

# Rethinking International Order

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Traditional accounts of “international order” assume that it is of recent vintage: that a European regional order increasingly became global between the seventeenth century and the present. This is partly because scholars and practitioners have not defined international order very well. There are two problems with commonly used definitions: on the one hand, they are too broad, conflating order with other cognate concepts; on the other hand, they are too narrow, unnecessarily building into the definition temporarily specific aspects that constrain our historical and future-oriented imagination. This conceptual fuzziness indirectly implicates some larger questions about the discipline of international relations (IR) and how it could rise to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The first section of this essay reflects on these problems. On the one hand, I argue that “order” should not be defined too broadly if we are to meaningfully observe how it can change, slip into disorder, or even completely fall apart. We can distinguish order from “structure” and “system” by reserving order for products of human design and agency, even if the outcome does not always perfectly resemble the design. Thus, I start by speculating about why IR came to conflate order with seemingly similar concepts such as system or structure in the first place. On the other hand, I argue that the term “international” is too narrow as a

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qualifier for orders with aspirations of universal coverage because it is too temporally specific and unnecessarily gives a priori privilege to a particular political unit—the nation. Orders with universalizing visions and ambitions predate the era of nations and nation-states. There is also no guarantee that the nation-state will continue to be the only or main unit of order-making in the future. Therefore, it would be better to adopt an alternative qualifier that allows for comparisons with the past and conceptualizations of the future.

In the second section of the essay, I put these arguments together to define “world order” as the (man-made) rules, understandings, and institutions that govern (and pattern) relations between the actors of world politics. A world order is more deliberately created (or designed) by its various actors and more reflexively maintained (or undermined) than structure. Defined as such, we can indeed find comparable world orders in history that we can learn from. Such orders have different primary units than the modern international order—for example, ruling houses—but are comparable to it in the ways that they were organized, reproduced, and/or undermined. Broadening our vision in this way also has important implications for how we think about the future of world order as well as our normative judgments about orderliness.

## DEFINING AND QUALIFYING ORDER

For all the collective hand-wringing we have engaged in as a discipline in the last decade (at least in the Global North) over the fate of the so-called liberal international order,<sup>1</sup> the concept of order remains undertheorized in a number of ways. The problem is not so much that we lack a definition of order (or a definition of the “liberal international order”). There are plenty of workable definitions of both: for instance, “international orders” are “institutionalised arrangements of sovereign states, in which institutions such as sovereignty, international law, and diplomacy help realize ‘the elementary goals of the society of states’ or ‘large-scale configurations of political authority, which might be imperial, suzerain, heteronomous, sovereign, or some combination of these.’”<sup>2</sup> Most of the definitions floating around are quite workable for the purposes of the discipline, especially if we are writing about contemporary events.

What I mean when I say that the concept of order is undertheorized is thus something else—that is, we do not have a good sense of how order differs from cognate concepts, on the one hand, and its antonyms, on the other. When I

was in graduate school in the United States in the first decade of the century, system discourse still eclipsed order discourse. Everyone talked about international *systems* (and structures) rather than international *orders*. There are probably a number of reasons for this. One is the influence of structural realism/Kenneth Waltz in the discipline.<sup>3</sup> This is well-trodden ground. But, of course, it is not just Waltz or realists who spoke of state systems. In a 1994 article he wrote for *American Political Science Review*, Alexander Wendt defined “constructivism” as “a structural theory of the *international system* that makes the following core claims: (1) states are the principal units of analysis for international political theory; (2) the key structures in the states system are intersubjective rather than material; and (3) state identities and interests are in important part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature [as neorealists maintain] or domestic politics [as neoliberals favor]” (Italics my own).<sup>4</sup> This was also a moment when both Anthony Giddens and structuration theory were quite influential in IR constructivism, and of course Giddens talks about social systems as the functioning of structural relationships.<sup>5</sup>

IR theorists’ thinking about structure has always found inspiration in social, economic, and organizational theorizing about systems. English School theorists spoke of international systems or state systems as well, drawing from structural realism.<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little published an article called “The Idea of ‘International System’: Theory Meets History” in 1994, where they explored the issue from a historical angle.<sup>7</sup> In sum, in the 1990s and also the aughts, most everyone in IR thought of the international as a system rather than an order (likely even the liberal institutionalists). We could delve into the bigger reasons for this—the influence of systems theory on social sciences in general, for instance. The desire to seem scientific<sup>8</sup> probably also has something to do with using “system” rather than “order.” The latter invokes human agency more explicitly and thus inevitably reminds us of the messiness/unpredictability of the same (I will discuss this below).

In the last decade, it has become somewhat less fashionable to talk about systems in IR and much more common to talk about order. Even a cursory web search will show that conference and workshop themes aimed at broad IR audiences in recent years invoke “order” much more frequently than “system” or “structure.” Some of this may have to do with the decreasing influence of neorealism in the aughts. Neorealists were always much more likely to talk about systems and structure, and when they dominated the field, their jargon also

dominated conversations.<sup>9</sup> Much of the order talk was specific to the liberal international order, of course; first about its resilience (though I note that Daniel Drezner's 2014 book on this theme was called *The System Worked* [emphasis added]),<sup>10</sup> and then, especially after 2016, about its crisis and decline (see, for example, the seventy-fifth anniversary issue of *International Organization*).<sup>11</sup> In time, this begat efforts (that many of us in this roundtable have also been involved in) to properly theorize order. But we never properly had a conversation in the discipline about how system differs from order (or vice versa).

The terms are not necessarily in competition, but nor are they interchangeable. But a lot of people do use them interchangeably, especially in oral discussions.<sup>12</sup> The growing order literature would benefit from clarifying how order differs from system. At a very basic level, we could note that the main difference seems to be the aforementioned respective associations with structure and agency. As noted previously, system points more easily toward structure, whereas order points more easily towards human agency. This may be another reason why the term order has become more popular lately. Many scholars and policymakers think that we are in a period of global crisis; it is possible that in such times observers become more aware that much of their environment was or is man-made. They become aware of its fragility; they realize that the world around them is not naturally or automatically self-sustaining, which takes them away from systems/equilibrium thinking and moves them toward thinking about order. In periods of crisis, we may want to believe in the possibility of ordering the world because we need to believe we have the agency to fix what is wrong.

So, we have established one problem with discussions of international order: orders are different from systems. This brings us to a second issue: Must orders be necessarily called international? "International" presumes the presence (or even the ubiquity) of nation-states, so it does not work for historical purposes before the nineteenth century. Nations in the sense we understand them did not exist until at least the eighteenth century, so it is misleading to speak of international relations or international orders before then as well (not that this stops anyone from speaking about Europe using these terms). This is partly what led us to believe as a discipline that orders of macroscale and universal ambition were of recent vintage and a European invention only.

But it is the unnecessary temporal restriction built into the term international order itself that leads us to make erroneous assumptions about non-Western actors. As I argue in my recent book *Before the West*,<sup>13</sup> in IR, non-Western states

and peoples are frequently understood to have been without international politics or an interest in the world at large until Europeans brought them into a global order in the nineteenth century; that is, they are understood to have been local actors only. In recent years, the rise of China (and “the Rest”), as well as the growing criticism about the Eurocentrism of traditional IR theories, has increased interest in studying the history of other parts of the world from an IR perspective, especially that of East Asia. Welcome as such efforts may be, most of them also still suffer from the assumption that all non-European orders were only regional not only in practice but also in aspiration. Furthermore, in studying non-European orders as regional, we tend to impose onto the past today’s regional divisions and sometimes also today’s national historiographies and myths. As I will discuss in the next section, if we did not unnecessarily build the unit expectation into our labels for orders, we could uncover historical orders comparable in their scope and ambition to the modern *international* order. If we pull back from the idea of “international relations” to instead look at interpolity relations and think about international orders as universalizing world-ordering arrangements, then we can be more open-minded about what sorts of “world orders” have existed outside of Europe.

“Global” is arguably better as a qualifier of orders (especially going forward in time), but it is still anachronistic when applied to periods before people thought of the world as a globe. Also, global implies an even stronger judgment about the coverage area of the order than “international.” When we call an order international or global, are we referring to its universal ambition or its geographic span? Maybe both, but making the definition too much about the empirical on-the-ground reality would disqualify all orders, and leaning too much in the other direction is not feasible either.

## SWITCHING TO “WORLD ORDER” AND IMPLICATIONS FOR IR

For all these reasons, at a higher level of abstraction it is better to speak of world orders than international orders, because doing so gives us better purchase on the past and thus helps us better imagine how *inter*-national or *inter*-state order (indeed a subtype of world order) may evolve in the future or what it may be replaced with.

As noted in the opening of this essay, I define world order as the (man-made) rules, understandings, and institutions that govern (and pattern) relations between

the actors of world politics. This is not a temporally specific definition per se because it does not make a priori assumptions about units. World orders could conceivably consist of inter-national, inter-city, inter-company, inter-house, or even inter-personal relations (or hybrid forms thereof). And order should be distinguished from systems and structure, the former being a product of agency and the latter not. Structural dynamics are not primarily driven by agency but do include collective human processes that emerge without deliberate design, as subject to material forces beyond deliberate human agency, such as climatological or environmental pressures; macroeconomic processes (for example, of capitalism<sup>14</sup>); long-term demographic trends, and technological and scientific ruptures. What is structural vs. ordered is not transhistorical—certain dynamics that used to be structural (such as disease) are now mostly within the purview of human agency.

Using these definitions and distinctions in *Before the West*, I was able to recover three overlooked historical world orders. There was, for instance, a Chinggisid world order created by Genghis Khan and members of his house in the thirteenth-to-fourteenth centuries; followed by the post-Chinggisid world order of the Timurids and the early Ming in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and finally, a globalizing world order with its core position occupied by three post-Timurid (and therefore, Chinggisid) empires in the fifteenth-to-seventeenth centuries; namely, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals (along with the Habsburgs). These orders were also linked to each other just as our contemporary order is linked to the nineteenth-century international order—there was a continuity in their shared norms. In each of these periods, the world was dominated and ordered by great houses that justified their sovereignty along Chinggisid lines.<sup>15</sup>

*Before the West* thus shows that there were also Eastern actors who aspired—for better or worse—to create orders that spanned the world in all its multiplicity. When they thought about the world, they were not thinking just in terms of their immediate neighborhoods (however those were understood) or just in terms of their coreligionists. Such actors did in fact exist in Asia/Eurasia, and not only did they aspire to universal sovereignty but they also came close to dominating (and thus ordering) the world—such as it existed—from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Neither the dreams nor the sins of universal world order and empire projects can be attributed solely to Western or European actors. World empires (those that aspire to universal sovereignty) inevitably create world orders (in such cases, these are usually orders of the interhouse subtype). It is

possible to create order without conquest, but it is not possible for empires not to have ordering effects. And universal empires have world-ordering effects. No matter how brutal or “disorderly” they are, conquests change the world, thus reordering it. Formal or informal conquests (and by extension, empires) are not just disruptions, interludes, or deviations from the norm. They are irreversible ordering events, for better or worse, especially if the conquests are sustained over long periods of time. One does not just shake off the “yoke” of a conqueror and go back to what existed before the conquest. Even if one resists the conquest, hates it, or resents it, one is nevertheless shaped by it; one’s world is reordered as a result of having lived through conquest, submission (or resistance), decline, and replacement.

Recovering historical world orders (even beyond the examples that I have given above) helps us better theorize about our current world order. At a minimum, it allows us to see that order may not always take the forms that we are familiar with. Our definitions of orderliness are contingent on what we have been exposed to, but we have difficulty resisting the temptation to apply these definitions to other orders. What may look chaotic to us based on our understanding of order may in fact be quite orderly by another logic. A simple example I discuss in *Before the West* is monarchic succession via tanistry, in which qualifying males of a great house essentially wage war on each other until a victor emerges as the next ruler. This was a shared institution that we can find across most of the different houses within the world orders I referred to above. From the outside, this mode of succession looks quite volatile and prone to cause periods of interregnum. If primogeniture is the understanding of orderly succession that one starts from, this other model seems senseless, barbaric even. Brothers killing brothers. Yet tanistry had its own logic: Within the model of sovereignty that organized the world orders I discuss in *Before the West*, the ruler had to be a world conqueror in order to have legitimacy. Having all potential candidates fight each other and the eventual winner “conquer” his own family is not an irrational way of selecting a world conqueror. Furthermore, all the actors in that normative universe knew the rules of this game and there was predictability as to what would happen after the death of the current ruler. Thus, what looks quite chaotic from the vantage point of another order was in fact very orderly within that different world order.

Extending this logic, conflict is not necessarily a sign of lack of order. Or, to be precise, whether conflict causes disorder depends on the ordering logic of any given order. The historical world orders I discuss in *Before the West* were ordered

and legitimated by conquest, so secession of conflict and therefore conquest caused some degree of disorder. Even in our modern international order, which has a very different legitimating logic that aims to minimize interstate war, not all conflict is a sign of disorder; for example, the Cold War order. Both competition and conflict can be constitutive of order if the various parties have similar understandings about what they are competing over and share similar normative models (which are, in fact, strengthened via competition and conflict). Even war can reinforce the existing order if there is agreement on, or at least lip service paid to, rules of war. Even if rhetorical agreement is absent, order may still be reinforced if the parties share an understanding about how to order the world; for example, secessionist terrorism reinforces the nation-state and thus the international nature of our world order.

## CONCLUSION

We need to realize that our normative judgments of orderliness (or lack thereof) always assume a particular understanding of order. And this bias not only obscures historical orders from our view (as discussed above) but also can stand in the way of recognizing when a new order has emerged if it is sufficiently different from the order we have been socialized into. Given the overlapping structural challenges of the twenty-first century—for example, in climate, technology, finance, and demographics—it is increasingly likely that we are headed into a tumultuous period that may last longer than many today currently predict. This suggests not only that we are headed for disorder (as understood from our current vantage point and our sense of the current order) but also that the world order that may emerge after may look very different than it does in the twentieth century. Just as history has known many orders not organized by nation-states, the future may also belong to orders not organized by nation-states: we may have political world orders dominated by other types of states or companies or even persons who act state-like. We need terms and labels that are flexible enough to accommodate both past and future arrangements, especially if we want to salvage some of the twentieth-century IR theorizing about the world. IR needs to broaden its understanding of order.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*,” in “Challenges to the Liberal International Order: *International Organization* at 75,” *International Organization* 75, special issue no. 2 (Spring 2021),



- pp. 225–57. See also, Jack Donnelly, “The Discourse of Anarchy in IR,” *International Theory* 7, no. 3 (2015), pp. 393–425.
- <sup>2</sup> See Chris Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, “Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order,” *International Affairs*, 99, no.1 (January 2023), p.2.
- <sup>3</sup> Jack Donnelly, “The Discourse of Anarchy in IR,” *International Theory* 7, no. 3, supp. 3 (November 2015), pp. 393–425; italics my own.
- <sup>4</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994), pp. 385.
- <sup>5</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1986).
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Adam Watson, “Systems of States,” *Review of International Studies* 16, no. 2 (April 1990), pp. 99–109.
- <sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “The Idea of ‘International System’: Theory Meets History,” *International Political Science Review* 15, no. 3 (July 1994), pp. 231–55. See also Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- <sup>9</sup> This trend is especially clear when it comes to the concept of anarchy. See Jack Donnelly, “Beyond Hierarchy,” in Ayşe Zarakol, ed., *Hierarchies in World Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 243–65.
- <sup>10</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- <sup>11</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>12</sup> There are some exceptions—some scholars maintained the distinction. See, for example, Jack Donnelly, *Systems, Relations, and the Structures of International Societies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2023); also, the late Bear Braumoeller’s work.
- <sup>13</sup> Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- <sup>14</sup> I do not mean by this that all of capitalism belongs in the “structure” column (although I think accounts that link it to human nature would be fine with that argument). What I mean is that there are macro-economic processes unleashed by the existence of capitalism that are experienced as structural pressures. But what exactly is structural and what is “ordered” at any particular time is not a given and is best studied as an empirical problem.
- <sup>15</sup> See Zarakol, *Before the West*, for a more detailed discussion of these world orders.

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the concept of “international order” and its uses and misuses. It argues that the concept of “order” should not be conflated with the concept of a “system,” and that it makes more sense to speak of world order than international order because the former accommodates political units beyond the nation-state. Drawing on my recent book *Before the West* (2022) I show how the concept of “world order” travels better in history and also speculate about how it can help us think about the future as well.

Keywords: international order, structure, system, IR theory, IR concepts