

1 The Elephant in the Room of International Relations Rule in the Study of International Politics

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From health to migration and cross-border trade and from policing to democratic elections, there is hardly any aspect of social, political, and economic life today that is not also governed internationally. The proliferation of international rules and standards, the mushrooming of international courts and tribunals, the ever-growing authority of international and regional organizations, the power of business firms and transnational non-state actors to shape international policies, and the persistent global inequality, both material and nonmaterial, all these emphasize that the international system is infused with structures of sub- and superordination that affect the conduct of actors across the globe, whether states or individuals. This observation is not new to the discipline of International Relations (IR). In fact, it has sparked lively debates on how to conceptualize these developments, centered on distinct theoretical lenses such as hegemony,¹ hierarchies,² status,³ empire,⁴ and international authority.⁵ No matter which of these approaches is preferred, one thing they have in common is that they all set out to describe the international “beyond anarchy,” questioning and replacing the anarchy *problematique* that has defined the field of IR for so long.⁶

This volume is part of and draws on these debates, but at the same time it aims to take the study of the international “beyond anarchy” a step further by establishing the concept of rule as the defining feature of order in the international realm. More specifically, we argue that the manifold conceptual approaches to sub- and superordination in the international should be understood as rich conceptualizations of one concept: rule. With this, we aim at advancing a research agenda that defines rule as a systematic approach to studying international politics.⁷ Unlike in the anarchy *problematique*, our approach sees rule – and not its absence – as the problematic aspect of the international, allowing an exploration of competing conceptualizations of rule and how they materialize in

diverse empirical realms. Drawing on the works of W. B. Gallie and John Rawls, we distinguish between concept and conceptions based on the idea that a concept is an abstract notion, while conceptions are the particular instantiations and specifications of such an abstract notion.⁸ As we will argue in this introduction, the burgeoning yet fragmented IR literature on the character of the international “beyond anarchy” has largely been based on different conceptions of the nature of this international that are rooted in one overarching concept of rule. We define rule broadly as constellations of formally or informally institutionalized sub- and superordination with the aim of affecting the distribution of basic goods and influence and of stabilizing expectations, regardless of whether these constellations are primarily of sociocultural, economic, or military nature. Thus, like the elephant in the room, *rule as an empirical phenomenon* has always been there in the study of international politics, addressed in different and disconnected strands of IR research. However, since the latter focused on different conceptions of rule, the relevance and potential of *rule as a theoretical concept* for understanding the international has not been systematically developed.

By promoting the concept of rule, we aim to show that rule can serve both as an integrating and a diagnostic tool for the study of the international “beyond anarchy.” First, the concept of rule allows us to identify the specific characteristics of the different conceptualizations used in IR scholarship and, in turn, builds bridges between and encourages critical engagement across what have so far been largely distinct and often disconnected literatures. Second, bringing together what have so far been separate conceptual debates, the concept of rule renders visible the multiplicity and heteronomy of different forms of sub- and superordination in the international. While, as we will explain in more detail in this introduction chapter, discussions around hierarchy, hegemony, and international authority shed light on different forms and constellations of sub- and superordination, it is important to note that reducing the international “beyond anarchy” to either of these artificially restricts our empirical gaze to what are, in fact, only specific instances of rule. In short, rule allows constellations of sub- and superordination in the international to be seen as more multiplex, systemic, and normatively ambiguous phenomena that need to be studied in the context of their interplay and consequences. Third, the concept of rule also helps identify blind spots in the existing scholarship on the international “beyond anarchy,” thus making a substantial contribution to moving the debate forward. Specifically, in this volume, we identify two such blind spots in particular: the practices of rule and the relational and dynamic characteristics of rule, which the contributions in Part II and Part III of this volume, respectively, will spell out in more detail.⁹ In sum, as we demonstrate

in this volume, understanding the international through the concept of rule, as opposed to its various conceptualizations, thus underlines the nonuniform and dynamic characteristics of the international “beyond anarchy,” which should be taken into account in a concept that is both integrative and diagnostic. We argue that rule is a concept that meets precisely these criteria.

In the remainder of this introduction chapter, we define the concept of rule vis-à-vis more substantial conceptualizations of it. We first summarize IR scholars’ more recent works on three key conceptual lenses – hierarchy, hegemony, and authority – which are the most established and productive debates on studying the international “beyond anarchy” to date. While hierarchy has broadened IR scholars’ study of constellations of sub- and superordination in the international, the concept is not specific enough to enable a systematic study and comparison of what we call rule; unless understood as “governance hierarchy,” it is not a replacement for anarchy as a fundamental ordering principle of the international.¹⁰ Hegemony and authority, in turn, we argue, are specific conceptualizations of rule. We contend that these two (and possibly other) conceptualizations of rule can be distinguished from one another based on their different understandings of the means and sources through which rule is established and exercised, and with regard to their normative assessments of rule, that is, whether rule is seen as a problem of or as a solution for international politics. They have also been predominantly applied to understanding and explaining different phenomena of international politics, such as interstate relations in the case of hegemony and global governance in the case of international authority. In Part III of this introduction chapter, we outline our understanding of the concept and conceptualizations of rule that underpin this volume. We define rule as constellations of formally or informally institutionalized sub- and superordination with the aim of affecting the distribution of basic goods and influence and of stabilizing expectations, regardless of whether these constellations are primarily of sociocultural, economic, or military nature. The individual chapters in this volume all consider a more substantial conceptualization of rule and in so doing expressly refer to the concept laid out in this introduction chapter. Based on the individual contributions, Part IV highlights the multiplicity and complexity of rule in the international system and Part V summarizes why this book matters for advancing our understanding of global politics.

What Is There “Beyond Anarchy”?

Notwithstanding the continuing attraction of the anarchy assumption in IR, today there is a growing, if fragmented, research agenda that seeks to describe and explain the international system “beyond anarchy.” These

debates are specifically centered on three conceptual lenses – hierarchy, hegemony, and authority – all of which emphasize different forms of sub- and superordination in international politics. In the following subsections, we briefly delve into the three strands of theoretical discussion, describing how they relate to the overarching concept of rule.

Of the three conceptual lenses, hierarchy is the broadest. Studies on international hierarchy constitute a burgeoning field of IR research that has produced important insights into how hierarchies emerge and fade, thus demonstrating the extent to which the international is organized hierarchically. As a concept, however, hierarchy is at once too broad and too limited to grasp the prevalence of different forms of rule in the international realm.¹¹ Although the study of international hierarchies allows us to identify the manifold forms of sub- and superordination that exist in international politics, the concept as such does not entail an explicit expectation as to the effects of such hierarchies, or more specifically, how they affect the conduct of actors in the international realm. Hegemony and authority, in contrast, are more narrowly defined approaches to the international “beyond anarchy” and have so far been predominantly applied to different empirical contexts. The debate on hegemony has a long pedigree in debates on world order, concentrating on how specific cultural, economic, and political structures and resources position some actors to affect the conduct of others. The debate on international authority, in turn, is deeply embedded in the study of global governance in IR. Focusing on the reasons for deference, authority research highlights the specific attributes of actors or institutions to explain why actors obey the commands or requests of others. Thus, both hegemony and authority make a clear conceptual reference to the effects of constellations of sub- and superordination on the conduct of actors and are therefore, as we will lay out in the following, specific but different conceptions of rule.

Hierarchy

Despite the prominent assumption that the international system is made up of equal units, various strands of IR theories have, if only implicitly, questioned this premise for a long time. This is especially true for power transition theories that understand the international order as a vertical one with the most powerful state at the top, always wary of rising challengers attempting to surpass it.¹² Even apart from these approaches, however, functional differentiation and stratification among states have been persistent features of both international politics and its theorization. For realists, for instance, the unequal distribution of

capabilities among states has ranked them vertically and allowed some to command others and function as guardians of the international order (see also the subsection “Hegemony” further below). Furthermore, changes in this unequal distribution of capabilities have been interpreted as major threats to international stability and entailing a risk of violent conflict in the international system, as in theories of hegemonic stability.¹³ Similarly, world systems theory and other Marxist theories have demonstrated the emergence and prevailing effects of the core–periphery relations resulting from imperialism and the global reach of capitalism.¹⁴ Notwithstanding this factual inequality among the units of the international system, however, it is only recently that hierarchies – that is “any system through which actors are organised into vertical relations of super- and subordination”¹⁵ – have come to form a burgeoning research agenda as such, leading some to even speak of a new field of “hierarchy studies.”¹⁶ Today, this field is marked by great diversity, uniting scholars from various strands of IR theory. As argued by Ayşe Zarakol, scholarship in this field “converges on two insights: first, that hierarchies are a ubiquitous feature of international (i.e. interstate) politics and, second, that they generate social, moral and behavioural dynamics that are different from those created by other arrangements.”¹⁷

Broadly speaking, the study of hierarchy in the international system has so far taken two quite different forms, resulting in two contrasting approaches. These approaches diverge in their meta-theoretical assumptions, in what they identify as the main sources of international hierarchies, and in the normative assessments of the latter, that is, to what extent hierarchies are considered a problem of or a solution to international politics. The first approach, often referred to as “narrow,” considers international hierarchy the result of contractual, usually dyadic relationships between states. This account has been most prominently advanced by David Lake but can also be found in works such as John Ikenberry’s *Liberal Leviathan*.¹⁸ For Lake, hierarchy is the exercise of authority – that is, rightful rule – by a dominant state over subordinate states on a particular set of issues. Subordinate states are willing to give up a portion of their freedom and subordinate themselves to the authority of dominant states in exchange for security and order. Hierarchy is then defined by “the extent of the authority exercised by the ruler over the ruled.”¹⁹ In this approach, hierarchy is the result of a bargain between states, based on mutual consent, which ranks states according to their different roles and responsibilities and thereby structures the international system based on the functions different states perform for the system. Rather than a problem, hierarchy is therefore a solution to the disorder that is likely to emerge in an international system marked by anarchy.

Contrary to this agency-focused account of international hierarchy, other scholars advance an understanding of hierarchy as resulting from deep-seated, historically grown, and changing structures of inequality that define actors' uneven power and status in the international system. In such a reading, hierarchies have always been a characteristic feature of the international system.²⁰ For scholars advocating this perspective, hierarchy is not the result of a voluntary bargain between dominant and subordinate states, but rather these states are said to already be enmeshed in structures of inequality that delineate their realm of action and define their position within a system of vertical differentiation. In other words, actors – whether states or otherwise – of the international system are already “born into” a structured world that not only defines roles and positions but also establishes who is a legitimate actor in the first place.²¹ In this regard, scholars have identified international hierarchies as resulting from historically grown and prevailing racism and imperial relationships,²² from the international expansion of law,²³ from international norms such as sovereignty,²⁴ self-determination,²⁵ or gender equality,²⁶ and from the unequal distribution of wealth.²⁷ Though materialism has played an important role in this strand of hierarchy research, many scholars have demonstrated the importance of intersubjective factors, such as discourse, habitus, embodiment, and stigma, for hierarchies to have an impact on everyday international life.²⁸

This diverse field of studies on international hierarchies has revealed the theoretical and empirical limits of the anarchy assumption and has helped to make visible the manifold ways in which the international realm is shaped by structured relationships of sub- and superordination. Indeed, one of the great advantages of this research agenda has been its emphasis on the existence of *hierarchies* rather than a single hierarchy in the international realm.²⁹ As a concept for the study of different forms of rule in the international realm, however, hierarchy is at once too broad and too limited.

First, the theoretical and empirical breadth of approaches to international hierarchy results in conceptual vagueness. While some see this as an advantage that will enable them to identify lines of critical engagement across different approaches,³⁰ such critical engagement has so far not come to fruition and is unlikely to bridge the gaping meta-theoretical divide that sets scholars of hierarchy apart. The narrow conception of hierarchy as contracted authority cannot serve as an integrating conceptual framework due to its emphasis on voluntarism and legitimacy, which may not hold for a general concept in international politics.³¹ Given the conceptual merging of hierarchy and authority, it also raises the question as to what value hierarchy has as a concept in itself.

The broad understanding of hierarchy, in turn, is prone to gloss over conceptual differences between hierarchy, inequality, and systems of rule and may thus lose sight of the particular forms of differentiation and stratification prevalent in international politics.³²

Second, as several authors have pointed out, the existence of hierarchical relations is not incompatible with the assumption of the international system being marked by anarchy. In fact, as argued by Jack Donnelly, the juxtaposition of hierarchy and anarchy is a false one, as at least etymologically speaking, hierarchy and anarchy are not mutually exclusive. Anarchy translates as “without a leader (*archos*) or rule (*arche*).” Thus “neither super-ordination nor differentiation ... has any logical relationship to (an)archy; that is, to government or its absence.”³³ Hence, discussion of hierarchies – broadly understood as differentiation and stratification – does not conceptually question but in fact qualifies international anarchy.³⁴ One possible way out would be to focus on what Meghan McConaughy et al. call “governance hierarchy” as a particular form of hierarchical relations based on the intention to command,³⁵ which is – as we will explain further – precisely what the concept of rule does.

Hegemony

A second prominent perspective for the study of the international “beyond anarchy” is hegemony. However, as in the case of hierarchy, it must be noted that some approaches, especially more traditional ones, emphasize that hegemony does not override the anarchy of the international system.³⁶ Hegemony is neither a uniformly used concept nor a coherent theory. Rather, it is a basic term from a larger family of theories dealing with a specific aspect of sub- and superordination in international politics.³⁷ Originating in debates about world order structures, what theories of hegemony have in common is a focus on capabilities, that is, the means by which rule is established and maintained. Realist and liberal approaches emphasize material capabilities, such as military and economic power. However, for hegemony to emerge, there must also be the will to apply these capabilities and to exercise leadership.³⁸ Depending on which of these aspects (power or will) is given priority, a distinction can be made between more realist or more liberal approaches to hegemony. Constructivist and critical theories, by contrast, stress ideational and cultural resources of power.³⁹ In addition, they emphasize the problematic effects of hegemony, namely domination, while realist and liberal approaches tend to see hegemony as a solution to cooperation problems and a formula for legitimate order and stability.

At the heart of realist theories is the material ability of strong states to force weaker ones into obedience.⁴⁰ John Mearsheimer defines a hegemon as a “state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system.”⁴¹ While classical realists and structural realists argue that unilateral concentrations of power can only be short-lived and are balanced by the countervailing power of other states, theorists of international hegemony argue that strong states can establish a stable unipolar order if they use their power to generate some sort of international public goods.⁴² Public goods might include not only ensuring an open and free world economy but also providing international security. The prevention of Great Power wars and the protection of relatively weak states is, according to Robert Gilpin, a crucial source of the “prestige” that hegemons enjoy: “To some extent the lesser states in an international system follow the leadership of more powerful states, in part because they accept the legitimacy and utility of the existing order.”⁴³ According to Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, the strength of this effect increases with the power of the hegemon: “The stronger the leading state is and the more entrenched its dominance, the more improbable and thus less constraining counterbalancing dynamics are.”⁴⁴ Under these conditions, unipolar systems may well be more stable than multi- or bipolar systems, as maintained by hegemonic stability theory.

While realist approaches to hegemony see the availability of superior power resources as crucial to create a stable order, liberal approaches understand them as necessary but not sufficient. Instead, liberal approaches focus more on the will to lead. According to Robert Keohane, hegemony is defined “as a situation in which one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and *willing to do so*.”⁴⁵ Along these lines, John Ikenberry has described the emergence of the liberal world order after World War II as a “rule and regime-based order created by a leading state.”⁴⁶ In the liberal world order, Ikenberry points out, “order is also established and maintained through the exercise of power by the leading state, but power is used to create a system of rule that weaker and secondary states agree to join.”⁴⁷ In a more recent essay, John Ikenberry and Daniel Nexon developed these ideas further and proposed that hegemony no longer be considered an independent variable and its consequences examined, but to focus on the practices of hegemonic politics and what effects they have on the hegemonic order.⁴⁸ This move, the authors argue, allows some of the criticism put forward by critical theories to be integrated, for example, that the concept of hegemony has a Western normative bias and overlooks the fact that the liberal order is anything but favorable or benign for large parts of the world, especially for actors in the Global South.⁴⁹

This line of argument is systematically spelled out in the critical tradition of IR, which relies on the Gramscian notion of “cultural hegemony.”⁵⁰ While traditional Marxist approaches were primarily concerned with the economic power of social classes institutionalized in the capitalist system of domination, Antonio Gramsci and critical theory approaches recognized the deeper connection between economic and cultural power and domination. The concept of cultural hegemony addresses the structural power of norms, rules, and procedures that generates various actors, with their identities, interests, and positions in the system in the first place.⁵¹ The resulting unequal distribution of opportunities to participate in shaping international politics leads to the stabilization of unequal exchange relations and the institutionalization of structures of sub- and superordination between center and periphery,⁵² a structure that is, *inter alia*, powerfully reinforced by Western concepts of international law, as theorists of Third World Approaches to International Law have stressed.⁵³

Although the prospect of combining material power and ideas⁵⁴ that draw more heavily on critical theory approaches that problematize the cultural foundations of hegemonic orders⁵⁵ and emphasize contestation rather than compliance to better understand contemporary developments⁵⁶ is promising, some reservations about the concept of hegemony remain. First, the concept of hegemony oscillates between the realist focus on powerful coercion and the liberal focus on legitimate leadership and thus obscures the crucial aspect of the precarious legitimacy of hegemonic orders instead of clarifying it.⁵⁷ Second, hegemony has always been and remains a concept largely related to states and interstate relations and thus underestimates the growing influence of international organizations (IOs) or non-state actors. Doing so, it reinforces a static and state-centric view of world politics instead of exploring its dynamic nature. Third, the normative overtones of the concept are also persistent, either identifying hegemony as a benevolent order per se or denouncing it as inherently illegitimate (e.g., as domination). Thus, while hegemony captures a specific aspect of sub- and superordination in international politics, namely the variety of means by which rule is established and maintained, it seems that hegemony studies do not fully exploit this potential.

Authority

Lastly, what is probably the most prominent IR debate concerning instances of rule is that which centers on the concept of authority. Authority is generally understood as the right of one actor to command

and induce deference from some other actor(s) on a particular issue. Similar to hegemony, the authority debate emerged within debates about world order, in particular, in the context of a proclaimed turn to global governance.⁵⁸ The governance turn was accompanied by an increased scholarly concern for the growing competencies of IOs and non-state actors, such as corporations and civil society organizations in the making, and the enforcement of international rules.⁵⁹ The starting point of this research agenda is the observation by Ian Hurd and others that states adhere to international norms, rules, and agreements not only because they fear external coercion or act out of self-interest but also, and not least, because they believe that these norms, rules, and agreements are legitimate.⁶⁰ This insight removed the traditional link between state, authority, and territory making it “possible to imagine other actors that might be authoritative.”⁶¹ Authority is thus something that, on the one hand, actors accrue, but on the other hand, it is also a systemic feature when patterns of authority change the structure of the international system.⁶² Central questions in this strand of research are therefore how international authority shapes relations between states, how other actors in the international realm, such as IOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international courts, and other transnational actors gain – or lose – authority, and how legitimacy is made, contested, and defended.⁶³

The study of international authority in IR has so far predominantly focused on the different sources of deference, that is, the reasons for actors to obey commands or fulfill requests. No matter what the different approaches argue are the particular reasons for this deference – rational calculation,⁶⁴ a sense of moral obligation,⁶⁵ or a reflexive insight into one’s own cognitive limitations⁶⁶ – all approaches share the idea that deference occurs because actors perceive the claim to authority as legitimate, that is, as rightful.

The various approaches to international authority in IR differ with regard to two dimensions: (1) the question of where this authority, or rather the deference to authority, comes from, that is, the sources of deference and (2) how the various approaches conceptualize the link between authority and legitimacy. Regarding the sources of deference, David Lake defines authority, in the spirit of Max Weber, as rightful and legitimate rule: “That is, an authoritative ruler has the right to command subordinates to perform certain actions and, because the commands are rightful, the ruled have the duty to comply.”⁶⁷ For Lake, this rightfulness can be attributed to a contract between ruler and ruled that is advantageous for both (see subsection “Hierarchy”). Other approaches, in contrast, hold that socialization into a specific set of norms and principles brings about rightfulness.⁶⁸ William Wohlforth et al., for instance, have studied the

“moral authority” of states and found that even small and middle powers can raise their international status by contributing as “good powers” to “system maintenance,” for example, by participating in peace missions. Moral authority does not change a state’s material capabilities, but it helps it negotiate its place in the imagined stratification order of sub- and superordination.⁶⁹ Lastly, another strand of literature refers to reflexive insights into cognitive limits as a source of deference. For instance, Michael Zürn highlights the rise of epistemic authority based on superior expertise that makes others defer to the requests of the actor in the superior position.⁷⁰ Similarly, Deborah Avant and her colleagues stress expertise as one important source but also highlight other actor attributes to explain deference.⁷¹ Finally, approaches that take a rather critical perspective of global governance reject the claim of actor or institutional attributes, instead focusing on the practices and techniques that make claims to authority effective.⁷² Nico Krisch and others have shown that international authority flows not only from formal structures and procedures but also, as “liquid authority,” from informal practices, inter-institutional cooperation, and functional effectiveness.⁷³ Similarly, Ole Jacob Sending has analyzed the competing practices that make certain actors become authoritative in the first place.⁷⁴ Alongside these different understandings of the sources of deference, the approaches also consider varying understandings of the link between authority and legitimacy. In one approach, for example, authority basically equals legitimate authority.⁷⁵ In IO and global governance research, authority is often perceived as delegated authority: states delegate certain tasks and responsibilities to IOs, thereby conferring authority, and this authority is legitimate because it is voluntarily delegated.⁷⁶ But through authority, IOs can also gain independence and agency, which they can, in turn, extend and increase through their own actions.⁷⁷ Particularly in crisis situations, IOs have the opportunity to expand and solidify their authority through “emergency powers.”⁷⁸

In another approach, Karen Alter and her colleagues studying international courts argue that authority does not guarantee legitimacy, whether delegated or not.⁷⁹ Only when international courts/IOs satisfy and justify this authority through the appropriate procedures and successful performance does legitimacy emerge, and with it the willingness of the actors concerned to abide by the organization’s decisions and rules. Thus, authority can be more or less legitimate.⁸⁰ This concerns what Michael Zürn calls the authority–legitimacy link. In *A Theory of Global Governance*, Zürn describes the increase of authority nested in trans- and international institutions and the need for new forms of legitimacy that is often not available to them because suitable political structures and

processes are absent.⁸¹ As a consequence, the rise of authority in international institutions is likely to produce politicization by civil society and contestation by states.⁸²

In both of these approaches, authority is inextricably linked to legitimacy, that is, the belief of the ruled that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern their conduct.⁸³ Even though the sources of this belief vary between the approaches, compliance with a command or request made by an authority holder is a matter of choice. This understanding, however, narrows the applicability of authority as a concept quite substantially. As Vincent Pouliot has highlighted, it particularly neglects all those relations of sub- and superordination in which the subordinate actors have only limited alternatives to obedience. For many actors in the international sphere, lacking material power or, even more importantly, social and cultural capital, there is no choice but to submit.⁸⁴ In sum, the study of international authority has advanced IR scholars' understanding of the international "beyond anarchy" in important ways. As a conceptual lens, however, authority only helps us grasp particular constellations of sub- and superordination in the international realm that affect the conduct of others and the distribution of resources: namely, those consciously – albeit for varying reasons – obeyed and considered more or less legitimate by subordinate actors.

The Concept of Rule in the International System

The study of international hierarchies, hegemony, and authority has profoundly influenced the way IR scholars have come to think about and research order in the international realm, demonstrating the manifold ways in which the international has been and continues to be shaped by constellations of sub- and superordination. But as the previous section and the discussion of the various theoretical approaches have highlighted, there is no consensus on what constitutes these constellations of sub- and superordination and on what basis to identify and normatively assess them. Are constellations of sub- and superordination in the international the effect of the unequal distribution of (cultural, economic, and political) means of affecting the conduct of subordinate actors? Or are such constellations to be identified based on the various reasons for which subordinate actors willingly obey commands from superior actors? And are such forms of sub- and superordination a solution to international politics or rather the most problematic aspect of the latter?

Given these differences, it cannot be our aim to come up with one thick, uniform concept. Also from an empirical point of view, a single concept seems impossible, given the observable multiplicity of empirical

forms of sub- and superordination in the international, which, to a certain extent, would necessarily make such a concept ignorant. As a consequence, we therefore do not consider such a thick, uniform concept to be of particular value, for it might actually hamper rather than advance the generation of knowledge on international politics. And yet, valuing empirical complexity and multiplicity should neither contradict the search for conceptual advancement nor impede critical engagement between the different conceptions. This is, in fact, a common feature of many of the core concepts of political life, such as the widely discussed concept of power in international relations.⁸⁵ Hence, in order to facilitate a conceptual discussion within IR, there is a need for an overarching concept that allows the integration of various conceptions, as well as diagnosis of the essence of (different forms of) sub- and superordination in the international realm and their effects on the conduct of actors. We argue that rule, understood as a constellation of formally or informally institutionalized sub- and superordination with the aim of affecting the distribution of basic goods and influence and of stabilizing expectations, can serve as precisely such an overarching, integrating, and diagnostic concept.

In seeking to advance rule as such an overarching concept, we draw on the distinction between “concept” and “conceptions.” The notion of differentiating between “concept” and “conceptions” can already be found in W. B. Gallie’s work on essentially contested concepts.⁸⁶ Introducing the distinction between the two, Gallie’s aim was to understand how essentially contested concepts, such as trust, power, or justice, could nevertheless be understood as referring to one kind of phenomenon. According to Gallie, it is the conditions for the application of a given concept that are contested, deriving from divergent theoretical or ethical positions held by different actors. Gallie therefore reserved these divergent positions for distinguishing between conceptions of the respective phenomena. Similarly, John Rawls used the distinction between concept and conceptions of justice to highlight the difference between a normative concept of justice and various conceptions that would apply a specific set of principles, such as his conception of “justice as fairness.”⁸⁷ Thus, while a concept denotes an abstract notion, conceptions are the particular instantiations and specifications of such an abstract notion. While concept and conceptions often use the same denominator – such as “power” for structural vs. institutional power⁸⁸ or “justice” as in “justice as fairness” vs. “justice as freedom”⁸⁹ – this is not necessarily the case. What is crucial is not the denomination but the existence of specific instantiations of a given concept, stemming from the varying theoretical and ethical positions a given people hold.

Using this distinction between concept and conceptions, we propose that rule be considered as a concept that leaves ample room for different, more substantial conceptions, varying with regard to (1) the means through which rule is established and enacted, (2) the sources of and reasons for deference on the side of the subordinate actors, and (3) the normative resources for assessing different forms of rule.

This means that our concept of rule does not specify how rule is constituted and on what means its exercise relies. It is also neutral in its normative assessment, whether rule is a solution to problems of international politics or in fact one of the problems of international politics. Moreover, in terms of empirical focus, the concept of rule is open to being applied to very different situations of international life, from interstate relations to transnational social movements. All these specifications can be located in various conceptions of rule.

While we argued that hierarchy is underdetermined with regard to rule unless an intention or ability to command on the part of the superordinate actor is added, hegemony and authority are in fact specific instantiations, hence conceptions of rule. Concretely, *hegemony* is a conception of a constellation of sub- and superordination based on the unequal distribution of key means to affect the conduct of subordinate actors. Depending on which strand of hegemony research is studied, such means can be economic and political, established in active leadership (liberal/realist hegemony), or they can be cultural, becoming effective in ideological prescription (critical hegemony). In terms of normative assessment, the two strands of hegemony research take opposing perspectives: while for the first, hegemony is legitimate as it rests on a willingness to obey on the part of subordinate actors, the latter strand stresses the problematic and potentially illegitimate aspects of hegemony, focusing in particular on situations in which hegemony is resisted (domination). *Authority*, in turn, is a particular conception of a constellation of sub- and superordination exercised through the voluntary obedience of those ruled and thus imbued with legitimacy. Unlike hierarchy and despite their substantial differences, these conceptions, by definition, refer to the formally or informally endorsed claim of superordinate actors that they have the right to affect the conduct of subordinates as a central characteristic of structures of sub- and superordination. Hence, they all refer to the same core concept: rule.

The Multiplicity of Rule in the International System

None of the contributions to this volume question the existence of constellations of sub- and superordination in the international system. Their purpose is therefore not to detect but to problematize these structures

of sub- and superordination, be it in theoretical, empirical, or normative terms. Each contribution starts from the observation that there are particular types and structures of rule and aims to investigate the causes of their emergence, their forms of existence, and their social effects. In so doing, each contribution spells out a specific conception of rule by drawing to the core concept as defined in this introduction. The need to do this emerges from the insight that, unlike the nation-state, which still serves as the unrivaled conceptual role model for political rule, there is neither a unified system of rule in the international realm, nor a clear and identifiable set of institutions and agents that constitute and manage structures of rule. While there are clear examples of institutionalized forms of rule based on material coercion, the overall image of rule in the international system is much more amorphous. Forms of rule emerge in different spaces and in more or less institutionalized constellations and therefore have to be traced in their multiple dimensions, that is, in the practices of actors constituting and enacting rule, the changing institutional conditions for rule, and the resulting consequences for the distribution of power and wealth. Apart from demonstrating this multiplicity of rule in the international system, the contributions in this volume also substantially advance the study of international structures of sub- and superordination by shedding light on two hitherto understudied dimensions: the practices of rule as well as its relational and dynamic character, which the chapters in Parts II and III address in more detail.

Outline of the Book

The volume is divided into three parts: Part I focuses on theorizing rule, bringing together different theoretical approaches to both the concept and to concrete yet different conceptions of rule. Michael Zürn opens this Part I by introducing a particular conception of rule, namely “reflexive authority.” According to Zürn, authority involves “a form of power that is based neither exclusively on coercion, nor on the manipulation of incentives, and also not on persuasion, but it includes the recognition of inequality among actors” (Zürn, this volume), which he calls “voluntary subordination.” Hence, it is the puzzle of obedience or deference that lies at the core of Zürn’s approach to constellations of sub- and superordination in the international system. Distinguishing between three different forms of authority – contracted, inscribed, and reflexive – he aims to demonstrate that authority rests on actors’ insights into the limitations of their own rationality and information base, because they conclude that without authoritative institutions or agents, certain goods and values could not be sufficiently provided for. Zürn argues that while contracted

authority conflates authority with cooperation, inscribed authority cannot deal with the prevalence of contestation against authority. Only the reflexive form of authority that centers around actors' insights into the need for certain forms of authority can explain the puzzle of deference.

David Lake in his chapter theorizes about the conditions for rule to come into being, concretely, why one particular form of rule emerges and not others. Starting from the premise that rules are not only the result of rulers' own interest, but are structured by the existing rules and rule makers, Lake uses an organizational ecology approach to explain the rise of a particular kind of ruling body in the international system: private governance organizations (PGOs) whose rule(s) favor free market neoliberalism. Lake demonstrates how the reluctance of states to invest authority in intergovernmental organizations induces the disproportionate growth because these are most likely to have the resources to engage in rulemaking.

Nicholas Onuf approaches the problem of rule by taking up and elaborating on ideas he first developed with Frank F. Klink in the late 1980s, starting from the socially constitutive effects of rules. Onuf argues that rules are what make rule possible and consequently identifies three different kinds of rules (instruction, directive, and commitment rules) and their corresponding forms of rule (hegemony, hierarchy, and heteronomy). Although hegemony and hierarchy are possible forms of rule, the international system is best described as heteronomous, as it consists of rules that simultaneously regulate the mutual recognition of state equality *and* the unequal distribution of their privileges. Onuf's heuristic also provides a departure point for understanding the proliferation of rule(s) globally as a defining feature of modernity.

The chapters in Part II, while building on different conceptualizations of rule, all focus on the practice of rule as enacted by a multitude of agencies in the international realm, such as state representatives, transnational organizations, and regional mediators. Ole Jacob Sending's chapter presents a conception of rule that is based on the rule-making practices of actors, which Sending calls "auto-authority." He starts from the observation that many forms of transnational governance are valued particularly because they are effective without being coercive, that is, they rely on nonbinding measures. As Sending highlights, this effectiveness is the effect of a form of authority that is neither delegated nor contracted, but that emerges solely from the practice of engaging in rulemaking. Hence, in order for IR scholars to explain forms of rule, Sending concludes, the important thing is not to look at different sources of legitimacy but rather to investigate the practices of actors engaging in rulemaking and their authority-constituting consequences.

Sending illustrates his argumentation with examples from the formation of a global population policy and the global governance of health.

Antonia Witt's chapter moves to another kind of actor involved in practicing rule: regional organizations. She introduces the idea of the region as a site of rule, formalized in the growing authority of regional organizations to define governance principles for their member states. Concretely, the chapter analyzes the connection between international authority and authority in/of states, thus offering a relational reading of authority that focuses on the constitutive connections between different sites of authority. With a case study on the African Union's (AU) anti-coup policy, Witt analyzes how the authority to define what counts as legitimate authority in states both reproduces the state as a locus of legitimate authority and denies it that very authority. Unlike most of the existing literature, which studied the authority of IOs based on the sources of IO authority, Witt offers a reading of IO authority through the practices of enacting authority and the effects this has in specific locations.

International law has become a key field both for practices and for the study of international rule. Ian Hurd investigates in his chapter whether there is such a thing as an international rule of law by analyzing the practices of state parties in relation to international law. Based on a comparison between the logic of the domestic rule of law and that of the international rule of law, Hurd demonstrates that, while the international rule of law might not work as a neutral institutional framework to help states solve their conflicts, it nevertheless functions as a kind of constitutional meta norm that structures states' arguments and practices regarding international law. Thus, even though the international rule of law is "fiction," it is an effective fiction in the sense that state practices working on this fiction end up making the international rule of law into a form of international rule.

Lastly, Part III advances our understanding of the relational and dynamic aspects of rule, in particular its relation to resistance. Christopher Daase and Nicole Deitelhoff introduce a conception of rule that rejects the hitherto dominant focus on recognition. Instead, the two authors propose a conception of rule that is tied to resistance. Based on an eclectic reading of different traditions of theories of rule, they stipulate that there is no rule without resistance. Even though rule might aim at suppressing resistance or might take such a subtle shape that it hardly encounters resistance, conceptually, rule is bound to resistance. Without a minimum of opposition and objection to orders, a recourse to rule would not be necessary. Even legitimate rule, which Weber calls authority, is legitimate only to a certain degree. Although one can assume

a general willingness to obey, it only makes sense to speak of rule or authority if there is also the chance of dissent and the possibility of resistance, because even legitimate rule (authority) is the assertion of interests *against the will* of others. As a consequence, the authors argue, not only obedience and the will to comply but also dissent and the will to resist have to be part of every conception of rule. Furthermore, from such a perspective, the shape of rule can be linked to the resistance it gives rise to. To demonstrate this relationship, Daase and Deitelhoff introduce four illustrative case studies on state and non-state forms of resistance and how they indicate and influence forms of rule.

Karen Alter, in extension to the chapter by Ian Hurd, explores state resistance against international law rather than the regularity of state practice that brings about the authority of the international rule of law. Specifically, Alter's focus is on recent waves of state contestation against international law. She distinguishes between ordinary and extraordinary contestation, the latter being aimed at pushing back international law, while the former "takes place within a legal field, when lawyers, stakeholders, judges, and government officials debate and contest over the meaning of international law" (Alter, this volume). As Alter highlights, it is the extraordinary contestations that are of concern, as they have the potential to tear down the very fabric of international law.

The question of the conditions under which resistance can become a threat to existing orders of rule is also at the center of Julia Morse's contribution. Morse focuses on the politics of anti-globalist leaders in the US, Europe, and beyond who portray their positions as being against an international that is increasingly shaped by authority. The goal of such leaders of restoring national sovereignty and reducing the power of international institutions is therefore framed as resistance to global rule. Morse identifies three possible alternative strategies to undermine the international liberal order: (1) challenging international regimes by breaking their rules or withdrawing completely, (2) demanding changes in institutional designs or rules, and (3) forming new institutions that run counter to the objectives of the old ones. So far, Morse holds, the robustness of international institutions in the face of anti-globalist challenges indicates the continuous authority of global governance arrangements. In the long run, however, unilateral strategies might have grave repercussions for global governance. Morse's chapter therefore demonstrates that the analysis of strategies of resistance not only reveals the preferences of the challengers but also "signals something about the nature of rule and authority in the international system," and "has long-term consequences for the authoritativeness of the regime complex" (Morse, this volume).

Why Rule Matters

Over the last two decades, in particular, a lot has been written about different forms of inequality and stratification, about hierarchies and authority in world politics, making abundantly clear that constellations of sub- and superordination are not new to the scene of international relations but have existed all along. Some of these constellations come with the explicit or implicit aim of affecting the conduct of actors, stabilizing expectations, and shaping the distribution of power and resources. We call these constellations rule. What differentiates international politics from national politics is that these constellations do not align themselves in one coherent scheme of rule but give rise to a wide array of different forms and structures of rule that compete and overlap.⁹⁰ To refer to the international system as either anarchical or hierarchical is an inadequate description, rather characterizing it as a heterarchy would be more fitting.⁹¹

But if rule has existed in international politics all along, why did it take so long for IR scholarship to tackle it systematically? There is no simple answer to this question. One of the reasons for the long neglect lies in conceptual developments in the field, the most important of which was the currency anarchy gained as an imaginary and ordering principle of the international system in the 1980s through Kenneth Waltz's seminal book *Theory of International Politics*.⁹² His move to equate rule with (formal) hierarchy worked as an effective showstopper to any serious engagement with rule in international politics for quite some time; this might even hold true today given the fact that most IR scholars working on related issues prefer to refer to hierarchies, hegemony, and international authority instead of rule. Nevertheless, the fact that today there is more research on hierarchies, hegemony, and authority is probably also related to the impressive institutionalization, and, as part of it, formalization of world politics during the last two decades, which made rule more visible, on the one hand, and harder to escape, on the other.⁹³

Looking at the contributions in this volume, we believe it was the right decision to cast our net more widely and address the multiplicity of rule in the international realm through the integrating and diagnostic concept introduced here.⁹⁴ In fact, as an initial conclusion, this volume demonstrates that a focus on rule, as defined in this introduction and explicated in the ensuing chapters, has at least three advantages: first, it makes the relational and processual dimension of forms of sub- and superordination visible, which in turn means grasping rule neither as static nor as given, but as dynamically constituted, contested, and changed through agency. This raises questions such as what

kind of practices make rule possible and under what conditions can particular actors successfully rule or make a claim to authority, to which the contributions by Lake, Sending, Hurd, Witt, and Onuf, in particular, provide answers. Second, understanding the forms and functions of rule helps to make sense of the myriad forms of resistance and contestation that we observe in world politics today. Not all forms of inequality point to rule, but nor do all forms of contestation. Understanding the interaction between rule and resistance, as demonstrated in the contributions by Daase and Deitelhoff, Alter, and Morse, allows us to assess the longevity as well as the conditions for erosion of particular systems of rule, an aspect also discussed in Zürn's contribution to this volume. A critical conclusion drawn by all contributions is that even though resistance is rising, the current international order demonstrates an impressive "stickiness." And lastly, deepening our understanding of international rule facilitates a normative interrogation of the structures of inequality and hierarchy that we can observe in world politics by laying bare the ruling function of those structures. The chapters by Lake, Sending, and Witt explicitly pursue such a critical objective. Rendering rule visible is a crucial precondition for it to be subjected to informed critique. Especially in times of anti-globalist movements, rising populism, and nationalism, such informed critique may become the inevitable basis for the formulation of real alternatives.

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Notes

- 1 Goh 2013; Ikenberry 2011; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019.
- 2 Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Lake 2009; MacDonald 2018; Viola et al. 2015; Zarakol 2017a.
- 3 Paul et al. 2014; Wolf 2019.
- 4 Barder 2015; Barkawi and Laffey 2002.
- 5 For instance, Krisch 2017; Sending 2015; Zürn 2018; see also Donnelly 2015.
- 6 On the "anarchy *problematique*," see Ashley 1988, but also see Slaughter 2017 on the "return of anarchy" in light of growing anti-globalization and anti-internationalization trends, as well as Havercroft and Prichard 2017 and Cerny and Prichard 2017 for theoretical discussions on the lasting currency of the concept of anarchy.
- 7 See Donnelly's (2017: 265) early call for such an agenda and, of course, the seminal article by Onuf and Klink 1989; see also Anderl 2022; Anderl et al. 2019; Daase and Deitelhoff 2019: 16.
- 8 Gallie 1956; Lukes 1974; Rawls 1971.
- 9 For an account of both aspects, see, for example, earlier works by Pouliot 2016; Sending 2015.
- 10 Donnelly 2006; McConaughy et al. 2018: 186.
- 11 See also Donnelly 2017.
- 12 The classic work by Organski 1958; overview in Tammen et al. 2017.
- 13 Kindleberger 1981.
- 14 Cox 1981; Gill 2003; Wallerstein 1979.
- 15 Zarakol 2017b: 1.
- 16 McConaughy et al. 2018: 184; for an overview, see Barder 2017; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Zarakol 2017a.

- 17 Zarakol 2017b: 2.
- 18 Ikenberry 2011; Lake 2009.
- 19 Lake 2009: 9.
- 20 Hobson and Sharman 2005.
- 21 Pouliot 2016; Pouliot 2017: 122.
- 22 Anievas et al. 2015; Barkawi and Laffey 2002; Gruffydd Jones 2008; Meiches 2019.
- 23 Anghie 2006; Koskenniemi 1997; Mallavarapu 2021.
- 24 Grovgui 1996; Keene 2013.
- 25 Spanu 2020.
- 26 Towns 2012; Towns and Rumelili 2017.
- 27 Wallerstein 1979.
- 28 Pouliot 2016; Zarakol 2010.
- 29 Donnelly 2017: 247.
- 30 Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Zarakol 2017b: 9.
- 31 For a critical discussion, see Pouliot 2017: 122–124.
- 32 Donnelly 2017: 265.
- 33 Donnelly 2006: 141.
- 34 See also MacDonald 2018.
- 35 McConaughey et al. 2018: 186.
- 36 See for instance Gilpin 1980: 7, 28.
- 37 Ikenberry and Nexon 2019: 396.
- 38 Clark 2011: 18; Lentner 2005; Schmidt 2018.
- 39 Anghie 2006; Buckel and Fischer-Lescano 2009.
- 40 Waltz 1979: 131.
- 41 Mearsheimer 2001: 41.
- 42 Webb and Krasner 2009.
- 43 Gilpin 1980: 30.
- 44 Brooks and Wohlforth 2008: 48.
- 45 Keohane 1984: 34, our emphasis.
- 46 Ikenberry 2011: 70.
- 47 Ikenberry 2011: 74.
- 48 Ikenberry and Nexon 2019.
- 49 Acharya 2014: 37.
- 50 Cox 1983; Bieler and Morton 2004.
- 51 Cox 1983; Gill 1993; Murphy 1994.
- 52 Frank 1979; Wallerstein 1974.
- 53 Anghie 2006; Anghie and Chimni 2003; Chimni 2003.
- 54 Hopf 2013.
- 55 Nexon and Neumann 2017; Parmar 2019.
- 56 Acharya 2017; Drezner 2019.
- 57 See Lentner 2005.
- 58 Hurrell 2007; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992.
- 59 Avant et al. 2010; Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Sending and Neumann 2006: 653.
- 60 Hurd 1999: 400.
- 61 Barnett 2001: 64.
- 62 Nedal and Nexon 2019: 6.

- 63 Alter 2014; Alter et al. 2018; Hooghe et al. 2019; Hurd 1999; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Tallberg et al. 2018; for an overview, see Kustermans and Horemans 2022.
- 64 Lake 2009.
- 65 Hurd 1999.
- 66 Zürn 2018.
- 67 Lake 2009: 8.
- 68 Hurd 1999; Zürn calls this form of authority “inscribed authority” (2018: 43).
- 69 Wohlforth et al. 2018.
- 70 Zürn 2018; see also Zürn, this volume.
- 71 Avant et al. 2010: 11–14.
- 72 Sending and Neumann 2006.
- 73 Black 2017; Krisch 2017; Macdonald and Macdonald 2017.
- 74 Sending 2015.
- 75 Hurd 1999; Lake 2009.
- 76 Hooghe and Marks 2015; Hooghe et al. 2017.
- 77 Alter et al. 2018; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Heupel and Zürn 2017.
- 78 Kreuder-Sonnen 2019.
- 79 Alter et al. 2018; see also Morse and Keohane 2014.
- 80 See also Tallberg and Zürn 2019.
- 81 Zürn 2018: 95–104.
- 82 Deitelhoff and Daase 2021.
- 83 Buchanan 2003; Tallberg et al. 2018: 8–10.
- 84 Pouliot 2017: 119, 2021; Sending 2017; Witt 2022.
- 85 Barnett and Duvall 2004; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018.
- 86 Gallie 1956.
- 87 Rawls 1971: 5.
- 88 Barnett and Duvall 2004: 12.
- 89 Rawls 1971.
- 90 Even this is rather a matter of degree not of category if empirical statehood across the globe is taken into account, where areas of limited statehood and the structures of rule and authority prevalent therein demonstrate the limitations of the ideal of a uniform power constituting state order that is still upheld (Clapham 1998; Risse 2013).
- 91 See also Daase and Deitelhoff 2019; Donnelly 2017: 256; McConaughy et al. 2018; Scholte 2020.
- 92 Waltz 1979.
- 93 Deitelhoff and Daase 2021.
- 94 See also Donnelly 2017, 265.