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WHY GOVERNMENT?

Security, Anarchy, and Some Basic Group Dynamics

The answer is simple: Because life without government sucks. I'm probably supposed to dress that up in complicated discussions of philosophy, economics, morality, and social dynamics, but the answer really is that simple. Think *The Purge*,¹ 24/7. I would even go so far as to claim that the worst of governed communities is arguably better than an ungoverned community. Now, with that out of the way, all that is left is the inconsequential matter of explaining why and how life sucks toad butts without government. I'm not even going to bother arguing with the guy in the back who's yelling, "Nuh-uh! Gubment's the problem! Gubment makes life suck!" Most of the reason I won't bother arguing with him is because he's my uncle, he's drunk, and if I say anything, it will set off his rant about the Illuminati and the Trilateral Commission, and that will ruin Christmas dinner.

STUFF TO REMEMBER

I've Seen the Test Questions, So Trust Me When I Say You Want to Figure Out How to Do These Things:

- Understand the motivations that lead to the establishment of government, aka Bobsville.
- Describe the importance of collective action in Bobsville.
- On threat of banishment, define the different types of security.
- Look up the definition of *banishment*.
- Explain the concept of power.
- Describe the relationship between anarchy and power.
- Go to the opposite extreme and describe the context of hierarchy.
- Describe how alliances work on *Gilligan's Island*,² on *Game of Thrones*, or in real life.
- Identify the factors that go into determining who's in a group and how the members interact.
- Complain about how this chapter seems to be totally about defining and describing things.

Why do we have **government**?

Some of you may think it unnecessary, if not absurd, to try to explain why we have government. The joy we all experience when blessed with the chance to interact with government is so blissful^{*} that the need for government all but explains itself. Whether it is the hot summer days we spend dancing through the intricate mazes of queues and taking of numbers involved in renewing our driver's licenses; or the paper shuffling, strutting, and other display rituals of the deodorant-challenged bureaucrats who hand out lawn-watering permits[†]; or the thrill of counting down the number of shopping days left before taxes are due; or a chance encounter with Officer Bubba, who doggedly pursues the ideal of swift and efficient customer service by filling out half the speeding ticket before you ever roll through his radar trap—our every interaction with officialdom reminds us of the lasting legacy of hope and joy that is government. Seriously, why wouldn't we all love government?

That whole paragraph was, of course, sarcastic—we really need a sarcasm font. The reality is that it can be tempting to agree with the drunken uncle's claim that we would be better off without government. Even people with an interest in politics are likely to describe their personal interactions with government as frustrating, infuriating, evil, satanic,

^{*} My copy editor cut out *orgasmic* here and suggested *nice* as a synonym . . . go figure.

[†] In Melbourne, Australia, the persistent drought has grown so bad that you actually need a permit to water your lawn, and such permits are very, very hard to get.

bulimic,[‡] or worse. We chafe at the restrictions government creates, we are annoyed by the taxes it imposes, we fume over its inefficiencies, we curse its wastefulness, and we rage at its failure.[§]

Seldom does anyone praise government, yet there it is. Except for passing moments of breakdown or revolutionary changes, government is always there. Whether in a communal tribe subsisting in an isolated jungle or in a virtual democracy emerging from the visible cloud of body odor wafting out of a hyper-caffeinated suburban cybercafe, nearly every human being who has ever set foot on this planet has lived in a governed society. Given the near-universal contempt for government, we must wonder why people repeatedly create, sustain, and submit to it. Whims of fate, freaks of nature, and simple accidents can cause anything to happen once or even twice, but rational explanations are needed for any phenomena that persist or occur frequently. There must be a reason we all live in governed societies, and it is the business of this chapter to offer you a convincing argument.

Why do we have government?

And here's where I won't bother arguing the point because there are soooooo many films and novels that make the point far better and far more viscerally than I ever could. Let's go old school for this one. The original *Mad Max*³ dates from 1979, so it's vintage old school—your-parents-were-barely-kids kind of old school. *Old school is good.*

Let's go old school. For Max Rockatansky, hotshot and slightly deranged cop, it starts out as just another postapocalyptic summer day along the edge of the outback. It is the perfect kind of day for the beach, some ice cream, and the soothing sounds of a rampaging motorcycle gang murdering his wife and son. That upsets Max just a wee bit, and he goes so medieval that everyone starts calling him Mad Max. The crumbling remnants of civilization can provide no justice in response to the murderous, raping rampage of Toecutter and his crew, so Max takes the last of the V8 Interceptors from the police motor pool, races into the outback, and starts dishing out some justice—old-school justice. It's ugly, extremely violent, and in so, so many ways deeply disturbing. In what has become a legendary film finale, Max handcuffs a man's ankle to the frame of a wrecked and burning car. Then, nodding at the leaking gas that's trickling toward the fire, Max tosses the man a hacksaw and tells him that it will take him ten minutes to cut through the chain but only five to cut through his ankle. Yeah, I know, the guy who wrote *Saw*⁴ totally stole that.

Part of my reason for going completely old school on you is the sheer artistry of the symphony of violence that director George Miller tosses up from down under. *Mad Max* presents such a graphic depiction of the horrors of brutal postapocalyptic **anarchy** that the original Australian release was rated M-18, the same adults-only rating that they give to porn. And that rating was probably the right call. There is plenty of violence in all of the *Mad Max* films. Lots of stuff blows up and lots of people die, as you may have noticed in the newer-school sequel *Fury Road*,⁵ but what sets the original movie apart from the sequels

[‡] It's never too early to start studying for the GRE. Have fun looking it up!

[§] It's fascinating that we all do this while enjoying the benefits of government. Still, it's so much more cathartic to complain.

is that it is not gratuitously violent. It is *disturbingly* violent. There is a kind of honesty to the brutality that makes it feel real and that curls your toes and makes you recoil in a way that a disemboweling chainsaw serial killer in a slasher film could never match. Even if you watch the sanitized American version, in which the distributors somehow thought that dubbing over Mel Gibson's thick Australian accent would make the raping and killing less disturbing, it's hard not to cringe at *Mad Max*. It provides the best, most visceral, most gut-churning example of the most horrific aspect of anarchy. It forces you to confront just how "nasty, brutish, and short" life would be in the constant "war of every man against every man"⁶ of an ungoverned world, and that is why we have government.

See it?

No?

Really? The whole "why do we have government?" question is a big question, but I could almost just point to *Mad Max* and its sequels and call that the whole answer. The violence in *Mad Max 2*, which you might know as *The Road Warrior*,⁷ is tame in comparison to that in *Mad Max*. *The Road Warrior* merited only an MA-15+ rating in Australia, roughly the equivalent of an R rating in the United States. *The Road Warrior* is violent, but it is far less viscerally violent than *Mad Max*, partly because of a subtle but important difference in context. The story in *Mad Max* catches the world at the moment that civilization collapses. Max goes over the edge at the point when the world descends into anarchy. In that moment, all constraints on human action have been momentarily removed, and that moment when there is a complete absence of any hint of government is the most brutal moment—and that last bit is the key. The complete absence of government will last but a moment. Anarchy almost never persists for more than a fleeting moment because the immediate, perhaps instinctual, human reaction to the horror of anarchy is to try to reestablish some semblance of a governed society. We can see this in *The Road Warrior*. This sequel to *Mad Max* is the story of a small, self-governed settlement trying to hold out against a well-organized—dare we say *governed*?—gang of marauders. *Thunderdome* sucks, and you will fail this course if you ever mention it again, so just don't even think about that atrocity. It sucks so much that I'm not even going to reference it properly. *Fury Road* is also violent, but it is set in a governed context. Individuals existing within the governed contexts in any of those films experience a degree of safety compared to those individuals caught outside them. As a result, people desperate for the slightest hint of **security** will flock to a group. In *The Road Warrior*, people join Lord Humungus even though being a part of his gang of marauders is pretty horrific.

See it?

No?

Really?

Fine. I give up. The answer is: security. Security is why government was invented and remains the most fundamental reason we have government. It is also important to note that security means more than you probably realize. So be ready for that. I'll give you a minute to gird your loins, take a deep breath, and carbo-load. I need some coffee anyway.

WE CALL THE NEW STUFF “POPULAR CULTURE”

Whatever the Latest *Purge* Movie Might Be

One night a year, anything goes. Murder, rape, arson, inconsiderate parking—all laws are suspended, and you can go out and do anything you want. The premise of *The Purge* and its sequels is a little difficult to believe, but the stories are surprisingly gripping. The horror of that brief release into anarchy becomes increasingly clear as the original film unfolds, but it also shows the expense of anarchy. That’s not something that most people notice, but the cost of the security measures needed for just that one night is astronomical. Selling them has made the central character a wealthy man, and as corollary the poor can do almost nothing to protect themselves. Impoverished people are abandoned, left to suffer the ugliest depredations of the basest impulses of mankind. Perhaps more disturbing is the film’s commentary on social norms, as it is the betrayal of trust by friends and lovers that is the most dangerous threat on the night of the purge. If you haven’t seen the original, prepare yourself for the scene where the mother has to watch the murder of her children.

Deadwood

It’s not exactly new, but *Deadwood*⁸ provides lots of nudity and a brilliantly nuanced exploration of how humans react when a community is thrust into an indistinct “no man’s land” between a governed and ungoverned existence. At times, the law, indistinct as it might be, seems to hold sway, as when a trial is held for the man who murdered Wild Bill Hickok. At other times, no rules seem to apply, and all that matters is power, as men are killed and fed to Mr. Wu’s pigs just to make a point. Sometimes norms of behavior act as a straitjacket, forcing the Jew and the whore to create a secret door between their homes in order to avoid acknowledging the relationship that everyone knows about. And at other times, you can buy whatever you desire—sex, drugs, or even a young woman to murder.

Sweet Tooth

A deceptively pitched series, *Sweet Tooth* manages to add a bit of subtlety to the horrors of anarchy.⁹ At first it seems like the cutesy stories about the hybrid children who start appearing with the disease that has wiped out most of the world’s population, with the horror being their persecution, but the quest to cure the disease gets horrifically dark, and that led to a lot of complaints from parents who had let their kids start watching the series. Underlying it all, however, is the horror of anarchy, where anyone who is stronger than someone can do anything they want to them. One moment off your guard is all it takes.

SECURITY CRUSHES ANARCHY, ROCK SMASHES SCISSORS, BUT WILL SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN HOW PAPER BEATS ROCK?

When confronted with anarchy, people will rush to join even the most unpleasant of governed environments. We can see this rush to government in several classic literary and popular culture examples of anarchy. In *Lord of the Flies*, the first thing the shipwrecked schoolboys do is create

rules for debate and collective decision-making. That effort fails, but government still arises, coalescing around the choir, of all things, and that governed group preys on those caught outside it. In David Brin's novel *The Postman*,¹⁰ government coalesces around the symbolism of an old, stolen U.S. Postal Service uniform. In *Lucifer's Hammer*,¹¹ it's a former senator and his effort to save a functioning nuclear power plant from an army of cannibals. In *Dies the Fire*,¹² the end of civilization leads different groups of people to coalesce into a pseudo-Viking warrior clan led by a former marine, a pseudo-Scottish clan that is run by a Wiccan priestess, a Renaissance recreationist society led by a psychotic monster of a man, and a university council run by a committee of professors. And anyone who knows anything about how a university committee works would realize that the university council is the most horrific of all those options. In all of these examples, we see that a governed society—even a ramshackle, accidental, and horribly governed society—offers security, and that is almost enough to explain why we have government. Security is a big part of it, but there is far more to government than joining the cannibal army so you're one of the people eating from the pot instead of going into it. The physical security, more formally known as personal security, offered by the tribe is just one of the many types of security we seek from government.

As a way of getting to all that other stuff government provides, I'm going to start with a ridiculously simple and far less violent story of life in the state of anarchy and offer you the *Sesame Street*³ version of how the first government was formed. This version needs a bit of background, but in order to avoid any need to go back and write a prequel to this story, let's just pretend that I did. It was awesome, dramatic to the end, and by the time you finished navigating through all the unexpected twists and turns in the plot, you realized that the whole point of my prequel story was that humans are social animals. Human nature has evolved into a balance between selfish and social motivations. It is literally hardwired into our brains, and the dynamics of this balance will become apparent in the discussion of **hierarchy**, **alliances**, groups, and group dynamics in the second half of the chapter, but it was that prequel that I never wrote that really told the story.

A MODEL FOR THE EMERGENCE OF COOPERATION: BOBSVILLE

One Thursday morning[†] 9,342 years ago, Bob the intrepid caveman wandered down to a swampy area near a stream. He hoped to breakfast on the wild rice plants growing there, as he had done once every few weeks over his many years. However, on this particular morning he tripped over his purebred hunting weasel, and his handful of rice was scattered across the muddy ground. After making heartfelt use of whatever foul language he had at his disposal, Bob quit trying to pick up the rice, shrugged off the minor disaster, and went to look somewhere else for his meal.**

A week or so later, in his always-difficult, never-ending search for food—which anthropologists tell us took far less of a hunter-gatherer's time than scientists previously assumed but was still a big deal—Bob decided to look for food in the swampy place again. While there, he noticed that the rice grains he had dropped were sprouting. A few weeks later, he saw that the

[†] Things like this always happen on Thursdays.

** This is also when humans first decided to try domesticating dogs rather than weasels, but that is an entirely different story.

sprouts had grown into rice plants. Then, after checking back regularly, Bob observed that one handful of grain had grown into plants capable of producing dozens of handfuls. Somewhere in the creaky and seldom-used depths of Bob's mind, it all came together—he could do that on purpose! Instead of just eating whatever rice he found, he could spread the grain on the damp ground and grow all the food he could ever eat.

Bob, in his primitive way, had discovered agriculture. He quickly began scattering rice across the mud as he dreamed of the day when he would never have to worry about hunger again. Bob eventually realized, however, that his fantasy faced a very serious obstacle: He was not the only brute who enjoyed eating rice. Others saw the plants growing in the swampy area and knew what they were. The sudden concentration of this food source attracted dozens of cavemen down from the hills to forage. All of Bob's effort and all the rice grains he had planted instead of eating were now feeding the marauders. In the end, outnumbered by the influx of hungry barbarians, Bob received little, if any, return for his effort and sacrifice.

Presumably, Bob was not the first ungraceful cliff dweller to discover that he could grow food intentionally, and he was certainly not the first to encounter difficulty in reaping the rewards of his labor. Over and over again, all around the world, this discovery was made, and it seems likely that the same hard lesson was learned again and again as this agricultural experiment failed. Growing food is relatively easy. Keeping the food you have grown is another thing entirely.

Somewhere along the way, one of the frustrated agricultural entrepreneurs had an inspiration. For the sake of my little story, let's assume it was Bob. Bob realized that several farmers working in close proximity could join together to protect the grain they grew. Even just a few cooperating farmers could defend the crops from the occasional barbarian wandering down from the hills. By coordinating their strength, several farmers could ward off all but the most organized efforts to steal their food.

Inspired, Bob searched for allies who could see the value of growing food, perhaps even looking for them among the horde of cavemen who had wandered down to take his first crop. After promising not to attack each other, they also agreed that they would coordinate their efforts to defend the rice they grew. Add a few huts for shelter, and Bob had created the first sedentary village and, with it, the first vestiges of government.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

The story of Bob's foray into agriculture captures the essence of government: **collective action**, which is coordinated group activity designed to achieve a common goal that individuals acting on their own could not otherwise attain. Bob and his fellow farmers organized themselves to pursue a collective benefit, but what exactly was the specific goal that drew them together? Although raising food might be the first thing that pops to mind, farming was not the collective benefit this very first government was pursuing. Individually, each caveman, cavelady, or caveperson^{††} could raise plenty of food for himself, herself, or themselves, but he, she, or they could

^{††} *Cavelady* is obviously a gratuitously politically correct reference to a person who might be crassly referred to as a cave-woman. Unfortunately, this is necessary. To meet Federal Communications Commission requirements, I am required to

not protect the crops from all the other thieving cave dwellers. Just like the people who flock to Lord Humungus and the protection that his marauders provide against the horrors of the post-apocalyptic outback in *The Road Warrior*, Bob's farmers needed the collective effort of the group first and foremost for security.

My admittedly cartoonish story of Bob's transformation from wandering caveperson to enterprising farmer demonstrates some of the fundamental reasons we have government. Undoubtedly, historians and anthropologists who specialize in primitive governmental and social structures would offer valid criticisms of my "state of nature" story. Its biggest, but by no means only, flaw is the omission of the almost-certain role of family structures in the creation of Bobsville. The similarities between the organizational and power structures of extended families and the structures of primitive governments throughout history provide ample evidence of a connection between family and early government. In fact, many of these family-derived governmental structures persist to this day in the form of hereditary dictatorships in states such as North Korea and structurally in the relationship between states or provinces and federal or national governmental structures. The United States, Canada, and Australia all have governmental structures that resemble the independent but connected relationships of an extended family. However, even a family-derived governmental structure would first have to confront the same problem that motivated Bob—having to protect something it values from others. Thus, the story demonstrates that one essential element of government—if not its primary element—is collective action. In this case, collective action is focused on the attainment of security. Eventually, Bob and his friends would realize that the same organizational structure they created for protecting their crops could also be used to pursue other collective efforts.

Collective action is the essence of government because there are certain things, such as attaining security, that individuals simply cannot accomplish on their own. Consider the many things that a modern government does, such as building roads, protecting the environment, maintaining libraries, and constructing elaborate hoaxes about men landing on the moon. How many of those things would be difficult, if not impossible, for even the wealthiest or most powerful individual to do alone?

For now, however, let's stick with Bob and focus on the collective pursuit of security.

SECURITY

What do I mean by the word *security*? Though we all have a sense of the concept, the term can be problematic, particularly for the study of politics. Security can involve anything from China pointing ballistic missiles at Taiwan to the security blanket Snoopy is always trying to steal from Linus. Security can mean the ability to walk from the classroom door to your car without fear of bodily harm, the assurance that you will have a paycheck arriving next week, or the knowledge that you can always drop by your parents' kitchen and walk away with a full stomach. Even if I limit the term to how it has been defined and used in the study of politics, it is still difficult

include enough inappropriately politically correct referents to offset the emotional trauma inflicted by my cavalier disregard for all those things everybody says I am disregarding. I actually tried to be a bit more over the top with this one to earn extra credit, but I was surprised to discover that *Cave Queen*, *Duchess of the Stone Age*, and *Mistress of the Monkeymen* are all porn films. I added *caveperson* for this edition. We'll see if that sticks.

to nail down a definition. Some scholars have even argued that the effort to define security is futile. Moreover, when I attempt to define the term precisely and accurately, I wind up juggling so many nuances and variations that even the clearest result tends to be impossibly complicated.

Rather than wrestling with the complexities, I offer a definition that cuts straight to the heart of the concept, much as I did with the term *politics* in Chapter 1. Bob and his farmer friends attained security when they developed the ability to protect their crops. Thus, security is the ability to protect, preserve, or maintain control of something of value. Although this definition lacks the richness of some others, it nevertheless captures the basic idea.

The good part of defining security so simply is that you don't even have to hope that the brilliant author of this textbook knows what he is talking about. If you look at the way the term *security* is defined or applied in research and commentary on politics, you can see that various definitions of security are differentiated by the specification of what is to be protected. For example, political scientist Brian L. Job lists four securities that are critical to understanding the political dynamics of developing nations.¹⁴ The first is the protection of borders and governmental structures from outside threats. You probably think that kind of security is national security, but Job and most other political scientists refer to that as **state security**. Job's basic argument is that in the developing world, state security is not the most important consideration. Instead, these countries' foreign policies are dominated by **regime security**, which is defined by the leaders' ability to protect their hold on power. The pursuit of regime security is often complicated by issues related to what political scientists define as **national security**: the protection of the interests or survival of tribal, ethnic, or other groups that exist within and across state borders.¹⁵ These ethnic groups often clash within countries, and they are often spread across the borders between countries, making the pursuit of national security a particularly vexing international issue in the developing world. Lost in the politics of state, regime, and national security is a fourth category—**individual security**, which, just to keep you off guard, is exactly what it sounds like.

Notice that in this discussion of different securities, the key to understanding the politics of security is determining who is trying to protect what.

To truly grasp the concept of security and to understand why the collective pursuit of security is such a central element for government, you are going to need the grossly oversimplified definitions of a few other closely related terms.

POWER

While *security* is a contested term, the debate over its meaning is nothing compared to the disagreements surrounding the concept of **power**. The manifestation of power can be as obvious as a tank rolling in to break up the protests in China's Tiananmen Square or as subtle as the shopping bag–burdened student who stopped that tank by simply refusing to get out of its way. Power can be exercised through the brute physical force of a police officer's patrol stick or through the glorious leader's deft evocation of patriotism to provoke a desired response from

¹⁴ I know the world would be a better place if political scientists just defined *national security* as everyone else does, but if our definitions of terms were less confusing, there would be less need to teach this stuff to suffering university students and, thus, fewer jobs for political scientists, so don't expect change to happen anytime soon.

a sycophantic crowd. Power can be found in the blunt words of a sixteen-year-old girl raging about the looming catastrophe of climate change or the hysterics of the wealthy old men who use their claim to authority to insult her and dismiss the points she makes. It is this wide range of applicability that makes the term so difficult to define with accuracy.

Again, I resort to a simple definition to capture the fundamentals of the concept of power. At its core, power is the ability to get something done. While this definition is so elementary that it borders on the tautological, it cuts right to the heart of the notion of power. We tend to regard any successful effort to accomplish a goal as an exercise of power. The tank had the power to disperse the protesters because it posed a threat to their lives. The student had the power to stop the tank by stepping in front of it because he could force the driver to choose between halting and accepting responsibility for running over an unarmed, nonthreatening person. Brute force is power that surges toward a goal by means of a direct application of energy. The manipulation of language and imagery is power because it can channel the actions of a crowd. Whether direct or indirect—doing something yourself or getting others to do it for you—power is the ability to disturb the momentum of events. It is the ability to *influence*.

Power is widely believed to be the key variable in politics. Clearly, if politics is about acting to achieve a particular goal, then the ability to get the task done is of the utmost importance. Power is so pervasive a concept that you likely take its role in your own life for granted, but think about all those people in your life who can get you to do certain things and how they go about getting you to do them. How do your parents get you to do what they want? What about your boss? Your professors? Why, exactly, are you reading this book?

When you think of power, you might picture a tangible implement of the use of force, such as a police officer's club. It's less likely that you will think of the officer's blue uniform and conspicuous patrol car and the way those things alter people's behavior. However, the subtle uses of power can be by far the most important. Think of the relationship between boss and employee—Mr. Spacely and George Jetson in *The Jetsons*,¹⁵ Mr. Slate and Fred Flintstone in *The Flintstones*,¹⁶ Mr. Krabs and SpongeBob in *SpongeBob SquarePants*.¹⁷ Poor George is constantly taking abuse from Mr. Spacely. Mr. Slate is always firing, or threatening to fire, Fred. SpongeBob doesn't get it, but if he did, he would realize that Mr. Krabs exerts power to get him to use his skills as the ultimate "fry cook to the gods." Why do George, Fred, and SpongeBob put up with it? Why do I bombard you with examples from ancient children's cartoons that you have never seen? Well, my choice of examples is a mystery that is better left unsolved,¹⁸ but in terms of the power inherent in the employment relationship, ask yourself why the underpaid employees in *Superstore*¹⁹ willingly clean up the baby's "accident" in Aisle 110. Why do millions of people comply with the wishes of their unarmed and physically unimpressive bosses? Is it because their kneecaps are in jeopardy? No, their acquiescence is probably due to the slightly subtler economic influence that all bosses have over their employees. At the extreme, bosses can fire their employees and deny them future paychecks, but they are more likely to exercise their power toward less drastic ends. After all, bosses also assign workloads, schedule vacations, distribute raises and promotions, and determine who gets the window office. In large corporations, the few sentences that a boss types into a performance review can facilitate or derail a worker's

career. The diffuse power that the boss wields is probably why, in our androgynous workplace example way back in Chapter 1, Pat was laughing at the boss's jokes—it was all about power.

I should totally put a *Game of Thrones* example here.

Stretching the employment analogy far beyond the bounds of prudence or caution, I will now split an infinitive to boldly suggest that power is to politics what money is to capitalism. The capitalist needs to accumulate money and then spend it carefully in the pursuit of profit and efficiency. The politician needs to amass power and then apply it carefully to gain the support of others, to win leadership positions, and to be effective in politics. In fact, we often use the term *political capital* to indicate the reserve of power on which some official can call to achieve political goals. While it is not a tangible resource like a stock option or a savings account,⁵⁸ political capital can be stored or built up. Very often, individuals earn political capital by doing favors for others in the hope that the person they are helping now will deliver their support at a future date. A person might volunteer to help someone else campaign for office or contribute money to a political action committee. Someone in office might vote for another representative's bill, or give a job to a colleague's nephew, or pay for the dry cleaning of an intern's nice blue dress.⁵⁹ For years, political parties in many big cities provided jobs, food, and entertainment and performed other favors for their constituents in order to ensure their support on Election Day.

Do note that there is a critical difference between power and **authority**. The easiest way to make the distinction is to think of authority as a subcategory of power—a type of power. A person has authority when the social structure or situational context leads others to accept that person's commands, direction, or other forms of control over their actions. We often talk about authority in terms of enforced legal systems for allocating aspects of social control to certain individuals, such as police patrolling the roads. However, authority can arise even when no formal coercion is involved in creating the leader-and-follower relationship. The Brain in *Pinky and the Brain*²⁰ calls the shots with every plan to take over the world even though it would be absurd to think that one laboratory mouse had any kind of formalized position of power in relation to another. In *Kitchen Nightmares*,²¹ the owners of skanky restaurants almost always follow many of Gordon Ramsay's instructions, commands, tirades, and invective-laden rants even though Ramsay has no official, legal position at all in the organizational chart of the business. And in just about every disaster movie that has ever been made, people choose to follow the hero even though they are not contractually obligated to do so. Well, actually those people are actors, so they *are* contractually obligated to do what's in the script, which includes following the overpaid actor playing the hero, but if you would stop it with that pedantically literal thing and just admit that you understand that I was talking about characters in the story in the disaster film, not the film production itself, then you would get the point. In all of these cases, something—such as specialized knowledge, experience, or insight—gives (or should give) people the opportunity to influence the actions of others, sometimes in profound and significant ways.

⁵⁸ Technically, stock options and bank accounts aren't tangible either since they aren't physical things that can be touched.

⁵⁹ This is a reference to something—5 points for guessing it without asking your parents.

One of the key points about authority lies in the way it highlights the relationship between power and context. The particular kind of power that is appropriate in a given situation is intimately related to the specific political and social context. Different social environments affect how power is used. For example, a president exercises a type of power that is different from that exercised by a dictator. A country with a nuclear arsenal exerts a different type of power than does one that is rich in petroleum reserves. However, there is one context—one structure of human interaction—that is fundamentally different from all others: anarchy. In order to comprehend how power works and why security is a fundamental reason for government, we must first return to anarchy and develop an understanding of the dynamics of an anarchic environment.

ANARCHY

Unlike the concepts of security and power, the definition of *anarchy* is not something that political scientists argue about. However, in this case, it is the common usage of the term—equating anarchy with lackadaisically rioting millennials—that is likely to create confusion. I reinforced that misunderstanding of anarchy with the *Mad Max* example, but instead of apologizing, I'm going to pretend that is exactly what I meant to do. It is a well-known fact-like belief that if you force students to intentionally rethink something, that process enriches their understanding of the nuances in a way that simply teaching them could never manage. Thus, making sure everyone was thinking of anarchy in terms of chaos and violence and now making you shift to think of it differently is a way to make you so totally smarter.^{***}

When political scientists speak of anarchy, they are referring not to chaos but to an absence of an overarching authority or hierarchy. In an anarchic situation, such as pre-cooperation Bobsville, there is no means for policing behavior or enforcing agreements. This absence can lead to chaos and violence, but there is no reason that it necessarily has to lead to homoerotic biker gangs roaming the outback and killing Max's family. In fact, many **anarchists** are ideologues who long for a lack of hierarchy not because they desire chaos but because they believe that human beings are capable of peacefully intermingling and ordering society without broad, formalized governmental structures.

Conversations in the classroom provide a good nonpolitical example of the difference between anarchy and hierarchy. Before the instructor arrives, there is no hierarchical structure in the room—no overarching authority—because none of the students has any control over the others. As a result, the conversation is reasonably anarchic. Any person can talk to any other person. The ability and desire to talk are the only things that really matter. Furthermore, as the relentless babbler next to you repeatedly demonstrates, it is not even necessary to find someone who agrees to listen before you start yapping. However, when the instructor arrives and starts class, the conversation becomes structured and hierarchical. There are rules for who can speak. The instructor directs the exchange, deciding who will speak and when, thus controlling both the content and the tone of the discussion.

^{***} That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

WE CALL THE OLD STUFF “CLASSICS”

Pallas and The Probability Broach

L. Neil Smith is well up there on the geek scale—at least a 14. While there are plenty of obscure science fiction authors out there, and a large proportion of science fiction authors explore extremes of social and/or political ideals, Smith is nearly unique in the way his writing explores anarchy and other extremes of libertarianism as an ideal. The extremes of idiocy, stupidity, racism, hatred, hypocrisy, and other bile spewed by those who scrambled to the front of the recent surge in libertarian politics in the United States have made it extremely difficult to engage the conceptual and social thought that underlies libertarianism. However, unlike just about anyone else you might hear talking about weapon ownership or any of the other issues associated with libertarianism, Smith has explored the social and political dynamics and has shared that thought in his novels. In doing so, he has also provided a unique insight into the mind of the extreme libertarian, showing them to be largely driven by fear, naïveté, and a deep-seated distrust of structurally constituted forms of power and authority. Having personally discussed the issue with Neil,^{†††} I can assure you that he did not intend to paint that picture. In fact, he intended the exact opposite and thinks that his anarchy-loving characters are heroically robust of spirit to the point of fearlessness. However, the casual humor those characters find in murdering someone simply because he was dumb enough to try to protect himself with the wrong kind of gun belies that point. Smith has accidentally created an almost-perfect fictional example of the psychological argument that both disdain for empathy and reverence for the empowerment afforded by weaponry are symptoms of fear and weakness. In Smith’s novels, there is also a profound failure to understand that many of the restrictions on individual actions that libertarians despise primarily limit the powerful and wealthy who would quash his erstwhile heroes, rather than the heroic individuals themselves. Still, the exploration Smith offers is a valuable tool for delving into the ideology of anarchy.

Lucifer’s Hammer

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle are probably the best writing duo that science fiction has ever seen, and they don’t disappoint with *Lucifer’s Hammer*. They turn a comet striking the earth into what is probably the best postapocalyptic tale ever. Readers could easily get caught up in how accurate the science is and some of the details, such as the reflooding of the dry land that used to be Tulare Lake, which just happened following a massive storm in 2023. However, it is the politics of the anarchic situation, in both the big-picture storytelling and the peeks they offer at isolated little groups, that really make this novel useful here. The Cannibal Army is perhaps the most horrific of government environments, but you understand why people join. The leader of the small band of girl and boy scouts up on the mountain is a total perv, but you are left uncomfortably wondering some uncomfortable wonderings about what you really think of him. The biker, the nuke plant—every permutation for how people might react to anarchy is explored.

^{†††} At the 2011 World Science Fiction Convention in Reno, Nevada.

Anarchy and Power

The classroom conversation example also demonstrates the connection between power and anarchy, suggesting why both are crucial concepts for the study of politics. Anarchy is important because of its relationship to power. Before the instructor arrives, your ability, or power, to speak is all that is necessary to allow you to do so. We could even think of the volume at which you can speak as the amount of power you have in this situation. The louder you can bellow, the more effective you will be at getting words from your mouth to someone else's ears. In a hierarchical situation, however, the power of the individual is constrained. When the instructor is in the room and directing the conversation, the volume of your bellow is not the only factor relevant to your effort to get your words to someone else's ears. You must also consider the structure of the conversation. Your power to make yourself heard is tempered by the rewards and punishments that the authority in the room can direct toward you in response to your bellowing. By shutting out, quieting, waterboarding, muzzling, or exiling the loudest voices, the classroom structure makes it possible for the soft-spoken to be heard. The structure and hierarchy of interaction both enable and constrain participation in the classroom conversation.

We spend so much of our lives in structured, hierarchical situations that we can actually find it difficult to appreciate and comprehend anarchy, and this makes fictional examples particularly valuable. *Lord of the Flies*, for instance, is probably the most totally classic story about anarchy. The characters are boys who are stranded on a tropical island with no adults, no authority, and no rules. Their descent into barbarity puts a human face on the definition of anarchy and illustrates the ways in which people who must confront the horrors of anarchy—even children—form groups and attempt to create governments. Postapocalyptic stories and films also offer us a visceral brush with the true meaning of anarchy. I've already mentioned *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*,^{***} in which Mel Gibson wins the all-time award for fewest lines spoken by a leading actor as his character becomes the reluctant savior of a small band of people trying to survive in a land without laws. Fans of classic Westerns will recognize the theme from countless films in which a lone cowboy rides in to enforce order in a Wild West town.

The extreme brutality that is often a characteristic of postapocalyptic stories demonstrates the connections among power, security, and anarchy. In an anarchic environment, power is the ultimate resource because there is no overarching authority—no structure—and no government to prevent the strongest individuals from using their power to get whatever they want. The only way those with less power can stop the bullies from acting as they wish is by mustering enough power to overcome the bullies' inherent advantage. In contrast, in a hierarchical situation, weaker individuals can rely on the coercive power of the authority structure to restrain more powerful individuals and protect the weak from the strong. The only hope for survival of the band of desperate people in *The Road Warrior* is to find enough power to defend themselves against the roving bandits. It is important to emphasize here that the white clothes they wear are totally symbolic of the good guys, but in the real world, no amount of bleach would keep them clean while living around an oil well and refinery in the middle of the desert. It is also

^{***} For those of you who missed it, it must be noted that *The Road Warrior* is actually a sequel. Most of the world knows it as *Mad Max 2*, which should be a hint that there probably was a *Mad Max 1*. Please try to pay attention, or I'll have to remind you about the ganja and short-term memory thing again.

important to note that hierarchy need not result from formalized structures of government, though governments do provide hierarchy. In an anarchic situation, something as simple as an acknowledgment of status and power within a roving band of thugs may constitute enough of an authority structure to create something similar to a governed environment. If the scenario of *The Road Warrior* seems far-fetched, think about how warlords in desolate places such as Somalia, Afghanistan, and Texas are able to exercise power and draw bands of followers despite the lack of a constitution drawn up by a bunch of dead white guys.^{§§§}

An Impetus for Government

Anarchy remains one of those ideal concepts that, if it ever really exists, is found only rarely and fleetingly in the real world, yet it is crucial for understanding government. Although it may come as something of a surprise, anarchy can even be thought of as the *source* of government. Why? Because anarchy sucks. I already told you that at the beginning of the chapter. You should have been paying attention.

In an anarchic environment, the vast majority of people struggle to survive, and those who do survive live in a context of constant fear and constant threat. Every moment of every day, they live in fear of and seek to protect themselves from those who are more powerful. People need protection from bullies, and the bullies themselves need protection, too. After all, even the nastiest of bullies has to sleep sometime. The collective pursuit of security—which is why Bob wanted to form a village in the first place—provides an escape from this pervasive atmosphere of threat. In a governed society, people essentially hire government to protect them and the things they value from those who are more powerful.

We can make a reasonable sociopsychological argument that humans naturally tend to flee from anarchy toward hierarchical structures even when those structures are far from ideal. If you watch the way strangers herded into a cafeteria seem to congregate in small groups, there does seem to be some aspect of human nature involved. Think about what happens when you meet and introduce yourself to people. The whole process of becoming acquainted is, in many ways, a method of establishing hierarchy based on information elicited by such polite questions as “What do you do?,” “Where do you live?,” or “How big are those pants?” An extreme example can be found in Japan, where a round of introductions can make you feel like a Vegas table dealer as you swap business cards as fast as you can pull them out of your pocket. That exchange becomes a quick and direct means of establishing everyone’s place in a social status hierarchy before the conversation can begin. Once the hierarchy is determined, the person at the top is often then expected to initiate and shepherd the discussion. Japan is one of the most formally hierarchical societies in the world, but all human societies are hierarchical to some extent.

Part of the explanation could simply be fear and the role it plays in survival and evolution. If *Mad Max* hasn’t convinced you that Thomas Hobbes had good reasons for describing life in his anarchic

^{§§§} This is a semantically tricky point since most of the dead white guys who wrote constitutions weren’t dead when they wrote them. Afghanistan is doubly tricky since it *has* a constitution written by a bunch of white guys, but at least some of them probably aren’t even completely dead yet. This is, however, offset by the degree to which the current Afghan constitution is completely ignored by pretty much everyone with a gun.

state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” try thinking of it in terms of accidentally walking past a couple of punks hanging out just inside the shadows of an alleyway. Think of how you feel in the moment you notice they are there. Think of that spike of fear in your gut when you realize that there’s nothing to stop them from mugging you, or worse, right then and there.⁵⁵ There is no one else around, they are steps away, and they could drag you into that alley before you could set your Galaxy Note 7 to explode mode. That fleeting instant during which the protection of a governed society has abandoned you is what every moment is like in anarchy, and that surge of fear is constant in an ungoverned environment. Fear is an evolved human reaction that helps people to survive by helping them recognize danger, and the fact that people fear anarchy should provide a strong clue to why it is hard to find anarchy in the real world. A hierarchical structure, with its rules and the means to enforce them, can keep society under control, and, most importantly, hierarchy protects us from those of our neighbors who feel free to sport their highly fashionable swastika tattoos.

Still, we’re stuck on that personal security aspect of government. This is important. Hopefully I have made that obvious by now, but even if we only talk of escaping anarchy, the collective pursuit of physical personal security is still just a portion of the equation. A governed environment is also appealing because anarchy is perhaps the most inefficient form of human organization. As can be seen in the story of Bobsville, farming is, in essence, investing. Bob invested his time, his effort, and his food—the very thing keeping him alive—in the belief that he would have a whole bunch more food to eat later. It is not rational to make an investment such as this, or any other, without the ability to secure that investment. The person making the sacrifice today must have some reasonable expectation that they will be able to reap the benefits in the future. Without that kind of assurance, without some reasonable expectation of being able to keep the fruits of their labor, a person would be crazy to invest all that effort and wealth. Would you put money into a savings account if there weren’t rules, laws, and structures keeping random meerkats who wander into the bank from making withdrawals from your account? Hierarchical structures provide that economic security. Not all do equally good jobs, but virtually all are better than anarchy. I’ll develop this point further when we discuss the relationship between government and the economy, but for now, I’m going to cross my fingers and hope you can begin to see why a stable government is essential for a sound economy.

THE CONTEXT OF HIERARCHY

Since *anarchy*, defined as the complete absence of hierarchy, is on the extreme end of a continuum, any movement away from anarchy is a movement toward hierarchy, toward some societal structure that elevates someone or a group of someones to a position of authority over others. In fact, a single bully who dominates everyone else in an anarchic situation has created one type of hierarchy. When Bob and his hygienically challenged primal farmers formed a commune to cooperate in defense of their crops, they formed a different type of hierarchy. When societies form governments, they create institutionalized hierarchies, and different societies shape their own distinct governmental institutions to meet their specific needs, backgrounds, and values. The particular

⁵⁵ My beloved copy editor insisted that “spike of fear” was better than any descriptive phrase using the word *sphincter*. I remain unconvinced.

types of institutions chosen determine the context for how decisions are made and how people relate to one another in each society. As I hope you will become increasingly aware, this context has a tremendous effect on what options people have and how they act. Some theorists would even argue that context is the most important consideration in the study of politics.

THINKER IN BOXES

Thomas Hobbes

Royal Goblin Paladin of the Orderly Queue

Proficiencies: Counting Things and Brownnosing the King

Vulnerabilities: An Achillies Bladder

Favorite Song: “Do What You Want” by OK Go²²

If you’re a dictator, king, or uptight schoolmarm with your hair pulled into a bun that’s so severe you can’t blink, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is going to be your favorite political theorist. Influenced by the scientific revolution that occurred during his lifetime, Hobbes rejected all information that was not acquired empirically as he sought to craft a scientific theory of politics and government. In his most famous work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes sought to explain why government was necessary. To accomplish this task, he asks us to engage in a thought experiment: What would life be like in this “state of nature”?

Imagine a time when there were no laws, no government, and no justice system at all, when individuals enjoyed perfect liberty to do whatever they pleased. Hobbes considered human beings to be essentially egotistical and self-interested rational pleasure seekers, but for some reason—a reason that will be difficult for university students to fathom—that belief did not lead him to predict that a world of complete freedom would lead to something like a constant spring break at Daytona Beach. Instead, he describes life in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” It was a life of constant war and violence. It was *Lord of the Flies* in Technicolor.

Hobbes believed that people form governments because they want to escape this state of nature, and they are willing to trade some of their liberty to achieve tranquility. According to Hobbes, government begins when people join together to form a “social contract” with each other. Under the terms of the contract, people agree to trade their liberty for protection from the harshness of the state of nature. Their individual freedom is turned over to a sovereign—a person or a group of people with supreme authority—who is responsible for securing and maintaining the peace. Once the people consent to join into this social contract, they must follow the will of the sovereign, and the dude in charge has the power to do whatever is necessary to ensure domestic tranquility. People have surrendered all of their rights, including their right to disagree. There is no such thing as freedom of speech or freedom of religion, and people should expect nothing except what is granted by the sovereign. Unlike Aristotle, Hobbes did not believe that government and the state were natural. Instead, they were human creations that originated because they served a useful purpose.

Thus, not only does Hobbes provide the reason for the origin of the state, but he also tells us about the obligations of the individual and the sovereign. The sovereign’s responsibility is to provide for the safety of the populace. Consequently, Hobbes contrasts the state of nature with the positive utopia of a life of security. However, that original, negative utopia always lurks in the background as a justification for the sovereign’s rule.

To understand how hierarchy and context come together to shape human interaction, let's return to the classroom. Sitting atop a strong hierarchical structure, the instructor is a capricious dictator. The students get to be the worthy peasants who toil away at the evil dictator's erratic whim. The instructor has this dictatorial power because the university structure gives them the authority to assign the grades that will ultimately affect the students' prospects for graduation and, except for philosophy majors, their future careers. The tremendous value that students place on the grades that must be earned within this university structure gives the instructor immense power over them. The fact that students sometimes actually attend classes, listen to instructors, read texts, and study for tests—things they almost certainly would not otherwise do—is evidence of how effective the university structure is at empowering the instructor. If your instructor were just another poorly dressed person with mismatched patches on the elbows of their corduroy blazer, lecturing from the back seat of a city bus, would you read what they recommended? Would you write papers at their command? Would you even stay on the bus?

The context of hierarchy is as crucial as its structure. When a student who also happens to be a police officer stops their instructor for speeding, the relationship is suddenly reversed. In the space of an hour, a professor may go from explaining a poor grade on an exam to handing over a driver's license and registration. The only difference is the context of interaction. The hierarchical structure of the university gives that professor power in the classroom, while the hierarchical structure of the local system of law enforcement gives that student power in the speed trap.

If people fear anarchy and seek hierarchy, if they institutionalize their collective effort to attain security, the next logical questions are as follows: How are these structures created? How do people get from anarchy to hierarchy—to the government that we all like to complain about?

ALLIANCES

An alliance occurs when individuals or groups agree to combine resources and abilities for a purpose that benefits the members of the alliance. In some contexts, the term *coalition* may be applied to such an arrangement. Alliances among countries are a key element of international politics, influencing prospects for war, peace, and complex diplomatic negotiations—we are all familiar, for example, with how S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Allies joined together to defeat Hydra and the Axis powers in World War II. For present purposes, the basics of alliance formation can illuminate how governmental structures emerge. The alliance is probably the simplest and the most obvious strategy for those pursuing security in an anarchic environment. Bob's primitive farmers protected their crops by joining together to gain power sufficient to ward off the neighboring marauders.

To illustrate the dynamics of alliances within anarchy, I can use a scenario very similar to that of *Lord of the Flies*. Among a group of seven children shipwrecked on an island, only one knows how to go out in the water and catch fish. We'll call this wimpy kid Gilligan—and if you don't understand

why, ask your grandparents. Regardless, the names aren't important. Since fish are particularly desirable when the only other thing you have to eat is coconuts, all of the kids want the fish. To catch the fish, Gilligan wades out until he is waist-deep in the ocean and then stands there for half the day until he eventually snags one of the slippery little entrées. In a fair and just world, Gilligan has just secured a nutritious dinner, but in an anarchic environment with no overarching authority, what happens when this scrawny kid emerges from the water with that tasty-looking fish?

Most likely, the biggest kid on the beach, whom we'll just randomly call the Skipper, walks up to Gilligan and snatches the fish. Can Gilligan do anything about it? No. The Skipper probably outweighs him by a hundred pounds, and there is no hierarchy on the island, no police officer on the corner for the weak little fisherman to turn to for protection. If the Skipper can withstand some whining, crying, and tugging at his pant legs, there really is no way Gilligan can keep the bully from taking his fish. What is he to do? If he still wants to eat fish, Gilligan must go out and catch another one. So he wades out and catches another fish. However, when he brings it back in, the second-biggest bully on the beach, Mary Ann,^{****} struts up and takes the fish. Gilligan is probably going to have to provide a fish for everyone bigger than he is before he gets to feed himself. What's more, long before he can feed all the others, the Skipper is hungry again. Poor Gilligan! He could spend his entire lifetime fishing and never get to eat any fish. On this anarchic little island that looks suspiciously like a little island in a Hawaiian harbor, any kid who is bigger and wants what Gilligan has can simply take it from him.

This situation is problematic not only for hungry Gilligan but also for all of the other castaways. Once Gilligan realizes that he is not going to get to eat any of the fish, why should he bother to catch any? Why would he work for no reward? The whole society would benefit if he were to stay out there catching as many fish as he could for as many of the kids as he could, but even if the bullies were to use their power to force him to do so, eventually Gilligan would become so weakened by malnutrition that he could not continue. Alliances offer a way out of such self-defeating situations by providing security within anarchy. Gilligan can make a deal with the Skipper, offering to catch two fish—one for the bully and one for himself. In return, he asks the Skipper to protect him from all the others who might want his fish. In other words, the Skipper and Gilligan form an alliance. Gilligan gives up part of the yield of his labor in return for protection. He is buying security, in the form of the ability to eat his own fish, by sharing his resources with the bully who can protect him.

Unlike the circumstances of the formation of Bobsville, Gilligan and the Skipper are not joining together to promote their common good; each is pursuing his individual interests.^{††††} You could run through a similar analysis of shifting alliances in *The Hunger Games*.²³ Go on. Do it.

If this were the end of my fish story, we would have a plot similar to that of Bob and the first village full of grunting, hairy farmers. However, there is a dynamic here that is different

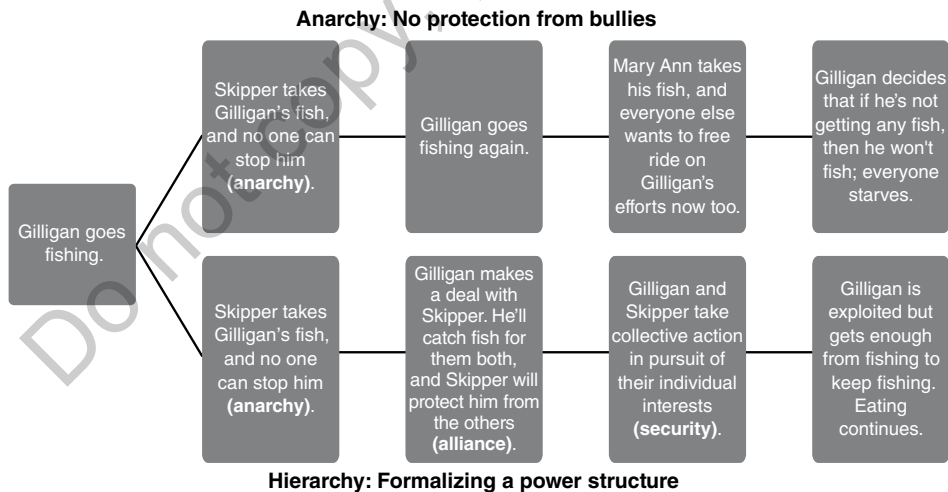
^{****} Gilligan is seriously a wimp.

^{††††} This is actually an arguable point. Both in Bobsville and in this island scenario, everyone who participates in the group is better off, and even though one dynamic is cooperative and one is coercive, the end result is the same.

from the collective action leading to the formation of Bobsville; the further complexity in this story of alliance formation can help us to understand power, politics, and the way that government structures form in response to anarchy. To continue with the story, the second-biggest bully, Mary Ann, wants the fish just as much as the Skipper does, and Mary Ann is just as capable of forming an alliance as anybody else. If she teams up with the third-biggest bully, Mrs. Lovey Howell,^{****} together they have more power than the Skipper. In fact, with a little bit of forceful persuasion, Mary Ann and Mrs. Howell can convince Gilligan that the biggest bully alone cannot protect him from their new alliance and that he will find life to be a lot less bruising if he joins their new alliance and agrees to catch three fish a day. The Skipper is not about to let that happen, however, so he recruits some additional thugs of his own, probably Ginger and the Professor, and forms another new alliance that is strong enough to overpower the rival team and force Gilligan back into the Skipper's camp. The Mary Ann–Mrs. Howell alliance is likely to reply in kind, adding sufficient power to overcome the alliance of the biggest bully. Of course, there is nothing (except the fact that there are only seven stranded castaways) to prevent the Skipper from then trying to amass even more power to force Gilligan back into his camp.

Aside from regurgitating some very unpleasant memories of the reality TV craze that I desperately hope will have finally died by the time you read this book,^{****} this example of alliance formation as a response to anarchy demonstrates how groups ultimately lead to governments.²⁴ The alliance that is ultimately successful will form a group. In our fish story, the group forms

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Anarchy versus Hierarchy: Power and Politics on *Gilligan's Island* Because *Game of Thrones* Was Really, Really Hard to Figure Out



^{****} Mrs. Lovey Howell is actually pretty tough—in a rich-old-lady kind of way.

^{****} Curse you, *Survivor*, and your progeny!

around the competition for control of a resource—in this case, a skinny angler. However, there need not be a fight over Gilligan or any other person for a group to coalesce. Alternatively, the competition could involve a struggle to control farmland, grazing land, a bay full of fish, a grove of trees, water, or any other resource. The key is that the group needs to exist and persist in order to provide the collective benefit of security.

Things really start to get complex, and nuances really start to matter, when we look at how such a group functions in everyday life. A momentary lapse in the group's ability to protect what it values is all it takes for a rival to take advantage and for the group's members to lose everything. The need for security is constant. There are always more cavepersons who may wander by. Thus, Bob's group of farmers had to persist as a group, even after the initial bands of raiding cavemen had been driven away from the crops. This permanent group eventually became the government of Bobsville. Consequently, government results from the group's need to institutionalize—that is, to make permanent—its power. It accomplishes this by creating governmental institutions to provide the security that people continually need. Thus, to repeat the trend of providing overly simplistic definitions, I define *government* as a set of agreements, laws, or other political structures designed to provide permanent hierarchy.

Grasping the connection between groups and government can be difficult because you must first drop your current expectations, which are based on what government is and does now. You must think about how, somewhere in the very distant past, the whole idea of government came to be. From this perspective, you can begin to see that it is from this essential first function that the governments we know evolved. With just a little modification, the collective effort that was put into rushing out and chasing the cavemen away from the field can be used to pursue other collective goals, and that, finally, is the answer to the question of why we have government.

Government is the primary mechanism through which people pursue collective actions. The collective pursuit of security is almost certainly the most fundamental of collective actions we ask government to coordinate for us, but it is by no means the only one. We ask government to build and maintain shared infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, subways, aqueducts, power grids, spaceports, and transdimensional wormhole transit stations. We ask government to regulate our activities and set standards so that we all drive on the proper side of the road (something they are still working on in China), and we can all be sure that the pint we buy at the pub is actually a full pint of beer.^{****} We ask the government to perform services such as sewage disposal and educating all you young ruffians. We ask government to provide a context in which we can reap at least some of the reward for invested effort. We ask the government to manage shared or communal resources such as fish, clean air, and music that does more than go “thumpa, thumpa, thumpa.” We also ask government

^{****} By the way, all you Americans with your silly little pints and miles and Fahrenheit, it pays to go metric. A half liter of beer is bigger than an American pint.

to accomplish things that no one, no matter how wealthy, could do alone, such as build the Panama Canal or mine asteroids. Wait, scratch the asteroids one—that'll totally be an ass of an Internet billionaire. Anyway, all of these things except for the asteroid mining are collective actions. Government isn't the only way to pursue a collective action—revolution against government is, after all, a collective action—but for most things that people need to pursue collectively, government (a really, really big group) provides the most efficient means for people to act. Consequently, in order to understand governmental dynamics, you need to understand group dynamics.

GROUPS AND GROUP IDENTITIES

Groups are fascinating beasts. They can suppress individuals and enforce conformity and, at the same time, elevate some people and drive others to rebel. They can aggregate the rational choices of individuals into collective irrationality. They can transform irrational fears and hatreds into a power that can be wielded to tremendous effect and lead to outcomes that appear rational in retrospect. However, before delving into group action and interaction, we need to explore the more basic notion of what makes a group—that is, what constitutes **group identity**. The degree to which members identify with a group, and, conversely, identify who is *not* part of that group, can affect its strength, its cohesiveness, and even its survival.

Group Identities

Think of some of the formal and informal groups that tolerate your presence: high school friends, college friends, a chess club, a church, that cluster of moody misfits in the back corner of the classroom, coworkers, the Jamaican curling team, siblings, a fraternity, an ethnic organization, an honor society, or the high school alumni organization that had a lawyer write a letter stating that it is not obligated to invite you to the reunion simply because some fool printed your name on a diploma. Chances are you identify more closely with some of these groups than you do with others. This closeness can affect the strength of the bond you feel with a particular group, which can affect what your group can accomplish. That, in turn, is a big part of whether or not that group continues to survive. Group identity is not fixed. It can vary in response to events within the group or to the experiences of the group as a whole. How a group defines its identity gives it purpose and shapes its interactions with other groups. Identity, and identity alone, may even be the basis for justifying and maintaining the existence of the group.

THINKER IN BOXES

John Locke

High Cleric of the Flowerchildren

Proficiencies: Chilling with the Vibes and Talking Smack about Freedom

Vulnerabilities: Polar Bears

Favorite Band: Barenaked Ladies

John Locke (1632–1704) was a Brit with a scary hairdo who also, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, begins with a state of nature.²⁵ However, unlike Hobbes's vision, Locke's state of nature is not a bad place. In his conception, all have natural rights to "life, liberty, and property." People are social, and since they deal with each other according to the rules of natural law, any social difference among them arises from how hard they work. However, the state of nature can suddenly turn into a state of war when a few people acting like playground bullies seek to violate natural laws and cause havoc for everyone.

Since Locke believed that the state of nature is not as nasty as Hobbes envisioned it, Locke argued that when people come together in a state of nature, they first form a "civil society," which then creates a government. Thus, the civil society is superior to the government, and the government that is created is a limited one. People surrender only as much of their rights as is absolutely necessary for the government to carry out its primary function, which, according to Locke, is the preservation of property. Hence Locke's utopia is one in which the government exists as a subcontractor to the civil society, and this subcontractor continues to work as long as it performs its responsibility to protect the natural rights of the populace. All are free to enjoy their rights (including life and liberty), property, and the fruits of their labor.

Perhaps what is most important in Locke's theory is what is left implicit. If the government does not live up to its responsibility, can it be fired? Do the people have the right to cast off a government that fails to protect the rights and privileges of its citizenry or abuses its power? One answer can be found in the Declaration of Independence, which, building on Lockean theory, proclaims "That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."

While many think that Locke died, it is rumored that he was "Lost" on a tropical island and is now living with a bunch of other survivors of a plane crash.²⁶

Group identification first becomes important when the members ask the following question: Who can be a member of the group? Groups constantly struggle over this crucial question. Leaders can manipulate the qualifications for membership in order to achieve their own political ends because after they have decided what goals the group will pursue, leaders must call on members to do the actual work. The strength of the members' identification with the group directly affects the amount of effort and resources they are willing to contribute to the group's

activities. Can you guess who can be a member of the Salish Tribal Council and, of those members, who is likely to feel a strong identification with this group?

Understanding groups is so critical to understanding government that those who study politics often equate current nations with groups, and they therefore study nations by applying to them concepts derived from theories of group dynamics. Thus, a good way to start delving into the subject of group identity and its role in group dynamics is to focus on the United States as a nation and ask this question: Who is an American?

The answer may, at first, seem obvious. With a quick glance around the classroom, relying on accents, appearances, and whatever you happen to know about the people around you, you can probably classify most of your classmates as either Americans or not Americans. While many cases are clear—such as the guy with the southern accent or the international exchange student with lutefisk breath—chances are that you will have trouble categorizing at least a few. The difficulty arises because Americans are missing a lot of the communal signifiers that many nations can rely on to identify citizens—Americans have no universally spoken language, no shared religion, and no common ethnic heritage. In the absence of an obvious marker such as language, people tend to fall back on more legalistic notions of citizenship. Thousands of pages of regulations and laws have been created in attempts to define American citizenship, but in some extreme cases, even these are insufficient. Furthermore, many of the people who do fit into the category of *U.S. citizen* may not match up with some of your expectations.

Let's take, for instance, someone born in Belgium who has always lived in Europe but has an American parent. While he meets the technical requirements for U.S. citizenship, he may not fit with your ideas of what it means to be an American. He may not even think of himself as an American. If a Japanese woman gives birth while waiting to change planes in a Chicago airport, that baby is a U.S. citizen even if the entirety of her residence in the United States extends no further than a few hours at O'Hare. Both of these kids fit the technical definition of U.S. citizen, but would you put either of them in the group we call Americans? What if, instead, the little girl is born over international waters while flying toward the United States and her birth is recorded upon landing in the country, or alternatively, what if the plane is merely in U.S. airspace, passing through on the way from Canada to Mexico, when the baby is born?

There are technical and legal answers to all of these questions, but the point is that human groups tend to be amorphous. There is usually a core of people who are clearly members, but groups are inevitably fuzzy at the edges, and they tend to overlap and blend into each other until it becomes nearly impossible to figure out precisely where one group ends and another begins. This lack of clear definition becomes especially problematic when we start talking about group dynamics because it leads to questions such as these: Who must contribute to the collective effort of the group? Who is subject to the group's rules? Who has the right to the benefits the group provides?

Conflict between Groups

The difficulty in clearly identifying group membership has an effect on one of the first aspects of political group dynamics. Although we may not be able to define precisely and completely who *is* part of a given group, we can—often quite easily—define who is *not* part of the group. We may not always be sure who is an American, but we can easily spot a group made up of those who are clearly not Americans. In other words, you can define the core membership of another group and use that definition to distinguish it from the membership of your group. You may not be able to identify clearly every member of your group, but you can absolutely define those who are *not* part of your group by instigating a conflict with them. That group becomes **the other**—the enemy—and you can be certain that one of “them” is not one of “us.” This process is a matter of defining your group by what it is not rather than by what it is. And it explains the efficacy of President George W. Bush’s remarks after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when he announced to the nations of the world, “You’re either with us or you are with the terrorists.”

In this and several other ways, conflict is probably the central element in political group dynamics. A sociologist named Lewis Coser, who examined group conflict in terms of the social or political functions it serves, noted that intergroup conflict has a profound effect on a group’s identity.²⁷ Specifically, Coser argued that the degree to which people consider themselves part of a group increases when that group is engaged in conflict with another group. Additionally, intergroup conflict tends to generate an increase in the willingness of group members to accept and actively support the leadership of the group. We can see how both of these dynamics connect to the collective pursuit of security, which, as you really should know by now, is central to the whole government thing.

Generally speaking, most scholars who study politics prefer to assume that people make rational choices based on self-interest, but the way groups respond to threats seems to be better explained as a sociopsychological process, an instinctual reaction. As you will see in Chapter 4 when we explore some of the concepts central to government’s role in the economy, a person’s rational choices tend to place their own immediate personal costs and benefits above the longer-term benefits of the group, and, in reference to that, the group response to threats presents a substantial challenge to the presumption of individualistic rational choice. Think of war as an intergroup conflict and then consider the extremes of patriotism people express during war and people’s willingness to sacrifice their lives to contribute to their groups’ goals.

THINKER IN BOXES

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Lawful Good Socialist Goblin Thief

Proficiencies: Not Being French

Vulnerabilities: Mysterious Head Wounds

Favorite Song: "Shine" by Collective Soul²⁸

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) wasn't French. While that may seem an odd point to make, I got yelled at for calling him French in the first edition of this book. Yes, he spoke French, wrote in French, and lived most of his life in Paris, which all seems pretty French to me, but he was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and lived there until he was ten and the cops chased his father out of the country. So he was the nearly French son of a petty criminal who lived in Paris, which I think is kind of like being a Canadian draft dodger living in North Dakota, but what do I know?

In the first edition, I mistakenly called him French when I was trying to make a point about the normative nature of political theory. The answers an individual gives to questions about what is right or wrong, what is better or worse, what should or should not be, are all profoundly influenced by the culture of the society in which the person thinks and writes. Just as you would not mistake Canadian beer for Mexican beer, you must recognize that English and nearly French political cultures are quite different, resulting in a profound divergence in the political theories produced by their philosophers. Thus, even though Rousseau was not French, he was also not British, and you can see some aspects of that in the way Rousseau's political theory does not stress individualism to the degree that the works of his British predecessors and contemporaries do.

Rousseau did not believe that civilized society is an improvement on the state of nature. In *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau wrote—in his characteristic dramatic style—"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."²⁹ Rousseau believed that life in the state of nature is not all that bad because the people may be primitive and simpleminded but they retain their liberty. Rousseau believed that all of society, not just political society, is corrupt. It makes people focus on their individual desires, robs them of their compassion, and promotes inequality. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who saw civilization as the answer, Rousseau thought it was the problem.

Rousseau believed that people need to reject societal inequality by placing the common good of all above their own personal interests. That's the bit that's different. When the populace is prepared to make this commitment, it can form a new social contract that is unlike any of those previously discussed. Rousseau is not seeking democracy—at least not liberal democracy, wherein the voice of the majority is considered primary. Rousseau's new contract is formed by the "total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community."³⁰ In exchange for the surrender of individual rights, each person gets to join in the solidarity of what Rousseau calls "the general will," which is the voice of the majority speaking for the common good. In essence, this is an experience in which participation is not just a means for reaching decisions but a process that is itself enlightening as well. All who participate grow through their participation in the general will. Since the general will is composed of equals with concern for everyone, and since it discounts private wills and personal stakes for the good of all, it can never be wrong.

Furthermore, the general will is the sovereign. Anyone who does not follow its rules will be "forced to be free."³¹ The general will represents Rousseau's perfect world. It is a government that rules for everyone at nobody's expense. All who participate are enlightened by their participation, as the evils of society are cast aside.

Although these extreme responses to threats to a group or to intergroup conflict appear to be individually irrational, they make a whole lot of sense in terms of human beings as social animals. You could even argue that there is a kind of Darwinian evolutionary benefit in this kind of reaction to intergroup conflict. We know that human beings are social animals. Humans have always lived in groups, and it is ingrained in us that being part of a group is a basic aspect of human nature. Why? Human beings are weak and fragile. We have no nasty claws or big deadly teeth, and we are slower than most predators. As a result, individual human beings in the wilderness are extremely vulnerable. However, just as Bob and his fellow agricultural pioneers discovered, if you get a half-dozen humans together and coordinate their efforts, the group can become quite formidable. Working as a group, humans wandering the African savanna with pointy sticks were more than a match for any lions and tigers and bears (oh, my!) they encountered.^{*****} Language and intelligence allow for the coordinated execution of extremely complex strategies that amplify the power of individuals far beyond the sum of their strengths.

This leads to a Darwinian argument for the evolution of what appears to be an irrational instinct to contribute to the group in times of conflict. The fact that you need to be part of a group in order to survive in a hostile, anarchic environment means that if you as an individual are better at deferring to authority and committing your efforts to combating threats to your group's security, then your group is more likely to be able to ward off threats. Assuming that warding off threats makes your group more likely to survive, then you, as an individual who is dependent on that group for your own survival, are also more likely to survive. Traits that increase your likelihood of survival in this way should also make you more likely to bear and raise children. These survivors will then pass on the instincts that enhance the group's response to external threats.

Once this group defense strategy gets embedded as an instinct, or basic aspect of human nature, it may occasionally motivate action that is hard to explain in terms of rational benefits for the individual—such as the self-sacrifice of a young soldier. However, in the vast majority of cases—particularly in those similar to the specific context in which the trait evolved—such action will provide sufficient indirect benefits to the group's survival to justify its individual costs. Regardless of whether it is rational or instinctual, group identity and the influence it can have on individual actions are powerful factors in politics.

Group response to external threat is more than just a theoretical concept. Researchers have done a great deal of work on the topic, and there is clear evidence that groups tend to coalesce when confronted with external threats. This defensive identification is an important part of the dynamics of real-world politics. Scholars have found that regardless of the nature of a country, its type of government, or its historical, social, political, or religious heritage, measures of group identification—such as nationalism and patriotism—tend to rise when a nation finds itself in an international conflict. In fact, the rise is often quite dramatic.

People tend to have an immediate, strong reaction to any threat to their nation. This phenomenon is very clearly demonstrated in the United States by what political scientists refer to as the “rally 'round the flag” effect. Whenever Americans perceive a threat to the nation, public opinion polls show a sudden upsurge in the president's approval ratings, as well as in other measures of patriotism. Over

^{*****} The ability to defeat lions, tigers, and bears in this setting is even more impressive when you consider that neither tigers nor bears live in Africa.

the course of his occupation of the White House, George W. Bush was averaging the lowest approval ratings of any U.S. president ever, but right after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, his approval rating surpassed 90 percent. Or to cite a rather less “scientific” example, it is not surprising that flag sales shot through the roof in the wake of 9/11, as Americans expressed their increased group identification in response to a clear and unmistakable threat.

Leadership Interests

In addition to defining who is or is not part of the group, the power of group identity can affect the purpose of the group, if not justify its existence. A perfect example can be seen in *Lord of the Flies* with Jack and the choir. If you think of all of the kinds of school groups you might want to have with you if you should get stuck on a deserted island, it would be hard to think of one that might seem less useful than a choir. You might even be better off with the chess team because at least its members have the proven ability to think logically and solve problems. The choir members in Golding’s novel, however, have a very strong group identity, which makes them and their leader powerful.

The identity of the group is crucial to the power and the position of its leader. Jack leads the choir from the very beginning of the island adventure, and he struggles to find a new purpose for the group. He tries to make them warriors, keepers of the fire, and then hunters. Why does he work so hard to change the group’s identity? If you think about it, Jack must have once invested a great deal of effort in becoming the leader of the choir. And *investing* is exactly the right word in this context because Jack devoted his efforts and his resources to obtain leadership, which he believed would give him future or continuing benefits. Being the leader of the choir (or the hunters or the clog-dancing flower pickers) gives Jack power. By controlling the efforts of a group, he controls a resource that can be used to accomplish goals beyond what an individual could manage, and through that control, Jack can bring benefits to himself. On the island, Jack is the only one who has troops at the ready, and that gives him power. He is desperate to maintain this power, and he can do so only by keeping his group together. He may not even consciously realize it, but his actions clearly demonstrate that he wants and needs the group to continue. As a result, even though the choir’s original purpose has disappeared, the group persists. In fact, much of the story is about the transformation of Jack’s group from a choir into a band of hunters.

Groups usually form for specific purposes, but they also provide benefits to their members, and because of that, they tend to survive even after they have accomplished the goals for which they were created. They adjust to meet new demands or changes in context. They take on added roles or expand upon what they have accomplished. Have you ever heard of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP)? You have; you probably just don’t realize it. The NFIP was founded by a group of North American housewives who organized a fundraising campaign to pay for treatments for the victims of polio and to finance research dedicated to curing the disease. A lot of people put a lot of effort into getting this group together, and it was tremendously effective, collecting huge amounts of money and becoming enormously influential. Then, all of the sudden, some guy (Dr. Jonas Salk) invented a vaccine, and in a matter of a few years, polio dwindled from the most dreaded of diseases to a rare condition, threatening only those people who, for some reason, had not been vaccinated.

What happened to the NFIP? The group had accomplished its goal, so it folded up shop, right? Wrong. A group that controls the flow of huge amounts of money and has a vast membership is invariably led by someone who has a great deal of power and who receives substantial benefits from that power. Leaders of such groups have made tremendous investments, often spending decades building

their organizations, designing structures to accomplish goals, crafting bylaws, and establishing headquarters. Whole armies of people depend on such organizations for their jobs, including the officers, the secretaries, and, most important, the leaders. The leaders of a group such as the NFIP fly across the nation and around the world, talking to important people and enjoying the kind of access to government officials that most people can only dream of.^{††††} Is there any reason to expect that the leaders who benefit from such a group will suddenly just stop and give it all up? Of course not. The leaders of the NFIP responded to the eradication of polio exactly as Jack does with his suddenly useless choir.

It doesn't matter that the choir is a bunch of skinny little wimps in robes. They are the warriors. No need for warriors? Fine, the choir will be the hunters. There is no longer a need for the NFIP? Fine, the leaders take the group and its structures and redefine them to focus on fighting birth defects. Thus, the group persists beyond the achievement of the original goal of its collective effort. In reality, there are probably several reasons the group persists, but one of the most important is that the leaders of the group have invested their time and effort to obtain benefits from the group's existence. Even if they gain only prestige, that is a thing of value. Today, the organization is known as the March of Dimes.

Even if we presume that the NFIP had a completely altruistic leader who selflessly wanted only to help other people (probably a reasonable presumption in this example, even for cynics), once polio was cured, the leader must have found it impossibly tempting to take advantage of the group's resources to help others. Having accomplished one good deed, why not pursue another?

Once formed, groups persist, as the NFIP did. Leadership interests, which always seem to be a part of politics, are often the best explanation for why groups act as they do. For example, the dynamics of group identity and intergroup conflict, as discussed by Coser, tend to support leaders' efforts to hold their respective groups together. If the individual members' attachment to a group is strong, it is easier for the leader to convince them to stay in the group and to contribute to its efforts—the group wants to stick together. Furthermore, because the group members respond to conflict with other groups by supporting the leader's directives, groups in conflict become not only more cohesive but also more willing to follow the demands of the leader.

What I have accomplished here is a totally slick transition into the next chapter, which is mostly about leaders and leadership. It probably would have been a better transition if I didn't go and point it out, but the whole smooth transition thing is tough to do, and I was pretty chuffed about managing to pull it off.

Anyway, while governments perform many functions, at root they are essentially groups formed for the pursuit of collective security and other collective goods. The process of government formation may be a little more complex than our tale of Bob and his cavemen farmers, but the basics are the same. This is why group dynamics can tell us a great deal about governments and politics. Since leaders usually make decisions on behalf of the group, direct its actions, apply its resources, and choose its goals, much of what a group does is determined by the interests of its leaders. Similarly, what a government does most often reflects the interests of its leaders. Thus, we must appreciate how leaders perceive their own personal interests if we are to understand why governments persist, how precisely leaders govern, and what they do to maintain control of society.

^{††††} Okay, given the limited nature of commercial air travel at the time, the leaders of the NFIP probably didn't fly much, but it's a pretty sure bet they did ride on trains.

The end result is a “realist” view of the origins and nature of governments, but idealists need to try to hang in there. Even if I am totally correct in my view of how and why governments began, idealism survives. As you would have noticed if you were paying attention, I made a big deal out of the fact that collective security is just the first collective good pursued with government. Once government is established, it can and often is used to pursue idealistic ends. Unfortunately, as you will see in the next chapter, idealism faces a substantial challenge in the face of leadership interests.

KEY TERMS

alliances
 anarchists
 anarchy
 authority
 collective action

 regime security
 security
 state security

government
 group identity
 hierarchy
 individual security
 national security
 other, the
 political capital
 power

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Although government seems to be everywhere, we seldom think about why governments began and why they continue to exist. Logic suggests that, initially, government emerged from collective action aimed at providing security. We can learn more about the continued existence of government by understanding human beings’ aversion to anarchy and their tendency toward hierarchy. Additionally, the concept of power and the dynamics of group behavior explain why governments persist. Students should learn two very important lessons from this chapter. First, the phenomena discussed here suggest that governments satisfy fundamental human desires. Second, as annoying as your state’s Department of Motor Vehicles can be, it is unlikely that it or any other form of government is going anywhere soon. Anarchy sucks.

STUDY QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. What might some of the theorists I’ve highlighted in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 think about our story of Bob, the caveman? Which of the theorists would agree that government might have begun as described in the story? Which would likely disagree? Why?
2. The news is consistently filled with stories involving conflict among groups. What current examples can you find in the news? How do your examples fit with this chapter’s discussion of group identification, the other, and threats to the group?
3. What are the four securities that are critical to understanding the political dynamics of developing nations? Why don’t they have normal names?
4. Why is collective action the essence of government?

5. What is power, and what are the various forms that it can take? What fictional examples can you think of that demonstrate the different forms of power? What are some real-world examples?
6. How do hierarchy and context come together to shape human interaction?

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