Chapter 1

What is international relations?

Let's start with some key events. In 2019 Hong Kong's citizens waged months of mass protests against the erosion of their democratic rights, and that September an estimated six million people across the world took to the streets in a global strike for urgent action on climate change. In 2016 the British people voted to leave the European Union (EU) and Donald Trump was elected President of the United States (US). In 2008 the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) wreaked havoc in the world economy, and seven years earlier Al Qaeda terrorists attacked the US, sparking the ongoing global 'war on terror'. In 1989 protestors in East and West Germany pulled down the Berlin Wall and helped bring an end to the long 'Cold War' between the Soviet Union and the US. In 1966 the United Nations (UN) adopted the two most important human rights treaties: the Covenants on 'Civil and Political Rights' and 'Cultural, Economic, and Social Rights'. In 1955 leaders of newly independent post-colonial states (such as China, Egypt, and India) met in Bandung, Indonesia, to fight for an end to empire and for a new international order based on political, economic, and cultural equality. The first half of the 20th century was, of course, dominated by World War One (WWI), the Great Depression of the 1930s, and World War Two (WWII). And in 1945 the UN was established in the hope that international cooperation and governance would prevent a return to war, stabilize the world economy, and protect human rights.

All of these events fall within the grand domain of international relations. But if this is the case, what is international relations? How can such diverse phenomena all come within its ambit? Scholars of international relations

have traditionally focused on external relations between sovereign states: wars, trade negotiations, arms control, environmental treaties, etc. And these remain critical subjects of inquiry. Yet the limits of this focus are readily apparent. Not all important relations are between sovereign states: the war on terror, after all, is between state and non-state actors. Not all important politics is external: Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency show just how important domestic phenomena can be well beyond the borders of a single state. And if international relations is truly only about the affairs of sovereign states, then our subject matter will be very limited, as today's *global* system of sovereign states emerged fully only with post-1945 decolonization. Before that sovereign states certainly existed, principally in Europe and the Americas, but as we shall see it was empires that ruled most of the world.

Given all of this, some scholars say we should address the broader subject of 'global politics', arguing that the concept of 'international relations' is too narrow to accommodate the rich diversity of important political phenomena. Yet this goes too far. If politics is about struggles for power, or about who gets what, when, and how, if it spans the public and private realms, and if it is a defining characteristic of all human associations—all things said about politics—then the content of global politics is potentially limitless. Where would we start, and where would we end, in describing such politics?

This *Very Short Introduction* takes a different approach. Raymond Aron, the great French historian and international relations scholar, wrote that '"International Relations" have no frontiers traced out in reality, they are not and cannot be materially separable from other social phenomena'. What he meant is that 'international relations' is a concept that scholars, practitioners, commentators, and people in their everyday lives use to define a particular domain of social life, a domain they imagine and construct through their actions. So if the traditional imagining of the international is too narrow, and 'global politics' too broad, what should be our focus? My big claim in this little book is that we should focus on the global organization of political authority, and on the human and environmental consequences of such organization.

Political authority is legitimate political power. It is power that is considered rightful. It is the form of political power that Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the early Renaissance artist, sought to capture in his famous Sienese fresco, the 'Allegory of Good Government' (see Figure 1). Lorenzetti portrays the male figure of the legitimate ruler as tied to the citizenry and surrounded by female figures representing the civic virtues of justice, concord, magnanimity, temperance, peace, fortitude, and prudence. Such a ruler, Lorenzetti writes at the bottom of the fresco, 'chooses never to turn his eyes from the resplendent faces of the Virtues who sit around him' (quoted in Starn). This is, of course, a thoroughly gendered illustration of political authority (a point I return to Chapter 3), but it offers nonetheless a particularly stark depiction of the differences between political authority and tyranny (political power that rests solely on coercion). These 14th-century frescos are interesting not just because they help us grasp the nature of political authority as legitimate power, but because Lorenzetti painted them as an act of legitimation. Not all political power is legitimate: coercive domination exists all too often. But Lorenzetti's artistic act embodies the abiding impulse to justify power, to turn domination into political authority.

1. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government*.

How political authority is organized has profound implications for human societies and—as we are increasingly aware—for the natural environments they inhabit. Think about sovereign states. They are now the dominant way of organizing political authority on the globe, centralizing legitimate political power within distinct, territorially bounded units. This affects individuals' rights (some states are authoritarian, others democracies), the functioning of economies (some states have command economies, others are more liberal), the provision of health and education services (some states have well-funded welfare systems, others do not), the diversity and inclusivity of cultural communities (some states are multicultural, others strongly nationalistic), and the protection or exploitation of nature (some states are 'greener' than others). Just as importantly, the division of the world into almost 200 separate sovereign states generates its own pathologies—from interstate war to refugee crises—while at the same time placing real limits on humanity's capacity to address such problems.

Throughout history humans have experienced the organization of political authority most palpably at local levels, in their villages, tribes, municipalities, colonies, city-states, provinces, and nation-states. But these

local authorities have usually been embedded in larger regional, imperial, interstate, transnational, and supranational configurations of political authority. For example, Native American tribes were often part of larger confederacies, such as the Iroquois League, which included the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations. Similarly, until the 19th century, although Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were distinct polities, with their own dynasties and imperial domains, they were also at times part of a larger Chinese suzerain order, and as part of this they paid tribute to Chinese emperors. Today, sovereign states are legally independent but they are embedded in a global system of states, with distinctive challenges, institutions, and political practices. When I call for a focus on the 'global' organization of political authority, I am referring to these larger configurations, regardless of whether they span the earth or not. Indeed, today's system of sovereign states may be the only genuinely global case.

Two things make this current way of organizing political authority especially fascinating. The first is its novelty. Students of international relations were long taught to assume a world organized into sovereign states, and to study its eternal verities: its tendency to 'recurrence and repetition', as the leading English School theorist Martin Wight observed. As noted above, though, prior to the 1970s the majority of humans lived in polities that were not sovereign states, most commonly in empires. The development of a system of sovereign states that spanned the entire globe was something utterly new, and it is a very recent development. This raises intriguing questions about its origins, dynamics, consequences, and potential transformation, questions that the system's novelty makes all the more challenging. Second, today's global configuration of authority is highly complex. Political authority is not simply parcelled up into multiple sovereign states—it is also invested in supranational bodies (like the EU), international organizations (such as the UN), and transnational actors (like multinational corporations). Moreover, politics within sovereign states is often deeply affected by these 'external' authorities. For example, states have given international human rights bodies, like the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the authority to report on the treatment of refugees, often challenging the policies and behaviour of national governments and empowering local and transnational activists.

Placing the global organization of political authority at the heart of our inquiries invites both analytical and ethical questions. Analytically, we can ask how political authority came to be organized in a particular way, we can probe its political dynamics and consequences (from the violent to the humane), and we can explore the forces driving its evolution and transformation. We can also ask how different historical arrangements of political authority compare, and how one transformed over time into another (how today's global system of states emerged from the collapse of the Chinese, European, Mughal, and Ottoman empires, for example). And, most importantly, we can ask how large-scale ways of organizing political authority have at times fostered human well-being but also produced hierarchies and exclusions: of race, gender, religion, sexuality, caste, and more.

This *Very Short Introduction* concentrates on analytical questions such these, but ethical questions also follow naturally from a focus on the organization of political authority. If such authority is rightful power, then it is always in part the product of historical debates and struggles over the good served by that power: the justice it delivers, the rights it protects, the morality it upholds. These debates are central to contemporary international relations: what are the limits of sovereign authority, when should human rights be protected, does the international community have a responsibility to protect peoples from mass atrocities, should reducing inequality be a goal of global economic governance, what obligations do we have to address the climate emergency, and what is more fundamental, the right to asylum or the right to police national borders? Not only is it appropriate that students of international relations address such questions, doing so is essential if we wish to speak to some of the most pressing issues of our time.

In the following chapters, I introduce international relations through the lens of the global organization of political authority. Chapter 2 examines such organization more closely, and provides a brief overview of some of the most prominent historical forms: heteronomy (think of feudal Europe), empire (from the Moghul to the British), and sovereignty (at its apogee, perhaps, in today's global system). My goals are twofold. I emphasize, first, the nature and importance of institutions, understood broadly as formal or informal systems of rules, norms, and practices. These range from

underlying norms of sovereignty to the rules governing international trade. Such institutions are important, as they play a crucial role in organizing political authority. My second goal is to place today's global system of sovereign states in a broader conceptual and historical framework, encouraging readers to see it as but one crucially important yet utterly unique way of ordering social and political life.

Chapter 3 takes a theoretical turn. You might hear that theory is an academic indulgence. 'What we want', as Charles Dickens's schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind insisted, 'is facts, nothing but facts, weed everything else out'. In reality, however, theory is an indispensable ally to understanding, and the idea of theory-free inquiry is an unhelpful myth. Theories are nothing more than organized assumptions that help us make sense of complexity, and even the most 'factual' accounts of international relations reflect such assumptions, informing which facts the authors thought were important: the personalities and choices of great leaders, the ideas or culture of the time, the distribution of material power, the role of capitalism, etc. As students of international relations it makes sense for us to be reflective and systematic in our use of such assumptions, and the principal way we do this is by organizing them into theories. To help with this task, I introduce readers to some of the most prominent existing theories of international relations, from realism to feminism. I read these differently than is common, however. I resist the common practice of dividing them into 'analytical' and 'ethical' theories, or 'mainstream' and 'critical' theories, and argue instead that all are centrally concerned with how political authority is defined and distributed globally, and with what consequences.

Powerful social forces have shaped—and been shaped by—the large-scale organization of political authority over time, and Chapters 4 to 7 explore some of the most important: war, economy, rights, and culture. Throughout history, war has had a profound effect on structures and practices of political authority. Think of how WWI swept away the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman empires. Chapter 4 defines war as purposive, organized violence, and examines how shifting patterns of such violence have generated forms of political authority, served as a key marker of such authority, and been objects of political and legal control.

Chapter 5 turns to the relationship between economies and the organization of political authority, arguing that the two are mutually dependent. After considering three shifting conditions—changes in the global economy, revolutions in technology, and shifts in the global distribution of economic resources—it examines key developments in the organization of political authority, and how these have affected global economic relations.

All arrangements of political authority define and distribute rights. Contemporary states grant certain rights to citizens, while denying them to non-citizens, such as refugees. Similarly, in empires, the citizens of imperial states commonly enjoyed one set of rights, while colonial subjects had different, lesser entitlements. Since 1945 international human rights treaties have codified the rights of all humans, simultaneously investing international human rights rules and agencies with authority while limiting the sovereign rights of states. In each of these cases, the nature and distribution of rights has affected the scope and limits of political authority. Chapter 6 examines two dimensions of the politics of rights: the role that individual rights played in the emergence of today's global system of sovereign states; and how local struggles for human rights, connected to the transnational human rights movement, have sought to redefine and limit sovereign authority.

The final factor we consider is culture. The rise of non-Western great powers, especially China, raises important questions about how culture affects the global organization of political authority. While some predict that the modern international order will collapse as Western cultural influence wanes, and others counter that liberal international institutions can accommodate states and peoples of diverse cultural complexions, Chapter 7 presents a different view. Historically, all large-scale configurations of political authority have evolved in heterogeneous not homogeneous cultural contexts, and the forms they have taken—the institutions they develop, the hierarchies they create, and the rights they distribute—have been deeply affected by the imperative to govern or rule this diversity.

By focusing on the contests and struggles that have shaped the organization of legitimate political power, and by directing our attention to the large-scale arrangements of political authority that affect politics more locally, the study of international relations confronts directly the fundamental political conditions of global social and biological life. This is political science at its most fascinating (and arguably most important), and this *Very Short Introduction* invites readers to view their world, and the profound challenges it faces, through this unique and illuminating lens.