



Politics

The Key Concepts

Lisa Harrison, Adrian Little and Edward Lock

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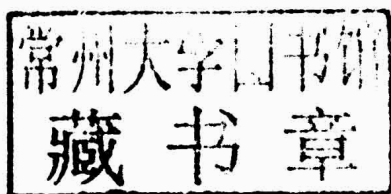


KEY GUIDES

POLITICS

The Key Concepts

*Lisa Harrison, Adrian Little and
Edward Lock*



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POLITICS

Politics: The Key Concepts is an up-to-date and broad-ranging introduction to the terms that lie at the heart of political discourse. Entries are drawn from areas such as political theory, international politics, political science and methodology. As well as explaining core, established principles, this informative guide explores some of the more complex, topical and contested concepts from the world of politics. Concepts covered include:

- Capitalism
- Identity
- Referendum
- Pluralism
- Socialism
- Class
- Institutionalism
- Marxism
- Postmodernism
- Constructivism.

In an accessible A–Z format with helpful cross-referencing and suggestions for further reading, *Politics: The Key Concepts* is an invaluable reference for all students of politics, international relations and related courses.

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PREFACE

This *Key Concepts* text has been written with several aims in mind. First, we have sought to avoid an approach which treats political theory, political science and international relations as distinct fields. Whilst it will be clear from each entry that not every concept relates to each of these ‘themes’, we did want to show that these concepts are used and discussed in different normative and empirical contexts. Increasingly, such concepts take an ‘international turn’ which generates new priorities, questions and considerations.

Second, we wanted to offer readers something of substance to grapple with. General textbooks often offer short definitions before choosing specific case studies for comparative analytical purposes. What is offered here is different to a politics dictionary or comparative politics textbook. We have selected political concepts which are ‘contested’. By this we mean there is no agreed simple definition, but in fact these concepts lie at the heart of much political argument. Whilst we are unable to give full and exhaustive explanations, what we will do is highlight the main sources of antagonism, and in particular whether there have been paradigm shifts.

Third, we have chosen the examples to reflect our own experience of teaching to incorporate the concepts which we believe students find most challenging. Where relevant, each concept is cross referenced to other related entries. We have not designed this text with a specific course or module in mind but hope that students undertaking a range of politics and international relations degrees will find it a helpful reference point throughout their studies. The inclusion of further reading suggestions will direct readers to more detailed and advanced debates.

Finally, we would like to thank all those colleagues, friends and family who have supported us in producing this book. In particular we would like to thank the two research assistants who worked with Adrian at the University of Melbourne, Sana Nakata and Ben Glasson.

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POLITICS

The Key Concepts

ANARCHY

Literally, the term ‘anarchy’ describes an absence of **authority** within a community. Imagine a country or city with no government, no laws and no police and you are imagining an anarchic community. This is a foreign notion to most of us, as we live in **nation-states** with clearly defined hierarchical structures of authority. In simple terms, we can think of these as communities in which one person or institution – such as a monarch or government – has authority over others. In reality, however, most countries have complex hierarchical structures in which political authority is distributed and shared amongst an array of different levels of government and types of institution.

Indeed, anarchy has been a historical rarity within political communities, which raises the question of why it might be an important concept in the fields of political science and **international relations**. First, the concept of anarchy has an important place in political philosophy. Several of the political philosophical texts that have had a major influence on the design of democratic governments – including works by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau – incorporate descriptions of what anarchy might look like in the context of efforts to justify certain models of political order. Hobbes (2010), for example, described human life in an anarchic system – or what he and others termed the ‘state of nature’ – as being ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’, and he used this pessimistic vision as a means of supporting his argument that a strong central government – a ‘leviathan’ – was necessary to preserve order in human life. More generally, ideas about how people might behave under conditions of anarchy were used by political philosophers in their efforts to define the necessary features of a successful and legitimate model of government.

Second, it has often been argued that one of the defining features of the international political system is that it is anarchical. Again, to make this claim is to argue that there is no institution (or person!) that holds authority over the members of the international political system (which are often considered to be nation-states). The key reason for this is that nation-states are deemed to possess **sovereignty**. Sovereignty is a legal principle that asserts, amongst other things, that each nation-state ought to be subject to no external source of authority. It is because of the sovereign independence of each nation-state, therefore, that the international system has traditionally been held to exist in a state of anarchy. This claim is important for a number

of reasons, not least because it is this claim that has been used to justify the independence of the field of international relations (IR) from the broader discipline of political science (Linklater 1990; Wight 1966). If political scientists focus on the analysis of the hierarchical forms of politics that exist within nation-states, scholars of international politics claim expertise in the analysis of the qualitatively distinct form of politics that takes place in the anarchic international system.

Realists, in particular, have stressed the importance of the concept of anarchy by highlighting the implications that follow from the lack of a central source of authority within the international system (Mearsheimer 2001; Morgenthau 1993; Waltz 1979). Realists have contended that the absence from international politics of anything like a nation-state's central **government** results in the absence of many of the features of political life that a central government might provide. Perhaps the key general point made by realists is that because there is no central authority within the international system, its members are forced to look after themselves. Put simply, there is no international police force or ambulance service to protect or care for the members of the international political system should they find themselves in trouble. This is the reason that realists consider **war** to be a constant possibility within international politics; under anarchy there is simply no authority figure that can be relied upon to prevent it.

Realists also suggest that the absence of any world state or government means that there is no authority that can enforce either international laws or agreements between states. Realists have long doubted the effectiveness of international laws regarding, for example, the prevention of war, not because they are unworthy but because there is little to stop an aggressive nation-state that is intent on breaching them (Morgenthau 1993). Similarly, realists are pessimistic regarding the possibility of widespread cooperation between states (Waltz 1979). Because, within an anarchic system, there is no authority capable of enforcing contracts, nation-states must always be wary that the agreements they reach with others do not leave them open to exploitation. Finally, realists also question the importance of the international institutions that have been created in order to serve some of the functions that, within a hierarchic political system, would be carried out by the central government (Mearsheimer 1994/5). The very claim that the international system is anarchic implies that institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization and World Bank do not possess authority and,

therefore, are relatively powerless and unimportant within international politics.

For realists, anarchy is considered to be a fact of international political life, and one that statesmen would do well to appreciate. Scholars from other schools of thought within IR have challenged this position, however. English School theorists, while acknowledging the importance of anarchy, have argued that we live in an international society rather than an international system (Bull 2002; Linklater and Suganami 2006). If an anarchical society may lack a central source of authority as realists suggest, English School theorists contend that members of such a society may nevertheless develop common values, construct international institutions and abide by international rules and laws. Constructivists too suggest that the implications of anarchy are not set in stone, arguing that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992). This claim is meant to highlight that what international anarchy means for nation-states is socially constructed and that while the meaning of anarchy may well have been constructed in terms of danger, uncertainty and self-interest in the past, this does not make this meaning natural or inevitable. Finally, Critical Theorists and Poststructuralists have sought to highlight the continued political role that the claim regarding the anarchic nature of international politics plays. This claim serves to legitimise the autonomy of sovereign states and the authority of their governments even as it delegitimises the authority of and roles played by international institutions and non-state actors (Ashley 1988; Cox 1981; Linklater 1990).

Finally, while much of the discussion above has focused on the problems associated with anarchy, there have been some who have advocated it as a desirable, legitimate political model (Proudhon 2007 [1840]; Wolff 1998). The argument in favour of anarchism is twofold. On the one hand, proponents of anarchy take exception to the suggestion that anarchy can be equated with disorder and chaos. As English School theorists of international relations have suggested, an anarchic society can be ordered by rules, but such rules must be created and enforced only through collective decisions that reach consensus, and not merely by an authoritative institution or individual. On the other hand, proponents of anarchism argue that a political community that lacks structures of authority is one where individual autonomy and responsibility are maximised.

Further reading: Ashley 1988; Mearsheimer 1994/5; Powell 1994; Waltz 1979; Wendt 1987; Wolff 1998.

ARMS CONTROL

An arms control agreement is an agreement – often but not necessarily between **nation-states** – designed to control the development, possession or use of weapons. ‘Control’ is an important if somewhat ambivalent term here, because although we might assume that the universal purpose of arms control agreements is to reduce the number of weapons possessed by states, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the practical terms of such agreements may vary widely, ranging from the banning of the development or possession of any and all weapons (total disarmament) to the prohibition of the use of only certain weapons and only in specific places or situations. The formality and scope of arms control agreements also vary. An arms control agreement may take the form of an informal agreement between two states or it may consist of a formal treaty, ratified by a great many states and supported by an international institution. The most obvious example of such a formal and extensive arms control agreement is the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), signed by 168 states and supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which is based in Vienna, Austria.

While the specific form and content of arms control agreements may vary, they are generally made with either or both of two intentions in mind. The first of these is the limitation of the potential costs of war; the second is the limitation of the likelihood of war. To use an arms control agreement to limit the potential costs of war is to follow a simple logic: if people (or countries) possess fewer weapons, then war between them will cause less harm. Unsurprisingly, this model of arms control has most frequently been employed in relation to weapons of mass destruction (WMD), such as chemical, biological and nuclear weapons (Blix 2008). Take, for example, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) signed between the United States and Russia. Through these agreements, the most recent of which was ratified in 2011, the two countries have agreed to reduce the number of nuclear warheads possessed by each from tens of thousands to fewer than 2,000. While this form of arms control agreement has typically focused on WMD, efforts have also been made in the post-Cold War era to reduce the numbers of small arms and light weapons (Rogers 2009).

The alternative objective pursued through the use of arms control agreements has been the reduction of the likelihood of conflict. Unfortunately, however, considerable disagreement exists regarding what causes **war** to occur. This matters greatly because unless we understand why wars happen we will be unable to determine how

arms control agreements might make war less likely. For example, some have argued that total disarmament – the abolition of all weapons – would reduce the likelihood of war because it would both delegitimise violence and make preparation for war more difficult. Others argue, as the saying goes, ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’. This saying rests on the belief that the only sure way to prevent others using force against you is to threaten them with even greater force. The tension between these positions persists. On the one hand, disarmament remains a goal advanced by various politicians, policy makers and peace activists, and on the other, many states continue to live by the maxim noted above and spend considerable sums on the development of their military capabilities.

If efforts to achieve total disarmament have a less than impressive historical record, those that seek to limit the occurrence of war through the achievement of less extensive arms control objectives have been more successful. Such arms control agreements arguably have reduced the likelihood of conflict in either or both of two ways. On the one hand, many arms control agreements have concentrated on controlling the development and use of specific types of weapons, where those weapons have been deemed to be particularly likely to destabilise peace between states. On the other hand, arms control agreements may have reduced the likelihood of war not by their practical effects on the use and deployment of weapons, but instead because of the nature of the process that states must go through to reach such agreements.

Let us start with the first of these: arms control agreements that are designed to control the development, deployment and use of particular types of weapons that are deemed to be most likely to destabilise peace and so encourage war. Arms control agreements of this type may be diverse in character, and may preclude signatories from researching and developing technology that would give them a decisive advantage in battle, stockpiling weaponry that is offensive (rather than defensive) in nature, or deploying weapons or weapons systems in particular geographical or spatial regions. One can find specific examples of each of these types of agreements having been used in the past century; what is common to all is that they are designed to promote **peace** by limiting the likelihood of war.

The criticism that is sometimes made of such agreements is that, if they are to be constructed, a considerable level of cooperation must be achieved within relationships that are already characterised by mistrust and tension. States within the relationship must shift from the competitive pursuit of advantage to the mutual recognition of the

dangers of war and the cooperative pursuit of stability and peace. If tensions between states are already high, achieving this shift would seem to be very difficult. This has led some to believe that arms control is likely to be least effective when it is most necessary and most successful in instances where it is not really needed.

It is at this point that the final function of arms control mentioned above becomes relevant. Arms control agreements are not merely important in terms of the practical outcomes that they produce; they are also significant as processes that are undertaken by states. The key point made by scholars and practitioners here is that trust is something that can be built over time, and the negotiation of arms control treaties is a practice that states can engage in so that they can build such trust. In this light, the specific terms of such agreements – the types of weapons that they ban or the limitations that they impose on signatories – are less important than are the processes that states must go through to produce such agreements. If previously warring states can initiate arms control discussions they may be able to build upon this limited cooperation to construct relations of mutual respect and trust in the future.

Further reading: Larsen and Wirtz 2009; Quinlan 2009; Sidhu and Thakur 2006; Williams and Viotti 2012.

AUTHORITY

The term authority describes either the right to be obeyed, or the capacity to have one's decisions or orders obeyed, without the need for coercion or persuasion. As such, the term is closely related to the concept of **power**, understood to be the capacity for one actor to get another to do something that they otherwise would not do. The crucial distinction between power in general and authority in particular, is that authority is not dependent upon the use of threats or incentives. Thus, a thief armed with a gun may threaten a person and force them to give up their money or a fraudster may use trickery to persuade a person to hand over their cash, but neither of these instances would seem to involve authority. A **government**, on the other hand, can take a citizen's money without recourse to persuasion or threats because they are deemed to have the authority to collect taxes.

However, the definition above actually incorporates two quite different understandings of 'authority', and the differences between these are important. The distinction here rests on whether we think of authority as a **right** to have orders obeyed or as the capacity to