

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/12/28/one-world-many-actors/>

CARMEN GEBHARD, DEC 28 2016

**This is an excerpt from *International Relations* – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook. Download your free copy here.**

International Relations (IR) traditionally focused on interactions between states. However, this conventional view has been broadened over the years to include relationships between all sorts of political entities ('polities'), including international organisations, multinational corporations, societies and citizens. IR captures a vast array of themes ranging from the growing interconnectedness of people to old and new forms of security, dialogue and conflict between visions, beliefs and ideologies, the environment, space, the global economy, poverty and climate change. The sheer number of actors and issues that are relevant to IR can be overwhelming. This can make it seem like a daunting task to not just study various aspects of IR but to try to grasp the bigger picture.

All the more important are the analytical tools that scholars have developed in an attempt to make the field more manageable – not just for newcomers to the discipline but also for themselves. Social scientists in general spend quite a lot of time thinking about effective ways of structuring their thinking and of processing the complexity of the reality they endeavour to study, analyse and understand. A lot of this kind of analytical sense-making in IR happens in the form of theories. Scholars use theories to explain and capture the meaning of real-life events in the form of abstract interpretations and generalised assumptions. On the one hand, theories can be 'empirical' – based on measurable experiences, usually through observation or experimentation. Empirical theories generally seek to try to explain the world *as it is*. On the other hand, theories can be 'normative' – meaning that they build on principles and assumptions about how social interactions should occur. In other words, normative theories generally seek to present a version of world that *ought to be*.

Before scholars develop or adopt any specific theories, however, they take what is often a subconscious decision in selecting the focus of their analysis. Following this, they normally stick with their choice without reflecting very much on alternative approaches to the issue. As students of IR it can be helpful to equip ourselves with a basic overview of the perspectives one can adopt when analysing just about any topic. This chapter will do this by looking at different 'levels of analysis' as one of the most common ways of structuring scholarly debates in IR.

### Levels of analysis

Thinking of different levels of analysis in IR means that the observer and analyst may choose to focus on the international system as a whole, parts of the system in interaction with each other, or some of its parts in particular. What forms the parts or components of this system is again a matter of perspective. The international system can be conceived of as made up of states, groups of states, organisations, societies or individuals within and across those societies. IR generally distinguishes between three levels of analysis: the system, the state, and the individual – but the group level is also important to consider as a fourth. To be able to use the level of analysis as an analytical device, we need to be clear about what we are most interested in. We have to clarify for ourselves what it is exactly that we want to look at when discussing a particular theme or issue concerning the 'international' sphere. If we were to study and understand the 2008 global financial crisis and its consequences, for example, there would be various

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

ways of approaching, discussing and presenting the issue. To determine the level of analysis we would need to determine what those levels are and ask ourselves some questions, which we can explore below.

The individual level

Would we look at the actions of individuals responding to the financial crisis according to their own position or responsibilities? For example, a prime minister encountering the leader of another state to negotiate an important financial agreement, the head of a large corporation adopting a policy to rescue their business or even the situation of individual citizens and their attitude towards austerity measures?

*The group level*

Would we be more interested in the actions of groups of individuals, such as all voters of a country and the way they express their views in the general election, political parties picking up on the issue in their campaigns or social movements forming to counter the effects of the crisis on society?

Would we be interested in activist/pressure groups like 'Anonymous' that seek to influence the global debate about the winners and losers of globalisation and capitalism?

*The state level*

Would we look at states as actors in their own right as if they were clearly defined entities that have certain preferences, and accordingly, look at their actions and decisions to find an answer to our analytical questions?

Would we then be looking at how states interact with each other to deal with the crisis – in other words, their foreign policy? How they build off each other's suggestions and react to international developments and trends? How they cooperate, say, in the framework of international organisations?

Or would we be looking at them as competitors and antagonists, each of them pushing for a stronger position in what makes up the world economy?

*The system level*

Finally, might we try to look at the global level, the big picture, and try to grasp wider ranging dynamics that emerge from the global economic 'system' to affect its various components, states, national economies, societies, individuals?

A much-debated example of this kind of system perspective has been presented by Daniel W. Drezner (2014), who argued controversially that the international system of financial governance did well at coping with the 2008 global financial crisis. He looked at how various parts of the system worked together to mitigate wider repercussions. After all, while we call it the global financial crisis, the world has really not changed much since then and you might argue it has been business as usual for the system.

## How the level of analysis determines our findings

Being aware of various possible perspectives helps us to develop an understanding of where we stand as analysts and observers. It also guides us through the process of investigation and analysis. First of all, the particular perspective we assume determines the kind of information we would need to gather and look at in order to be able to answer our questions and draw meaningful conclusions.

A system-level ('systemic') study would need to consider global linkages that go beyond single interactions between states. It would need to look at such things as the balance of power between states and how that determines what happens in global politics. This could include developments that are even outside the immediate control of any

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

particular state or group of states, such as the global economy, transnational terrorism or the internet.

A state-level study would require careful consideration of what kinds of states we are looking at (how they are ordered politically), their geographical position, their historical ties and experiences and their economic standing. It would likely also look at the foreign policy of states, meaning their approach to and practice of interacting with other states. Key indicators of the foreign policy of states would be the policies proposed and decided by governments, statements of top-level politicians but also the role and behaviour of diplomats and their adjoining bureaucratic structures.

A group level analysis would again need to try and break the analysis down into certain kinds of groups, how they relate to the state level and where they position themselves with respect to the global dimension of the issues they are dealing with. An example of this can be seen in the work of Engelen et al. (2012), who discuss the global financial crisis as the 'misrule of experts', pointing at the politicised role of technocratic circles and the relative lack of democratic control over the boards of large banks and corporations. A group-level analysis focusing on foreign policy would look, for example, at the role of lobbying groups and the way they influence national decision-making on an issue.

If looking at the actions of individuals, we would likely also need to engage with the implications of human nature. This can be seen in the psychology and emotions behind people's actions and decisions, their fears and their visions as well as their access to information and capacity to make a difference. Psychological factors do not only matter at the level of individual members of society or of a group. They are also an important factor in the analysis of foreign policy, whenever particular mindsets and perceptions of political leaders and key actors might influence their decisions and behaviour.

Which one of these specific perspectives we choose would greatly influence our findings. In other words, the focus or level of analysis determines the outcome of our scholarly investigations. Meanwhile, the real-life events we are analysing remain the same, of course. That is a particularly important consideration if we aim at developing generalised conclusions from our observations. Strictly speaking, our conclusions would only be valid within the scope of the level of analysis we chose to focus on. Insights provided by other perspectives would remain outside the remit of our analysis. To illustrate this, let's stick with the above example of the global financial crisis as it is one of the more debated issues in contemporary politics.

## *From the system level*

If we studied the global financial crisis from a system-level perspective, for instance, we would expect to gain an insight into the global dynamics that make up the international financial system. Focusing on the big picture would enable us to develop a comprehensive model of explanation that could potentially capture the states and national economies within that global system. The explanations we derive from this systemic model, however, might exaggerate the system-level factors that have conditioned the global financial crisis. As a consequence, we might overlook a lot of psychological and sociological issues that would be the subject of a group-level or individual-level analysis.

## *From the state level*

If we studied the same theme from a state perspective, we would develop a greater level of detail about specific circumstances in particular states as well as in their interaction with each other. The distinction here, as will be discussed further below, is not quite this rigid in practice as the state level is rarely looked at in isolation but more in its wider systemic context. For our example this would mean that the world financial system is taken as the framework in which state actors operate, so state action is often conditioned by factors beyond the state's control.

## *From the group level*

If we studied the issue from a group-level perspective, we would yet again reach a different result in our findings. We

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

would potentially emphasise aspects of the global financial crisis that would escape a more comprehensive global level analysis. This includes analysing the impact of the crisis on society and the livelihoods of individuals as exemplified in the UN Report 'The Global Social Crisis' (2011).

## *From the individual level*

Finally, focusing on the individual level and, say, particular actions of specific personalities in the public realm – be they politicians, diplomats or bankers – would lead to us drawing different conclusions again about the causes and consequences of the financial crisis.

## The bigger picture

In short, being aware and acknowledging the potential gaps in our observation – that is to say, all of what is not directly captured by our perspective or level of analysis – is important. Applying rigour in our analysis is also important. These guidelines for scholarly investigation are applied in many academic disciplines, including the natural sciences. What German theoretical physicist Werner K. Heisenberg (1962, 58) said in respect to research in his field very much also applies to IR; 'we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.' Scholarly writings are nevertheless not always explicit about their particular perspective or level of analysis. So, as a reader, it is important to stay critical and to look closely and enquire whenever an argument presented to us appears to straddle potentially conflicting analytical lenses.

As you start to read deeper on particular IR issues, always remind yourself of the importance of analytical clarity. Do not hesitate to expect and demand it even from renowned authors and established publications outlets. Note that clarity concerning one's level of analysis does not necessarily mean that different perspectives could not be used in conjunction with each other – on the contrary. As will be argued further below, many of today's political challenges are so complex that they require our analyses to span across various levels.

## *Foreign policy*

A crucial area where the need to broaden our levels of analysis is particularly important is the analysis of the foreign policy of states. Hopefully, we can see this immediately due to the fact that any state activity that crosses their national borders, such as a foreign policy, will have implications for other states. We can look at foreign policy at the state level by analysing government policies and diplomatic decisions in isolation. However, governments are also actors on the world stage and their foreign policies contribute to what we call international relations. As highlighted above, foreign policy can also be explained by looking at the individual level, for example, the psychological and political factors that guide leaders and their advisers in their foreign policy decisions. Those decisions in turn then feed into national decisions that matter at the state level and in relation to other states.

It can be helpful to think of foreign policy behaviour as something that is influenced by a range of factors. Some of them can be found within a state, in its political traditions, its socio-economic profile, its political party system or in the minds of leading politicians. Others come from outside, from the global system that builds the context within which states operate. This does not mean that every meaningful discussion of foreign policy needs to look at all these aspects: investigations at one particular level should be used very carefully to draw conclusions about a different level. Where the levels overlap, we need to be aware that each one will require us to look at different kinds of evidence.

To help lock in the foreign policy example, we can draw on the case of British prime minister Tony Blair. Blair is often remembered for his decision to take the UK to war with Iraq in 2003, in coalition with the United States. To examine this important foreign policy decision from the individual level, we might draw on Blair's personal convictions as a committed anti-terrorist with a strong moral sense based on his Christianity, something that helped him forge a common personal bond with the US president, George W. Bush. If we move our focus to the state level, we can judge equally as fairly that Blair might have been acting to preserve the Anglo-American 'special relationship' that was vital to British national security. The Iraq war period was a contentious one in Europe, with many European nations

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

rejecting American plans for war. If Blair had followed some of his European colleagues and not supported the war, then he may have put a vital bilateral relationship in danger. Finally, we move to the international, or systemic, level. Here, we are not so much focused on Blair himself since the systemic level often supposes that it is forces operating at the international level that shape behaviour. By this reading, Blair may have felt compelled to participate in what he saw as a shift in world order that was defined by the existence of dangerous transnational terrorism on one hand, and a coalition led by the United States on the other hand who were waging a war on terrorism. Of course, as has been noted already, you would also be able to argue that Blair's motives might have been drawn from more than one of these levels – perhaps even all of them.

## Levels of analysis and the changing ambitions of a discipline

Apart from making us more critical and discerning readers, being aware of the issue of different levels of analysis can also help us understand the way in which the academic discipline of IR has developed over time. To begin with, in the early days of IR – say, from 1919 until the after the Second World War – a lot of what could be called traditional or conventional IR was not concerned with any potential distinctions between different levels of analysis or theoretical perspectives. J. David Singer (1961, 78) lamented that scholars would simply

roam up and down the ladder of organizational complexity with remarkable abandon, focusing upon the total system, international organizations, regions, coalitions, extra-national associations, nations, domestic pressure groups, social classes, elites, and individuals as the needs of the moment required.

Singer's criticism of this 'general sluggishness' (Singer 1961, 78) highlights another value in thinking of IR as something that can be studied from different and distinctive perspectives. Being clear about our level of analysis can prevent us from indulging in analytical 'cherry-picking', that is to say, from randomly gathering evidence across different levels in pursuit of an answer to our research questions. This 'vertical drift', as Singer calls it, can compromise the accuracy of our observations and undermine the validity of our findings. That in turn can obscure some of the detail that might have otherwise turned out to be the key to a conclusive explanation. This does not mean that any one piece of scholarly work must not consider aspects from different levels of analysis. However, when moving between different levels of analysis, we need to do so openly and explicitly. We also need to acknowledge the analytical consequences of drifting between levels: that our search for evidence will need to be comprehensive and that we might have to look at a different set of data or material for each additional aspect. For example, if you were to explain Germany's decision to open its borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees in 2015 you might want to look at the external pressures as much as the personal motivations of German chancellor Angela Merkel. You would investigate factors at the system level (such as economic indicators, refugee flows, the attitude of key partners) and at the individual level (such as Merkel's ideological background, her interests and perceptions of the problem as it emerges from statements and key decisions throughout her career). Each would contribute to an overall explanation, but you would need to be prepared to look at different sets of information.

From the 1950s onwards, more and more IR scholars endeavoured to specify the focus of their analysis more clearly. The most prominent example was Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (1959) which introduced an analytical framework for the study of IR that distinguished between what he referred to as different 'images' of an issue: the individual, the state and the international system. Waltz's contributions to the discipline generated interest in analysing the international system as a place of interactions between states. From this perspective, the global system is conceived of as the structure or context within which states cooperate, compete and confront each other over issues of national interest. You might visualise it as a level above the state. Particularly important in that context is the distribution of power amongst states, meaning, whether there is one main concentration of power ('unipolarity'), two ('bipolarity') or several ('multipolarity'). Global circumstances are seen to condition the ability and opportunity of individual states and groups of states to pursue their interests in cooperative or competitive ways. The view of states being embedded in a global context traditionally comes with the assumption that our international system is 'anarchic'. An anarchic system is one that lacks a central government (or international sovereign) that regulates and controls what happens to states in their dealings with each other.

Although this idea of the global or system level as a context of anarchy features in many contributions to the IR

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

literature, the main focus remains on the state as the dominant unit of analysis. This enduring focus on the state, and therefore, on the state level of analysis, is referred to as the relative 'state-centrism' of the discipline. This means that IR scholars would generally not only regard states as the central unit of analysis as such, they also conceive of the state as a point of reference for other types of actors. From this perspective, the state acts as the arena in which state officials, politicians and decision-makers operate. The state is seen as the framework that encapsulates society and as the main point of reference for the individual. This predominant focus on the state is strongly related to an assumption IR scholars have made about the state also being the main location of power within the international sphere. This idea that the state is where power is primarily concentrated and located has to be seen against the historical context within which some of the most prominent IR scholars operated – the Cold War. It was an era in which much of international affairs appeared to be run via state channels and in line with particular state interests. Other actors that we would consider important from today's perspective, such as those explored in later chapters in this book, seem to have had little leverage during the Cold War. This was because the period was dominated by great power confrontation and overwhelming military might on each side of the systemic conflict.

Although the Cold War has long since passed, a lot of today's political life remains managed in the state framework, based on issues like national security, domestic cohesion or internal stability. States form the primary kind of actor in major international organisations such as the United Nations, they feature prominently in the global discourse on most of the major challenges of our time, and states still hold what famous German sociologist Max Weber called the monopoly on violence – the exclusive right to the legitimate use of physical force. States continue to matter and thus have to be part of our considerations about what happens in the world and why. The state as a unit of analysis and frame of reference will certainly not go away any time soon, nor will the interactions of states as a key level of analysis in IR.

## IR as arena or process?

It is important to highlight that thinking from the point of view of different – and to a degree, separate – levels of analysis as discussed up to this point has been contested by some. Leftwich (2004), for instance, has argued that thinking of international politics as something that takes place in a certain site or location is just one possible way of looking at things. He calls this the 'arena' approach given the way in which it focuses on the location, or 'locus' of interactions, on different platforms that provide the stage to particular events and instances of international relations. He distinguishes this 'arena' approach from what he calls the 'processual' approach, which assumes that international relations should not primarily be looked at as something that happens in a particular location or at a particular level of analysis but that it can instead be thought of as a complex web of processes that takes place between people.

Some theoretical approaches have what is often an implicit preference for a conception of IR as a process rather than an arena with various distinctive levels. This is because they aim to highlight the meaning of interactions as opposed to the meaning of physical structures and locations, such as the state or particular institutions within states. An example of such a perspective can be found in environmentalism or so-called 'Green Politics', which traditionally refuses to think of the practice of international relations as something that can be studied at different 'levels' of analysis. This is mainly because analysts pertaining to this approach perceive any proposed division of political reality into arenas or any attempts at physically locating a problem in a particular context as arbitrary and misleading. They would also argue that thinking in those divisions conveys a false sense of structure, when all aspects of any societal challenge are fundamentally interconnected and should thus be studied in a 'holistic' way – meaning, in conjunction with each other.

Another example of such a theoretical approach is feminism, which would argue that politics does not exclusively occur in public places such as state institutions and international organisations. Feminists would instead argue that 'the personal is the political', meaning that all human interactions carry and reproduce political meaning, and are therefore part of the intricate process of global affairs. Other thinkers would even go as far as to suggest that politics as a process is not even confined to the human species. Frans de Waal (1982) argues that even the interactions between animals, such as chimpanzees, can carry political meaning and should thus not be excluded from any

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

intellectual accounts of politics including its international and global dimensions.

We will not develop these kinds of perspectives further at this point, but it is nevertheless useful to note how such contentions challenge any assumption of there being any kind of clear cut structure or specific levels of analysis that we can rely on as students and analysts of IR. Regardless of perspective, it is important to be aware of the multiplicity of actors and processes that make up the global system. Reminding ourselves of the complexity of international relations equips us with the ability to recognise any overgeneralisations as they are being presented to us by the media, by political leaders, activists, pressure groups and through our social networks, making us more informed, nuanced and rounded in our thinking.

## Beyond the state

While the legacy of conventional Cold War-style thinking still looms large in contemporary analyses, researchers have been interested in developing non-state-centric and more fluid perspectives. We already mentioned environmentalism and feminism as examples of analytical perspectives that acknowledge the importance of actors other than the state, and the role of individuals in particular. Some analysts have not completely abandoned the state perspective but suggest looking into what exactly it is inside states that might be contributing to what happens in the global sphere. This could be related to their internal characteristics, such as their form of government, their economic profile, their cultural and ideological composition or their demography. This perspective includes a distinctive focus on the societies that make up a specific state as much as particular groups and individuals within those societies. Many analysts invite their readers to open the 'black box' that way. In other words, to break up the conventional IR habit of treating states as secluded units and containers of power, politics and societies. They also openly challenge the assumption that there is such a thing as 'unitary' state action. They would dispute, for instance, that 'Germany' – as a nation-state – would push for austerity measures in Greece. Rather, they would insist that related policies are initiated by specific German politicians that advocate such measures out of a particular sentiment, out of an individual interpretation of current developments, or for reasons that might be linked to their own political future or specific preferences of their electorate.

Apart from a focus on the individual and group level of official decision-making, this 'sub-state' (meaning, 'below the state') level of analysis also attempts to expand the scope of scholarly investigation beyond formal interactions of the state, its official representatives and of its constituent parts to include informal relationships and non-official exchanges, such as flows and transfers of goods, information, communications, services and people – above and below the purview of the state.

Contemporary IR is interested in looking at actors that operate across state borders instead of being specifically confined by them – for instance, citizens of a particular state or proponents of a particular ethnic or cultural minority within that state. The study of IR has gradually widened to include all kinds of interactions between a variety of actors, including the general public and individual members of it, people like you and me.

Such an analytical move seems welcome if we think of how potent the influence of individual actors can be that do not officially represent or act on behalf of states or any of their constituent parts. An example of this is the activist Julian Assange, who spearheaded a widely publicised whistleblowing campaign leaking government secrets via the website WikiLeaks. Another example is Osama Bin Laden, who built a global terrorist network (Al Qaeda) based on his own religious and political visions. Both Assange and Bin Laden, although very different in nature, have had lasting impact on top-level global politics from the position of a private persona with no official political status or role.

What is significant in this context is that the traditional conception of the state as the main framework of political interaction and the main point of reference for both society and the individuals within it has lost a lot of its meaning and importance. If we look at the world around us, state borders do not seem to accurately delimitate global affairs. The majority of global interactions – be they related to global finance, production, education, personal and professional travel, labour migration or terrorism – no longer occur via state channels the way they once did. We could say that the increased focus on non-state actors and cross-border issues has marked a close-to-revolutionary turn in IR; something that could be interpreted as a shift away from the inter-national ('between-states') to the 'trans-

# One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

national' ('across/beyond-states' and their borders). Robert Keohane, one of the leading scholars in the field, recently stated that 'International Relations' is no longer a suitable label and that we should instead refer to the discipline as 'Global Studies' or 'World Politics' (Keohane 2016). In today's world, few societal and political issues, challenges and problems are neatly confined by the borders of individual states or even groups of states. Thinking about world affairs in 'transnational' rather than in purely 'inter-national' terms therefore seems more of an analytical necessity than just a choice.

Individuals and groups interact across borders and thus relativise the meaning of space and territory as conventional IR knew it. International commercial aviation and the rapid spread of information technologies has further increased people's mobility and the rate at which interactions occur across and beyond state borders. The ability for common people to store, transfer and distribute large amounts of information, the possibility for data to travel across the world in virtually no time, and the increasing availability of high-speed internet have not only changed lives at personal and community levels but also dramatically altered the general dynamics in politics and global affairs.

Social media provide accessible platforms of communication that allow for the projection and promotion of ideas across borders at virtually no cost to the individual or group generating and advocating them. Various political agendas – be they progressive, revolutionary or outright dangerous – can unfold in a relatively uncontrolled and unregulated way, posing real challenges to governmental agencies and the political leaders that try to improve and direct them. Random individuals can potentially start a revolution from their homes, bypassing any conventional conceptions of power and transcending spatial and material boundaries to the point where political activity and even confrontation become weightless and immaterial altogether. A powerful illustration of this can be found in Thomas Neuwirth, an Austrian singer, who is most commonly known by the stage persona 'Conchita Wurst'. The political messages displayed during a show at the Sydney Opera House in March 2016 multiplied and spread through social media. This eventually urged various representatives of the Australian government to take a stance on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues and also gave momentum to the global LGBT movement. A national politician from, say, Austria, would likely not have been able to influence the domestic debate in Australia to that extent, let alone spark a worldwide debate that way.

## IR and you

This chapter has introduced you to the idea of levels of analysis as an analytical device that makes the variety of issues in IR more manageable and structured. More specifically, we distinguished between the system level, the state level, the group and the individual level, highlighting differences as well as connections between them. We have shown that the academic discipline of IR has gradually moved away from a dominant focus on the state and the system to deal more with the role and perspective of groups and individuals. As you are reading this book it should be an inspirational thought that never in the history of humanity has it been easier for individuals like you to become directly involved in the practice of international relations, or should we say transnational relations. As an individual you are not just a passive subject of international relations as directed by political elites and official state actors; you have the means of being an actor in your own right – or at the very least being counted as more scholars focus beyond the narrow confines of the state level of analysis.

*\*Please consult the PDF linked above for any citation or reference details.*

---

## About the author:

**Dr Carmen Gebhard** is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. She has a particular interest in small states as well as in inter-organisational relationships in security and defence matters.



**One World, Many Actors: Levels of Analysis in International Relations**

Written by Carmen Gebhard