Theorising Hierarchies
An Introduction

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Globalising processes are gathering increased attention for complicating the nature of political boundaries, authority and sovereignty. Recent global financial and political turmoils have also created a sense of unease about the durability of modern international order and the ability of our existing theoretical frameworks to explain system dynamics. In light of the insufficiencies of traditional International Relations (IR) theories[1] in explaining the contemporary global context, a growing number of scholars have been seeking to make sense of world politics through an analytical focus on hierarchies instead.[2] Until now, the explanatory potential of such research agendas and the implications for the discipline went unrecognised due to the fragmented nature of the IR field.

Hierarchies, understood broadly as any system through which actors are organised into vertical relations of super- and subordination, have long been of interest to social scientists, including in IR.[3] In recent years, however, IR scholarship concerned with hierarchies has expanded considerably. Building upon economic, sociological, legal, philosophical and

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[1] Some have described (and others have lamented) this as evidence of the 'end of theory' in IR. See the special issue of *EJIR*, especially Mearsheimer and Walt (2013).

[2] Hierarchies themselves are not new phenomena in world politics, but recent developments in the system have drawn the attention of *more* scholars to hierarchy.

[3] See e.g. Lake 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Nexon and Wright 2007; Donnelly 2006; Cooley 2003, 2005; Keene 2002; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Hobson 2012; Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Simpson 2004; Anghie 2005; Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth 2007; Bowden 2009; Lebow 2008; Zarakol 2011; Buzan and Lawson 2015. There are also approaches that never conceded the anarchy assumption to begin with: for example, world systems theory (e.g. Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1974, 1984; Arrighi 1994), uneven and combined development (e.g. Rosenberg 2013; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015) and post-colonial (see e.g. Grovugui 2006; Darby and Paolini 1994; Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

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historical 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 issues such as global governance, economic relations and security. This scholarship is diverse, but it also converges on two insights: first, that hierarchies are a ubiquitous feature of international (i.e. inter-state) politics and, second, that they generate social, moral and behavioural dynamics that are different from those created by other arrangements. In short, hierarchies matter in distinctive ways for world politics.

We owe the close association of IR and anarchy to neorealism. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz posited that '[i]n defining structures, the first question to answer is: What is the principle by which the parts are arranged?'[4] and that 'domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic', whereas 'international systems are decentralized and anarchic.'[5] From these postulates he derived a number of other components, e.g. that 'the units of an anarchic system are functionally undifferentiated'[6]; that 'in anarchic realms, like units coact'[7]; that 'so long as anarchy endures, states remain like units'[8]; and that 'like units work to maintain a measure of independence and may even strive for autarchy.'[9] Though Waltz was not, by any means, the first[10] scholar to make the argument that international relations was characterised primarily by its anarchic nature, he did make the statement more definitively than most and had a strong influence in this regard on the generations of scholarship that followed him[11]: 'Before 1979 three-fifths of the books use "anarchy" or "anarchic" three or fewer times. After 1978 four-fifths use these terms 10 or more times ... A sharp transition occurs around the publication of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.'[12] According to Donnelly, the subsequent success of the anarchy concept in IR can be explained in reference to three factors: its association with structural realism, which offered the promise of an elegant systemic theory of international politics; its appeal to rationalist approaches as a starting assumption; and its presentation 'as an analytically neutral demarcation criterion'.[13] Again in Donnelly's words: 'By the mid-1990s, anarchy had become "naturalized" across much of the discipline; treated as a taken-for-granted foundational assumption. Neorealism and neoliberalism, the leading research programmes of the era, even incorporated anarchy into the IR orthodoxy that no contrary evidence or argument can be permitted to challenge.' To this day,

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[4] Waltz 1979, 82.   [5] *Ibid.*, 88.   [6] *Ibid.*, 97.   [7] *Ibid.*, 104.   [8] *Ibid.*, 93.
[9] *Ibid.*, 104.
[10] See Donnelly (2015a) for an overview of pre-Waltz usages of the concept in IR.
[11] Schmidt 1997, 40.   [12] Donnelly 2015a, 394–5.   [13] Donnelly 2015a, 402.

'anarchy' has been rarely questioned *explicitly* within the mainstream of IR as both *the* defining assumption of the discipline and *the* defining feature of international relations.

Many IR scholars have nevertheless been studying hierarchies because hierarchies feature heavily among *both* the problems of world politics that scholarship is interested in addressing *and* the possible solutions to those problems. Yet, scholars working on different types and aspects of hierarchies have not engaged each other, having trained their sights instead on dismantling or bypassing the anarchy assumption. Put another way, always having to confront the concept of anarchy as a starting point has impeded the productivity of hierarchy research in IR. Different strands of hierarchy scholarship should be challenging each other on conceptualisations of hierarchies (and their mechanisms) rather than continuously having to 'reinvent the-criticisms-of-the anarchy-assumption wheel' in different ways. This book aims to change this status quo and open up a productive space for hierarchy-oriented research through the mutual engagement of diverse approaches.[14] The concept of hierarchy thus promises to unite fragmented insights about world politics into an alternative explanatory framework.

A comprehensive survey of the existing IR literature[15] reveals some insights about how hierarchies have been understood in the discipline. 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 organise the relations not only among states but also among 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. 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-centred theories so useful and, unlike anarchy-centred theories, account for on-going globalising processes as a part of the system.

IR research on hierarchy thus far could be summarised as having gravitated towards two major research questions: (1) 'What is the nature of hierarchy?' (with the accompanying questions, 'What is hierarchy

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[14] The book itself is product of a series of conversations: (1) an ISA working group (2013 San Francisco Convention), (2) a 2014 workshop hosted by UCSD and (3) a 2015 workshop hosted by the University of Cambridge. There were also roundtables and panels at the ISA, EISA and CEEISA.

[15] See Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016. Literature review sections below also draw from that article.

made of?'; 'How is hierarchy made?'; 'Where does hierarchy come from?'; etc.) and (2) 'How do actors exist in hierarchies?' (with the accompanying questions, 'How do actors use/navigate/reproduce/resist/escape existing hierarchies?'; 'How do existing hierarchies function?'; and 'How are existing hierarchies sustained or dismantled?'). Hierarchy research therefore can move forward by developing conversations around the two primary questions it has already focused upon: origin and nature of hierarchies, on the one hand, and actor behaviour in existing hierarchies, on the other.

It is not particularly difficult to demonstrate that the concept of hierarchy captures dynamics that exist in most, if not all, social systems. However, recognition of this fact alone does not get us very far empirically. Hierarchy research, if it is to open new paths for IR thinking, needs to first better specify where hierarch*ies* come from, how different hierarch*ies* interact and how actors navigate hierarch*ies* given the particular origin and interactive effects of existing hierarch*ies*. This introduction thus first reviews the existing research on these questions and contextualises the chapters in this book against that background. I suggest that one major existing cleavage in the literature has been around more agentic/institutional accounts of the origins of hierarchies versus more structural understandings. The former sees hierarchies as solutions to problems of order, whereas the latter sees hierarchies more as a constraining environment (or worse). The second part of this introduction reviews the literature on agency in hierarchies and contextualises the chapters in this book accordingly.

Origins and Nature of Hierarchies

One dominant strain of IR research understands hierarchies – and a given actor's position within a hierarchy – as arising in the first place from bargained solutions to problems of order. In this understanding, hierarchies are founded on exchanges in which actors trade degrees of freedom for a desired social or political arrangement. Hierarchies institutionalise interests in that order, and this distinctively affects actors' incentives and disincentives to create compliant and non-compliant outcomes.[16] This line of research generally operates with a *narrow* conception of hierarchy, understood as legitimate authority.

Within IR, the best example of this account is in David Lake's contract theory of hierarchies as expounded in *Hierarchy in International Relations*. 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

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[16] Pumain 2006, 7.

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 theorised as functional, intentional solutions to collective problems of global governance.[17] As 'bargains between ruler and ruled premised on the former's provision of a social order of value sufficient to offset the loss of freedom',[18] hierarchies uniquely structure incentives in ways that explain behaviour of super- and subordinate actors alike.[19]

In *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry invokes a similar contract-functionalist logic to explain both America's long-standing 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'[20] and that was 'made acceptable to other states . . . because it provided security and other "system services"'.[21] With US authority no longer securely established, the liberal international order needs 'a new bargain' through which to stabilise incentives and behaviours in world politics.[22]

In *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power*, Bukovanksy 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 political power struggle provides an adequate basis on which to address challenges of co-existence and cooperation.[23] In such instances, international society has allocated special responsibilities 'to enhance the efficient working of international order'.[24] International society has, in other words, promulgated hierarchies because they give incentives to super- and subordinates to support and conform to the order it values.

The trade-off explanation has also been deployed to account for the creation of regional orders. Kang has argued that the hierarchy that ordered East Asian international relations from 1368 to 1841 rested on an implicit bargain in which Chinese authority was legitimated because China crafted the kind of Confucian-inspired social order that was

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[17] Lake 2009a, 32.   [18] Lake 2007, 54.   [19] See Lake 2009a, Chapters 4 and 5.
[20] Ikenberry 2012, 6.   [21] *Ibid.*, 5.   [22] *Ibid.*, Chapters 7 and 8.
[23] Bukovansky et al. 2012, 6–7.   [24] *Ibid.*, 5.

generally valued by, and so conformed with, its subordinates.[25] Keene similarly turns to bargained hierarchy resting on a prior stock of shared culture in accounting for the European Union's normative power. Normative power, suggests Keene, arises from a sort of authorised 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 European Union just 'construct[s] a distinctive identity and lifestyle'[26] 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 as a trade-off.

There are significant differences between each of the hierarchy-oriented analyses represented in these examples. Most notable are differences in the basis of hierarchy-constituting agreements. Kang and Keene see the bargains upon which hierarchies are founded as authorised by the social appropriateness of the subordination, whereas 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 crucial points. First, hierarchies are understood *narrowly* as legitimate orders of authority in which super-ordinate and subordinate alike have some material, functional and/or social *interest*. Second, actors are understood (more and less) as *purposeful agents* in international life.[27] Finally, and most importantly, the *bargains encoded* in hierarchies are assumed to *structure subsequent action*, whether through social or interest-based incentives.

To put it another way, this vein of research is interested primarily in how and why hierarchies are *deliberately* erected by specific actors as solutions to problems of anarchy, i.e. in the origins of hierarchies. This is why the bulk of this research has focused on the incentives super-ordinate states face to exercise self-restraint in spite of their right to govern through power as they see fit. Ikenberry and Lake each characterise these incentives in terms of the contingency of the dominant states' authority on the buy-in of the super-ordinate, whereas Bukovansky et al. characterise them in terms of the norms of right action and the expectation of political accountability faced by super-ordinate power.[28] It is in this incentive for self-restraint that the value of this hierarchy heuristic becomes clear. Basically, this logic explains an aspect of uni-polarity that could not be apprehended through balance-of-power theory.[29] Some

[25] Kang 2010a.   [26] Keene 2013, 950.
[27] There are disagreements about how much agency and intention actors exert in this process, as well as who has it.
[28] Bukovansky et al. 2012, 16.   [29] Ikenberry 2012, 9; see also Finnemore 2009.

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.[30] With respect to noncompliant behaviour, research has focused on the incentives for contestation arising from the rather visible inequalities that hierarchies entail.[31] There is also a common concern with the internal dynamism of hierarchies. Bargained hierarchy rests on 'relational authority' such that superordinates' legitimacy depends upon how well those actors deliver upon the expectations of the role. But given that all actors in hierarchies face position-specific matrices of incentives, sustaining 'an equilibrium among interests' is an on-going process.[32] 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. By contrast, this strand of research has mostly overlooked (until this book) the possibility of deep hierarchical structures influencing the creation and renegotiation of hierarchies as institutions of bargain.

In fact, in direct contrast to the agentic-contractual accounts outlined earlier, the other dominant strain of IR research on hierarchy conceives hierarchies *broadly* as deep structures of organised inequality that are neither designed nor particularly open to renegotiation. Such accounts suggest that hierarchy does not just shape the behaviours of actors in world politics but rather produces *both* the actors (or at least their worldview) and the space of world politics in which they act. Approached (depending upon the school of thought) as deeply ingrained social practices, inter-subjective structures or a superstructure rooted in material inequality, hierarchies are seen as deep patterns of inequality that are manifested through actors' habitus, role perceptions, bodily activity or discursive regimes.[33] In such accounts, hierarchies shape actors 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. Hierarchies create the actors of world politics and/or their repertoires for action. They also produce the boundaries that define who and what belongs where in world politics.

Within IR, understandings of hierarchy as deep structure are found most commonly in post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist and critical scholarship, both of the more ideational variety and critical work within the historical materialist vein. To give just a few examples, Weldes et al.

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[30] Lake 2009b.   [31] Bukovansky et al. 2012, 16.   [32] Lake 2009b, 16.
[33] E.g. Schatzki et al. 2001, Butler 1997.

argue that borders – physical, territorial, conceptual or collectively imagined – must be seen as sites of power, inequality and the practice of hierarchy.[34] This claim rests on the idea that discursive practices – like all practices – are founded not on universal truths but on historically contingent knowledge structures that signify objects, subjects and other phenomena by positioning them in relation to each other.[35] 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.[36] They bring social beings into being, as particular identities, with particular 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 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.[37] 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'.[38] In Barder's account, even *domestic* political outcomes in both the core and the periphery are produced by international hierarchies. Post-colonial approaches, such as that of Shilliam, also build their explanations around structures of inequality in the international system, for instance, that of race.[39] It is not just ideational approaches, however, that see hierarchy as a structural force in international political life. Such an understanding of hierarchy is also evident in the core, semi-periphery and periphery accounts of World Systems approaches.[40] Similarly, 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.[41]

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[34] Weldes et al. 1999.   [35] Milliken 1999.
[36] Hayward as cited in Barnett and Duvall 2005, 21.
[37] Campbell 1988, 5. See also Weber 1999.   [38] Barder 2015, 2.
[39] See e.g. Shilliam 2010, 2015; Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam 2014; see also the recent forum in *International Theory*: Epstein 2014; Jabri 2014; Shilliam 2014; Gallagher 2014; Zarakol 2014.
[40] Wallerstein 1984; Arrighi 1994.   [41] Ashley 1988.

To sum up thus far, the *narrow* understanding of hierarchy in IR as a designed institution assumes that hierarchies, once erected, will function more or less as planned. Actors' initial choices are significant in explaining the design of such hierarchies. The *broad* understanding of hierarchy as structure assumes that understanding the content of inequality and/or the shape of the structure will reveal more or less everything about how actors exist in hierarchies, and one does not need to pay much attention to the actors. The *narrow* approach, because it was operating with an implicit structure as anarchy assumption, has not considered very well how an institutional hierarchy, once erected, may interact with broad hierarchies, i.e. structures of inequality. It has also not considered the impact of broad hierarchies in shaping actors and their choices. The *broad* approach, however, has not considered the possibility that the solution to the problems created by broad hierarchies may be hierarchies of the *narrow* type.

It is apparent from the preceding discussion that approaches that posit that hierarchies can be erected as solutions to problems of order need to take more seriously the insights of research that understands the nature of hierarchy more broadly (and vice versa). How are contractual hierarchies of legitimate authority created in a world of broader hierarchies of organised inequality? How do 'consensually' erected hierarchies underwritten by international law intersect, for instance, with racial inequalities in the international system? Part I of this book brings together contributors with very different understandings of hierarchy, ranging from very agentic/institutional to very structural. The contributors display varying degrees of optimism as to whether hierarchies as institutions can be created independently of broader structural hierarchies, but they all genuinely engage with alternative understandings of hierarchy.

Part I starts with Lake, who is at one end of the spectrum in terms of his conception of hierarchy as legitimate authority. In Chapter 1, writing on international law and norms, with a particular focus on the principle of non-intervention, he maintains his emphasis on agency and deliberate action in explaining the origins of hierarchies. At the same time, he also fruitfully engages with a broader conception of hierarchy by recognising that the normative structure of racial inequality has to some extent undermined agent efforts in solidifying the principle of non-intervention in international law. The chapters that follow are ordered by their level of emphasis on the narrow (agentic/institutional) versus broad (structural) types of hierarchy as being more determinative. In Chapter 2, in his comparative study of the Chinese and British Empires, Phillips makes more room for the influence of social and cultural hierarchies but nevertheless maintains an emphasis on the agency of elites in creating empires as legitimate forms of authority. In Chapter 3, Barnett looks at

paternalism, a narrow(er) type of hierarchy, but one that cannot be explained as a consensual trade-off and therefore one that points very clearly towards the influence of broader hierarchies on agent behaviour. In Chapter 4, Sjoberg examines both how narrow hierarchies are gendered and also at gender hierarchy as broadly defined. In Chapter 5, Pouliot takes the agentic explanations for the origin and existence of narrow hierarchies head on, arguing that no such legitimate authority exists independent of broader social hierarchies. In Part I, then, the main debate is about the origins and forms of hierarchy and how different hierarchies intersect.

How Actors Experience Hierarchies

The second major vein of research on hierarchies in IR has focused on actor behaviour within existing hierarchical environments. In other words, this growing body of IR research is much less focused on the nature of hierarchy and much more focused on how existing hierarchies shape *actors* or actor *behaviour*. As such, research in this cluster is able to operate both with a narrow institutional view of hierarchy *and* a broad structural view depending on the particular research question. This line of research generally asserts 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. Such a view can be found in research in a variety of substantive areas: security,[42] foreign policy,[43] diplomacy,[44] international law[45] and even research on IR scholarship itself.[46] The shared analytical focus is on the socialising effects of hierarchies on the actors positioned within them; 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.

Scholarship on the distribution of power and its impact on state behaviour offers one important example of this type of research. Because of its theoretical origins in balance-of-power studies, this scholarship is not explicitly connected to the notion of 'hierarchy'. However, by underlining systemic, vertical differentiation-of-power capabilities, this approach implicitly invokes the broad conception of hierarchy (as organised inequality). Its focus, however, is on actors' position-contingent interests and expectations. In characterising the international system as a cycle of hegemony, challenge, war and restabilisation, power transition theory as discussed in Organski and Kugler's *The War Ledger*, for instance,

[42] See e.g. Ayoob 2003; Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Wendt and Barnett 1993.
[43] See e.g. Adler-Nissen and Gad 2013, Morozov 2013, Kösebalaban 2008.
[44] See e.g. Adler-Nissen 2014, Zarakol 2014.
[45] See e.g. Keene 2007, Subotic and Zarakol 2013.   [46] See e.g. Levine 2012.