

Review Essay: Hierarchies in World Politics

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Abstract: In this article, we argue that hierarchy-centered approaches to IR promise to deliver what anarchy-centered approaches have not: a framework for theorizing and empirically analyzing world politics as a global system—rather than just an international one. At the core of this proposition are three features of hierarchical systems as they are represented across the growing IR literature on the topic. First, the structures of differentiation at the core of hierarchical systems are deeply implicated with power. Hierarchical systems are thus intrinsically political. Second, in world politics, hierarchies stratify, rank, and organize the relations not only among states but also other kinds of actors as well, and often even a mix of different actors within a single structure of differentiation. Third, there are many different kinds of hierarchical relations in world politics, each of which generate different ‘logics’ influencing social, moral, and behavioral outcomes. This essay illustrates the promise of hierarchy-centered approaches through review and analysis of key IR scholarship. We show, first, that hierarchy has been understood in the IR literature in two ways: narrowly, i.e. as a relationship of legitimate authority; and broadly, i.e. as intersubjective manifestations of organized inequality. The scholarship also reveals that hierarchy operates in a variety of different ways that range from ordering solutions to deep

structures. We identify three such 'logics' that have been fruitfully explored in IR scholarship and that can form the basis of a future research agenda: hierarchy as an institutionalized functional bargain between actors (a logic of trade-offs); hierarchy as differentiated social and political roles shaping behavior (a logic of positionality); and hierarchy as a productive political space or structure (a logic of productivity). In doing so, we also show how hierarchy promises a more integrated theoretical framework for IR from which will follow more cohesive analytical and empirical insights into contemporary world politics.

Books Discussed¹

Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. 2015. *Opting Out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European Integration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barder, Alexander. 2015. *Empire Within: International Hierarchy and its Imperial Laboratories of Governance*. London: Routledge.

Bukovansky, Mlada, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard MacKay Price, Christian Reus-Smit, and Nicholas J. Wheeler. 2012. *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lake, David. 2009. *Hierarchy in International Relations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

In recent decades, globalizing processes have gathered intense attention for complicating the nature of political boundaries, authority and sovereignty. Perhaps it is partly due to such developments that scholarship in International Relations (IR) now appeals far less frequently to anarchy and its systemic logics. In light of the analytic insufficiencies of anarchy-centered theories in the contemporary global context, a growing range of scholars are seeking to make sense of world politics through an analytical focus on hierarchies instead.²

Hierarchies, understood broadly as any system through which actors are organized into vertical relations of super and sub-ordination, have long been of interest to

¹ Many other books and articles on hierarchy are also discussed in this essay. For the full list, please consult the works cited section.

² We are not suggesting that hierarchies themselves are new phenomena in world politics, but that recent developments in the system have drawn the attention of *more* scholars to hierarchy.

social scientists, including some notable scholars in IR.³ In recent years, however, the range of scholarship in IR concerned with hierarchies has expanded considerably. Building upon economic, sociological, legal and philosophical insights about the intertwined logics of formal equality and vertical stratification, researchers across the spectrum of theoretical and methodological commitments have undertaken inquiry into the effects of ranked differentiation among actors on the political dynamics of such issues as global governance, economic relations and security. Diverse though this scholarship is, it is nonetheless unified in suggesting two significant insights: first, that hierarchies are a ubiquitous feature of international (i.e., inter-state) politics; and second, that they generate social, moral, and behavioral dynamics that are different from those created by other arrangements. In short, hierarchies matter (and have always mattered) in distinctive ways for world politics.

In this article, we argue that hierarchy-centered approaches to IR promise to deliver what anarchy-centered approaches have not: a framework for theorizing and empirically analyzing world politics as a *global system*—rather than just an international one. Anarchy-centered approaches reduce world politics to an international (i.e., inter-state) system because they take state sovereignty as a 'hard' given: that is, as an enduring fact of world politics, as clear in its boundaries, and as inextricable from state interests. In exposing the (historical and contemporary) softness of sovereignty—that is, its contingency and porosity—globalizing processes have challenged scholars to theorize world politics more globally: that is, in a manner that does not analytically conflate states with their sovereignty and so, by

³ See e.g., Lake 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, Nexon and Wright 2007, Donnelly 2006, Cooley 2003, 2005, Hobson and Sharman 2005, Hobson 2013, Wendt and Friedheim 1995.

extension, does not privilege sovereignty as the only defining feature of the primary units in world politics.

To the extent that scholars have begun to think more globally about world politics, they have done so by focusing on issues and actors. Such topically narrow, predominantly mid-level inquiries, however, do not make explicit the broader contours of a global system, effectively leaving undisturbed anarchy-centered grand theorizing that represents world politics as an inter-state system. For this reason, some have even declared that the age of theorizing in IR is over.⁴ In this essay, we aim to demonstrate that this is not so: the concept of hierarchy offers a basis for uniting fragmented insights about world politics into an alternative (though not always competing) explanatory framework. By drawing our focus to structures of stratification and the differentiation of units, the concept of hierarchy suggests a perspective on world politics that accommodates but does not insist upon sovereignty and that is systemic in scope.

At the core of this proposition are three features of hierarchical systems as they are represented across the growing IR literature on the topic. First, the structures of differentiation at the core of hierarchical systems are deeply implicated with power. Hierarchical systems are thus intrinsically political. Second, in world politics, hierarchies stratify, rank, and organize the relations not only among states but also other kinds of actors as well, and often even a mix of different actors within a single structure of differentiation. Third, there are many different kinds of hierarchical relations in world politics, each of which generate different “logics” in the sense of

⁴ See the ‘End of Theory?’ special issue of *EJIR*, especially Mearsheimer and Walt (2013).

giving rise to different social, moral, and behavioral dynamics. However, since different hierarchies can and often do intersect each other, these logics can be nested. Taken together, these features suggest that a focus on hierarchies can *both* facilitate the kinds of systemic perspectives on world politics that made anarchy-centered theories so useful, and, unlike anarchy-centered theories, account for ongoing globalizing processes as a part of the system. The promise of hierarchy-centrism is of a more integrated theoretical framework from which may follow more cohesive analytical and empirical insights into contemporary world politics.

The purpose of this article is to facilitate the development of explicitly hierarchy-centric approaches to theorizing and empirical analysis of world politics. We start with the observation that despite burgeoning interest in hierarchies, only a few IR scholars have actually pursued explicitly hierarchy-centered theoretical and empirical analyses of world politics. The obstacles to an explicit hierarchy-centered research agenda within IR are therefore twofold: an unrecognized disjuncture in how hierarchies are (implicitly) conceived as a part of world politics; and the diversity of epistemological commitments among IR researchers concerned with hierarchy. While there is significant scholarly convergence on the idea that hierarchies are intersubjectively⁵ constituted systems structured by vertical stratification, there is considerable divergence regarding which such orders count as hierarchies in world politics. For some, all organized arrangements of inequality (i.e., vertical actor-differentiation) ought to be treated analytically as hierarchies. Others, however, maintain that in the context of world politics, hierarchy ought to pertain for

⁵ Though not all approaches use the term "intersubjective", even those that do not would concede that hierarchies are sustained by mutual participation to some extent.

analytical purposes only to those vertical arrangements that differentiate actors according to their degrees of authority. Such differences could and should found the basis of productive debate and scholarly inquiry. But since most hierarchy-oriented research has not been explicit about how hierarchy should be conceptualized, these divergences in the understandings of hierarchy have gone largely unnoticed. Even when they have been noticed, conversations on these differences have been quickly been derailed by more familiar and easily articulated differences of epistemology.

Incommensurable epistemologies, however, need not occlude commonalities that can generate potentially agenda-consolidating conversations. To show why and how, we undertake an analytical review of the literature, which is published in both book and article form. Thus, to provide as full an overview possible, we have interwoven our analysis of books with a discussion of noteworthy articles.

Our analysis proceeds in four sections. In the first, we offer a brief overview of hierarchy-oriented IR scholarship, making explicit the ways in which hierarchy figures into a broad range of research on world politics. We note that hierarchy has been conceptualized in two ways in the IR literature, which we label as *narrow* (focusing on relations of legitimate authority) and *broad* (focusing on all forms of organized inequality). Focusing on conceptual and epistemological differences that cut across the strains of hierarchy-oriented research, we suggest ways these different understandings can be reconciled. There are also, we note, at least three distinct lines of analysis regarding how hierarchies are thought to matter. And yet, since these lines of analysis are not mutually exclusive they can provide the basis from which to develop explicitly hierarchy-centered theorizing. Toward this end, the second section, characterizes the three distinctive 'logics' of hierarchy as action and

dynamic-shaping systems: (1) the logic of *trade-offs*, which understands hierarchies as functional bargains; (2) the logic of *positionality*, which focuses on the structural effects of the material and social arrangements that characterize hierarchies on actors; (3) and the logic of *productivity*, which is interested in the practical and performative ontology of hierarchies as structures. The third section brings the logics into contact with each other to suggest how, together, they can animate theories that are both integrated and complex enough to offer traction on world politics as a global, rather than just international system.

The final section considers the implications of developing hierarchy-centered approaches to IR. At a minimum, hierarchy centered-theorizing would imply that world politics is a space of complex hierarchies, and therefore a space that is not structurally different from domestic politics. Taking hierarchy seriously as an object of study thus insists on a different view of world politics and forces us to re-confront the question of how world politics is different from other kinds of politics and how the discipline of IR is different from other fields of inquiry.

I. Hierarchy Conceptions in IR

Ironically, one of the most important “hierarchy-oriented” works in IR is also the very work that rendered natural the distinction of ‘the international’ and the analytic primacy of anarchy: *Theory of International Politics*.⁶ There, Kenneth Waltz argues that there are only two kinds of orders: hierarchy and anarchy. Anarchy is the condition in which the features of hierarchy are absent, while hierarchy consists of

⁶ Waltz 1979.

"relations of super- and subordination in which 'actors are formally differentiated according to the degrees of their authority, and their distinct functions.'"⁷ Waltz further argues that whereas hierarchy is the realm of law, government and order, anarchy is marked by their absence. This opposition between hierarchy and anarchy inscribes the dichotomy between domestic and international politics.⁸ International politics comes into theoretical existence *because* of the boundary hierarchy sets around domestic politics. In short, *Theory of International Politics* implicates hierarchy in IR as its constitutive analytic "other" and thus makes anarchy the central feature of the discipline.

Given the increasing complexity of globalizing politics and the waning influence of neorealism, few scholars explicitly frame their research around the fact of formal international anarchy anymore. Even fewer invoke it as a cause of state behavior. But as a discipline, IR (still) approaches the study of world politics through the prism of anarchy. The very idea of an "international" [i.e., inter-state] space of political relations that is conceptually and analytically distinctive from other kinds of political relations, persists. IR is marked by a continued—albeit more complex—state-centrism.⁹

And yet, even as the discipline of IR remains latently organized around an anarchy-centered conception of world politics, it has also long promulgated lines of research

⁷ As cited in Donnelly 2006, 141.

⁸ Donnelly 2006.

⁹ Our point is not that states are not crucial to world politics, but rather that prism of anarchy insists upon a strictly statist view of the world politics system that is inadequate to the task of understanding world politics.

that complicate this framework by drawing attention to hierarchical arrangements within the formally anarchic international system. In this section, we take stock of the ways in which this has been so, and explore the extent to which these disclosures can—and should—challenge how scholars conceptualize and study world politics. Most hierarchy-oriented scholarship is too implicit, about its hierarchy-orientation for its researchers to fathom hierarchy as a focal point of their research. The bulk of research that evokes the concept of hierarchy does so rather casually—for instance, as a descriptive modifier or synonym for the phenomenon that is the real focus of inquiry, like empire, hegemony, identity, gender, imperialism and race in IR. Hierarchy thus becomes central at the same time that it is left theoretically unexamined.¹⁰ It is unsurprising then that much of what scholars have said about hierarchy in world politics remains underdeveloped, offering no clear alternative to an anarchy-centered vision. Things are improving, however: not only are there a number key works that make hierarchy the focal point of their research but recently published literature offers evidence of greater awareness among IR scholars of hierarchy as a topic and analytic lens.¹¹ Thus taking stock of hierarchy research in IR requires reading widely across the discipline and between the lines of works that are more or less oriented toward hierarchy. Doing so reveals that arrangements of super- and sub-ordination emerge in two different kinds IR scholarship: research that discloses within world politics *relations of legitimate authority* that, following conventional reasoning, should only have analytical importance within domestic political relations; and research that discloses within world politics *structures of inequality* that matter so profoundly to social, behavioral, and moral dynamics in

¹⁰ See Barkawi and Laffey 1999, Hardt and Negri 2001, Barnett 2011.

¹¹ See Lake 2009a, 2009b, 2010, Cooley 2005, K. Weber 2000, Donnelly 2006, 2009, Lanoszka 2013.

world politics as to render formal equality among states analytically uninteresting. We label the first understanding of hierarchy the *narrow* understanding and the second the *broad* one. Both conceptions have in common the view of hierarchy as an intersubjectively or mutually constituted system. In this section, we take each in turn.

1. Hierarchies as Legitimate Authority - The Narrow Conception

This kind of intervention is most readily associated with scholarship in the liberal tradition in IR theory. As an approach to world politics, liberalism is ambivalent toward the idea that nation-states are the exclusive sites of legitimate political authority. By extension, liberalism sits in some tension with the notion that the formal sovereignty of states, and so anarchy, is so analytically significant in world politics. This tension is expressed through theoretical commitments like liberal optimism about international law, the pluralistic conception of states (as indicated by the liberal preference for terms such as “government” and “institutions” rather than states) and the devotion to global capitalism as an economic model. Each of these extrude suspicion of national borders as meaningful containers of political authority. As a matter of practice, however, liberal IR theory has tended to shy away from its own ambivalence, often conceding the primacy of the sovereign nation-state and anarchy.¹² But even as liberals concede, they still tend to pose research questions that draw attention to hierarchies within the international anarchy. Milner, for instance, has questioned whether anarchy necessarily implies absence of government as government takes many forms. In addition to central authorities that legitimately

¹² see e.g., Keohane 2005.

monopolize violence, governmental forms include the international institutions and laws that govern states. In noting this, Milner implicitly challenges the extent to which an exclusively anarchic conception of world politics makes sense.¹³

Others have been more explicit, highlighting informal hierarchies in world politics by focusing on legitimate political authority among states under formal anarchy. Ikenberry and Kupchan's analysis of hegemony challenges the Waltzian logic of strict material positionality by arguing that hegemonic power works at the level of substantive beliefs rather than just material payoffs. Acquiescence emerges also from the diffusion of a set of normative ideals.¹⁴ Even under anarchy, thus, the hegemon has a certain informal authority as a governor.¹⁵ Hence legitimate relations of super- and sub-ordination that transcend national borders are not just domestic phenomenon but part of anarchic international orders as well. In fact, in *Hierarchy in International Relations*, David Lake argues that hierarchies matter for how political relations unfold among all kinds of actors in world politics. Noting the significance in globalized politics of hierarchies in which states are subordinated to the legitimate, and sometimes even formal, authority of private, non-state, and supranational actors, Lake calls for a more hierarchy-centered approach that could capture more of the politics in world politics.¹⁶

¹³ Milner 1991.

¹⁴ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990.

¹⁵ See also Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, Lake 2009a, 2009b, Keohane 2005, Nye 2002, Ikenberry 2004, 2012, Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990.

¹⁶ See also Lake 2010.

Liberals are not the only scholars who have exposed authority-based hierarchical arrangements in international relations. Concerned with IR's neglect of the historical process by which international anarchy emerged, a number of constructivists have highlighted its evolution in and through hierarchies of various sorts. Reus-Smit introduces hierarchy through a historical focus on the evolution of the defining norms of international society and the informal political legitimacy granted to particular states through it.¹⁷ Hobson and Sharman go further. They argue that such normative hierarchies can establish *formal* political authority in addition to informal, and have organized not only inter-state but all relations among all kinds of polities in history, including empires, civilizations, and cultures.¹⁸ Though this body of constructivist hierarchy-oriented research differs from more liberal variants in its emphasis on historical contingency and the construction of social meaning, both draw attention to the effect of structures of legitimate political authority (informal and formal) on world politics.

A second, overlapping vein of constructivist hierarchy-oriented research has recently expanded the challenge by looking beyond legitimate political authority to the social authority upon which all such hierarchies necessarily depend. The core insight here is that in relations of 'rightful rule' world politics entails relations of 'rightful role'. Actors—state and non-state—become intelligible to each other as specific, differentiated kinds of subjects that, depending upon their social value, acquire different degrees of social authority and influence over others. Connecting degree of

¹⁷ Reus-Smit 1999. See also Barnett 2011, Dunne 1998, Keene 2007.

¹⁸ Hobson and Sharman 2005. See also Simpson 2004, Lebow 2008, Barnett 2011, Ferguson and Mansbach 2008.

social authorization to such factors as access to social capital and technical expertise, this line of research emphasizes the importance of hierarchies in governing not just what actors *do* in world politics, but *which actors get to play which roles*.¹⁹ This line of research illuminates the social politics entailed in world politics that are obscured by anarchy-centered approaches.

2. Hierarchy as (Intersubjectively) Organized Inequality - The Broad Conception

The second way that hierarchy has surfaced in IR research is through research that discloses structures of inequality. Eclectic in its theoretical inspirations, scholarship in this vein converges around the idea that hierarchies are particular kinds of organizational forms, i.e. systems that arrange units into unequal relationships with one another. Importantly, then, to speak of a hierarchy is to say nothing of the nature of the inequalities or of whether they are established through legitimate authority. In contrast to the first line of research, which identifies hierarchies in world politics *through the existence* of legitimate authority, on this line, hierarchy has nothing to do with the particular kind of power relations through which it is established. Emblematic of this organizational hierarchy-orientation in IR is Alex Cooley's study in *Logics of Hierarchy* of the varied sub-systems of stratification within anarchic international politics and the varied effects that these different systems of inequality have on the behavior of actors.²⁰ What emerges from such research is that hierarchies matter differently for various dimensions of world politics depending how the units are arranged; on the particular character of the relational

¹⁹ See e.g. Pouliot 2010, Keene 2013, Neumann and Sending 2010; Towns 2010.

²⁰ Cooley 2005. See also Nexon and Wright 2007.

inequalities among them; and on the specific forms of power they entail.²¹ It should be noted also that compared to the narrow approaches discussed above, approaches that take a broad view of hierarchy rarely converge on the same definition and are better thought of as belonging on a spectrum.

Approaching hierarchy as an intersubjectively constituted (or maintained)²² structure of inequality poses a deeper challenge to IR's anarchy-centered conception of world politics. First, it implies that hierarchies exist even more broadly in world politics (not just where there is legitimate authority). Second, it exposes a complicity in the first approach to hierarchy—i.e., as system of legitimate authority—with the notion that hierarchies exist more 'naturally' at the domestic level than among sovereign equals. By contrast, in identifying systems of inequality as hierarchies, irrespective of a basis in legitimate authority, hierarchy appears as an organizational form that intrinsically belongs at no particular level of human social life. In this sense, hierarchies are "global": they can, in principle, cut analytically across and through the levels of analysis that has locked IR into an inter-state approach to world politics.

Critical approaches to IR have long been engaged in the project of identifying hierarchies, analyzing the logic and basis of their organized inequalities, and drawing out their implications for social, moral, and behavior logics of world politics. However, whereas scholars like Cooley arrive at their project through empirical inquiry that reveals the inadequacy of anarchy-centered conception of world politics,

²¹ Donnelly 2009, 51-2.

²² Some may disagree that all structures of inequality entail intersubjectivity. Our view is that even materialist approaches to structure imply intersubjectivity (e.g. to explain why agency is not possible).

critical approaches never accept the legitimacy of that heuristic in the first place. Critical approaches begin by refusing the analytical value of the distinction between domestic and international spaces of politics and define hierarchy very broadly. Rob Walker has argued, for instance, that this distinction obscures more than it reveals, naturalizing and masking the contingency and violence of the modern political project that organizes human subjects into national territorially defined communities.²³

In developing this line of thought, critical scholarship divorces itself from mainstream IR's alliance with the nation-state, freeing it to approach world politics through a hierarchy analytic without concern for tensions with sovereignty and anarchy. Wallerstein, for instance, takes the world economy rather than nation-states as its starting point of analysis.²⁴ This enables him to direct his attention not to the relations between states, but instead to the hierarchical organization of the world system into core and periphery; to the modes of cultural and economic power through which capital establishes and perpetuates that order; to the particular nature of the inequalities entailed by this organizational form; and to moral, social and behavioral dynamics that follow from them. Others offer similarly hierarchy-centered stories about the organization of world politics and IR through systems of gendered, racial, geographical and civilizational inequalities.²⁵ In each, the analysis begins not with sovereign states in anarchy but with systems of inequality, the particular machinations of which are then interrogated. This includes examining the

²³ Walker 1993.

²⁴ See e.g. Wallerstein 1984, 2011.

²⁵ See e.g. Vitalis 2010, Sjoberg 2012, Hobson 2013, Arlene Tickner 2003, Seth 2011.

concrete forms of power they entail (including but limited to legitimate authority); the variety of actors or 'units' differentiated through (including but not limited to states); and the ways in which the differentiation of those units constitutes the social, moral and behavioral logics of world politics.

Insights from critical theories about hierarchy could be profoundly disruptive to the way IR conceptualizes world politics because they indicate that hierarchies are prior to and fundamentally constitutive of sovereign statehood. Anarchy, as such, is produced by hierarchy. And yet, precisely because it is critical—that is, because it flat out rejects the validity of the discipline's orienting concepts—this line of research has been largely overlooked by the mainstream. A similarly hierarchy-centric message, however, is increasingly also being delivered by more critical strands of constructivist scholarship. This scholarship provisionally accepts anarchy and states as the analytical starting point in order to expose how hierarchical relations of social, economic and political domination are necessary for and reproduced by the rhetoric of formal equality among states.²⁶ In this way, critical constructivist research indicates that any anarchic international political order is generated by prior hierarchical ones. Anarchy, it suggests, makes no sense without hierarchy.

In sum, most major IR approaches (materialist and ideational) contain arguments that either implicitly or explicitly call out the limitations of approaching world politics as an international anarchy. What is more, these challenges unfold in ways that suggest hierarchy is often a better analytical starting point. After all, it has only been

²⁶ See e.g. Rumelili 2004, Suzuki 2009, Kayaoglu 2010, Towns 2010, 2012, Onuf 2013, Bially Mattern 2001, 2005a, 2005b, Zarakol 2011.

in quietly supplementing frameworks that emphasize international anarchy with more hierarchy-oriented ones that researchers have begun to make headway on explaining the kinds of complex, 'multi-centric' processes and relationships that are characteristic of globalized world politics—for instance, multilevel governance and the existence non-state, private, and supranational authorities to which even states may be subordinate.²⁷ Clearly states are still central to world politics. But especially given globalizing dynamics, the question is how much more might be learned about world politics if scholars were to *start* with hierarchy, making anarchy a supplementary analytic? This question is forcefully raised by hierarchy-oriented research, which invites new modes of theorizing and analysis that begin with a new understanding of world politics. Reorientation along these lines invites us to envision world politics as a system of multiple, varied, internally differentiated systems of super-and subordination that include but are not limited to those among states. Hierarchy-oriented research, in other words, invites hierarchy-centered approaches to IR.

3. Obstacles to Moving Hierarchy to the Centre

For a hierarchy-centered approach to prevail as a major strand of research in IR, a sufficient majority of scholars first need to recognize their shared interest in interrogating the analytic value and limitations of a hierarchy heuristic. This is already happening.²⁸ The second step is more difficult to achieve: researchers would need to go about interrogating the analytic value and limitations of a hierarchy

²⁷ See e.g. Rosenau 1997, Lake 2009, 2010, Zürn et al 2012.

²⁸ e.g., Sharman 2013.

heuristic by consciously (though not exclusively) fashioning their research in relation to and as an engagement with other research(ers) on hierarchy. The different understandings of hierarchy have stood in the way of this development.

From different conceptions of hierarchy follow different analyses of the relationship between hierarchy and power. For those using a *broad* definition discerning “the nature and variation in power relations between the superior and subordinate actors” is a critical part of the research endeavor.²⁹ At issue is how different forms of power—coercion, dominance, legitimacy, and so on—give rise to different kinds of hierarchies that have different kinds of effects on international politics.³⁰ For those working with a narrow understanding this analytic venture makes no sense at all. After all, for them hierarchies are defined by their basis in authoritative, consensual, or otherwise legitimate power. Accordingly, international political dynamics that manifest other forms of power—coercion or domination, for instance—ought not be approached through a hierarchy analytic at all. As Lake argues, anarchy and power balancing provide all the analytic leverage we need on most vertical arrangement in world politics.³¹ The only arrangements that require a hierarchy analytic are those organized through authority relations. Indeed, researchers committed to *narrow* conceptions of hierarchy may find little to reason to engage with research that has been guided by a *broad* conception, unless the particular hierarchy under investigation turns out to be constituted by legitimate authority. Conversely, researchers committed to *broad* views perceive *narrow* research on hierarchy as too

²⁹ Ikenberry 2011, 60.

³⁰ Lanoszka 2013.

³¹ Lake 2007.

narrow to capture the full range of dynamics, even in instances where legitimate authority is at work.³²

To compound the difficulties, neither the *narrow* nor *broad* conceptions provide sufficient common ground among their respective adherents to function as the basis for a coherent research endeavor.³³ Adherents to each conception are internally divided along theoretical and methodological lines such that there is no tidy alliance between researchers' theoretical orientations and their conceptions of hierarchy. This further attenuates the possibility of mutual engagement around common interests in super and sub-ordination. In *Hierarchy in International Relations*, David Lake, for instance, marries a substantive conception of hierarchy to theoretical commitments that are generally liberal and rationalist.³⁴ Vincent Pouliot, in *International Security in Practice*, and Vivienne Jabri in *The Post-Colonial Subject*, also adopt narrow conceptions of hierarchy but without a liberal rationalist framework.³⁵ Quite the contrary, Pouliot theorizes hierarchy's significance through a Bourdieusian, or practice-oriented constructivism, while Jabri does so through a post-colonialist lens. When played out through these respective projects, it is rather difficult to discern any real overlap in shared research interest, despite the common narrow conception of hierarchy. Lake directs our analytical attention toward dynamics of functional

³² MacDonald 2008.

³³ In fact, scholars are not always conscious or deliberate about the conception of hierarchy they adopt. Many do not ground their conception in appropriate literature (e.g., philosophy, sociology, psychology, organizational studies). Often the notion of hierarchy gets defined in a derivative, instrumental way in order to fulfill a particular function within a broader project. There is, thus, an 'empty' quality to hierarchy as it is often deployed in IR.

³⁴ Lake 2007, 2009a, 2009b.

³⁵ Pouliot 2010, Jabri 2013.

differentiation, Pouliot toward differentiation by social capital or status, and Jabri to differentiation by race. In fact, Lake's analysis ultimately bears more resemblance to that by Ikenberry in *Liberal Leviathan* or Nexon in the *Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe*, both of which adopt broad conceptions of hierarchy. But here again, there are not clear alignments with theories. While Ikenberry, like Lake, adopts a theoretically liberal/rationalist approach, Nexon deploys social network theory. In short, hierarchy-oriented research is transected by so many differences that simply recognizing it as such has been difficult.

We believe it is possible to overcome these divides. To wit, the narrow conception of hierarchy understands hierarchy as a particular kind of organizing principle, reflecting an intrinsically legitimate political order. The broad conception views hierarch(ies) as systems of vertical stratification, versions of which are constituted through distinct criteria for differentiation. Hence different hierarchies structure distinct kinds of political orders. Vertical stratification that is constituted through and reflective of an authorized, legitimate political order is one possibility. Just as analytically possible, though, is a hierarchical political order constituted through and reflective of domination. What ultimately unites both approaches is the idea that hierarchies require participation (or at least the awareness) of all actors in them—i.e., that their structures are (at least partly) intersubjective orders. Understood in this way, the different conceptions of hierarchy are not competing. Rather, the difference is one of focus. Those who work with the broader understandings of hierarchy can view the narrow conception as one type (which they may find uninteresting because it is too limited); likewise, those who work with the narrower understanding may similarly concede that their definition of hierarchy does not capture all forms (yet still maintain that it deserves to be the focus due to its empirical verifiability).

II. Three Logics of Hierarchy

By the discussion above we do not mean to suggest that there should be no divisions in the hierarchy research agenda going forward; to the contrary, some clustering around major analytical poles is likely to be more productive in the immediate future. In this section we argue that the existing research in fact coheres around three such analytically distinct but nonexclusive 'logics of hierarchy'. A logic of hierarchy, as we mean it here,³⁶ refers to an account of particular features of hierarchical systems in terms of how they generate, produce, and otherwise create effects in, to, and of world politics. The first, the logic of *trade-offs*, focuses on the functional bargains encoded in hierarchies, which are thought to generate effects by alternatively incentivizing compliant and resistant behavior; the second, the logic of *positionality*, focuses on the material and/or social arrangements that characterize hierarchies with attention to the variety of positional or role-based behaviors they are understood to generate; and the third, the logic of *productivity*, focuses on the practical or performative ontology of hierarchies, which is understood to simultaneously produce distinctive political spaces and the varied actors and actions that populate and enact them. While each logic is thus far implicit and relatively underdeveloped, the fact that each is already being advanced across the fragmented "non-body" of hierarchy-oriented research indicates that conversation and contestation—that is, a shared research enterprise—can and should be pursued.³⁷

³⁶ The term is Alex Cooley's (2005) but we specify it differently.

³⁷ The work of rendering implicit arguments more explicit entails risks, especially appearing to characterize an author's entire oeuvre through an interpretation of one particular work. We do not

Hierarchy 1: A Logic of *Trade-offs*

The core proposition of the logic of *trade-offs* is that hierarchies affect outcomes through the particular way they structure choices that lead to action. Important to the logic of *trade-offs* is that hierarchies—and a given actor's position within a hierarchy—are understood to arise in the first place from bargained solutions to problems of order. Hierarchies, that is, are founded on exchanges in which actors trade degrees of freedom for a desired social or political arrangement. Accordingly, hierarchies institutionalize interests in that order and this distinctively affects actors' incentives and disincentives, creating compliant and non-compliant outcomes.³⁸

Within IR, the best example of the logic of *trade-offs* is David Lake's contract theory of hierarchies as expounded in *Hierarchy in International Relations*, discussed above also as an example of scholarship that adopts a narrow understanding of hierarchy. Noting the general inattention of IR to the persistence of power asymmetries established through colonialism and alliances, Lake argues that such arrangements are best understood as authoritative institutions. They function, he argues, as (explicit or tacit) bargains in which subordinates give up rights to freedom in exchange for the provision of a social order that is valued by the subordinate. International hierarchies, in other words, are theorized as functional, intentional solutions to collective problems of global governance.³⁹ As "bargains between ruler

intend to position any particular author as an exemplar theorist of one or another logic. Very few authors are attached explicitly to only one of the three logics.

³⁸ Pumain 2006, 7.

³⁹ Lake 2009, 32.

and ruled premised on the former's provision of a social order of value sufficient to offset the loss of freedom,"⁴⁰ hierarchies uniquely structure incentives in ways that explain behavior of superordinate and subordinate actors alike.⁴¹

In *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry invokes a similarly contract-functionalist logic to explain both America's longstanding position as hegemon in the liberal international order and the current crisis of American hegemony. As Ikenberry explains it, American hegemony is "a hierarchical system that was built on both American power dominance and liberal principles of governance"⁴² and that was "made acceptable to other states...because it provided security and other 'system services'."⁴³ With US authority no longer securely established, the liberal international order needs "a new bargain" through which to stabilize incentives and behaviors in world politics.⁴⁴

In *Special Responsibilities*, Bukovansky et al. also treat hierarchies as functional bargains, though ones undertaken by international society as a whole rather than by individual states. Their account arises in the course of seeking to explain why international society has historically dealt "with major global problems" through the allocation of differentiated responsibilities—or hierarchies—among sovereign states. Their argument is that hierarchies "come to the fore and assume particular political importance" in instances where neither the formal principle of sovereign equality nor power political struggle provides an adequate basis on which to address challenges

⁴⁰ Lake 2007, 54.

⁴¹ See Lake 2009, Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴² Ikenberry 2011, 6.

⁴³ Ikenberry 2011, 5.

⁴⁴ See Ikenberry 2011, Chapters 7 and 8.

of co-existence and cooperation.⁴⁵ In such instances, international society has allocated special responsibilities “to enhance the efficient working of international order.”⁴⁶ International society has, in other words, promulgated hierarchies because they give incentives to superordinates and subordinates to support and conform to the order it values.

The logic of *trade-offs* has also been deployed to account for actors’ behavior within regional orders. Kang, for instance, has argued that the hierarchy that ordered East Asian international relations from 1368-1841 rested on an implicit bargain, in which Chinese authority was legitimated because China crafted the kind of Confucian-inspired social order that was generally valued by, and so conformed with, its subordinates.⁴⁷ Keene similarly turns to bargained hierarchy resting on a prior stock of shared culture in accounting for the EU’s normative power. Normative power, suggests Keene, arises from a sort of authorized leadership in an international social club in which others are followers—that is, from a social hierarchy. Such a hierarchy, in turn, arises from a social bargain. The EU intentionally “construct[s] a distinctive identity and lifestyle”⁴⁸ that draws in a unique and exclusive way on the core social principles of international society and... establish[es] the EU as a model society to whose normative authority others implicitly consent to defer. Normative power, in this way, is explained at least partly by a logic of *trade-offs*.

⁴⁵ Bukovansky et al 2012, 6-7.

⁴⁶ Bukovansky et al 2012, 5.

⁴⁷ Kang 2010.

⁴⁸ Keene 2013, 950.

There are significant differences between each of the hierarchy-oriented analyses represented in these examples. Most notable are differences in the bases of the hierarchy-constituting agreements. Kang and Keene see the bargains upon which hierarchies are founded as authorized by the social appropriateness of the subordination, while Lake and Ikenberry focus positive consequences of subordination. Bukovansky et al. highlight both positive consequences *and* social appropriateness. Despite their differences, however, these accounts converge on at least three key points. First, *hierarchies are understood as legitimate orders* in which superordinate and subordinate alike have some material, functional, and/or social *interest* in the arrangement. Each works, that is, with a narrow understanding of hierarchy. Second and following from the first, actors are understood (more and less) as purposeful agents of order.⁴⁹ Finally, and most importantly, the bargains encoded in hierarchies are understood to structure action, whether through social or interest-based incentives.

It is on this last point that a common research enterprise can be clearly discerned. From the logic of *trade-offs* follows the need to make sense of the distinctive matrix of (social and/or material) incentives created by hierarchies. Since the matrix varies for any given action (compliant, non-compliant, resistant, conciliatory, etc.) and with an actor's (superordinate or subordinate) role, the challenge is to specify the matrices as they pertain to differently positioned actors under varied conditions. The bulk of this research has focused on superordinate states, and in particular, the incentives they face to exercise self-restraint in spite of their right to govern through

⁴⁹ There are disagreements about how much agency and intention actors exert in this process, as well as who has it.

power as they see fit. Ikenberry and Lake each characterize these incentives in terms of the contingency of the dominant states' authority on the buy-in of the superordinate, while Bukovansky et al. characterize them in terms of the norms of right action and the expectation of political accountability faced by superordinate power.⁵⁰ In any case, it is in this incentive for self-restraint, arising from the intersubjective or relational character of a legitimacy the order, that the value of this hierarchy heuristic becomes clear. Basically, this logic explains an aspect of unipolarity that couldn't be apprehended through balance of power theory.⁵¹

In addition to research on the *trade-offs* facing superordinates, some attention has also been paid to the distinctive effects of (bargained) hierarchy on subordinates, as well as the conditions under which non-compliance, resistance or under-compliance might emerge. With respect to subordinates, the matrix of incentives appears to encourage the delegation of responsibility for security—among other things—to superordinates.⁵² With respect to noncompliant behavior, research has focused on the incentives for contestation arising from the rather visible inequalities that hierarchies entail.⁵³

Related to this line of research is a common concern with the internal dynamism of hierarchies. Bargained hierarchy rests on 'relational authority' such that superordinate's legitimacy depends upon how well that actor delivers upon the expectations of the role. But given that all actors in hierarchies face position-specific

⁵⁰ Bukovansky et al 2012, 16.

⁵¹ Ikenberry 2011, 9; see also Finnemore 2009.

⁵² Lake 2009b.

⁵³ Bukovansky et al. 2012, 16.

matrices of incentives, sustaining “an equilibrium among interests” is an ongoing process.⁵⁴ The implication is that whereas anarchy is understood as a given condition, or as deep structure, hierarchies, by contrast, are seen to be constantly subject to renegotiation as bargained orders. Hence, some research has considered the benefits of disequilibrium for creating flexible, durable orders. Conflicts of incentives generate productive tensions that change behavior and outcomes. This creates opportunities for a new bargain and a new equilibrium.⁵⁵ Other research however questions the extent to which these tensions are necessarily productive, considering how disequilibrium of interests can undermine legitimacy, provoke resistance and even lead to the transformation of the hierarchical order.⁵⁶

Hierarchy 2: A Logic of *Positionality*

While a logic of *trade-offs* proposes that hierarchies affect international politics by altering how actors go about pursuing their interests, a logic of *positionality* proposes that hierarchies do so by constituting or making salient to actors their particular position-contingent roles. The insight thus is that the content of what actors want and what is important to them depends in part on where they are positioned in a hierarchical order. Accounts of hierarchy along these lines have emerged through research in a variety of substantive areas: security,⁵⁷ foreign policy,⁵⁸ the influence of international relations on domestic politics,⁵⁹ diplomacy,⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Lake 2009, 16.

⁵⁵ Ikenberry 2012.

⁵⁶ Nexon 2007.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Ayoob 2003, Wendt and Friedheim 1995, Wendt and Barnett 1993.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Adler-Nissen and Gad 2012, Morozov 2013, 2015, Kosebalaban 2008, Zarakol 2011.

international law,⁶¹ and even in research on IR scholarship itself.⁶² Paul et al's *Status in World Politics* covers most of these areas as well.

Within IR there are many excellent examples of the logic of *positionality*, though this research tends to be more indirect about its hierarchy-orientation than the logic of *trade-offs*. Most of this vein of scholarship also operates with a broader understanding of hierarchy as (intersubjectively) organized inequality. Though the particular puzzles on which these research efforts are trained vary widely, there is a shared analytical focus on the socializing effects of hierarchies on the actors positioned within them. Whereas in the logic of *trade-offs* hierarchies appear as agent-constituted bargains that constrain and enable the pursuit of actors' already-given interests, here, hierarchies appear as extant features of the world political environment in which actors simply find themselves; and which *teach* actors to play certain roles, including having certain interests and expectations (and are thus sustained by them)

Scholarship on the distribution of power and its impact on state behavior offers one important example of a logic of *positionality* as an approach to hierarchies. Because of its theoretical origins in balance-of-power studies, it is rare to see this scholarship directly connected to the notion of "hierarchy." However, in its focus on systemic, vertical differentiation of power capabilities, this scholarship indirectly invokes the broad conception of hierarchy. In its focus on actors' position-contingent interests

⁵⁹ See e.g. Neumann 1995, Zarakol 2011, 2013, Morozov 2013, 2015.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Adler-Nissen 2014, Zarakol 2010, 2014.

⁶¹ See e.g. Keene 2007, Subotic and Zarakol 2013.

⁶² See e.g. Levine 2012, Vitalis 2015.

and expectations, it points to a logic of *positionality* to explain outcomes in world politics. In characterizing the international system as a cycle of hegemony, challenge, war, and restabilization, power transition theory as discussed in Organski and Kugler, for instance, presupposes that actors are always already positioned within a durable structure of vertical differentiation and that different positions stimulate different kinds of interests—status quo, revisionist, and regional—for dominant, great, and middle powers, respectively.⁶³

A focus on the logic of positionality in hierarchies has also been used to explain outcomes that are unexpected through the 'balance-of-power' theory. For instance, in their essay in Paul et al's *Status in World Politics*, Larson and Schevchenko argue that materially stratified hierarchies are just part of the story, for most of those hierarchies are also overlaid with a social hierarchy. In the latter, actors are positioned according to the level of status conferred on them by the social recognition of others. Social status matters for behavior, but precisely *how* it matters depends on positionality. Those with superior material positions tend to become socially competitive when those with inferior material positions have a higher status rank. Writing in a similar vein, Tom Volgy et al. in the same volume reverse the story: social hierarchies matter much more for the behavior of those who are positioned *lower down* on a material hierarchy—like those who fall just short of great power standing. In such cases improved social status is less costly to achieve and more attainable than great power standing.

⁶³ See e.g. Organski and Kugler 1980.

Still others have argued that to fully understand the impact of social hierarchies on world politics, their logic of positionality and behavior generating effects ought to be treated on their own, rather than fused analytically to positionality in material hierarchy. For instance, Bially Mattern argues that quite apart from material concerns, the status anxieties of each the US and Britain over their potential 'unrecognition' as leaders of the West played a key role in the peaceful resolution of the Suez Crisis in 1956.⁶⁴ Onuf emphasizes that hierarchy cannot be reduced to an order of material power and argues that international relations are best thought of as a heteronomous.⁶⁵

Just as with the logic of *trade-offs*, there are significant differences among the works that adopt a logic of *positionality*. Some study positionality effects in the context of material stratification, whereas others focus on the logic of social positionality. Though in principle there is nothing to preclude *positionality* approaches from adopting a narrow conception of hierarchy, most works in this vein work with a broad conception (though often not as broad as the one adopted by the logic of *productivity* discussed below). While most work following a logic of *positionality* thus emphasizes the importance of structure, disagreements exist over the degree of agency actors enjoy within hierarchical systems. Despite their differences, however, these accounts converge on a number of points: that hierarchies are relatively durable; that an actor's position within a hierarchy is not (just) a choice or the result of a bargain; that an actors' identity, role, interests and/or expectations are

⁶⁴ Bially Mattern 2005b.

⁶⁵ Onuf 1989, 2013, 2014.

constituted by, or an effect of, their position in the system; and that it is through these socializing dynamics that hierarchies create effects in world politics.

Vibrant research is growing up around this common ground. For instance, a core area of inquiry regards which actors' behaviors are most affected by hierarchy: those at the top, the bottom or somewhere in between. Within this vein, research on social hierarchies (both in connection with and sometimes independent of material hierarchies) has developed particularly quickly, focusing especially on the *intensity* of socialization. Building on the idea that the impact of a hierarchy depends on socialization at the bottom, many have turned their attention to lower ranking actors. In *Women and States*, Towns sees the desire to move up ranks as part of being socialized to lower rankings, and as a result, she is more optimistic about the possibility of upward mobility. This explains why policy diffusion can come from below.⁶⁶ For Adler-Nissen in *Opting out of the European Union*, low-ranking agents are socialized enough to be negatively affected by their stigmatization, but not so socialized as to lack the agency to strive for change. By considering the conditions under which stigma would be managed by opting out, she uses the logic of positionality to consider how hierarchies may produce resistance as well as compliance.⁶⁷ Others see actors as having less ability to resist socialization to their position. For example, Zarakol argues in *After Defeat* that socialization of non-Western states (particularly former empires such as Turkey, Japan and Russia) to the Western order after the nineteenth century, when coupled with defeat, did create a desire in those actors to move up rank; yet the very act of having to fight

⁶⁶ Towns 2012; see also Towns 2010.

⁶⁷ Adler-Nissen 2015; see also Adler-Nissen 2014.

stigmatization has led to behaviors that reproduce stigmatization and reinforce the hierarchy.⁶⁸ Drawing from an English School account and focusing on China and Japan, Suzuki in *Civilization and Empire* advances a similar view.⁶⁹ Authors who focus primarily on non-Western states are generally less optimistic about the possibility of upward mobility. Hobson and Sharman observe that status hierarchies can also socialize the powerful: "In the 18th and especially 19th centuries through to 1945/60 prevailing norms of great power status were grounded in racist norms which prescribed that a state is a great power when it can govern over large areas of land in the 'inferior non-European world'...The British (and others) engaged in imperialism not simply because they could. Rather they engaged in it because they believed they should."⁷⁰ The British superior racial standing and superior power standing not only legitimated but required their superior political standing.

In sum, the logic of positionality connects hierarchies to action in world politics through the dynamics created by vertically differentiated status, material, ideational, or otherwise. Hence, whereas the logic of *trade-offs* suggests that hierarchies are created by actors as solutions to problems of order, the logic of *positionality* suggests that existing hierarchies (which may or may not have been purposefully created⁷¹) matter because they socialize actors to respond to positionally-appropriate incentives.

⁶⁸ Zarakol 2011; see also Zarakol 2010, 2014.

⁶⁹ Suzuki 2010; see also Suzuki 2005.

⁷⁰ Hobson and Sharman 2005, 87.

⁷¹ Most research in this vein is not interested in purposefully created hierarchies a la the logic of *trade-offs*, but it is possible to reconcile some versions of the two logics if one considered the logic of *trade-offs* as being more about the origins and the logic of *positionality* as being more about

Hierarchy 3: Logic of *Productivity*

With the logic of *trade-offs*, then, the emphasis is on *agents* and how they purposefully erect hierarchies as solutions to problems of order, with minimal attention paid to structures; by contrast, with the logic of *positionality* the emphasis is on how hierarchical *structures* constrain or influence agent choices, behavior and perceptions. The third logic, that of productivity, mutes the agency angle almost entirely in favor of *structure*.

The core proposition implied by the logic of *productivity* is that hierarchy does not just shape the behaviors of actors in world politics, but rather produces *both* the actors and the space of world politics in which they act. The feature of hierarchies most central to the logic of *productivity* is their practical, or performative, ontology. It also goes without saying that adopting the logic of *productivity* necessarily implies a broader understanding of hierarchy, even beyond what is found in most works that employ a logic of *positionality*. Approached as social practices, hierarchies are cultures-in-action that are materialized through bodily activity and discursive regimes.⁷² The practice of hierarchies produces actors by surfacing them within their structure of differentiation as particular kinds of agents with particular capacities for action that belong, or do not, in some space of world politics. The practice of hierarchies, as such, produces the actors of world politics as well as their repertoires

effects of hierarchies on agents. It should be emphasized however that other readings are also possible that would not be so complimentary.

⁷² e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001, Butler 1997, Bially Mattern 2011.

for action. But it also produces the boundaries that define who and what belongs where in world politics. In this way, a logic of productivity is bold in the stance that to study international politics inevitably is to study hierarchies.

Within IR, a logic of *productivity* is found most commonly in post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist, and critical research, especially on borders. Starting from premise that “our worlds” are produced through the discursive practices by which we make sense of them, Weldes et. al. argue that borders—physical, territorial, conceptual/analytical, or collectively imagined—must be seen as sites of power, inequality and the practice of hierarchy.⁷³ Key to this claim about borders is that discursive practices—like all practices—are founded not on universal truths but historically contingent knowledge structures (linguistic, bodily, tacit, explicit) that signify objects, subjects and other phenomena by positioning them in relation to each other.⁷⁴ Discourses, thus, are forms of power; “regimes of truth” that dominate and violate by arbitrarily defining “the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal, what counts as a social problem”; and so, *who* is (im)possible, (im)probable, natural, normal and problematic.⁷⁵ They bring social beings into being, as particular identities, with particular interests, that have particular agencies, or particular capacities to make themselves present to others— capacities that mark them as superior or inferior. The discursive practices of bordering, thus, inscribe spaces of inside (superior) and outside (inferior) by ‘making’ the superior and inferior actors that populate them. For instance, in *Writing Security* Campbell argues that

⁷³ Weldes et al. 1999.

⁷⁴ Milliken 1999.

⁷⁵ Hayward as cited in Barnett and Duvall 2005, 21.

discourses that drive US foreign policy have produced “the boundaries of the identity in whose name it operates.” But at the same time it also produced the many dangers against which the US requires protection.⁷⁶ More recently, Barder has argued that international hierarchies, whether in the guise of imperialism or hegemony, have “historically resulted in the experimentation and innovation of various norms and practices that (re)shape the domestic space of various imperial or hegemonic powers.”⁷⁷ In Barder’s account even *domestic* political outcomes in both the core and the periphery are produced by international hierarchies.

Given the importance of power-laden discourses in the practice of hierarchies and the logic of productivity, one focal point for researchers has been on disclosing the mechanisms of power through which particular discursive regimes of truth produce and naturalize hierarchies and the political inequalities that flow from them. In *Simulating Sovereignty*, Weber demonstrates how “the natural” fact of state sovereignty is produced and sustained through the ongoing performance of a constantly shifting discursive boundary between acceptable and unacceptable international interventions.⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Agathangelou and Ling show how the seemingly natural interest of states in clear borders and security are actually produced by hierarchical social relations centered on the boundaries of class, race, and gender.⁷⁹ In other words, even the most basic concepts of international politics are normalized reflections of the structures of inequality of everyday life.

⁷⁶ Campbell 1998, 5.

⁷⁷ Barder 2015, 2.

⁷⁸ Weber 1998, 93.

⁷⁹ Agathangelou and Ling 2004.

Another focus within the logic of *productivity* has been on the kind of subjectivities produced by hierarchies. Given that “identities are always constituted in relation to difference because a thing can only be known by what it is not,” it follows that “subjectivity...produces its own exteriority as object.”⁸⁰ Since these discursive formations define the things that can be said and are therefore also constitutive of actions and social reality as a whole, subjectivity appears stable. The implication is of being locked into and perpetually reproducing the discourse by which one is produced. This has led to a concern in this literature with ethics as well as with the lived experience of different perspectives.⁸¹

It is not just critical approaches, however, that see hierarchy as a productive force in international political life. Any theory that accepts formal anarchy among states as a defining feature of international politics implicitly presupposes the productive effects of hierarchies. After all, it is only through the distinctive hierarchical relation of states to their territorially-bounded societies that they emerge as sovereign actors and that the formally anarchic space of international politics comes into being.⁸² Inasmuch as one acknowledges the productive effects of domestic hierarchy for creating the international, it is also logically consistent to consider the productive effects of hierarchies on international life, and world politics more broadly. Perhaps the failure among IR scholars who do not ascribe to thick constructivist assumptions to appreciate this explains why the implications of productive hierarchies are even more understudied than others. Implied though a logic of *productivity* may be in

⁸⁰ Rumelili 2004, 29; Walker 2006, 58; see also Neumann 1998.

⁸¹ Sylvester et al 2011, Guillaume 2002, Edkins et al. 2004.

⁸² Ashley 1988.

many mainstream IR theories—especially Waltzian neorealism—the sociological and political distance has surely impeded the emergence of any latent common research enterprise around this account of hierarchy.

III. Toward a Hierarchy Agenda

The discussion above demonstrates that it is possible to pursue a meaningful research agenda focused on the effects of hierarchies in world politics. In this section we bring the three logics of hierarchy into contact with each other to suggest the most promising paths forward. Globalized world politics unfolds among a multiplicity of actors, and plays out through multiple processes across multiples scales of aggregation. This complexity, combined with the growing distaste of most IR scholars for overly parsimonious theories, has led to a decline in systemic theorizing about world politics.⁸³ Along with it has been the demise of an integrated and shared (if disputed) understanding among IR scholars of how world politics is organized. Hierarchy-centered approaches to world politics contain within them a path toward systemic theories that can accommodate global complexity.

First, as is evident from the application of hierarchy-oriented research to non-state actors and processes, all three logics of hierarchy are just as applicable to non-state actors as to states⁸⁴ and at all scales of aggregation. What is more, whereas studies of non-state actors that begin with the international/anarchy imaginary “add” these actors into a state-based system that is already whole without them, the logic of

⁸³ Albert et al. 2010 notwithstanding.

⁸⁴ e.g. Wong 2012.

hierarchical systems derives from their constitutive principle for stratification—not from the putative likeness of the units.⁸⁵ Second, since each logic of hierarchy analytically captures different processes, dynamics, and forms of power, *taking them together* increases the leverage on the complex, multifaceted processes by which globalized world politics unfold. In other words, the logics of *trade-offs*, *positionality*, and *productivity* ought not be treated as mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, the limitations of each logic gesture for their resolution back to the others. The suggestion, thus, is that the logics are nested, layered, overlapping, or otherwise linked within or across hierarchies. Sustained inquiry into the nature of the linkages among the three logics is the first step toward a coherent systemic account of how globalized world politics is organized.

Consider first the logic of *trade-offs*. While this logic gestures toward a connection between the origins of hierarchies and hierarchies' effects on choice and action in world politics, the connection is far from clear. How exactly do hierarchies create the trade-offs that (later) shape behavior? The significance of exogenous conditions for the matrix of incentive structures facing any given actor is under-theorized.⁸⁶ For instance, some research has shown that the incentives for superordinate self-restraint vary significantly depending on such factors as domestic regime type and system polarity.⁸⁷ Another area that needs further study are the origins and effects

⁸⁵ Donnelly 2009.

⁸⁶ For an illustration of positionality and productivity critiques on the logic of trade-offs on this point, see e.g. the "Interrogating the Use of Norms in International Relations" Forum in *International Theory*. Epstein 2014, Zarakol 2014, Gallagher 2014, Shilliam 2014, Jabri 2014.

⁸⁷ E.g., bipolar systems reinforce the incentive for superordinate self-restraint while unipolar systems weaken it. See e.g. Ikenberry 2012, Deudney 2007.

of particular incentives, given that most actors are positioned within many overlapping hierarchies all at the same time. In other words, “narrow” hierarchies exist in a world of “broad” hierarchies and the many ways in which the two types interact have been understudied. In a world of heterarchy—multi-level and nested hierarchical arrangements where authority is dispersed across different superordinates—behavior may be driven more by the interaction of incentives *across* hierarchies rather than within them. Addressing the question of how hierarchies matter also requires facing up to the possibility that the matrix of incentives (or at least some significant portion of it) *pre-exists* the emergence of bargains rather than arise out of them. A possible indication is that hierarchies do not create the matrix of incentives that confront actors; they merely reflect them. Bargained hierarchies may often merely institutionalize exchanges of order for freedom. To demonstrate that hierarchy matters for world political behavior would require demonstrating that hierarchies generate new incentives for behavior and action.⁸⁸ Hence, for instance, Bukovansky et al. suggest that hierarchies also have generative effects in producing authoritative social actors and endowing them with social power that did not pre-exist the hierarchy. But it is hard to make sense of how this could be so if hierarchies are functional, interest-based bargains that reflect pre-existing conditions. It is in realizing this, perhaps, Bukovansky et al. gesture tentatively toward the other logics of hierarchy. In doing so, they signal key links that merit exploration.

⁸⁸ For instance, the way that Waltz argues that anarchy produces incentives for defensive self-help. The problem echoes the common critique of neoliberal institutionalism regarding whether institutions do anything that isn't reducible to pre-existing interests in the first place.

The logic of *positionality* has much to offer in terms of developing structuralist research in IR, especially because of its sensitivity to historical and geographical differences. When it comes to specifying the conditions of movement within hierarchies, however, this line of analysis could benefit from a deeper engagement with theories of agency, both as found in the logic of *trade-offs* but also elsewhere, e.g. in psychology. Indeed, the lack of attention to psychology is surprising given that this literature is making a very substantive set of claims about human drives (such as status-seeking). In other words, it needs to take more seriously the ways in which agents participate in the creation and maintenance of hierarchical structures. Another avenue for further consideration are the implications of hierarchy-influenced behavior for stability and change in world politics. While on the one hand this logic suggests that hierarchies stimulate agency and change as actors try to move up, on the other hand it also suggests that hierarchies stimulate dynamics that play on and reinforce dynamics of differentiation. In this way, hierarchy begets hierarchy, and to escape from one hierarchy requires the erection of another one. Just as Waltz offered no way out of anarchy, this line of reasoning offers no way out of hierarchy. The core insight seems to be that hierarchy always matters. Hence, like anarchy, it really never matters much. The challenge then becomes explaining why any variation in behavior exists. Some scholars accept that hierarchy is everywhere and would prefer to focus on improving them. But many leave open the possibility of the collapse of hierarchy. Interests, identity, drives and desires can change, so it remains theoretically possible that the dynamics touched off by hierarchy be disrupted. Hierarchies break down where their initial conditions (the desires of actors) vary; and this will result in a different evolution of the trajectory of the system. This is implied in the idea that given the right circumstances peasants, workers, racial minorities, etc. will revolt. But what are those circumstances? To understand what difference

hierarchy makes we need to understand—as with the logic of *trade-offs*—how much hierarchy matters relative to other factors in stimulating the drives to action.

The logic of *productivity*, aligned as it generally is with a non-positivist epistemology, raises significant insights about the variety of forms and mechanisms of power as well as the importance of process to the workings of hierarchies that are overlooked by the logics of *trade-offs* and *positionality*. And yet, precisely because of its emphasis on human social practice and insistence on the arbitrariness of the foundations of knowledge, discourse, practice, and hierarchies, the logic of *productivity* implies an ironic sort of (over-)determinism and stasis. Inasmuch as hierarchies produce the actors within them, they also determine their capacities for action—from deep-seated unconscious drives and desires, to tacit habituated knowledge, to conscious identities and interests. Hence, as Butler notes, it is unclear how agents have the capacity to act apart from or against the hierarchical structures that produce them and their particular positions within it. They are *subject* to it.⁸⁹ The suggestion is that IR scholars should probe more deeply into the *interiorizing* dynamics of socialization rather than eschewing psychology on the curiously arbitrary ground that “we can’t get inside minds”.⁹⁰ What makes this so important is that in the absence of insights into the lapses in socialization, the problem of determinism arising from productive power of hierarchies remains.

Not only does this sit uncomfortably with the emphasis on process and contingency but it is far from clear that actors do more than just reproduce the hierarchies that

⁸⁹ Butler 1997, 8.

⁹⁰ cf. Neumann and Sending 2010.

produce them. Just as structural realists tried to account for deviations by paying analytical attention to the varied forms of agency that emerge when the logic of a domestic hierarchy becomes intertwined with the logic of material hierarchy under anarchy (i.e., neoclassical realism, two level games) so have those interested in productive hierarchies in world politics taken up the question of how overlapping and networked hierarchies create dissident agencies. For instance, Rumelili notes in reference to the EU that not all difference can be readily rendered exterior, for hierarchies thrive on clear distinctions that can be difficult to reproduce in a “multi-perspectival polity” that is itself constituted through competing discourses. The result is that some subjects are produced as liminal, slipping back and forth across the boundary between identity and difference in ways that are potentially disruptive to hierarchies.⁹¹ Turning a similar insight into a quasi-auto-ethnographic reflection, Muppidi makes an argument about his own “non-western” subjectivity as a professor of International Relations—though one that is perhaps less optimistic about the potentially transformative effects of liminality.⁹² In these accounts of varying agency and roles, the logic of productivity gestures back towards other logics of hierarchy.

TABLE I HERE

In short, the shortcomings of each logic gestures back to the others for a solution. Though the precise nature of the links among the logics requires careful examination, the indication is nonetheless clear that they can be taken together (or

⁹¹ Rumelili 2003, 2004.

⁹² Muppidi 2012.

at least coexist) to inform theorizing and empirical research on world politics as a global system.

Conclusion: Looking Beyond Anarchy

The hierarchy-centered research agenda that we have sketched over the course of this essay is organic to the discipline, latent already within so much IR scholarship. And yet, we fear that there remains a considerable obstacle to the development of the kind of active, self-conscious enterprise we have proposed. The problem is not conceptual disarray (which we have shown can be negotiated) or logical complexity (which we have shown can be parsed). The problem is that scholars, as people, may be too socialized to the political project of the nation-state to systematically engage with a world of politics that is not always neatly organized into discrete domains of domestic and international.

Our socialization as individuals to the "nation-state" manifests professionally in a number of ways, above all in the fact that anarchy, understood as a condition of the relations between sovereign nation-states, has been made to be *the* defining feature of IR as a discipline even though it is of relatively new vintage in world politics. Although IR scholars trace anarchy⁹³ back to the discipline's foundational texts, it is more accurate to say they have read it back onto those texts. Waltz, for example, claimed that Thucydides' history represented "an early recognition of the 'anarchic character of international politics,' which 'accounts for the striking sameness of the

⁹³ For a more extensive critical take on IR's treatment of the anarchy concept, see Donnelly (Forthcoming). See also Verdier 2006.

quality of international life throughout the millennia’.”⁹⁴ Others have similarly interpreted Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau.⁹⁵ But none of these supposed precursors talk about anarchy in the way that contemporary IR scholars mean it.⁹⁶ When Thucydides talked about civil war, he was describing a world where the “enemy” is seen as part of the same community rather than another sovereign; when Hobbes likened the relations between states to kings standing in the posture of gladiators, he used the metaphor to conjure a much more formalized setting (with its codes of fighting, weaponry, salutes etc.) than the nasty, brutish and short existence that described individuals surviving in the state of nature. But it is the latter upon which IR scholars have seized in constructing the history of anarchy. In using the concepts and metaphors they did, authors such as Thucydides and Hobbes could not help but convey certain common understandings of their time. But as scholars of our time, we have grafted their terms onto our own understandings. Those understandings—of sovereigns ungoverned—emerged only at the turn of the twentieth century, alongside the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations.⁹⁷

It is no accident that IR scholarship reflects the particular understanding of world politics (or inter-polity relations) that it does. The particular way in which we

⁹⁴ Schmidt 1997, 40, quoting Waltz 1979.

⁹⁵ Schmidt 1997, 27; see also Doyle 1996.

⁹⁶ The word anarchy is not mentioned in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651). The word did exist in English having entered usage before the seventeenth century, but Hobbes did not use the word anarchy in reference to the relations of individuals or states either (see Hobbes 1946[1651], 83, chapter XIII). The origins of the word are in ancient Greek, but the particular word was not used by Thucydides either. Thucydides’ views on anarchy are mined from his observations on “civil war”.

⁹⁷ See Schmidt 1997; Vitalis 2005, 2010.

conceptualize relations between polities has much to do with how we perceive the polity itself. But perception of polities as bounded communities (or as “states”) is a distinctly modern invention. It was not even until Renaissance that “man and state for the first time came to be thought of as independent and self-directing entities.”⁹⁸ It was not even until early nineteenth century that “rule came to be defined exclusively in terms of territories with boundaries between homogenous spatial authority claims.”⁹⁹ It would have been inconceivable for most of human history to think of polities in terms of territorial continuity, unitary rational agency, or as existing in an anarchy. Indeed, the conception of “the state” which our discipline to be universal is so historically contingent and so far removed from practical reality that it has only ever been actualized at only for moments in history.¹⁰⁰

In sum, the same processes that gave rise to Political Science and International Relations—the project of modern statecraft—also make it possible (and attractive) to think of world politics as only an inter-state anarchy. Fearing the possibilities of an oppressive world state or the fragmentation implicit in neo-feudal scenarios, perhaps we instinctively sense that the domestic-international dichotomy provides some theoretical protection from worse worlds. Alternatively anarchy may be attractive as a concept because it masks the intractable inequalities of the modern order. Focusing on the anarchic nature of the international system arguably obscures the conditions of inequality in the world, making it difficult to talk about even the

⁹⁸ Bruckhardt, 1860/1958, vol, II: 279-302, cited by Ringmar, 1996, 444; see also Bartelson 2009, Ruggie 1993.

⁹⁹ Branch 2011, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Krasner 1999.

political hierarchies that are not explicitly formalized, let alone economic or social inequalities.

We emphasize possible reasons behind the discipline's attachment to anarchy beyond its explanatory power not because we think anarchy has no utility as a concept but because we believe it has been a jealous god in demanding our attention. Hierarchy-centrism does not necessitate abandoning the concept of anarchy altogether, any more than trying to understand the dynamics of our vast universe requires astronomers to deny the importance of the Sun altogether. The undeniable changes in world politics—from the rise of non-state actors to global protests to erosion of state power—are making it increasingly harder to ignore cross-cutting global hierarchies that were always there anyway. It is time that we take hierarchy seriously.

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TABLE I: LOGICS OF HIERARCHY COMPARISON CHART

	Emphasis	Definition	Analytic Focus	Manifestations	Usually found in	Shortcomings
Logic of Trade-offs	Agency	Narrow	Creation of functional bargains (with super and subordinate positions)	Authority Legitimacy	Liberalism Constructivism	Origins of incentives under-theorized
Logic of Positionality	Structures shaping actors and action	[Broad]	Effects of superior and inferior social and political roles	Status and status-seeking	Realism Constructivism Marxism	Mechanisms of change under-theorized
Logic of Productivity	Structures	Very broad	Existence of superior and inferior social/political spaces and actors	Borders Binaries Subjectivity	Post-structuralism Post-colonialism Feminism Critical theory	Ways of exercising agency under-theorized