Matthew Draper | Systemic Organization: Anarchy, Society, Hierarchy | POLI 240 | 1/22/20

"Pick one approach to how the environment is conceptualized (anarchy, society, hierarchy, etc.) and explain why it is more useful than the others."

Before we can select the most useful conceptualization of the international environment, we must answer the threshold question "useful for *what*?" An immediate candidate answer might be "for understanding the international environment". But conceptualizing something in order to understand it might seem to put the cart before the horse. At the very least, it might seem to forsake the positivist foundations of the scientific method. If we are to conceptualize in order to understand, we by definition admit *a priori* notions into our thinking. Such notions can be an impediment to scientific understanding. Of the approaches we read this week, it seems to me that the concept of an international society gives us the most analytic traction.

Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that the international system is fundamentally anarchic. Recalling Hobbes, Waltz writes that "[a]mong states, the state of nature is a state of war," associating anarchy with violence. Since both national and international politics are characterized by force, Waltz argues that the difference lies in their different modes of organization for addressing the *use* of force. (103). In the international system, states are forced to rely on "self-help". Waltz stresses the functional similarity of units in anarchy, arguing that anarchic systems lack opportunities for differentiation because participants wish to avoid dependency (106). States are thus "denied the advantages that a full division of labor, political as well as economic, would provide (107). This is a zero-sum situation, and "[e]ven the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities" (105). He writes that as a result "[t]he division of labor across nations…is slight in comparison with the highly articulated division of labor within them.

Waltz differentiates between two different organization principles: hierarchy and anarchy. Hierarchy is said to involve relations of super- and sub-ordination, implying differentiation, while anarchy entails coordination among a system's units, implying their sameness. National politics is hierarchic, with differentiated units performing particular functions, while international politics consists of like units performing the same activities (97). Fundamental to the structure of the system is the distribution of capabilities across the system's units. Waltz is careful to distinguish between individual capabilities (unit attributes) and the distribution of capabilities (a systemic attribute).

Helen Milner (1991) questions whether it is fruitful to abstract away from domestic politics in this way. She suggests that differentiation and hierarchy provide governing mechanisms for states, "just as they do for individuals within states" (78), and that states are highly interdependent (82). Pursuing this theme, David Lake (2009) argues that although international politics indeed takes place against a background of anarchy (17), differentiation among units is much more advanced than Waltz supposed. Lake distinguishes authority from coercion, arguing that authority rests "on the collective acceptance or legitimacy of the ruler's right to rule". He conceives this authority as granted by some units to other units (if it were merely *taken*, this would be coercion), and argues that authority contains some obligation to obey legitimate commands (21).[1] Though there is "no bright line" separating these concepts (23), this analytic distinction is fundamental to the subsequent argument. Lake sees hierarchy as a form of relational authority, producing an equilibrium contingent on the actions of ruler and ruled. Arguing that sovereignty is divisible, Lake makes the case that hierarchy is the antonym of anarchy, and that it is based on authority, not coercion (62).

Recalling Waltz (1959), it may be the case that a principle that explains everything explains nothing. If anarchy is omnipresent in the international system, then, like human nature, it seems difficult to appeal to it as an explanation of particular events. Hierarchy seems to be vulnerable to the same criticism. It seems to me that anarchy must be conceptually prior to hierarchy in the same way that cold (the absence of molecular activity) is prior to heat (the presence of such activity). However, as explanations of particular events, both seem to fall flat.

Hedley Bull (1977) argues that political order can exist in the absence of rules (7). He proposes that we understand international politics as the interaction of a society of states, formed when states conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules and share common institutions (13). Such international societies occur within an international system that does not necessarily share the common rules and institutions just described. International societies are founded (loosely) on a common culture or civilization, and this shared background facilitates the functioning of the international *system* by promoting communication and understanding and reinforcing shared interests (15). He (correctly) locates individual human beings as the locus of moral agency, and draws from this premise the conclusion that if international order has any value, it must be its instrumental support of the goal of order in individual human societies.

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[1] Lake draws what appear to be counterintuitive conclusions from this distinction between authority and coercion. For instance, he asserts that empires have never exercised authority, only coercion (23). He sees imperialism as the international analogue to tyranny, and the (unstated) implication is that as soon as an empire is able to exercise genuine authority, it ceases to be an empire, leaving his assertion true by definition.

Provocatively, Bull argues that the present global international society lacks a common culture (289). The development of international societies is typically spurred by an awareness of their fundamental difference from other states (32), and such an awareness is (as yet) impossible for the world as a whole. The fundamental human tendency to divide the world into “us” and “them” must play a pivotal role in the development of these international societies – they are in a sense negatively defined. The definition of “us” is literally “not them”. These uncomfortable facts about human psychology would seem to preclude the development of a genuine international society encompassing the whole world.

The concept of international society seems to me to provide the best (monistic) framework for understanding international politics because it can encompass both anarchy (an international system without an international society) and hierarchy. Whether we should be hedgehogs in precisely this way, knowing but one big thing, seems to be less certain. The fruitful disorder of the real world is difficult to capture with simple models, and the passage of time often calcifies theory into dogma. While I am satisfied that Waltz, Lake and Bull appreciate the limitations of their organizing assumptions, others deploying these organizing principles may be less careful.

The arguments advanced by Waltz, Lake and (to a lesser extent) Bull are vulnerable to criticism raised by Richard Ashley (1984). By hypostasizing structure, these authors are led by the “impulse to theorize” into producing ahistorical predictions. As Ashley writes, “[n]ot even the structures of the modern state or the states system, not even the practical efficacy of the balance-of-power scheme itself, can be taken as given. They are essentially political concepts because they are… “essentially contested” or “essentially disputed” concepts” (271).

I am aware of the consequences of this line of argument. Indeed, as I read Ashley’s paen to classical realism, I was able to imagine the criticisms Waltz, Lake and Bull might make of a tradition that is “misunderstood at the very moment that it is objectified or “captured” within some conceptual system, formal logic, or set of rules external to practice” (266). Such a tradition is not suited to the scientific method. Our approach to social science is contingent on the methodological bet that Ashley’s description is not the only way to understand politics. The results of our own research tradition speak for themselves. But one is left with the nagging thought that as our approach becomes more universal, political phenomena inexplicable by this method will simply remain unexplained.

References

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