

What Makes Anarchy Peaceful or Violent?

Imagine a world in which all members of the ruled class – that is, ordinary individuals who do not belong to the structures of power – suddenly disappear without a trace, the only people remaining being the members of the ruling class – politicians, bureaucrats, and their enforcers. Now, since in order to be a ruler, one needs to have someone to rule over, those people, logically speaking, could not be considered as rulers any more. Thus, they would end up in a state of anarchy vis-a-vis each other, but since, qua former rulers, they would be accustomed to earning their living through coercive exploitation rather than through production, free exchange, and entrepreneurship, they would likely start fighting with each other until a victorious group emerged and turned the losers into a new ruled class. In this particular case, anarchy could be truly said to lead to conflict and chaos.

Now imagine a different world – a one in which it is the rulers who disappear, not because the propensity to coercively control others was eradicated, but because the ruled class, to use la Boetie's phrase, "resolved to serve no more" and, to use another popular phrase, successfully "starved the beast". Unlike in the previous case, the state of anarchy that they would subsequently find themselves in would be unlikely to result in a conflict over power vacuum, because, to quote Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, "the same social consensus, the same institutions, and the same ideological imperatives that had gained them liberation from their own state would be automatically in place to defend against any other states that tried to fill the vacuum".

Thus, it turns out that what prevents peaceful coexistence from degenerating into violent conflict is, contra the Hobbesian myth, not the presence of rulers, but precisely their absence.