



# Anarchy and Institutions: A Question of Norms, Values, and the Understanding of the World

This article was reviewed by Maximilian Schußmüller



## Elie Castanie [in](#)

Elie Castanie is currently studying for a Bachelor's degree in International Relations at Karlshochschule in Karlsruhe. He is involved at the Initiative der Jungen Transatlantiker e.V. pursuing his interests in German-American relations.

## Introduction

Institutions are built to foster prosperity and peace on the international stage by mitigating the effects of anarchy. But recent events in Syria and Ukraine show that institutions are not a guarantee for security, thus questioning if their proliferation will truly mitigate anarchy or if they only serve as tools for the powerful. To address this, this essay will embark on the endeavor to find the foundation at the heart of institutions and the implications that this search will have on the cooperation within existing institutions and on the formation of new ones. Therefore, it is vital to first discuss the concept of anarchy from different perspectives of international relations, settling on Alexander Wendt's (1992) argument, making anarchy a constructed phenomenon that can be altered and transformed. Following this, it is necessary to establish the nature of institutions and by moving beyond their physical form this paper will unearth their underlying foundation: values. But what are values, and how do they interact with each other on the international stage? By answering these questions from a cosmopolitan and postcolonial perspective, the tensions between international cooperation and national, or even local, identity will be highlighted, thus concluding that the creation of shared values is as vital as it is difficult for the creation of institutions and that their proliferation can contribute to the mitigation of anarchy, and even the change of that institution altogether.

## Anarchy in International Relations

The concept of anarchy is constructed differently by competing theories of International Relations, resulting in different assessments of its impact on world politics, ranging from conflictual to cooperative. Anarchy in the context

of international relations refers to the absence of an overarching authority or sovereign and, thus, the absence of a monopoly on the use of force. While this concept in itself is clear and concise, its implications are widely different and strongly depend on the utilized theoretical approach. Realist theory, through its focus on states, their survival, and lack of trust (Jervis, 1978) views anarchy as the foundation for the primacy of hard power on the international stage since the survival of a state can only be guaranteed through its relative strength over others. Where realists differ is in the precise actions that cement or build a state's hegemonic status in the balance of power. Offensive realists argue that states will attempt to increase their power through expansionist gambits, therefore, creating a constant threat of attack by their competitors. Defensive realists, on the other hand, suggest that the state avoid most expansionist endeavors since the lack of trust can turn into violence that spirals out of control, thus they recommend policies of restraint (Taliaferro, 2001 pp. 128-129). Nonetheless, realist theory views cooperation in an anarchical context as difficult due to the lack of trust and fears that states will cheat to gain advantages (Mearsheimer, 1994 p. 13).

Liberalist theory on the other hand approaches anarchy from an angle of cooperation. Diverging from the realist perspective of conflictual selfish states, liberals argue that states cooperatively interact with each other since the resulting mutual gains are in their best self-interest (Keohane, 1984). This view is based on the fact that states frequently interact with one another and that this behavior, assessed through the prisoner's dilemma, is the most fruitful outcome of interstate relations since deception or cheating would constitute a barrier to future interaction with other states (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1984). This focus on cooperation then results in an increasingly

complex web of inter-state interactions through which states depend on one another in a phenomenon called complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1973) further reducing the conflictual elements of anarchy under the gaze of liberal institutionalism making anarchy an issue of economic cooperation.

While realist and liberalist theories view anarchy as a given component of the international system with a complete set of rules that apply to all, constructivist theory instead follows the sociological path of intersubjectivity to emphasize that the actions of states do not purely follow rational behavior and the maximization of economic gains or security. At the core anarchy from a constructivist viewpoint is based on the identity of a state, thus arguing against the unified rational actor at the core of realist and liberalist theory, thus including peoples and their biases and views in the formation of an identity that then interacts with those formed by other nations leading to a fluent and ever-changing international environment where identities are formed and changed depending on those that interact with one another (Wendt, 1992). Furthermore, constructivism views the social world as a set of structures that create and confine human interaction but in contrast to the deterministic nature of realism, the constructed nature of the social world constitutes the opportunity to change structures and shape them according to our will (Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1992), opening the door for understandings of anarchy that reach beyond a fight for survival or cooperation through economic interdependence.

Reflecting on these three approaches to anarchy, the constructivist approach contains clear advantages to the assessment of the issue at hand. Realist and liberalist theories view anarchy as a set constant in the international system akin to natural law, its human origin creates a dichotomy between this unmoving principle and the fluency

of human interactions and development. The focus of the constructivist perspective on the identity of actors and the constructed nature of the international order, on the other hand, lends itself to the assessment of institutions since it incorporates human dynamics into international structures. This lens allows for the dissection of institutions into their origins and foundations, while also aiding in the process of uncovering the challenges they face in their effort to mitigate anarchy. Lastly, in contrast to realism and liberalism, constructivism also offers a framework to glimpse beyond the concept of anarchy altogether, making it the ideal theory for this essay.

**Anarchy in International Relations:**  
The absence of a singular authority with a monopoly on the use of force on the international stage. Traditionally seen as a state of nature which nation-states have to consider surviving.

### Institutions, Norms, and Values

Having established the nature of anarchy in a constructivist environment, it is necessary to consider the concept of international institutions and their foundations. Although intergovernmental organizations need to be considered in this question, this essay will depart from the traditional view of institutions as formal organizations and only do so once the nature of the underlying institutions is established since this enables a discussion without combining two separate, but connected, factors (Duffield, 2007). Instead, it will follow John Duffield's (2007) definition of institutions as "relatively stable sets of related constitutive, regulative, and procedural norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors in the system [...], and their activities." (pp. 7-8). This definition enables a view of institutions as sets of norms and rules which provides the opportunity to address

the final component in the search for the foundations of institutions: values.

Since rules are codified norms, they share similar foundations at their core. And it is precisely this core that holds the foundation for the challenges in the proliferation of institutions which can be seen through their analysis. Norms are in their essence ought statements that are formed through a process that combines the values of individual actors with the values of a specific group, thus creating a system with values that partly reflects those of the individuals, while simultaneously creating a strong sense of belonging with a group (Mitchell, 1999). Assessing this dynamic between the individual and the group from a constructive perspective visualizes the impact that the structure and the actor have on one another. A norm can only withstand the test of time if enough individuals share its values highlighting the impact that an actor has on the structure itself. At the same time, through the social, or legal, penalties attached to the violation of norms, the impact of the structure on the individual actor is clearly visible. This dynamic can then be further reduced into a process of interactions where, based on the values of individuals, norms, and institutions are shaped that then, in turn, influence the values of the individuals creating both an individual and a group identity. And it is precisely this process that is of interest to this essay since it can be applied to the international system.



Through the previously discussed process, values are seen as a set of norms, of both internal and external nature, that an individual applies to their being and identity. In turn, these values then act on the group identity and its values, closing the circle of interaction (Mitchell 1999, 186-187). Therefore, nation-states find themselves as part of two of these circles, on the one hand, they represent the group identity of their peoples, while on the other, they are the individuals in the state-dominated international system, interacting with the topic of this essay, institutions. While the formation of national identity is in itself a contested and debated subject that deserves further inquiry, this argument calls upon different approaches like cosmopolitanism and post-colonialism to analyze the interactions between nation-states and international institutions since this enables a deeper look at their effectiveness in the mitigation of anarchy and the challenges they face to achieve this.

### Cosmopolitanism and Post-Colonialism: At Odds?

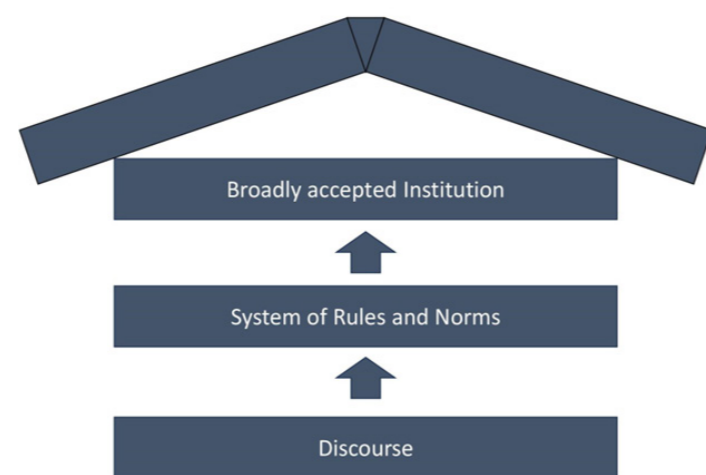
While it is clear that a homogenous set of values and a shared identity will create institutions that are acceptable to all, this raises concerns about the process through which this could be achieved since the forced implementation of a certain set of values akin to colonial history should be avoided. To further explore this strain between a drive for common values and the avoidance of colonial patterns of domination, the theories of cosmopolitanism and post-colonialism can be used to expand on this conflict between individual heritage and global peace. Here, cosmopolitanism will provide a perspective on possibilities regarding the permeation of global values into national societies and its normative nature will further provide the chance to address this theory from a post-co-

lonial perspective to highlight the difficulties this kind of endeavor faces when considering it through local identities and the traditions attached to it. By combining these two approaches it will then be possible to assess if additional institutions would have a positive effect on the international stage and what challenges have to be overcome to effectively mitigate anarchy.

Commencing with cosmopolitanism, a theory characterized by its normative approach toward universal core values and the transformation of the world along the lines of a peaceful world society beyond the concept of nation-states. While these main characteristics are shared by most cosmopolitan approaches, this theory, like others in the realm of International Relations, consists of many different sub-theories with their focus and slight differences (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019). For this argument, a focus will be set on two different cosmopolitan approaches: moral and political cosmopolitanism. Moral cosmopolitanism has its roots in liberal theories of justice like those of Immanuel Kant or John Rawls through which it aims to build a system beyond the nation-state in which the same considerations of justice are awarded to every person regardless of their origin or heritage resulting in global institutions reflecting a societal consensus on the foundational liberal values (Jabri, 2007 p. 719; Beitz, 2005). While this approach to cosmopolitanism is of great merit from a Western, liberal, perspective, its universal nature and grounding in the ethics of the Enlightenment pose significant issues from a postcolonial perspective (Jabri, 2007).

A major complication arises when one considers the issue that liberal cosmopolitanism is based on an ethical framework that is aimed at the primacy of human rights and, through its connection with the Enlightenment, creates a clear hierarchy with systems of democratic

nature and ideals on top. From a post-colonial perspective, this has the consequence that the cosmopolitan ideal is used by those societies that possess significant resources to build an international order that allows for interventions based on the ideals that those societies stand for (Jabri, 2007 p. 721). Furthermore, through its singular moral standpoint, this approach to cosmopolitanism disregards the post-colonial notion of hierarchy based on power distribution that it shares with constructivism. Consequentially, this view aids the efforts of former colonial powers to, once again, engage in a narrative of progress and civilization and, thus, disregard their colonial past. Last, this approach, through its Western foundations, also largely focuses on the Western approach to politics and its understanding of modernity leading to a project that, while it enables some, constrains others (Jabri, 2007 pp. 722-723). It is because of these issues that a different kind of cosmopolitanism should also be examined.



Political cosmopolitanism draws its foundation not from a given set of values, rather it grounds itself in the political sphere of argumentation and discourse. Through this, a cosmopolitan society does not have one ideal shape, instead, it uses political interaction to build an institution of discussion with equal voices for all actors. Additionally, this approach takes a different stance on culture. Instead of viewing it as a part of the private realm, it highlights it

and involves it in the political discourse, thus incorporating its values (Jabri, 2007 pp. 724-725). From a post-colonial perspective, political cosmopolitanism enables a critique of the current system and its institutions and, in the process, moves beyond a set hierarchy and the connected issues of a superior set of values. Furthermore, its discursive nature allows for the consideration of smaller units in the search for an overarching system (Jabri 2007, 725). And it is precisely this combination of openness and acceptance of different units under a common cosmopolitan identity that brings this argument back to its starting point.

### **Institutions: Past, Present, and Future**

Through the search for the nature of international anarchy, this essay has shown its origin as a human structure instead of a natural phenomenon as well as the importance that identity and interaction carry in its

perception and its possible change. Following this, the analysis of the foundation of international institutions has highlighted a similar constructed nature that is based on cycles of interaction between individuals, nation-states, and the institutions themselves, which consequently means that they, like anarchy, are a product of interaction within a changeable structure. To explore ways to affect these existing structures and to assess the effectiveness of institutions in their mitigation of anarchy, this essay explored two cosmopolitan approaches, settling on po-

litical cosmopolitanism and supplementing it with post-colonial insights, due to its social and cooperative nature and its lack of a set hierarchy in conjunction with a critical perspective on the current institutions and their history.

Through this framework, the issues faced by current institutions in their effort to mitigate anarchy are clearly visible. Since they were often conceptualized with the realist experience of war and strong liberal values in mind (Trent & Schnurr, 2017). Additionally, this focus on Western values further represents the colonial

**Members influence their institutions as much as institutions influence them, [thus] international anarchy could be replaced with a foundation of cooperative conduct in world politics.**

past and the power dynamics that made them possible. Consequentially, this means that these institutions were created in an environment suffering from the realist understanding of anarchy necessitating a clear response that moved beyond a system of power struggle and armed conflict. Therefore, these institutions which are still in place today, are only partially effective

in their mitigation of anarchy since they were created by those in power and through this perpetuate the realist anarchical assumption. On the other hand, an approach to institutions that incorporates a constructivist understanding of anarchy with a foundation of political cosmopolitanism and post-colonialism for institutions contains the opportunity for change.

Such an approach would rely on discourse instead of dictation to find a system of values

and norms that is acceptable to all participants in international society. This would not only create institutions with broad acceptance but similar to social norms, it would create pressures to act within this system which could then be reinforced through legal norms creating far more effective institutions. Additionally, this approach would also contain a different understanding of anarchy, framing it as a social structure and, therefore, an institution in itself. Furthermore, since, as established, members influence their institutions as much as institutions influence them, international anarchy could be replaced with a foundation of cooperative conduct in world politics.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, while current institutions were created with the mitigation of anarchy in mind, it is this fact that constrains them in the same effort. Through their assumptions about the international system and its construction around international anarchy, institutions are unable to explore options that lie beyond this concept. Using constructivist theory in conjunction with political cosmopolitanism and post-colonialism, this essay demonstrated that an international society beyond a realist understanding of anarchy is indeed possible, although it would require a radical transformation of the institutions that currently govern international affairs. And it is this transformative process that will likely prevent a rapid shift beyond the institutions that are currently in place. On the other hand, in line with constructivist thought, the possibility of change does not solely lie with the structure; instead, individuals retain the power to act upon the structure and to slowly change it. Furthermore, it is through this line of thought that the importance of our values is once again highlighted since they interact with those of others on all levels of society thus, in the process, creating, upholding, and replacing the institutions in our life. While to some this might raise the question if this approach will result in many unnecessary and ineffective ethical institutions, it is also vital to emphasize that values, and therefore institutions, are a reflection of human society, which in the modern world grows increasingly complex, therefore raising the question whether there can also be too few institutions in our world.

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