formulate the claim above (at footnote 20) that early-twentieth-century international relations was characterized by international government rather than anarchy. There was government, understood as a function – governance, as we would say today – despite the absence of a single hierarchical governmental authority (a government). There was rule without a ruler.

³² Cf. Katzenstein *et al.*, 1999, 658; Inoguchi and Bacon 2001, 5; Hoddie and Hartzell 2005, 22; Lentner 2006, 103; Holmes 2011, 291; Vucetic 2011, 29; Polat 2012, 1.

³³ This sense is also present in early IR where anarchy (understood as the absence of rules) is contrasted to sovereignty (which involves at least rules, and perhaps also rule, even in the absence of a ruler). See the second paragraph of the section 'A discourse of sovereignty (not anarchy)' (above).

These are not relatively minor differences of detail (on the level of, e.g., the fact that higher or superior authority need be neither supreme (or sovereign) nor centralized). Absence of an authority of a particular type (a ruler), absence of a particular type of authority (rule), and absence of all authority (rules) – like absence of government and absence of hierarchy – are fundamentally different notions. (Different concepts are expressed by the same word.)

Furthermore, as we move from a ruler to rule to rules, the scope of ‘anarchy’ constricts, dramatically. All international systems lack a government. Few, if any, lack (any/all) authority. Moreover, neither absence of rule nor absence of rules provides a plausible demarcation criterion.

This multiplicity of definitions seems to be driven by the desire, shared with Waltz, of using anarchy both to define the discipline and serve as a major explanatory variable – which is possible only by switching between absence of a ruler and absence of rule or rules. In any case, all of these definitions are standard in contemporary IR. The differences between them are regularly elided or ignored. And, it is distressingly common to generalize claims that rely (explicitly or implicitly) on the absence rule or rules to ‘international relations’ defined by the absence of a government.³⁴ In addition, although this problem has been well known for decades³⁵ it persists, largely unaddressed (as Appendix 5 illustrates). The ‘naturalization’ of anarchy – its unthinking acceptance as an obvious and essential feature of international relations³⁶ – has allowed us to blithely ignore the confusion at the conceptual core of the discipline.

We should also note that this proliferation of definitions – in particular, adding the ‘thick’ senses of absence of rule and rules to the ‘thin’ sense of absence of a ruler – is substantively biased toward ‘realist’ accounts (which minimize the international significance of rule and rules). Moreover, despite protestations that disorder, lawlessness, and violence are not what ‘anarchy’ means in IR – if that is true, why don’t we just talk about the

³⁴ See, for example, the passages in the third paragraph of the next section.

³⁵ For example, Helen Milner’s classic article ‘The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory’ gave considerable attention (1991, 71–74) to the difference between absence of government and absence of authority.

³⁶ For example, an anonymous reader of an earlier draft wrote that ‘anarchy is understood by many as being a system in which states interact within a structure that is defined by rules and institutions that are weak in their behavioral effects.’ The logic would appear to be: international relations is anarchic; *this* is how international relations typically is structured; therefore, anarchy means this. However, of course, it does not (which is why almost all accounts say it means something else, even when this is the kind of international system intended to be referenced by anarchy).

absence of an international government, a much clearer and more precise notion? – these ordinary language connotations are almost inescapable. As Inis Claude puts it ‘anarchy is a symbol of peril – the peril of uncontrollable disorder’ (1962, 212).³⁷

Anarchy has no effects

All of this might still be tolerable if anarchy in some sense(s) had more or less determinate effects in most international systems. In the 1980s it seemed that it did. Rationalist modeling, however, soon demonstrated that anarchy has no effects.³⁸

Formal analysis revealed that rational actors in a world without government do not necessarily pursue relative gains – and that even those that do often rationally cooperate (e.g., Powell 1991, 1993; Snidal 1991a, b). Informally, Wendt (1992) showed that self-help balancing and the pursuit of relative gains are not effects of anarchy (absence of government) but of a particular type of international system that happens to be anarchic. By the mid-1990s it was clear, as Robert Powell (1994, 314) put it, that ‘what have often been taken to be the implications of anarchy do not really follow from the assumption of anarchy. Rather, *these implications result from other implicit and unarticulated assumptions about the states’ strategic environment*’.³⁹

If anarchy means absence of a government – the only sense in which it applies across the whole of international relations – it simply is not true that ‘self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order’ (Waltz 1979, 111, cf. Mears 1988, 456; Walt 2002, 135; Copeland 2006 [2000], 9); that ‘little can be done to ameliorate the security dilemma as long as states operate in anarchy’ (Mearsheimer 2001, 36, cf. Schweller and Wohlforth 2002, 72); or that ‘the systemic imperatives of anarchy require states to view their gains and losses in relative, not absolute, terms’ (Copeland 2003, 434–35). Such claims can be charitably dismissed as rhetorical exaggerations. It remains standard, though, to identify such ‘effects of anarchy’ but to acknowledge that outcomes may be altered by ‘intervening variables.’

³⁷ These misleading connotations are further encouraged by analogies to the Hobbesian state of nature (which I criticize in the sixth and seventh paragraphs of the section Anarchy as a constructed concept).

³⁸ The following paragraphs, for reasons of space, often assert (or cite to) claims that ought to be argued.

³⁹ For a particularly spirited refrain, see Wagner (2007, 16–18, 21–29).

Anarchy, in this reading, pushes states in certain directions. The *effects* of anarchy are universal. *Outcomes*, however, vary depending on anarchy's relative causal efficacy. As Waltz puts it, the predictions of a structural theory are 'indeterminate,' in the sense that 'the outcome is indeterminate' (1979, 124, 134).

Determinate effects can be deduced, though, only by adding something to the absence of a government. The purported 'effects of anarchy' thus actually are effects of (anarchy and) something else. And those effects vary, considerably, with the 'something else' in question.⁴⁰ Similarly, if 'anarchy' means absence of rule or rules, that additional absence, not absence of a government (a ruler), does the explanatory work.

Anarchy *understood as a general feature of international relations* is not an independent variable with uniform effects (that may or may not be mitigated or overcome). It is an interactive and contextual variable associated with multiple equilibria. The effects of anarchy, not just its outcomes, vary – often dramatically.

The Waltzian project of employing anarchy as a master explanatory variable has failed. Anarchy provides no significant analytical payoff *for the discipline as a whole*.⁴¹ Therefore, there is no good reason to give a prominent place to a technical term of art that not only is readily subject to misunderstanding but is regularly and systematically used in shifting (and substantively biased) senses.

Anarchy and structure

Even Waltz's critics usually accept that anarchy structures international systems. It does not.

Anarchy is not the ordering principle of international systems. Absence of an international government (or a comparable institution) is not an ordering principle. (It simply indicates one way in which the system is *not* ordered.) Absence of hierarchy may be an ordering principle. It is not, however, the ordering principle *of international systems*. (Most international systems

⁴⁰ For example, simple immediate-return forager societies, composed of equal, functionally undifferentiated, and equally armed individuals and bands that confront each other in the absence of government and hierarchy, are warless societies that neither practice self-help balancing nor pursue relative gains but employ a security strategy that I call binding through sharing (Donnelly 2012, 610–16).

⁴¹ My argument, however, says nothing about structural realism (or any other substantive theory that employs a thick sense of anarchy or supplements absence of a government with other features) – as long as it is understood as a model or theory of a particular type of international system.

are hierarchical.) And the other absences noted above all run up against one or the other of these fatal problems.

The Waltzian account confuses demarcation and structure. Consider a biological analogy. Mammals can be demarcated from other vertebrates as milk-producing animals with hair, three bones in the middle ear, a neocortex, and a lower jaw made of a single bone. These features, however, do not define the structure of mammals. That A differs structurally from B by *c* does not make *c* the structure of A. Demarcation criteria and structural ‘ordering principles’ are very different things.

Equally problematic is the idea that all international systems have a single ordering principle; that they are all structured (arranged) in fundamentally the same way. This is no more true of international systems than national political systems, societies, or economies. Once we stop pretending that the absence of a government structures (arranges or orders rather than defines) international systems, their diverse structures become evident.⁴²

Even the idea that each international system has a single ordering principle reflects little more than aesthetic prejudice. There was no single ordering principle in, for example, the Mediterranean system in the third and second centuries BCE or the European system of the thirteenth and fourteenth (or the sixteenth and early seventeenth) centuries – or in today’s globalizing world. Multidimensional, ‘hybrid,’ and *sui generis* systems are normal features of international relations.

Waltz, it seems to me, was right to try to specify a small number of elements that characteristically structure international systems. Anarchy, however, is woefully inadequate to that task.⁴³

An anarchy-centric conception of structure focuses attention on something that tells us nothing about how international systems are structured. And in its Waltzian form, ‘anarchy’ denies the reality of vital features that actually do structure/arrange international systems. For example,

- Anarchy understood as the absence of hierarchy denies the existence of stratification, which in fact is central to the structure of most international systems.

⁴² For illustrations, see Donnelly (2006, 153–57; 2009, 58–71; 2012, 610–20).

⁴³ In the Waltzian account, anarchy does almost all the work. For example, anarchy (alone) is held to explain self-help balancing, the pursuit of relative gains, and the security dilemma. It is thus surprisingly common to speak not only of the anarchic structure of international relations but of the ‘structure of anarchy’ (e.g., Keohane 1989, 152; Ruggie 1998, 143, 144, 152; Vasquez, 1998, 197, 211; Buzan and Waever 2003, 249; Little 2007, 175; Reus-Smit and Snidal 2009, 695). Cf. Waltz (1979, 116): ‘two, and only two, types of structures are need to cover societies of all sorts.’ A Google Scholar search in May 2015 for ‘structure of anarchy’ and ‘international relations’ produced more than 200 results since 2000.

- Waltz claims that because international systems are anarchic they lack functional differentiation (1979, 97). In fact, however, states and nonstate actors have different functions, rights, and obligations in states systems. And Waltz himself devotes a chapter of *Theory of International Politics* to ‘The Management of International Affairs,’ addressing the ‘special responsibilities’ of great powers (1979, 198) and arguing that ‘neither the United States nor the Soviet Union can behave as “ordinary” states because that is not what they are’ (1979, 199).
- Neither is it true that ‘in a system without central governance ... there are no effective laws and institutions to direct and constrain’ actors (Waltz 1999, 698). Just as actors are ‘differently placed by their power and differences in placement help to explain both their behavior and their fates’ (Waltz 1990, 31), they are differently placed and shaped by their authority, status, and roles, by the rules that govern them, and by the institutions and practices in which they participate.⁴⁴

The Waltzian construction of anarchy leaves us without a vocabulary or conceptual framework to even identify the ways in which *any* international system is actually arranged (structured) – let alone explore the ways in which the differing arrangements of the parts of different types of international systems have differing consequences for the character of international societies and the behavior of their members.

Waltz’s account of structure, we should note, cannot be defended as making admittedly inaccurate assumptions that provide predictive leverage. A structural explanation claims that a system *is* arranged in a certain way and that *that* arrangement explains the phenomena in question. Some simplification is, of course, necessary. Structural models, however, must be fundamentally accurate – or they are analogical or metaphorical, rather than explanatory in a stronger sense of that term. Moreover, the divergence between Waltzian anarchic international orders and the actual structure of international systems is so extreme that even an analogical argument is highly implausible.

Conclusion: towards a post-Waltzian IR

The arguments above, it seems to me, suggest not only the possibility but the desirability of a post-Waltzian IR in which anarchy is, at the very least, decentered. I introduce that suggestion, though, by stepping back to elucidate the claim that anarchy is a constructed concept. (In the available

⁴⁴ All of these errors are rooted in falsely generalizing to systems without government features of systems without hierarchy.

space I can state (but not defend) my understanding, in order to clarify what would have to be debated in order to develop a ‘deeper’ argument for or against my account.)

Anarchy as a constructed concept

All concepts are constructed. About that there is little disagreement in contemporary philosophy of science. The central issue of genuine controversy, it seems to me, is the mix between analytical practices and the resistance of the world in shaping any particular concept.

To what extent is ‘anarchy’ imposed on us by the world? To what extent could we just as well construct IR and its subject matter in some (but not just any) other way(s)? Obviously, I see anarchy as a contingent construction – as illustrated by the fact that for two-thirds of the history of academic IR, realists and nonrealists alike successfully practiced their craft without central reference to anarchy.

But isn’t the absence of an international government a ‘fact’ that IR simply *must* comprehend? Let us grant that it is.⁴⁵ ‘Anarchy,’ however, is only one of many possible ways – or, in contemporary IR, a fairly wide and disparate set of ways – to do that.

Consider, again, discourses of sovereignty and anarchy. They partially overlap. However, they differ fundamentally not only in reference and meaning⁴⁶ but also in implication and connotation. For example, a discourse of sovereignty neither implies international disorder nor suggests the absence (or even the weakness) of international law, institutions, or authority. And where a discourse of sovereignty recognizes that the absence of international government takes different forms, anarchy, in its contemporary American conception, is a universal feature of international systems that largely specifies their structure (and tells us something of importance about their operation).

Or consider states systems, understood as a type of international society that prioritizes the autonomy of its members and thus radically decentralizes authority. States have many interests that can only be realized through cooperation. Horizontally generated rules and institutions thus are

⁴⁵ This, however, is (by itself) not a compelling reason to grant it any analytic (as opposed to definitional) privilege.

⁴⁶ For example, systems of sovereign states are ‘anarchic’ in the sense of lacking a government. But so are hegemonic systems, imperial systems, heterarchic systems involving multiple types of actors arranged in multiple ways (as in medieval Europe and many scenarios of globalization), and systems of autonomous polities that are not sovereign (as in Classical Greece or China during the Warring States period).

neither a puzzle to be explained nor a mechanism to mitigate the effects of anarchy but an expected result of a particular type of distribution of authority. Moreover, when rules and institutions develop beyond minimal mechanisms of coexistence, the resulting governance structure is, at best, misleadingly described as absence of international government.⁴⁷

To take a final example, consider the (Hobbesian) ‘state of nature’ that contemporary IR often associates with ‘anarchy.’ International systems in fact rarely (if ever) resemble such a formless void. Almost all formally privilege some actors (e.g., states in states systems). Inequalities of power commonly create further qualitative differences (e.g., great powers). And internal processes arrange actors as parts of a system (rather than atoms in a void or mere elements of an aggregate).

Unfortunately, though, Lake seems correct when he suggests that ‘we are drawn by our dominant theories to see the international system as an anarchy, a state of nature’ (2009, 16). Most strikingly, Waltzian anarchy, understood as absence of hierarchy, effectively amounts to such a formless void.⁴⁸

It simply is not true, though, that ‘authoritative rules within hierarchies allow states to escape at least in part the anarchic state of nature *in which they would otherwise find themselves*’ (Lake 2009, 101, emphasis added) or that we should compare particular international arrangements and institutions to ‘the anarchic state of nature *they [states] would otherwise inhabit*’ (Lake 2009, 34, emphasis added, cf. 7, 9, 62, 93). Rarely if ever are politics confronted with the need to escape from, or the possibility of falling into, a state of nature. There is nothing ‘natural’ about the ‘state of nature.’ It is a particular (substantively biased) representation of the absence of government.

‘Anarchy’ is not an analytically neutral ‘thing’ lying ‘out there,’ waiting for us to bang our heads against or otherwise discover and then come to grips with. Rather than something ‘objective’ that can be conceptualized in varying ways, it is a particular (and thus contentious) representation of certain states of the world. As Waltz notes, ‘theoretical notions are defined by the theory in which they appear’ (1979, 10). ‘Even descriptive terms acquire different meanings as theories change’ (1979, 12).

⁴⁷ Some readers may suggest that this account is very close to the English School vision of anarchical international societies. I would note that this is how Schuman, Gulick, Wright, Herz, and many others in pre-Waltzian IR understood the ‘facts’ that contemporary IR understands as anarchic international orders.

⁴⁸ ‘Most realists, including Waltz, *use* the term *anarchy* to mean not simply the absence of hierarchical government but the presence of a Hobbesian state of nature’ (Vasquez 1993, 268).

Putting anarchy back into the background

The meanings given to anarchy in contemporary IR, I have argued, have impeded understanding the actual structure of real international systems. And nothing of substantive interest has been explained by the absence of an international government (alone).⁴⁹ The Waltzian project of an anarchy-centric IR has proved, at best, a dead end.⁵⁰

Although the pervasive presence of a professional discourse of anarchy makes it unrealistic to imagine ‘anarchy’ soon returning to an ordinary language concept indicating disorder and lawlessness, we may perhaps reasonably aspire to restrict the term to the thinnest and most neutral conception presently employed. I thus propose that ‘anarchy’ be understood (1) to mean (only) absence of ‘a ruler’ (an authoritative governing institution or actor) and (2) to be (only) a demarcation criterion.

Thus understood, anarchy is a background condition. Absence of an international government poses problems.⁵¹ Nothing more. But nothing less either. The particular problems that anarchy poses limit the range of possible solutions. That range, though, is considerable.

Abandoning anarchy, however, does not suggest jumping on the hierarchy bandwagon. The denial of international hierarchy is indeed a particularly perverse consequence of the Waltzian construction of anarchy. Giving hierarchy its due place thus is an important remedial project. But hierarchy – *pace* John Hobson’s recent suggestion (2014) – is not IR’s core concept. Hierarchy is at least as characteristic of national as international systems. Moreover, the simple fact that international systems are hierarchic ought to be obvious and uninteresting to anyone who has not undergone professional training in academic IR.

In particular, hierarchy provides almost as poor an account of the structure of international (and national) systems as anarchy. It simply states that the pattern of stratification is not flat. It does not tell us *how* a system is

⁴⁹ One might imagine that *something* of substantive interest about international relations in general *must* be explained by absence of an international government. I honestly, though, cannot think of anything.

⁵⁰ I have chosen ‘dead end’ carefully. For example, the literature on ‘cooperation under anarchy,’ although often illuminating, is essentially a remedial effort to undo the damage caused by the idea of anarchy as an ordering principle with determinate effects. (Before Waltz, the fact that states cooperate was not thought to merit articles in major journals.) Moreover, if the frame of anarchy is fundamentally mistaken, as I have argued, then the substance (as opposed to the instigation) of the contributions of this literature has come despite (rather than as a result of) the turn to anarchy.

⁵¹ In the context of this essay, it is interesting to note that Waltz (1990, 36) claims that classical realists treat ‘anarchy [a]s a general condition rather than a distinct structure. Anarchy sets the problem that states have to cope with.’

stratified – or anything else about the (many and varied) ways in which international systems are structured.

A focus on hierarchy, like a focus on anarchy, gives in to the siren song of simple universal patterns; of general, transhistorical ‘theory of international politics.’⁵² Even Economics, though, does not claim to have something of substantive interest to say about all economies at all times. We need more modest – and more realistic – expectations of international theory in general and structural theory in particular.

We need an IR that strives to comprehend, in methodologically and theoretically pluralistic ways, the complexity and diversity of international systems; an IR that neither minimizes nor obscures the careful analysis of the varied and typically complex structures of international systems.⁵³ If we must use the language of anarchy and hierarchy, our focus should be on the considerable variety of types of hierarchies and anarchies, rather than the ‘facts’ – the simple existence – of anarchy and hierarchy.⁵⁴

The absence of an international government (anarchy) certainly is significant to the character and conduct of international relations. It is not, however, analytically central. Anarchy neither is a structural ordering principle nor has determinate effects. It is best understood, I have argued, as a background condition that differentially constrains and enables the security strategies and policy choices of international actors. As such, we ought to put anarchy back into the background of IR – where it was before Waltz.

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Supplementary material

For Appendices 1–5, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971915000111>.

⁵² A less systematic survey of the books in my sample has convinced me that ‘hierarchy’ was also absent from pre-Waltzian IR. Both sides of the anarchy-hierarchy binary are Waltz’s construction. (He indicates no sources, precursors, or inspirations – and I have been able to find none.) Moreover, each, I am suggesting, has similar analytical shortcomings (because they are mutually co-constituting opposites).

⁵³ Donnelly (2012, 622–28) sketches one such account. There are, however, many other potentially productive paths forward.

⁵⁴ Escaping the anarchy-hierarchy binary would also allow us to treat structural change as no less a theoretical possibility than continuity. (Both anarchy and hierarchy, in the Waltzian construction, are constant, not variable.)

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Sources with authors printed in small caps indicate books in Appendix 1, 2, or 3. Numbers in square brackets at the end of the entry indicate the occurrences of 'anarchy' or 'anarchic.'

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