

# Introduction: The Problem with the Problem of Order

*Ian Hurd*

It seems today that a sense of crisis permeates international affairs. From war to pollution to trade and beyond, there is much talk of the disintegration of the settled ways of doing things and fear of what comes next. The twenty-first century has turned sour for many believers in international order. This is not unique in history; order has been on the minds of writers for centuries, from Kant to Carr to Hedley Bull. It is hard to find a period in history when there has not been some sense of crisis. The problem of international order is both a perennial theme and an urgent contemporary concern. The essays in this collection broaden the conversation to consider the ambiguity, complexity, and contradiction within the concept of world order. Order is neither self-evident nor universally agreed upon; to the contrary, it is contested, political, and contingent. Order is a very disorderly idea.

The problem of order has long been central to the study of international politics. It is almost axiomatic among scholars of IR that the deficit in international order is an existential problem for collective life on the planet. The underlying fault, it is often said, lies in the structure of world politics. The fact that there are separate nation-states, each built on the idea of sovereignty, ensures that coordination and cooperation will be forever in short supply. The undersupply of order is a consequence of how the system is set up.

On this view, the “problem of order” is woven into the fabric of the world, and requires wise rulers to constantly invest (and reinvest) in it. Many scholars search for evidence in the past of the tools and circumstances that are conducive to order, and others turn to logic and theory to show how these might be applied today.

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*Ethics & International Affairs*, 38, no. 2 (2024), pp. 137–139.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679424000224

The scholarly discussion around international order today often assumes that order is self-evident and good for everyone. Rather than define “order” carefully, writers often treat it as a proxy for a mix of desirable properties such as peace, welfare, good governance, and stability. Together, these are meant to indicate order, but this approach leads to some confusion. It is impossible to know when order does or does not exist, or how it is measured or compared over time, and conflicting ideas about international order become hidden in a conceptual fog.

In this collection, we shake up these assumptions by looking at the many ways the concept of order has been understood, deployed, and fought for. This collection features authors who wonder how the idea of a deficit in order came to be so central to many people’s understanding of international affairs. We examine the politics, history, and pedagogy of framing world politics around the problem of order making. We open up the study of world order by looking into how the term is defined. What do people mean when they use the term “international order”? Why is the idea so often connected with anxiety that things are going wrong? How are discussions of world affairs shaped when one assumes that what the world needs is more order?

The essays in this roundtable unite around the view that order is a contested and political idea. It is a locus of disagreement rather than an objective condition. We make the politics of order discourse part of the story. The working premise is that the problem with “the problem of order” is that it avoids the politics in the concept of the discourse.

Trine Flockhart shows how the idea of world order is connected with prevailing notions of what constitutes “the good life.” She suggests that people are more likely to feel a sense of community within a single society, with a shared sense of the good life, rather than across societies, where such values are more likely to be interpreted in different ways. In this way, she sees a naturally inverse relationship between relatively stable domestic social orders and sharp contestation over the terms of international order. In my own contribution, I draw on the writing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to shine light on the discourse of world order. King encouraged his audience to see the difference between social order as defined by the authorities and the effects of ordering practices on the lived experience of people. I use King’s writing to criticize IR scholars who endorse international order without considering the political values encoded within it.

The political content of contemporary international affairs also concerns Lina Benabdallah. Where many writers classify the post-1945 world as being based

on liberal values and institutions, Benabdallah notes how the same features are interpreted by others as oppressive and disordered. Her contrapuntal reading of twentieth-century international history shows judgments about order to be politically contested, both when history is used as evidence in scholarly debates and when different political values confront each other.

Jennifer Mitzen brings these issues to the classroom. What does a course on international politics look like once the instructor recognizes that the basic terms of the discipline are inescapably contested? She speaks for many instructors as she wonders about how to present classic IR material (anarchy, 1648, and all the rest) in a way that produces open-mindedness rather than reinforces old tropes. Her solution is to think of “order and justice together, as perpetually entangled parts of the political present.”

Owen Brown suggests that scholars of world order should remember that order is at once descriptive and normative. It is used to describe how things are, but always in relation to an idea about how things should be. He shows the power of this insight by tracing how the thinking about world order since the nineteenth century has closely mapped the politics of racial hierarchy. “World order” has, he says, traditionally meant “white world order.” It is not clear if the current liberal international order can survive the “abolition” of its racial hierarchy.

Ayşe Zarakol offers a possible answer to this conundrum. She highlights world-ordering schemes from a wider view of history and offers a reconstruction of the concept informed by non-Western and pre-1648 sources. By provincializing Western and Westphalian notions of world order, she argues not only for the continued value of the concept but also for disengaging it from the particular racial, political, regional, and other hierarchies that are so easily conflated with it.

Each essay in its own way shows some of the paths forward once one accepts that competing conceptualizations are part of the story of world order. This insight opens new ways of thinking in IR, both theoretical and empirical. These essays draw on history, political theory, domestic affairs, and practices of pedagogy, among other sources, to widen the conversation.

Where traditional approaches treat world order as the answer to the problem of global politics, we treat it as a question—specifically: what do people mean when they use the concept? And more pointedly: what happens when people disagree about what constitutes order?