

Introduction to International Relations

Lecture 2: State and Anarchy

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Overview. We study the evolution of the modern state system, tracing its origins from the Peace of Westphalia, and then the formation of nation-states. We then examine the concept of sovereignty, and discuss the ideas of anarchy and hierarchy as organizing principles of the international system.

OUTLINE OF LECTURE 2: STATE AND ANARCHY

1. Three levels of analysis
2. The modern state system
 - a) Westphalia, 1648
 - b) from overlapping feudal loyalties to sovereignty of the state
3. Nationalism
 - a) Formative events:
 - American Revolutionary War, 1775-83
 - French Revolution, 1789-99
 - Italian Unification, 1859-70
 - German Unification, 1866-71
 - World War I, 1914-19
 - b) Creating the nation-state
 - core similarities (religious, ethnic, linguistic)
 - feeling of community (communication, shared history, culture)
 - desire for self-rule
 - c) Social Darwinism: genocide, colonialism, Nazism
4. Other state-creation forces:
 - a) Marxism/Leninism
 - b) Religion
5. Anarchy and hierarchy
 - a) authority and coercion
 - b) security to generate and use wealth
 - c) anarchy: no central authority, possible use of force
 - d) means to cope: guns vs. butter, alliances, protection
 - e) hierarchy: protectorate, informal empire, formal empire
 - f) sovereignty: polite fiction
6. Legitimacy
 - source: divine, natural law, people, authority
 - Milgram's obedience to authority experiments
 - Zimbardo prison experiment

Last time we talked about the general method we shall take in our study of international relations. In order to employ this method, we need to understand how to build our theories. That is, we must begin identifying various concepts that would be useful as simplifications of reality. That is, we want to know what are the phenomena that we want to study (e.g. war and peace), and what are the entities involved (e.g. states, people). We shall generally use three **levels of analysis**, or three levels of abstraction, when studying a particular phenomenon: the interaction of people, groups, and states.

We now begin with the highest level of abstraction: the state system. Where do modern states come from? How are they organized? What sort of relations can we observe among them? I will first give a brief overview of the last 300 years of state formation in Europe, and will then discuss nationalism as its most important driving force. We shall then examine the ideas of anarchy and hierarchy in some detail. In discussion, you will further probe certain features of the organization of the international system (polarity).

1 The Genesis of the Modern State System

Where do the modern states come from? Tradition dates the creation of the modern state system with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty ended the Thirty Years War, which was actually a series of wars over religious, territorial, dynastic, and commercial issues. It started when the Catholic king of Bohemia Ferdinand II attempted to impose his religion on his Protestant nobles. Soon Denmark and Sweden got involved, along with Poland and Russia. In the end, the main alliances solidified around religious lines, pitting the Catholic Holy Roman Empire ruled by the Habsburg dynasty, against a group of Protestant towns and territories aided by Sweden and Netherlands. Waged mostly in German territories, the war was grievously costly and the devastation - immense.

The treaty distributed territories (mostly to Sweden, France, and their allies) and confirmed the sovereignty over them. It also confirmed or extended religious toleration to Lutherans and Calvinists within the Holy Roman Empire. In Germany, central authority was replaced by sovereignty of about 300 princes and the weak confederation persisted until the unification more than three centuries later.

There have been many other wars and treaties before the Peace of Westphalia. There have been many other large-scale political organizations before that as well. Why do we privilege 1648 then? Because Westphalia marked the transition from a system of overlapping feudal loyalties toward a system incorporating the principle of sovereignty. **Sovereignty** refers to the principle of complete authority within a territory. That is, it provides for an entity that commands the loyalty of its subjects. This entity was called the **state**, an abstract notion that referred to the legal standing of the ruler.

Prior to 1648, Britain and France looked like sovereign states because they

both had kings who wielded power within their territories. But the situation in the rest of Europe was quite different. After the fall of the Roman empire, political entities were local, organized along feudal lines, and with little or no interaction among themselves. The Catholic Holy Roman Empire formally encompassed almost all of Central Europe but its ruler did not have sovereignty over its various members: by the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, local German princes could impose their own religion within their territories. The system was unstable because of conflicting claims of authority over the same territories and their inhabitants. It was this that led to the Thirty Years War.

The Westphalian system enshrined the state as the sole form of authority in Europe that neither the Holy Roman Empire nor the Pope could challenge (which explains why Pope Innocent X blasted the treaties as “null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, empty of meaning and effect for all time.”) The local rulers could freely align diplomatically with whoever they wished, they could organize they commerce and trade as they saw fit. Although intervention did not cease, the treaty brought to an end the intervention based on religious matters, removing what had been the prime cause of war in Europe for the preceding two centuries.

Before discussing sovereignty in some detail, it is worth taking a look at the movement toward a nation-state. That is, a state that encompasses a nation.

2 Nationalism and the Nation-State

Nationalism is a set of forces that mold various groups into a **nation**, a large identity group that commands the loyalty of its members. When such a group then seeks to govern itself within a separate state and succeeds, we have a **nation-state**. The various groups that constitute a nation usually share some *core similarities*: religion, ethnicity, language, or race. They also develop a *feeling of community* that is established through social communications, shared history, and culture. And finally, the groups that come together through their similarities and sense of community must also *desire self-rule*, that is, they want to separate themselves from others and govern themselves as they see fit, usually by some sort of representation by members of their own group.

Although the potential for popular mobilization along nationalist lines has been present long before the modern era, it was not easily manipulated by rulers because their source of legitimacy did not rest with their subjects. Nationalism began asserting itself during the 19th century. The process was set in motion by the examples of the American and French revolutions that challenged the legitimacy of traditional rule. Kings used to rule according to divine mandate, that was periodically (but ineffectually) challenged by the gathering storm of secularism. With the arrival of the Age of Reason, the reliance on super-rational justifications was doomed. The two revolutions delivered a mortal blow to the old system by vesting legitimacy in the people, the ancient idea of **res publica**, government by the people, a republic.

The French revolution ate its own children, as most revolutions are apt to do, and France soon found itself on an unstoppable expansionist drive under Napoleon. The export of the pernicious ideas of democracy to the rest of Europe challenged the institutional order and mobilized the monarchies against France. Eventually, the Russians and the British, with lots of help from the Prussians and the Austrians, prevailed. France was defeated, and monarchy was restored in 1815. But the principle of a nation that determined its own destiny survived.

Within thirty years revolution spread again across Europe. Italians chafed under Austrian rule, Germans wanted to unite the myriad small (and mostly impotent) principalities and kingdoms that divided them, and the three large multi-ethnic empires: Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman, wobbled. Among the first to succeed in bringing their nationalist goal to fruition were the Germans under the most militarily advanced Prussia. First, Prussia wrested domination of the German Confederation from Austria in the Seven Weeks War of 1866. Next, when France attacked in 1870, Prussia defeated it, conquered Paris, and proclaimed the creation of a unified German state in 1871. Suddenly, Europe found itself facing a modern, rapidly industrializing country with a population large enough to assert its desire for more say in European (and world) affairs.

The Italians had begun their unification in 1859 and were first assisted by France in defeating the Austrians. Then in 1870 when France pulled out of the Papal States for its war against Prussia, the Italians completed the unification. The new Italian state finally emerged incorporating the entire peninsula, something that had not happened in the thousand years since the days of the Roman Empire.

The Balkans stirred next and when Russia defeated the Ottoman Empire in 1878, the Turks were deprived of some of their European holdings. The Christian Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria emerged again as states under centuries of Ottoman Muslim rule. Very soon violence exploded in the Balkans again: the borders hastily drawn in the wake of Turkish retreat did not accommodate the ethnic, linguistic, or nationalist boundaries well. Each country attempted a land-grab justified along the same lines we would see again and again. Each of them claimed to be uniting members of its own nation within its "rightful" borders.

As nationalism asserted itself on the Balkans, the Austrians watched with mounting fear. They had recently been forced to share power with the large Hungarian minority in the empire, and now their other provinces were clamoring for a say in government. Czechs, Slovaks, and Slovenians began pulling apart. Poles, Ukrainians, Finns, and Balts were similarly unhappy under Russian rule. Frequent interventions and repression became the norm of the day in many places, and then the powder keg exploded in 1914: the assassination of an Austrian arch-duke in Sarajevo, and the consequent failure of Serbia to satisfy the Austrians (Serb intransigence goaded by Russia, and Austrian intransigence goaded by Germany) put into motion the alliance that had divided Europe in two camps.

By 1919, the three multi-ethnic empires were gone. Austria-Hungary split giv-

ing way to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Yugoslavia. Russia descended into civil war with Communists trying to assert their rule, and Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland becoming independent. The Ottoman Empire became Turkey and lost its holdings in much of the Middle East to British and French rule. The rising tide of nationalism made it impossible to maintain these old empires without extensive repression, which was simply beyond their capabilities. (At least for some: the Russians managed to defeat their opponents in the Civil War by 1922, and then set about to create the USSR, another multi-ethnic empire based on extensive repression and domination by the ethnic Russians.)

With World War I, nationalism triumphed in Europe, to a degree. President Wilson embraced the principle of national self-determination, but that was not to be. For example, Yugoslavia combined Catholic Croats with Muslim Bosnians with Orthodox Serbs, and Czechoslovakia united both Czechs and Slovaks. (After World War II, Romania would also grab territories from Hungary and to this day many Hungarians live in Romania.) These mistakes were very serious and quite similar to what the victors did in 1815 when they ignored the distribution of ethnic, religious, and national characteristics among the people while redrawing the map of Europe.

In addition, the punitive Versailles Treaty attempted to relegate Germany to an inferior position quite inconsistent with its industrial, military, and cultural potential. The desire to keep Germany down drove the victors to redraw the European map yet again, placing sizeable German populations under Polish, Austrian, and Czechoslovak rule. This ignored the basic lesson of 1815: the reason France never really attempted a *revanche* after its defeat was because it was quickly assimilated into the new system. It was placed in a position that roughly corresponded with its capabilities, it kept the territories of its pre-revolutionary boundaries, and was given the right to assert its influence in Spain and Belgium.

All of this contrasted sharply with the position that Germany was placed into after WWI. While World War II was not inevitable, the Versailles Treaty made the ground fertile for a come-back, and the Great Depression of the late 1920s brought down the fragile edifice of the Weimar Republic that proved unable to give Germans what they wanted: a decent life. The National Socialists (Nazis) came to power on a platform of economic recovery based on massive public works. When their program bore fruit, the Germans enthusiastically endorsed their rule, including its much less savory components.

Nationalism becomes exceptionally dangerous in combination with **Social Darwinism**, a pseudo-scientific theory that attempts to apply Darwin's idea of *natural selection* and *survival of the fittest* to societies, nations, and states. Under this ideology, the fittest nations survive, the strong gobble up the weak, and the entire process is "natural" and therefore beyond moral qualms. This line of thinking has enabled imperialism, the Holocaust, and continues to fuel genocide around the world even today.

After nationalism has defined the group and the outsiders, Social Darwinism further constructs a hierarchy of groups (curiously, one's own group never fails to come on top), and provides justification for mistreatment of the outsiders. These "undesirables" are portrayed as deficient (e.g. inferior blood, bad socialization, some imagined racial trait that makes them dangerous and untrustworthy), and unworthy of survival. Since "our" group is better, it deserves to live at the expense of others. Social Darwinism almost invariably goes hand in hand with racism, and is most frequently used as a thin veneer designed to convey some semblance of respectability on thoroughly discredited ideas.

Perhaps the most infamous marriage of the two ideas occurred in Nazi Germany. The Aryan race was deemed superior to the rest, especially Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies (and no doubt would have been extended to cover just about everyone else, as required by state policy). At first, the Nazis attempted expulsion of these elements, then they murdered the feeble-minded (huge euthanasia programs, some in the U.S. as well in the 1920s), then they switched to wholesale slaughter of Jews, Soviet POWs, and members of conquered populations.

Unfortunately, the Nazis were not unique in their racially-motivated murder. The Japanese army in China indulged in large-scale atrocities (e.g. the rape of Nanking) that were motivated along similar lines. Not to mention the use of "comfort women" (Korean women forced into prostitution in service of the conquering Japanese army).

More recently, the Serbian government under Slobodan Milosevic managed to stoke the flames of nationalism and fear until the Serb minorities in Bosnia turned on their Muslim and Croat neighbors with viciousness that had not been seen in Europe for fifty years. They brought back the concentration camps, and altogether managed to exterminate tens of thousands of Bosniac civilians, all under the watchful eye of the civilized West. NATO's coercion of the Serbs was a form of international intervention, a violation of the principle of sovereignty. We hear a lot about this these days with Iraq and Afghanistan, so it will pay to take a closer look at what it means. Before we do that, however, let's take a brief look at two other prominent mobilization forces.

3 Marxism/Leninism and Religion

In addition to nationalism, there are at least two other prominent ways to mobilize people and motivate them to act. Both provide a world view that simultaneously prescribes certain courses of action, and creates divisions between various groups that can then become avenues for conflict.

Religion is one in the sense that it creates group identity (i.e. I am not talking here about religion as source of morals or ethics). Europe gradually moved away from religious wars — mostly because neither side was able to obliterate the other — and has developed an almost entirely secular nationalist identities. Similarly, religious identification was suppressed in the communist countries, and has not made a huge comeback except in Muslim territories.

However, religion has seen somewhat of a “Renaissance” as it surged back into the Middle East and Asia, beginning with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran, and then spreading fast. Even in the United States, the situation is much more different than in Europe: many important issues, both domestic and foreign policy, are still framed in religious terms (much to the dismay of allies and fear of opponents).

Economic ideologies also provide a somewhat weaker source of group identity. We all know capitalism, so let’s talk a bit about Marxism/Leninism. As I told you last time, this ideology takes the economic organization as the basis of human, and by extension, international, relations. Instead of categorizing people as believers and non-believers, this ideology separates them into laborers (proletariat, people who do not own the tools of production but can only sell their labor) and capitalists (bourgeois, the owners of the tools of production who hire laborers). All power relationships are established on the basis of ownership of the tools of production: the capitalists exploit the working class. Hence, workers have a common interest in overturning this order and replacing it with one where they will own the tools of production: communism.

Marxism/Leninism has been quite discredited by the spectacular failure of the Soviet empire. However, it is not to be dismissed lightly: there are still active Marxist groups in various parts of the world (Colombia, Nepal, Cuba, and North Korea come to mind), and when economic grievances are at the forefront of a conflict, then ideologies that provide for a unifying economic identity can be very useful to politicians.

(Social Darwinism, by the way, was yet another ideology that worked almost by itself during the 19th century when it fueled the **imperialist drive** of the European powers by justifying the **colonization** of “lesser” peoples.)

It is worth remembering that *nationalism, Marxism/Leninism, and religion are not only enabling, but also constraining forces*. They can provide a powerful impetus for state creation but also for state dissolution, as we have seen with the break-up of the Soviet Union. They can also provide a source for continuing instability, like the scattered Germans did prior to WWII, the Arabs during the Cold War and today, and the Russians in the other ex-Soviet republics.

These forces, once unleashed, may escape state control and they are dangerous tools to use. At the same time, states ignore them at their own peril. It is the rare leader who goes against them and survives for long. As such, they limit the options available to states, sometimes severely so.

Many in the West are tempted to dismiss religion or Marxism/Leninism, or even sometimes nationalism, as sources of conflict. Enlightenment discredited religion and emaciated it as a cause of war (in Europe). History “shows” that Marxism is dead, and perhaps nationalism on the wane. All of these conclusions are rash, superficial, and dangerously misleading.

Take religion, for example. Due to our own strong rationalist bend, some of us cannot seem to comprehend the simple fact that the differences between Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus are quite real. For someone like me,

they make no sense, but for a devout believer, the stakes are exceptionally high. There may be genuinely unbridgeable gaps unless, of course, both sides agree to disagree on matters of faith. But of course therein lies the problem. While some will be perfectly willing to compromise, others may see such compromise in absolute terms, akin to betrayal. We tend to label such people **fundamentalists**, but dismissing them would be a grave mistake for religious divisions have emerged again, in certain regions (e.g. Middle East) even supplanting nationalism as cause of conflict. Radical Islamic movements now pose one of the prime challenges to international security.

4 Sovereignty: Anarchy vs. Hierarchy

Sovereign states began spreading worldwide, and with the collapse of colonialism in the 20th century they are now the sole form of polity on Earth. The Charter of the United Nations restricts intervention and prohibits attacks on the “political independence and territorial integrity” of member states. The principle of *supreme authority within a territory* was something that most rulers before Westphalia lacked, and that all modern states claim.

What do we mean by “supreme authority”? Authority is not simply a matter of coercion, that is, using force or the threat to use force to get someone to do something. Rather, it is the right to command and be obeyed. For example, while the state possesses a monopoly on the coercive use of power and can therefore ensure obedience of its subjects by means of force, its authority is derived from some widely accepted source of *legitimacy*: natural law, divine mandate, or a constitution. Supreme authority then means that the holder of sovereignty is superior to all other authorities under it, and is perceived as legitimate by its subjects.

In modern times, sovereignty is almost inextricably bound with **territoriality**. Groups of people are now defined by their residence within some particular boundaries which may have little to do with their identities. A state’s boundaries may not include all members of a particular, say ethnic, group. However, the state’s authority only extends to those members that happen to live within its borders. Conversely, the state may encompass many diverse groups with separate identities, and yet its authority extends to all of them just because they happen to live within its borders. As we shall see, the lack of close correspondence between territorial membership and identity derived from other sources is a frequent cause of instability today.

Hence, the **modern state system** consists of entities called *states* that have legal standing as sovereign in their territories. There is no authority above the state within its boundaries, and similarly, no other entity can legitimately dictate a state’s activities. For example, within a state, the system of authority is one of **hierarchy**: if we write a contract, we are bound to abide by its terms. If one of us fails to do so, the other can take the matter to court, a higher authority that can demand adherence to the agreement to an extent much greater than the

contracting party itself. The court's decision can be appealed to an even higher authority, until the process reaches the highest one: the Supreme Court, whose decision is then final because it is the entity that the Constitution invests with ultimate legal power, and the Constitution is the source of all authority in this country.

No such mechanism exists internationally in the sense that no entity can legitimately coerce a state, a condition of **anarchy**. In this context, "anarchy" refers primarily to two features of the state system: (a) lack of central authority, and (b) possible use of force by any member. In principle, there is no authority that exercises sovereignty over states, and hence there is nothing to compel them to abide by agreements and rules that they do not wish to abide by. All states are equal. Furthermore, each one can resort to the use of force in pursuit of its goals. There is no entity that possesses the monopoly on the coercive use of power. (It is worth noting that international law permits only state use of force, other entities, e.g. pirates, terrorists, etc., are seen as illegitimate. Also, note that both features of anarchy are absent domestically: there usually exists a higher authority and we cannot legally use force.)

Sovereignty, however, is polite fiction. Although all states are in principle equal before international law, some are more equal than others. In fact, it is quite misleading to characterize the international system as one of anarchy. While it is true that it is largely a self-help system, the enormous discrepancies in resource endowments of various states make some of them far more able to pursue their interests than others, even when this pursuit involves interference in the supposedly sovereign spheres of others. While there is no official central authority that controls states, many are subjected to various degrees of informal, but no less tangible, influences that greatly diminish their sovereign status. Moreover, this is not a recent phenomenon, but is long-standing tradition that has been around from time immemorial and that no amount of fantasy can wish away. Much of what we shall do in this class will involve studying the **hierarchical** relationships between strong and weak states, and the interactions between roughly equal states or groups of states (blocs).

So, where do these various relationships come from? Let's think about states in the world system by analogy with people in some group living on an island with no contact to the outside world. That is, these people have no authority above themselves. Naturally, people will vary in terms of their abilities: some will be stronger, smarter, or more cunning than others. Everyone wants to live well and prosper, for which some amount of cooperation is necessary.

The problem is now obvious. Suppose I am a small and not terribly bright person and I need to build a fence to house my pigs. You are a pretty strong guy, so I come and ask you to help me. You, not being altruistic, demand something in exchange, so I tell you I will plow your field. I do it but when the time comes for you to help with the fence, you refuse to abide by the terms of our contract. What do I do?

We live in a state of anarchy, and there is no authority that I can call upon

to make you live up to your promises. In addition, since I am much weaker, I cannot force you to do it myself. Even worse, I have revealed that I am helpless, and the time when you will come and take my pigs away is probably not too far off. Unless I find a way to (a) compel you to come to terms, and (b) defend my pigs against you, I can expect to live a life that is “nasty, brutish, and short.”

I have several options at this point. First, I can arm myself, barricade my dwelling, and prepare to fight you off. But this may not work because you are much stronger to begin with, and you will probably anticipate such an attempt and prepare yourself. Since I am not too bright, I cannot expect to outwit you. Second, I can call upon several others like me, and we can form an alliance for the purpose of fending you off, and perhaps even compelling you to do things that neither one of us separately could. This may work until you lay an ambush for each of us separately and dispatch us, destroying the alliance. Third, I can go to someone who’s even stronger than you and ask him to extend his protection to me. Of course, in exchange I will have to do certain things for him, but at least I won’t be physically harassed.

In the end, what I really want is **security** to use my wealth as I see fit, free of outside interference. We can say that this is precisely what each state pursues: an ability to create and consume wealth in a way it wants. (For now we shall abstract away from who the “it” refers to: a dictator, an elite, or the polity.) Security then refers to the extent that the state cannot be coerced to do what it does not want to do. This concern with security pervades international relations.

From our analogy, we know that there are several ways states can choose to pursue security under anarchy. First, they can build up their capability to defend themselves or force others to do what they want. In this, they must decide on the **guns versus butter** trade-off because the time and resources spent building up arms are time and resources not spent on alternative opportunities to create wealth. Second, they can create **alliances**, which is yet another method to enhance their capabilities, this time by aggregating them instead of building them up. Third, they can form **hierarchical relationships** with stronger states. These can range from protectorates (e.g. a state retains its sovereignty in all matters except defense), to informal empires (e.g. a state relinquishes sovereignty in other, usually economic and trade, matters), to formal empires, in which the state relinquishes sovereignty completely and is absorbed into the stronger state. All these are strategies for the pursuit of security. We shall examine what costs and benefits the various options entail.

5 A Side on Legitimacy

We tried to distinguish carefully between coercion and authority by discussing the idea of legitimacy. Why is this so important? Because when people perceive a source of orders as legitimate, they are often willing to suspend moral judgment and fulfill these orders. This has nothing to do with people being bad or morally deficient but perhaps everything to do with how we are socialized to follow orders issued by someone in position of legitimate authority. (Note:

this is different from the idea of group pressure that is also discussed in your readings.)

Let me give you two very famous examples from experiments in social psychology. The first was conducted by Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s. He demonstrated that people do not always behave in ways consistent with their own morality but can often be induced to behave contrary to it by their impulse to obey authority. This was not startling. However, the power of this impulse surprised everyone.

Milgram set up an experiment at Yale University. He hired two people to help: one was a stern-looking guy who played the part of a scientist leading an experiment in learning, and the other was a mild-looking guy who played the part of the learner-victim. Milgram then solicited participants for the “learning experiment.” These people, who came from various socio-economic backgrounds, were told that the scientist was investigating the effects of punishment on learning. They were shown a scary looking machine for administering electrical shocks and were actually shocked at the lowest level to demonstrate that it was working. Then they drew a lottery to see if they would be the teacher or the learner. This was rigged so the mild-looking man was always the learner and the random other person the teacher.

The teacher and the learner were placed in separate rooms and the teacher was instructed to ask specific questions. When the learner failed to answer correctly (which he did periodically in a prearranged pattern), the teacher had to give him an electrical shock, pushing up the level of punishment after each failure of the learner. The idea was to see how far people would be willing to go with the intensity of the shocks. The dial had labels for the voltages starting from “Slight Shock,” going to moderate, strong, very strong, intense, extremely intense, and ending with “Danger: Severe Shock,” and “XXX.”

Of course, unbeknownst to the teacher, no actual shock was administered to the learner. The learner, however, was instructed to follow a pattern of behavior that would convince the teacher that the shocks were real and painful. This was done through an audio connection so the teacher and learner could hear, but not see, each other. The audio cues went as follows:

- at 75, 90, and 105 volts: small grunts;
- at 120: shouts that shocks are painful;
- at 150: demands that the experimenter let him out;
- at 270: agonized screams;
- at 300: refusal to participate, but “experimenter” tells teacher to treat refusal as an incorrect answer; no more answers, just screams;
- at 345: screams ominously disappear, and nothing is heard until the highest level of 450 volts.

How far would you go? Would you challenge the authority of the experimenter?

As it turned out, more than 62% of the teachers delivered the highest level of voltage! Not a single one stopped before the strong shock level, the average maximum shock exceeded 350 volts.

Were these people somehow abnormal? Were they sadists? No. In fact, most of them were very reluctant to continue the experiment, many even asked for permission to stop it, but when it was denied, they obeyed. Not because they hated the learner, but because they could not muster the courage to contradict authority. These were not evil people: when allowed to choose the intensity of the shock (instead of always increasing it), the majority chose very low levels and almost no one continued after the first protest of the victim.

The experiment has been replicated in various settings throughout the world, with the same results. Interestingly, if there were two “scientists” present and they disagreed between themselves whether to continue the shocks, the teachers always stopped after the first disagreement, they never took the opportunity to continue with the shocks. That is, these people were not driven by some innate impulse to do harm, quite the contrary. They found it extremely taxing to obey... and yet obey they did.

This experiment demonstrates clearly the importance of the situation in determining behavior, in particular the apparently exceedingly strong social norm to obey authority, obey orders that come from a legitimate source. Similar commands coming from a source that is not perceived as legitimate would fail to push people over their moral threshold. So, where the Nazis who exterminated so many people really that different from you and me? Or the Bosnian Serbs who massacred and raped Bosnian Muslims? Or the Hutus in Rwanda who managed to hack to death hundreds of thousands of Tutsis with machetes? Maybe everyone is susceptible to becoming a murderer under appropriate conditions?

But what about the cruelty and brutality displayed in these infamous genocidal episodes from history? Surely the people in the Milgram experiment were not savages, they displayed great aversion to escalating the punishment, there was no cruelty there. So maybe this experiment does not tell us that much after all, at least when it comes to horrific deeds, like murder, that are asked for by an authority. Maybe people would refuse to do *that*?

Maybe not. Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment at Stanford University in 1971.¹ In this experiment, college students were randomly assigned the roles of prisoners and prison guards. They were then placed in a simulated prison environment; that is, the prisoners were confined to their cells, could not go to the toilet without permission, had minimal food, etc. The experimenters simulated the degradation of the experience by “arresting” the students at their homes, stripping, delousing, and putting them in prison wear with numbers. The guards were instructed to refer to them by these numbers, and were allowed to go home at the end of their shifts.

What happened was startling. Within a day both groups assumed their new roles. The guards began acting unpleasantly toward the prisoners, the prisoners

¹See <http://www.prisonexp.org/> for a video and more information.

staged a rebellion, and when that failed, they became demoralized, apathetic, and suffered a loss of self-esteem. Within six days, these American students (who were screened for maturity) started on a path of brutality and cruelty. Things got so out of hand that the experiment had to be canceled even though it was scheduled to continue for two weeks.

You may want to read about this (and other) studies to see what psychologists think happened. For us, the basic point is clear: under the appropriate conditions, some people will become brutal (about one-third in this study), and others will find it impossible to stop them (the other guards did not interfere with that third and did nothing to alleviate the plight of the prisoners or even report this to the experimenters). Encouraged by the lack of resistance by their peers, the first group can escalate its cruelty, making it self-sustaining. Hence, if people are “properly” indoctrinated, desensitized, and brutalized, they seem to have the capacity to not only suspend moral judgment but act with astonishing cruelty.

These studies have profoundly upsetting implications about morality. They seem to show that evil deeds do not necessarily come from evil people. More importantly, they also show that normal people could be induced into brutality and evil deeds by orders coming from a legitimate source. This is why we need to pay close attention to the issue of legitimacy, it's nothing to sneeze at. Legitimacy creates authority that can command loyalty to an extent that individual morality can be overridden, or at least suspended, with disastrous consequences. Our most important role then would be to ensure that the people in positions of legitimate authority are constrained in a way that does not permit them to issue such orders. Or that they are people who would resist issuing such orders and putting in motion the machinery of social obedience.