Kenneth Waltz and the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations

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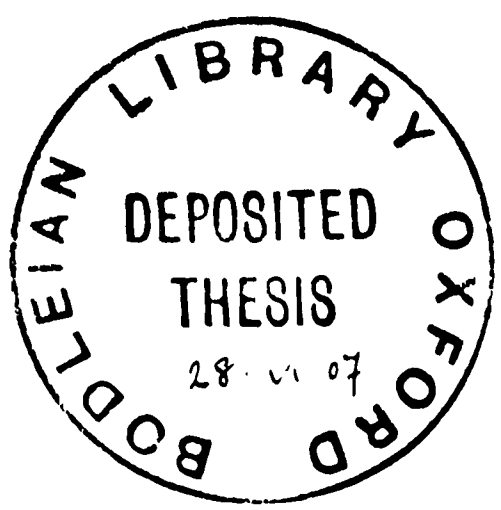

Abstract

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Kenneth Waltz's seminal work *Theory of international politics* (1979) conceptualizes international relations as a complex system in which the structure of the system and the interacting units (sovereign states) that comprise it are mutually affecting. Nevertheless, Waltz seeks to develop a nomothetic theory in which the structure of the international political system is isolated as an independent variable, state behaviour being the dependent variable. Waltz's explanatory strategy is therefore characterized by a deep tension: he treats structure as an independent variable whilst also arguing that structure and units are mutually affecting. Consequently, his systemic theory only generates partial explanations: it indicates how structure affects behaviour, but not how structure interacts with other variables to produce specific behavioural outcomes.

This thesis draws on Waltz's theoretical writings, on Waltz's applications of his theory to empirical subjects in international relations (superpower relations during the Cold War, Soviet socialization into international society, and NATO's role after the Cold War), and on a wide range of theoretical literature. It explores the implications of the tension in Waltz's approach for explanatory theory in International Relations. It shows that Waltz's theory cannot ground many of his substantive arguments, that realists who attempt to improve Waltz's theory misunderstand the problems Waltz encounters, and that constructivists are unable to offer causal generalizations about complex systems. It concludes that explanatory theory in International Relations is currently poorly equipped to address complex systems in which structure and units are mutually affecting.

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Introduction

One text could stand for a host of others in presenting International Relations as a recurring battle between realists and their critics: 'For at least sixty years, realists and nonrealists alike have been occupied with defining, defending, and defeating different versions of realist theory ... both realists and their critics have largely taken realist theory as their target of choice'.[1] Of all realist approaches, Waltz's neorealism is probably the most influential, assuredly the most controversial, and undoubtedly the approach in opposition to which the most scholars have defined their preferred alternatives.[2] It is even said to occupy 'a position of intellectual hegemony in the discipline'.[3] *Theory of international politics* [hereafter *Theory*] is the canonical neorealist text: according to Schmidt, it 'established the basis of the neorealist school of thought and has since become one of the leading texts in the field'.[4] Although its status in part reflects the number of scholars who have defined competing approaches in relation to (what they take to be) Waltz's position, *Theory*'s importance is acknowledged even by non-realists. Donnelly argues that it 'was for a decade the most influential theoretical work in the academic study of international relations'.[5] Ruggie concurs: 'Rarely has a book so influenced a field of study'.[6] Brown maintains that *Theory* 'is, justly, the most influential book on International Relations theory of

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[1] John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, 'Preface', in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds.), *Realism and the balancing of power: A new debate* (Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), p.xi. I use 'International Relations' to denote the academic discipline and 'international relations' to denote its object of study. On problems with disciplinary histories see Brian C. Schmidt, *The political discourse of anarchy: A disciplinary history of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), ch.1.

[2] Cox coined the term 'neorealism'. Following common practice, I use it to refer to Waltz's theory. See Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.211.

[3] Scott Burchill, 'Realism and neo-realism', in Scott Burchill *et al*, *Theories of international relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p.83.

[4] Schmidt, *The political discourse of anarchy*, p.39. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[5] Jack Donnelly, *Realism and international relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p.16.

[6] John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity: Essays on international institutionalization* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.6.

its generation' and suggests that International Relations continues to be 'fixated' on it.[7] Two attempts to apply Lakatosian standards of theory appraisal to International Relations, published in 2003, demonstrate the influence that Waltz's work continues to have.[8]

Neorealism is often described as an attempt to formalize realism in opposition to pluralist approaches emphasizing international interdependence.[9] This reflects two common claims about *Theory*: that Waltz 'sought to place realist thought on a firmer social scientific footing', and that Waltz's 'most fundamental contribution was his emphasis on the international system as an active and autonomous causal force'.[10] Keohane argues that the significance of Waltz's theory 'lies less in his initiation of a new line of theoretical inquiry or speculation than in his attempt to systematize political realism into a rigorous, deductive theory of international politics'.[11] Buzan, Jones and Little argue that Waltz's development of 'the idea of a structural explanation for the logic of power politics' stimulated interest 'in the philosophical foundations of International Relations theory'.[12] Waltz himself has argued that the 'idea that international politics can be thought of as a system with a precisely defined structure is neorealism's fundamental departure from traditional realism'.[13] He defines the structure of the international political system in terms of its ordering principle (anarchy), the functional differentiation of the units (absent from anarchy), and the distribution of capabilities (the system's polarity).[14] The central explanatory role of this narrow definition of structure is the basis of many criticisms of neorealism: that it cannot explain change; that it ignores salient system-wide factors; and that it is

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[7] Chris Brown, *Understanding international relations*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.45, 40.
[8] See Vasquez & Elman (eds.), *Realism and the balancing of power*; Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Progress in international relations theory: Appraising the field* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).
[9] See Brown, *Understanding international relations*, pp.41-2; Burchill, 'Realism and neo-realism', p.83; Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*, p.30.
[10] Stephen M. Walt, 'The enduring relevance of the realist tradition', in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds.), *Political science: The state of the discipline* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002), p.202.
[11] Robert O. Keohane, 'Realism, neorealism and the study of world politics', in Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and its critics*, p.15.
[12] Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The logic of anarchy: Neorealism to structural realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.1.
[13] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', *Journal of International Affairs*, 44.1, Spring 1990, p.30.
[14] See Waltz, *Theory*, ch.5.

ahistorical and legitimizes the current political order by treating particular historical structures as natural.[15] However, despite these critiques, Waltz's attempt to develop realism as a deductive theory and to examine international relations as a system are rarely analyzed in conjunction, except in post-positivist critiques that reject Waltz's approach entirely.[16]

Theories, Waltz argues, are not collections of empirical laws: rather, theories explain laws.[17] Yet he does not provide a detailed account of what explanation is. He discusses what it is possible to explain; he assesses approaches to explanation; he outlines how theories may be tested; but he does not indicate what it is to have explained something.[18] He is not alone in this: most accounts of explanation focus on questions of epistemology (what counts as knowledge) or methodology (how knowledge is achieved) rather than on what it is (for us, as humans) to explain something.[19] Although he does not say what explanation is, Waltz believes that we 'wish irresistibly' to explain: he argues that a definition of theory must cover 'the explanatory activity we persistently engage in'.[20] He associates the urge to explain with 'the desire to control' and contrasts this with the ability to predict: we want to know not just what will happen, but 'whether we can exercise control and how we might go about doing so'.[21]

To explain something, therefore, includes (at least) the ability satisfactorily to describe why it

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[15] See, for example, John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation in the world polity: toward a neorealist synthesis', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics*, pp.131-57; Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders'.

[16] See, for example, Richard K. Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics*, pp.255-300. Lapid describes post-positivism as 'a rather loosely patched-up umbrella for a confusing array of only remotely related philosophical articulations'. I use 'post-positivist' as an umbrella term for approaches sometimes termed 'critical': they have in common a rejection of positivism and a belief that Enlightenment discourses are in crisis. See Yosef Lapid, 'The third debate: on the prospects of international theory in a post-positivist era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33.3, Sep 1989, p.239; Steve Smith, 'Positivism and beyond', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International theory: Positivism and beyond* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp.11-12; Chris Brown, '"Turtles all the way down": anti-foundationalism, critical theory and international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23.2, Summer 1994, p.214.

[17] See Waltz, *Theory*, pp.5-6.

[18] According to Waltz, to explain is 'to say why the range of expected outcomes falls within certain limits; to say why patterns of behaviour recur; to say why events repeat themselves'. However, this concerns what his theory explains, not what it is for any theory to explain. See *ibid.* p.69.

[19] Lukes suggests that to 'explain something is (at least) to overcome an obstacle – to make what was unintelligible intelligible'. See Steven Lukes, 'Methodological individualism reconsidered', in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The philosophy of social explanation* (London: OUP, 1973), p.126.

[20] Waltz, *Theory*, p.6.

[21] *Ibid.*

happened and how it might have been different. This does not tell us what explanation is, but it does suggest what, for Waltz, it is not. First, explanation is not interpretive or hermeneutic: to explain is not to illuminate actors' reasons for action.[22] Waltz seeks to explain, not to understand.[23] Second, explanation invokes causation, not constitution: it answers questions of the form 'why?' or 'how?' not 'what?' or 'how possible?'[24] To explain a balance of power is to explain why or by what process (how) it comes about: it is not to say what constitutes a balance of power or to detail the conditions that make it possible.[25] Theory, in other words, reveals causal relations: examining Waltz's theory illuminates which aspects of international relations a causal theory can help us to comprehend.

The puzzle

Despite the attention *Theory* has received, one aspect in particular tends to be ignored: Waltz's belief that international politics 'is both complex and organized'.[26] Waltz conceives of international politics as a complex system: one in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting.[27] He defines a system as 'a set of interacting units' and argues that the system's structure is what 'makes it possible to think of the units as forming a set as distinct from a mere collection'.[28] He insists, as he had in *Man, the state and war*, that examining structure alone is insufficient: 'international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to traditional realism's unit-level explanations'.[29] Nevertheless, he attempts to develop a nomothetic theory in which the structure of the international

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[22] Neufeld discusses the difference between adopting an interpretive approach and utilizing actors' reasons heuristically or as explanatory variables. See Mark Neufeld, 'Interpretation and the "science" of international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 19.1, Jan 1993, pp.39-61.

[23] See Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and understanding international relations* (Oxford: OUP, 1990).

[24] See Alexander Wendt, 'On constitution and causation in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (Special Issue), 1998, pp.104-6.

[25] This notion of constitutive explanation is related to, but not identical with, the notion that theory (in part) constitutes reality. See Steve Smith, 'The self-images of a discipline: a genealogy of international relations theory', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations theory today* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), pp.26-8.

[26] Waltz, *Theory*, p.12. See Richard Little, 'International relations and the methodological turn', *Political Studies*, 39.3, Sep 1991, p.472.

[27] See Waltz, *Theory*, pp.39-40, 58; Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.135-6.

[28] Waltz, *Theory*, p.40.

[29] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.34. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the state and war: A theoretical analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1959]), pp.160, 238.

political system is isolated as an independent variable: his theory 'explains how structures affect behaviour and outcomes'.[30] Waltz's work is therefore characterized by a deep tension: on the one hand, he views structure and units as mutually affecting and argues that good explanations must draw on both; on the other hand, he develops a theory in which structure is the sole causal variable. The puzzle, in other words, is that Waltz's approach to explanation (a causal theory that treats structure as an independent variable) is apparently at odds with how he conceptualizes international relations (as a complex system in which structure and units are mutually affecting).[31]

In order to isolate the structure of the international political system as an independent variable, Waltz excludes many known causes of state behaviour (and the outcomes thereof).[32] Instead of attempting 'to explain those (substantial) portions of state behaviour caused by individuals, small groups, or the interests, character, or internal process of states', Waltz sought 'to understand the system-wide forces that shape the behaviour of all individuals and groups, whatever their particular character or history'.[33] Waltz's theory therefore only explains some aspects of international relations: those caused by the structure of the international system. However, little or no behaviour is determined solely by structure. Ruggie argues that Waltz's model 'directly predicts little more than that tendencies toward balancing will recur and that the system of states will reproduce itself'.[34] Waltz acknowledges that structure is only part of the story: he criticizes those who believe that, in a systems theory, causes run only from structure to behaviour, and vehemently denies being a structural determinist.[35] Yet this raises the question of why he attempts to isolate system structure as an independent variable. If Waltz believes that structure and units are mutually affecting and that structure is only one cause of state

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[30] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.37. Nomothetic means 'of or pertaining to the study or discovery of general laws'. *The new shorter Oxford English dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), vol.2, p.1933. Nomothetic explanations identify causal relations by applying general laws to defined circumstances, showing the explanandum to follow deductively from the explanans. See Ch.4, below.

[31] Although Waltz discusses international politics, not international relations, I use the terms interchangeably.

[32] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.82.

[33] Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*, p.83.

[34] Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity*, pp.6-7.

[35] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.40; Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Letter to the editor', *International Organization*, 36.3, Summer 1982, p.680.

behaviour among many, why does he limit himself to developing a structural theory? Further, if structure is not the only relevant factor, how is it possible to develop accounts of historical or contemporary international relations that draw both on Waltz's theory and on non-structural factors?

Waltz's attempt to apply a nomothetic conception of explanation to a putatively complex system suggests a broader puzzle about explanatory theories in International Relations. Smith associates explanatory theory with rationalism, by which he denotes neorealism, neoliberalism and much (but not all) constructivist work.[36] He argues that rationalism rests on a positivist methodology, identifying four key positivist tenets: naturalism (belief in a single scientific method); a fact/value distinction (facts are theory-neutral); belief that social regularities exist independently of the methods used to uncover them; and empiricism (the view that knowledge is only warranted by experience).[37] These assumptions, Smith argues, underwrite a nomothetic approach to explanation and an empiricist approach to testing.[38] Yet it is striking that Waltz conceptualizes international politics as a complex system, that neoliberals adopt neorealist premises about how structure affects behaviour, and that many of the constructivists who pursue explanatory theory nevertheless see agents and structures as mutually constitutive or co-determined.[39] Explanatory theory in International Relations may rest (at least implicitly) on positivist assumptions and employ (if unsuccessfully) a nomothetic approach to explanation, yet it conceptualizes international relations in a manner that is radically inconsistent with these methodological tenets. This reflects Ruggie's observation that nomothetic theory is presented as 'the only valid model', yet virtually no International Relations theory 'meets the formal criteria of the deductive–nomological model, and when challenged most theorists readily admit that fact'.[40] In other

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[36] See Steve Smith, 'The discipline of international relations: still an American social science?' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2.3, Oct 2000, p.380.
[37] See *ibid.* p.383; Smith, 'Positivism and beyond', pp.15-17, 31-2. Smith argues that rationalists often refuse to admit that they are positivists; they tend to define positivism narrowly so that it covers only an unenlightened minority (equating it, for example, with reliance solely on quantitative data).
[38] See Smith, 'Positivism and beyond', p.16.
[39] See David A. Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and neoliberalism: The contemporary debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Alexander E. Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem in international relations theory', *International Organization*, 41.3, Summer 1987, p.339.
[40] John Gerard Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together? Neo-utilitarianism and the constructivist challenge', *International Organization*, 52.4, Autumn 1998, p.861 (fn.27).

words, explanatory theory in International Relations manifests a deep inconsistency between its method and its authors' beliefs about its subject matter.

The argument

This thesis examines the logic and implications of Waltz's explanatory strategy in *Theory*. It contends that Waltz's nomothetic model of explanation is at odds with his characterization of international politics as a complex system. Waltz's work therefore represents, in one aspect, a study of the limits of explanatory theory when applied to complex systems. In order to isolate system structure as an independent variable, Waltz ignores or treats by assumption many factors believed to affect behaviour and outcomes in international relations. Waltz's theory therefore generates only partial explanations. Considered in isolation, these explanations are likely to be inaccurate. This accounts for the difficulties Waltz encounters when applying his theory empirically. In order for his substantive explanations to provide useful insights, Waltz has to do one of two things: to indicate what weight structure has in determining behaviour and outcomes, or to show how his theory may be employed as a source of heuristic insights about the importance of structure. Unable to achieve the former, Waltz barely attempts the latter. This thesis argues that, rather than presenting integrated explanations in which structure is one factor among many, Waltz consistently fails to do justice to non-structural factors. His substantive explanations tend to press beyond the logic of his actual theory, to presume, rather than to demonstrate, that structure is important, and to utilize partial or attenuated characterizations of historical cases. Consequently, his substantive explanations fulfil the requirements neither of theoretical explanation (they do not follow directly from his theory) nor of historical inquiry (they wilfully ignore pertinent factors): they are instances of (what I term) theoretical commentary.

This examination of Waltz's explanatory strategy is also used to generate broader insights about explanatory theory in International Relations. Explanatory theory encompasses not only what Smith terms rationalism (approaches that assume instrumental rationality) but any approach that pursues

causal or deductive (nomothetic) explanation.[41] This thesis argues that any approach that construes international relations as a system, conceives of structure as a source of behavioural incentives, or conceives of agents and structures as mutually constitutive, is inconsistent with a nomothetic approach to explanation. Many explanatory approaches in International Relations employ some such assumption. Nevertheless, these approaches lack any consensus on an alternative to the nomothetic model of explanation. In other words, although explanatory approaches in International Relations do not replicate Waltz's parsimony, they tend, nevertheless, to encounter, in some form, the explanatory problems encountered by Waltz. The discipline of International Relations therefore faces both a choice and a challenge. The choice is whether to persevere in the attempt to construct explanatory theories or to disavow 'explanation' in favour of hermeneutic, historical, or post-positivist perspectives. The challenge, if explanation remains the goal, is to develop a mode of explanation that is consistent with the notion that international relations forms a complex system, either by seeking an alternative to the nomothetic model, or by finding new ways to characterize the complexity of international relations.

In developing these arguments, this thesis seeks to progress beyond the (potentially disappointing) conclusion that systemic approaches are inherently flawed, that Waltz's theory is unhelpful, and that Waltz's substantive explanations are inaccurate: it seeks to identify the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations. Waltz's empirical applications of his theory are used to indicate the kinds of problems that are likely to be encountered in developing and applying explanatory theories. These problems include the restrictive explanatory scope imposed by the narrow logic of deductive theory, difficulties in identifying causal mechanisms, and the limited potential for improving deductive theories by incorporating additional variables. This thesis also draws a distinction between theory and theory application.[42] It builds upon Wendt's distinction between neorealists 'as theorists' and as 'students of world politics' to suggest that Waltz operates in two guises: he is both a theorist and a

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[41] Thus Smith characterizes some constructivist work as explanatory on the basis of its epistemological stance. See Smith, 'The discipline of international relations', pp.390-1. See also Ch.5, below.
[42] See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', *The American Political Science Review*, 91.4, Dec 1997, p.916.

commentator.[43] As a theorist, Waltz seeks to develop deductive explanations: he does what is necessary to isolate structure as an independent variable. However, he is also conscious of the limitations of his structural approach. As a commentator, Waltz seeks to make sense of events: his explanations push beyond the logic of a narrow, structural theory, drawing on factors that cannot be reconciled with the isolation of structure as an independent variable. This thesis therefore shows how the tensions in Waltz's underlying explanatory strategy are manifested in his attempts to apply his theory.

Part I of this thesis examines Waltz's explanatory strategy and the theoretical and meta-theoretical debates in International Relations to which it is linked. Chapter Two introduces key themes concerning systems, complexity, and holistic explanation and presents Waltz's basic approach with reference to those themes. Chapter Three reviews the level-of-analysis and agent-structure debates and the major criticisms of Waltz's work. Chapter Four examines Waltz's explanatory strategy in detail, indicating the limits of its explanatory power. Chapter Five explores alternative approaches to the theoretical and explanatory problems Waltz encounters. Part II of this thesis examines Waltz's applications of his theory. Chapter Six examines Waltz's attempt to explain the superpower relationship during the Cold War: it contends that Waltz fits his theory to events. Chapter Seven reviews Waltz's efforts to uncover a causal link between system structure and state behaviour, indicating the deficiencies of his account of Soviet socialization. Chapter Eight examines Waltz's various arguments about NATO's post-Cold War role: it outlines the problems involved in attempting to derive predictions from partial theories. Chapter Nine explores the relationship between theories of international politics and of foreign policy and assesses realist attempts to enhance the explanatory power of Waltz's theory. The Conclusion summarizes my account of Waltz's explanatory strategy, reinforces my contention that the problems Waltz encounters are of broad relevance, and indicates how other research might build upon these insights.

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[43] Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing international politics', *International Security*, 20.1, Summer 1995, p.73.

Waltz and the academy

Despite the significance of both *Theory* and the research programmes it spawned, academic studies of Waltz's methodology and explanatory strategy are few and far between. There are no well-known monographs on Waltz. Since the initial responses to *Theory*, several of which are compiled in *Neorealism and its critics*, the only dedicated studies of Waltz's theoretical approach and explanatory strategy have been articles by Mouritzen and by Goddard and Nexon.[44] Craig's *Glimmer of a new Leviathan* incorporates a detailed analysis of Waltz's writings on nuclear weapons.[45] Hollis and Smith examine Waltz as an exemplar of holistic explanatory approaches.[46] Donnelly and Tellis each discuss Waltz's explanatory strategy in the context of broader studies of realist thought in International Relations.[47] A vast realist literature draws on Waltz's work: representative samples may be found in the *International Security* reader *The perils of anarchy* and the *Security Studies* special issue *Realism: Restatements and renewal*.[48] However, none of this literature directly addresses the tension between, on the one hand, conceptualizing international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting and, on the other hand, attempting to develop a nomothetic theory by isolating structure as an independent variable. Contemporary International Relations theory also barely acknowledges neorealism's debt to systemic approaches in other disciplines and largely ignores concepts such as (organized) complexity.[49]

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[44] See Hans Mouritzen, 'Kenneth Waltz: a critical rationalist between international politics and foreign policy', in Iver B. Neumann and Ole Wæver (eds.), *The future of international relations: Masters in the making?* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.66-89; Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Paradigm lost: reassessing *Theory of international politics*', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11.1, March 2005, pp.9-62.

[45] See Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a new Leviathan: Total war in the realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[46] See Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, ch.5.

[47] See Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*; Ashley J. Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism: the long march to scientific theory', *Security Studies*, 5.2, Winter 1995/96, pp.3-100.

[48] See Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *The perils of anarchy: Contemporary realism and international security* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995); Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Realism: Restatements and renewal* (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

[49] An exception is Richard Little, 'Three approaches to the international system: some ontological and epistemological considerations', *British Journal of International Studies*, 3.3, Oct 1977, pp.269-85. See also Robert Jervis, *System effects: Complexity in political and social life* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis (eds.), *Coping with complexity in the international system* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

Several works that seek to improve upon or to progress beyond Waltz's theory fail to address why, having identified international relations as an instance of organized complexity, Waltz attempts to develop a parsimonious, nomothetic theory. *The logic of anarchy* is an important attempt to develop a Structural Realism that avoids the flaws of Waltz's narrower and more static neorealism. However, although Buzan, Jones and Little examine Waltz's approach to theory construction, their agenda is reconstructive: they seek to correct neorealism where it has been criticized, rather than exploring the logic of Waltz's explanatory strategy. James criticizes neorealist explanations for being deterministic, unable to account for important changes, insufficiently specific and largely unconfirmed.[50] He argues that structural realism needs to 'specify how units are expected to cope with the environment'.[51] However, in attempting to incorporate variables that he deems important, but which Waltz excludes from his theory, James does not pay sufficient attention to why Waltz believed it necessary to exclude those variables. Keohane describes neorealism as 'a good starting-point', arguing that it 'can be modified progressively to attain closer correspondence with reality'.[52] For example, he suggests that a 'modified structural research program' should recognize that state interests are not uniform.[53] However, Keohane fails to engage with Waltz's reasons for treating state interests by assumption rather than attempting to describe them realistically. Neither Keohane, James, nor Buzan, Jones and Little explicitly situate Waltz's decision to develop a nomothetic theory in the context of his contention that international politics should be conceptualized as a complex system.

A number of scholars have attempted to apply standards of theory evaluation borrowed from the philosophy of science to Waltz and to realism. Keohane observes that 'Realism does not provide a satisfactory theory of world politics, if we require of an adequate theory that it provide a set of

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[50] See Patrick James, 'Neorealism as a research enterprise: toward elaborated structural realism', *International Political Science Review*, 14.2, April 1993, p.132.
[51] *Ibid.* p.135.
[52] Robert O. Keohane, 'Theory of world politics: structural realism and beyond', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics*, pp.189, 191.
[53] *Ibid.* pp.193-4.

plausible and testable answers to questions about state behaviour under specified conditions'.[54] However, he fails to ask why Waltz is unable to meet this standard, or to ask what kinds of explanations Waltz's theory is able to offer. Further, Keohane's preferred standard of evaluation is undermined by his acknowledgement that, if we took Lakatos's requirements for progressive research programs literally, 'all actual theories of international politics – and perhaps all conceivable theories – would fail the test'.[55] Vasquez argues that 'the realist paradigm is a fundamentally flawed and empirically inaccurate view of the world'.[56] However, he merely asserts that a realist paradigm exists and that Waltz should be subsumed within it, ignoring Kuhn's warning that the social sciences are in a pre-paradigmatic condition.[57] Turning to Waltz's conception of the structure of the international political system, Vasquez argues that structure does not operate as Waltz claims and does not exist as Waltz depicts. He adds that 'focusing on structure to the exclusion of other levels of analysis has proven to be too simple to account for the complexities of world politics'.[58] Although Vasquez is undoubtedly right that an exclusive focus on structure entails narrow explanatory scope, his insight is limited by his failure to engage with Waltz's reasons for adopting a narrow definition of structure. He not only ignores Waltz's contention that structure is only one part of the international system, but treats a theoretical representation of structure as if it were an attempt accurately to depict contemporary international affairs.

Post-positivist critiques of Waltz have tended to highlight the explanatory limitations of Waltz's theory rather than to engage with the puzzle of why Waltz attempted to develop a nomothetic theory about a complex system. Ashley, for example, criticizes the state-as-actor premises of Waltz's theory,

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[54] *Ibid.* p.159.
[55] *Ibid.* pp.160-1. See Imre Lakatos, 'Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes', in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), pp.91-195.
[56] John A. Vasquez, *The power of power politics: From classical realism to neotraditionalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p.1.
[57] See Colin Wight, 'Philosophy of social science and international relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of international relations* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp.30-2; Schmidt, *The political discourse of anarchy*, ch.1.
[58] Vasquez, *The power of power politics*, pp.212-3.

suggesting that it is statist first and structuralist second.[59] He proposes, as an alternative, a dialectical competence model of social action that would 'account for the emergence, reproduction, and possible transformation of a world-dominant public political apparatus: a tradition of regime anchored in the balance-of-power scheme and constitutive of the modern states system'.[60] This regime, Ashley argues, does not merely regulate the behaviour of states-as-actors but '*produces* sovereign states' that embody the regime.[61] In other words, Ashley disputes the view that states are '*ontologically prior* to the international system'.[62] Wendt also criticizes Waltz for employing a conception of structure that is ontologically reducible to properties of states (their capabilities). The consequence, Wendt argues, is that neorealism 'sees system structures in the manner in which they appear to states – as given, external constraints on their actions – rather than as conditions of possibility for state action'.[63] Ashley and Wendt assume that, in theorizing structure as reducible to the properties of states with given identities and interests, Waltz is making an ontological claim. But Waltz is also committed to conceptualizing international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. These critiques ignore the question of why, if Waltz views international politics as a complex system, he attempted to develop a nomothetic theory that isolates system structure as an independent variable.

A final class of approaches to Waltz's work are explicitly developed in contradistinction to neorealism. This class encompasses both realists who have attempted to amend and thereby develop Waltz's theory and those (generally post-positivist) theorists who have used neorealism as an example of what they take to be a limited, misguided, or outmoded approach. The former includes important realist touchstones such as Walt's *The origins of alliances* and Christensen and Snyder's 'Chain gangs and passed bucks'.[64] Although important in their own right, these works illustrate a tendency to treat

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[59] See Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', pp.268-73.
[60] *Ibid.* p.294.
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] *Ibid.* p.271.
[63] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.342.
[64] See Stephen M. Walt, *The origins of alliances* (London: Cornell University Press, 1986); Thomas J. Christensen and Jack L. Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks: predicting alliance patterns in multipolarity', *International Organization*, 44.2, Spring 1990, pp.137-68.

Waltz's theory as a complete explanation of state behaviour, or as an attempt to depict international relations in operation, rather than as an attempt to illuminate one aspect of international relations (an attempt that is constrained by a strictly causal approach to explanation). The latter group includes the work of critics such as Wendt and Dessler, who use Waltz as a counterpoint to their preferred scientific realist approach to international relations.[65] It also includes Cox's use of neorealism as an archetype of 'problem-solving theory', against which he contrasted his preferred approach: 'critical theory'.[66] The limitation of these approaches, as with the reconstructive, philosophy of science, and post-positivist works critiques discussed above, is that, being focused on developing alternative approaches, they do not engage in detail with the nuances of Waltz's explanatory strategy. They do not directly address the subject of this thesis: the tension between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a complex system and his development of a nomothetic structural theory.

Methodology

A significant part of this study involves discussion of methodological issues in International Relations (what might be termed the philosophy of international relations). Although methodological discussion often has normative implications (concerning how study should best proceed), I view International Relations methodology as having an empirical focus: methodological enquiry begins by examining practice.[67] The aim is not to develop abstract rules for the conduct of enquiry, but to analyze and assess how scholars actually proceed. This may involve a distinction between what Kaplan terms '*logic-in-use*' and '*reconstructed logic*' (between scholars' actual cognitive style and their more or less formal (re)presentation of it), but the aim is not to prescribe a logic-in-use.[68] In International Relations, as in any discipline, substantive knowledge and understanding is achieved by those engaged with the raw material, whether they be theorists, historians, commentators, or actors. The

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[65] See Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem'; David Dessler, 'What's at stake in the agent-structure debate?' *International Organization*, 43.3, Summer 1989, pp.441-73.
[66] See Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders'.
[67] See Daniel M. Hausman, 'How to do philosophy of economics', in *Essays on philosophy and economic methodology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp.221-9.
[68] Abraham Kaplan, *The conduct of inquiry: Methodology for behavioural science* (Aylesbury: Intertext Books, 1964), p.8.

methodologist's task is to improve understanding of their methods. Insofar as I engage in methodological study, I aim to reveal aspects of systemic theories (and of approaches that employ heuristic insights drawn from such theories) that, in my view, have not been fully recognized. I seek to understand and improve the process of inquiry in International Relations rather than to use International Relations theory as a vehicle for investigating general philosophical questions about the possibilities for human knowledge.[69] This reflects two beliefs. First, I do not agree with Wendt that International Relations scholars spend too much time debating epistemological issues.[70] What we seek to know is (rightly) influenced by what we think we can know (explain, understand). Second, attempts to understand the qualities and deficiencies of existing approaches in International Relations are at least as valuable as attempts to develop new approaches.

Although I discuss explanatory theory in International Relations in general terms, this remains a thesis about Waltz. It draws on his work as a source of ideas about the relationship between subject matter and explanatory strategy. It does not, therefore, attempt to reconstruct Waltz's intentions or beliefs, and does not incorporate interviews or correspondence with Waltz himself. This thesis is, itself, an explanatory, rather than an interpretive, work: it seeks to establish the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations. Little argues that

> the philosophy of social science must work in close proximity to the actual problems of research and explanation in particular areas of social science, and it must formulate its questions in a way that permits different answers in different cases. Before we can make significant progress on the most general issues, it is necessary to develop a much more detailed conception of the actual models, explanations, debates, methods, etc., in contemporary social science.[71]

This thesis is based on a similar premise: that explanatory theory in International Relations manifests a fundamental tension between how it conceptualizes international relations and the kinds of theories it attempts to develop, but that this tension is best addressed through a detailed analysis of how influential scholars actually proceed. This thesis examines Waltz's explanatory strategy in the belief

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[69] See Daniel M. Hausman, 'Reflections on philosophy and economic methodology', in *Essays*, pp.230-5.
[70] See Wendt, 'On constitution and causation' p.115.
[71] Daniel Little, *Varieties of social explanation: An introduction to the philosophy of social science* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), p.2.

that doing so illuminates not only neorealism, but also those approaches explicitly developed in contrast to neorealism.

Waltz is an enigmatic subject. He makes few concrete claims, often qualifying substantive positions. He argues, for example, that testing is essential, yet represents it as almost prohibitively difficult; he develops a structural theory, yet insists that structures tell us only 'a small number of big and important things'.[72] Waltz's explanatory strategy is difficult to pin down: he gives no clear statement of ontology or epistemology and often veers between describing his substantive views about international relations and detailing his theoretical definitions and assumptions. His arguments rely on distinctions that are often under-specified, such as that between a theory and its application, and he often fails to justify or reference important substantive claims. The form of Waltz's published work reflects its substantive content. Waltz tends to respond to critics merely be restating his case: he reaffirms central ideas, giving short shrift to (what he sees as) peripheral concerns. His writing is replete with short, assertive statements, yet tends to brush over details and to emphasize general propositions and insights over specific cases or arguments. Waltz gives the impression of never being happier than when in a minority of one: his most provocative work is on nuclear proliferation, but he also attempted to reverse conventional wisdom on the peacefulness of bipolar and multipolar systems, and criticized US policy in Vietnam and the Middle East.[73] However, his use of historical examples borders on the peremptory: Waltz may be accused of mining history, but he rarely develops a historical account sufficiently to facilitate a considered assessment of a substantive empirical claim.

Although my account of Waltz's explanatory strategy identifies a tension between his views about the nature of international politics and his approach to explanation, I do not suggest that Waltz considered this tension important, or even that he recognized it at all. In fact, Waltz's many attempts to extend his

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[72] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of international politics*: a response to my critics', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics*, p.329.

[73] See Kenneth Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons: more may be better', *Adelphi Paper* No.171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981); Fred Halliday and Justin Rosenberg, 'Interview with Ken Waltz', *Review of International Studies*, 24.3, July 1998, pp.371-86; Harry Kreisler, 'Theory and international politics: conversation with Kenneth N. Waltz', February 10, 2003, http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people3/Waltz/waltz-con0.html.

substantive explanations beyond the logic of his theory illustrate an unwillingness to accept how limited a nomothetic theory is likely to be when applied to a complex system.[74] I seek, therefore, to establish that there is a tension in Waltz's work, rather than to evaluate his understanding of it. I also seek to show how recognizing this tension illuminates other aspects of Waltz's work, especially empirical applications of his theory, and to indicate how this tension may be of broader relevance for International Relations theory. The point is not to advance the claims of one theoretical school over another, but to emphasize the explanatory ramifications of conceiving of international relations as a system and of conceiving of agents and structures as mutually affecting. Similarly, the purpose of examining Waltz's applications of his theory is not to propound a particular perspective on particular empirical debates. Rather, I seek to unpack the kinds of problems that accompany an attempt to apply a partial theory and to make the case that Waltz failed to give due attention to the task of showing how his theory could be employed heuristically.

Given these objectives, there are three tasks that this thesis does not attempt. First, it neither seeks to resolve fundamental debates in the philosophy of science nor advocates a particular epistemological position. In contrast to Buzan, Jones and Little's attempt to 'ground Structural Realism on pragmatist epistemological foundations', this thesis seeks merely to show how inconsistencies in Waltz's explanatory strategy play out in his substantive explanations and to indicate the broader relevance of the problems he encounters.[75] Second, despite debating the limits of explanatory theory, this thesis does not propound a hermeneutic or post-positivist perspective. It asks how far an explanatory approach can take us, not what the alternatives are. This reflects the fact that a significant proportion of work in International Relations is (at least implicitly) explanatory.[76] It also reflects a tendency within the explanatory discourse to define legitimate scholarship in its own image: this thesis attempts to indicate the limits of explanatory approaches without adopting a label that places the study outside

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[74] I therefore reject Schweller's argument that Waltz has already 'brilliantly said everything that can usefully be said about neorealism'. See Randall L. Schweller, 'The progressiveness of neoclassical realism', in Elman & Elman (eds.), *Progress*, p.313.

[75] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.234.

[76] Smith suggests that the discipline as a whole 'is far more realist, far more state-centric and far more unquestioning of the dominance of realism and positivism than is the case within IR theory'. See Smith, 'The discipline of international relations', p.379.

that discourse.[77] Third, this thesis does not examine the question of whether, and if so in what sense, states are actors. In *Man, the state and war*, Waltz argues, following Rousseau, that the state can be thought of as an actor when it 'can with some appropriateness take the adjective "organismic"', or when a power 'has so established itself that its decisions are accepted as the decisions of the state'.[78] Tellis objects that Waltz is unable to explain (in a manner consistent with his emphasis on the behavioural consequences of anarchy) how such states are constituted given conflictual human relations.[79] Nonetheless, explanatory theories in International Relations do treat states as actors. An underlying premise of this thesis is, therefore, that the limits of explanatory theory can be exposed without rejecting the foundational assumptions of explanatory approaches.

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[77] See *ibid.* pp.383-9.
[78] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.178.
[79] See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', pp.70-2.

Part I

Waltz's explanatory strategy

[2]

System concepts: the roots of Waltz's approach

Waltz's systemic approach has clearly identifiable roots in social scientific thought about systems and complexity. It is, nevertheless, unique: Waltz argues that international politics is complex and organized, conceptualizes international relations as a system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting, and yet attempts to isolate system structure as an independent variable. This chapter explores the ideas that lie behind Waltz's use of the system concept and examines how those ideas are manifested in his explanatory strategy. The first section explores what and how systemic approaches try to explain. It finds that a systemic approach only provides one perspective on complex systems. The challenge is therefore not only to develop a plausible systemic theory, but also to show how it complements other perspectives. The second section investigates how Waltz employs the system concept in his balance-of-power theory. It shows how Waltz draws on the ideas outlined in the first section and how his approach differs from the approaches of other systems theorists in International Relations. It links ambiguities about what Waltz's theory explains to deeper ambiguities about the purpose and scope of systemic approaches. It argues that Waltz's attempt to show how system structure affects state behaviour not only distinguishes him from other systems theorists, but also establishes a deep tension in his work: Waltz attempts to isolate system structure as an independent variable despite conceiving of international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting.

System concepts

This section examines four sets of ideas about systems and complexity. First, it outlines Weaver's notion of organized complexity, arguing that Weaver is unclear about what aspects of complex wholes need to be explained and how that should be achieved. Second, it reviews Nagel's discussion of what

it means to say that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, arguing that the notion of organized complexity identifies deficiencies in available theories rather than distinctive types of whole. Third, two aspects of a broader debate about holistic and individualistic explanation are explored: the doctrine of methodological individualism is rejected, while functional explanation is contrasted with functional analysis and shown to be illegitimate. These debates about parts and wholes and about individualistic and holistic explanation indicate that we always face a choice about which aspects of complex wholes to explain and about how to explain them. Lastly, this section outlines the general systems approach, identifying it with a focus on system structure. Blauberg *et al*'s philosophical critique of systems theory is drawn upon to suggest that complex wholes can be examined from both holistic and individualistic perspectives and that the ultimate challenge is to combine the two. This section therefore develops two central ideas: first, complex wholes may be examined either individualistically or holistically; second, these modes of explanation are ultimately complementary.

Organized Complexity

Waltz argues that a systemic approach is required if an object of study is characterized by organized complexity, a term borrowed from Weaver's account of the requirements for the continued progress of science.[1] Weaver argues that, until the twentieth century, physical science 'was largely concerned with two-variable *problems of simplicity*': problems in which 'one can rigidly maintain constant all but two variables'.[2] In contrast, the life sciences often faced situations in which many variables were interconnected: their subject matter included 'complexly organized whole[s]'.[3] Lacking techniques for dealing with such complexity, the life sciences were mainly limited to 'preliminary stages in the application of the scientific method', such as observation, description and classification.[4] During the early twentieth century, Weaver argues, the physical sciences developed statistical methods for dealing

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[1] See Waltz, *Theory*, pp.12-13; Warren Weaver, 'Science and complexity', *American Scientist*, 36.4, Oct 1948, pp.536-44; Little, 'Three approaches', pp.278-84; Todd R. La Porte (ed.), *Organized social complexity: Challenge to politics and policy* (Princeton: University Press, 1975).
[2] Weaver, 'Science and complexity', pp.536-7.
[3] *Ibid.* p.536.
[4] *Ibid.*

with what he terms 'problems of *disorganized complexity*'.[5] In such problems 'the number of variables is very large' and each 'has a behaviour which is individually erratic, or perhaps totally unknown', yet 'the system as a whole possesses certain orderly and analyzable average properties'.[6] Yet problems remained, Weaver argues, especially in the life sciences, for which the new methods were inappropriate. These problems were distinguished not only by the number of variables involved, but by 'the essential feature of *organization*'.[7] Weaver characterizes them as 'problems of *organized complexity*': they 'involve dealing simultaneously with a *sizeable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole*'.[8]

According to Weaver, the nineteenth-century methods of classical dynamics were suited to tasks such as 'analyzing and predicting the motion of a single ivory ball as it moves about a billiard table'.[9] They could also, 'but with a surprising increase in difficulty, analyze the motion of two or even of three of these balls'.[10] However, 'as soon as one tries to analyze the motion of ten or fifteen balls on the table at once ... the problem becomes unmanageable': 'the actual labour of dealing in specific detail with so many variables turns out to be impracticable'.[11] In other words, the analytical method is useful only in relation to small-number systems. Statistical methods, meanwhile, are useful only when the number of factors is very large. Further, statistical methods are applicable only when factors are unorganized: for example, when very many balls are 'distributed, in their positions and motions, in a helter-skelter, that is to say a disorganized way'.[12] This is so because statistical methods cannot trace the path of a particular ball: rather, they indicate properties of the whole system, such as the frequency with which balls strike rails. Thus problems of organized complexity are characterized not only by the number of factors, but also by their organization: they are problems such as the behaviour of an organized group,

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[5] *Ibid.* p.537.
[6] *Ibid.* p.538.
[7] *Ibid.* p.539.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.* p.537. On the deficiencies of a 'billiard ball' model of international politics see Arnold Wolfers, 'The actors in international politics', in *Discord and collaboration: Essays on international politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp.19-24.
[10] Weaver, 'Science and complexity', p.537.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.* pp.537-8.

what makes an evening primrose open when it does, or what determines the price of wheat. Such problems, Weaver argues, and many 'similar problems in the biological, medical, psychological, economic, and political sciences', are 'too complicated' for analytical methods, yet 'cannot be handled with the statistical techniques so effective in describing average behaviour in problems of disorganized complexity'.[13] Weaver called for science to make an advance 'even greater than the nineteenth-century conquest of problems of simplicity or the twentieth-century victory over problems of disorganized complexity': science must learn to deal with problems of organized complexity.[14]

Weaver does not explain precisely how to identify organized complexity. On the one hand, he associates it with the presence of an organic whole. On the other hand, he argues that problems of organized complexity are characterized by the number of factors and suggests that analytic methods are merely impracticable (rather than inapplicable). Further, because analytic and statistical methods have different deficiencies, Weaver is unclear about what features of organized complexity we are unable to explain. In his account, analytic methods explain variations in individual factors, whereas statistical methods explain characteristics of the whole (or average properties of the factors).[15] Whereas problems of simplicity are characterized by the (small) number of variables, problems of disorganized complexity are characterized by the (large) number of units (billiard balls). But there is an important distinction between systems of many units where few variables affect the behaviour of the units, and systems where many variables affect the behaviour of any number of units. If problems of organized complexity are characterized by the presence of many interconnected variables, then analytic and statistical methods are inapplicable and not merely impracticable. Analytic methods are inapplicable because two variables cannot be isolated; statistical methods are inapplicable because the behaviour of the units is organized. However, even if organized complexity refers to a distinct kind of whole (an organic whole), it remains unclear what aspect of these systems we must learn to explain. Is the problem to trace the path of individual units (which analytic methods cannot do because of the

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[13] *Ibid.* p.540.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] In this sense, the application of statistical methods does not solve the problem of how to trace the variation of many factors (the individual paths of many balls).

number of variables), or to explain properties of the whole (which statistical methods cannot do because of the organization of the units)?

Parts and wholes

It might be thought that organized complexity refers to wholes that are greater than (or not merely) the sum of their parts. But what would this mean? One possibility is that the sum of the parts is the unordered set of units. Yet if the difference between the whole and the sum of its parts is merely that the whole includes the configuration of the units, then the distinction, Nagel argues, is 'trivial'.[16] Further, such a distinction 'does not preclude the possibility of *analyzing* such wholes into a set of elements related to one another in definite ways'.[17] In other words, the fact that a whole is an organized set of elements does not rule out a priori the application of analytical or statistical methods. Another interpretation of the claim that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts is illustrated by the proposition that the behaviour of a machine, such as a clock, is the sum of the behaviour of its spatial parts. If so, Nagel argues, it should be possible to deduce the 'properties and behaviours of the entire system' from 'the theory of mechanics, coupled with suitable information about the actual arrangement of the parts'.[18] The crucial point here is not whether Weaver's problems of organized complexity are explicable in terms of the theory of mechanics and relevant information about the parts of the respective wholes. Rather, it is that we determine whether the whole is (in the sense being discussed) greater than the sum of its parts not according to intrinsic properties of the whole, but '*relative to some assumed theory* ... in terms of which the analysis of a system is undertaken'.[19] In other words, it is the quality of our theories that determines how we classify (explain) systems.[20]

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[16] Ernest Nagel, 'Wholes, sums, and organic unities', in David Lerner (ed.), *Parts and wholes* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p.143.
[17] *Ibid.* pp.143-4.
[18] *Ibid.* p.145.
[19] *Ibid.* p.146.
[20] Thus Simon argues that, in complex systems, 'the whole is more than the sum of the parts, not in an ultimate, metaphysical sense, but in the important pragmatic sense that, given the properties of the parts and the laws of their interaction, it is not a trivial matter to infer the properties of the whole'. See Herbert A. Simon, 'The architecture of complexity', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106.6, Dec 1962, p.468.

Weaver associates organized complexity with the presence of organic wholes. Such unities, Nagel observes, are claimed to be incapable of analysis in additive (summative) terms: 'their parts do not act, and do not possess characteristics, *independently* of one another'.[21] Therefore, so the argument goes, 'the characteristic modes of functioning' of the system's constituent parts 'must be studied *in situ*, and the structure of activities of the whole cannot be inferred from properties displayed by its constituents in isolation from the whole'.[22] However, Nagel distinguishes between two possible claims: first, that such systems cannot be constructed out of independently existing elements that display the properties they have as part of the whole; second, that such systems cannot 'be *analyzed in terms of a theory* concerning the assumed constituents and their interrelations'.[23] The fundamental issue, he argues, is 'whether the analysis of "organic unities" necessarily involves the adoption of irreducible laws for such systems, and whether their mode of organization precludes the possibility of analyzing them from the so-called additive point of view'.[24] The problem with the claim that organic wholes constitute a distinct type of system, characterized by the inapplicability of additive analyses, is that the difference between additive and non-additive analyses 'is not one of fundamental principle': even additive analyses take into account some aspects of the organization of the whole in describing the functions of the elements.[25] Therefore, Nagel concludes, the question of whether organic unities 'can be analyzed from the additive point of view does not possess a general answer'.[26] In other words, our inability to explain a system in additive terms indicates only that our theories are inadequate, not that the system is a distinctive kind of whole (an organic unity).[27] Thus the notion of organized complexity indicates the

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[21] Nagel, 'Wholes, sums, and organic unities', p.147. See Andras Angyal, 'The structure of wholes', *Philosophy of Science*, 6.1, Jan 1939, pp.25-37.
[22] Nagel, 'Wholes, sums, and organic unities', p.147. For example, Watzlawick *et al* argue that in interactive systems every part 'is so related to its fellow parts that a change in one part will cause a change in all of them and in the total system. That is, a system behaves not as a single composite of independent elements, but coherently and as an inseparable whole'. See Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of human communication* (New York: Norton, 1967), p.123.
[23] Nagel, 'Wholes, sums, and organic unities', p.149.
[24] *Ibid.* pp.149-50.
[25] *Ibid.* p.150.
[26] *Ibid.* p.152.
[27] Laszlo argues that, if we could know the precise characteristics of all the parts and the relationships between them, 'we could reduce the characteristics of the whole to the sum of the characteristics of the

inadequacy of available analytic approaches (our inability to isolate relevant variables by holding others constant), not the presence of a distinct type of system (an organic whole).

Individualistic and holistic approaches

When investigating systems (instances of organized complexity) for which analytic approaches have so far proved insufficient, we may seek to explain either the behaviour of the individual parts or properties of the whole. Further, we may seek to explain either in terms of laws about the individual parts or in terms of laws about the organization of the whole. Explanations in terms of laws about individual parts may be termed individualistic, atomistic, additive or analytic. Explanations in terms of laws about the organization of the whole may be termed holistic, systemic or integral. Philosophers of science have long debated whether explanations should, in principle, be individualistic. At stake is the doctrine of methodological individualism: that 'facts about society and social phenomena are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals'.[28] If this holds, then we may seek to explain either the behaviour of individual parts or properties of the whole, but all such explanations must be 'couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals'.[29] The doctrine's main deficiency is that many predicates about individuals refer to their social settings. For example, it is impossible to describe or explain an action such as cashing a cheque without referring to social conventions, yet explanations of social conventions do not fulfil the requirements of methodological individualism.[30] Further, it is unsatisfactory to characterize cashing a cheque in terms of individual actions, because this merely disguises the social context that makes it possible to identify the action as something to be explained in the first place. This is not to say that explanations of social phenomena, including the behaviour of

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parts in interaction', but adds that this is not practically possible: 'to all intents and purposes, the characteristics of complex wholes remain irreducible to the characteristics of the parts'. See Ervin Laszlo, *The systems view of the world: The natural philosophy of the new developments in the sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), p.8.

[28] Lukes, 'Methodological individualism reconsidered', p.121.

[29] *Ibid.* p.122. Explanations consistent with the doctrine of methodological individualism may explain social phenomena in terms of other social phenomena, but only if those phenomena are themselves, ultimately, explicable in terms of facts about individuals.

[30] This discussion draws on *ibid.* pp.124-9. Recall Nagel's contention that additive analyses (inevitably) refer to aspects of the whole when describing the role of individuals.

international actors and the outcomes thereof, should not refer to individuals, but that the doctrine of methodological individualism is overly restrictive.

Although we may wish, in our explanations, to refer to social phenomena that are not themselves explicable solely in terms of facts about individuals, functional explanations are commonly held to be unacceptable. According to Hollis, functionalists hold that whatever maintains a system (fulfils its functional requisites) is not only functional for that system but 'occurs *because* it is functional'.[31] A functional explanation, in other words, is 'one in which the *consequences* of some behaviour or social arrangement are essential elements of the *causes* of that behaviour'.[32] There are therefore legitimate and illegitimate forms of functional explanation. The legitimate form identifies causal links between outcomes and the structures that produce them. For example, in functional theories of regimes, 'anticipated consequences explain the persistence of the regime and compliance with its injunctions'.[33] In these theories, human intentions link outcomes to the structures producing them. Legitimate functional explanations, therefore, can be reformulated in individualistic terms. The illegitimate form of functional explanation arises when some design or purpose is alleged to reside in the system itself. For example, although organisms have functional needs in the sense that they 'survive and flourish only if various conditions are met', Hollis describes the suggestion that the parts of the organism 'are as they are and behave as they do *because* they serve these needs' as a 'beguiling step'.[34] The 'fallacy of functional teleology', argues Young, 'refers to the tendency to explain the origins of a condition or pattern of action in terms of its being a functional necessity for the survival of the system'.[35] The key question is not whether structures fulfil functions for systems, but whether their functionality adequately explains their existence. In theories of natural selection, for example, mutations may flourish because of the functions they serve, but this does not explain why mutations arise.

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[31] Martin Hollis, *The philosophy of social science: An introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p.95.
[32] Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Constructing social theories* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), p.80.
[33] Stephan Haggard and Beth A. Simmons, 'Theories of international regimes', *International Organization*, 41.3, Summer 1987, p.506.
[34] Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, p.96.
[35] Oran R. Young, *Systems of political science* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p.35.

Functional explanation is distinct from functional analysis: analysis of the functions that structures in fact fulfil. In political science, functional analysis focuses on 'system maintenance – how political systems survive over time'.[36] It organizes empirical enquiry in terms of the following questions: 'What structures are involved?' 'What functions have resulted (or have been performed)?' 'What functions take place in terms of a given structure(s)?'[37] Thus Easton argued that 'the question that gives coherence and purpose to a rigorous analysis of political life as a system of behaviour is ... How do any and all political systems manage to persist in a world of both stability and change?'[38] Functional analysis explains properties of systems as wholes without fulfilling the requirements of methodological individualism: it explains properties of systems as wholes by reference to structures that may not themselves be explicable in terms of facts about individuals. Yet functional analysis is not teleological: such explanations are only problematic if the structures that maintain systems are thought to exist because they have that effect. One of the virtues of functional analysis, therefore, is that it can contribute to our knowledge of how systems work without having first to explain the structures of those systems in individualistic terms. It is, in this sense, a possible response to our inability to explain the behaviour of the parts of a system or the properties of the whole in individualistic terms.

General Systems Theory

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[36] Alan C. Isaak, *Scope and methods of political science: An introduction to the methodology of political inquiry* (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1969), p.221.

[37] Marion J. Levy, Jr., 'Functional analysis: structural-functional analysis', in David L. Sills (ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (New York: Macmillan & Free Press, 1968), vol.6, p.22.

[38] David Easton, *A systems analysis of political life* (New York: John Wiley, 1965), p.17. His answer was that all political systems successfully fulfil two functions, which he described as 'the *essential variables* of political life': they 'allocate values for a society' and 'induce most members to accept these allocations as binding, at least most of the time'. See *ibid.* pp.22-4. Young argues that Easton failed to achieve a 'general or unified theory of politics' in part because it is logically and empirically doubtful that 'questions concerning system persistence constitute the most inclusive questions for political analysis'. See Young, *Systems of political science*, pp.46-7.

Little argues that the idea of studying the international system 'can be traced back to Grotius, who considered it necessary to view interactions among states from a holistic perspective'.[39] However, the genesis of 'system' as a scientific concept is most often associated with the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who argued that organisms are not just 'conglomeration[s] of separate elements', but are systems that possess '*organization* and *wholeness*' and are continually changing.[40] In Bertalanffy's view, the old biology was

> marked by an *analytical summative* approach to its subject matter (an organism was considered to be an aggregate of separate elements), by the tendency *to equate the structure of the organism with that of the machine*, and by the view of the organism, as something static, acting only under external influence.[41]

By contrast, the new biology 'held a *systems view* of ... the living organism, and insisted upon the primacy of the *dynamic* approach to the study of biological phenomena'.[42] Bertalanffy sought to formulate exact methods for the analysis of organisms as systems. He argued that science's traditional, analytical procedures are only applicable when 'interaction between "parts" [is] non-existent or weak enough to be neglected'.[43] He denoted entities in which interaction between the parts cannot be neglected 'systems' and proposed a general systems theory the task of which would be the 'scientific exploration of "wholes" and "wholeness"'.[44]

A system may be broadly defined as 'a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes'.[45] However, Nettl insists that a system is 'a *whole*, not merely an *aggregate*': 'it consists of objects or elements in interaction, not merely in random contact'.[46] The system concept is therefore reserved for wholes with emergent properties: 'properties, functions or

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[39] Richard Little, 'The systems approach', in Steve Smith (ed.), *International relations: British and American perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p.79.
[40] I. V. Blauberg, V. N. Sadovsky and E. G. Yudin, *Systems theory: Philosophical and methodological problems* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p.44.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.* pp.44-5.
[43] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp.16-17.
[44] *Ibid.* pp.17, xviii. See also M. B. Nicholson and P. A. Reynolds, 'General systems, the international system, and the Eastonian analysis', *Political studies*, 15.1, Feb 1967, p.14.
[45] A. D. Hall and R. E. Fagan, 'Definition of system', *General Systems*, 1, 1956, p.18.
[46] Peter Nettl, 'The concept of system in political science', *Political Studies*, 14.3, Oct 1966, p.307.

purposes distinct from [their] constituent objects, relationships and attributes'.[47] The presence of emergent properties does not necessarily require a systemic approach: analytic methods may still be applicable. However, Bertalanffy developed the system concept 'within the framework of the "theory of open systems"'.[48] In closed systems, final states depend exclusively on initial conditions: they may be deduced from knowledge of the position of variables and their usual manner of functioning. Mechanistic (additive) models are therefore adequate. Open systems, by contrast, are characterized by interaction with an environment and by equifinality: they exhibit (apparently) goal-directed behaviour, arriving at outcomes despite environmental interferences.[49] The development of an organism, for example, is determined not by its initial state 'but by its structural, integral properties, and independent of the modification of initial states (within certain limits) the organism eventually arrives at a final state "predetermined" by its structure'.[50] Bertalanffy argues that the presence of goal-directed behaviour requires that open systems be studied as wholes. Nettl agrees: the behaviour of open systems 'depends on *integral* as well as *external* factors arising from a relationship with the environment'.[51] Thus general systems theory focuses on systems characterized by interaction not only among parts, but also between systems and environments.[52] Further, general systems theory focuses on system structure: the structure of an open system determines the role of the elements within the whole and, therefore, the purpose, goal, or final state of that system.

As an approach, general systems theory does not explain the behaviour of particular systems, but is concerned with 'the formulation and derivation of those principles which are valid for "systems" in general'.[53] General systems theorists contend that 'models, principles, and laws exist which apply to

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[47] Hall & Fagan, 'Definition of system', p.18.
[48] Blauberg *et al*, *Systems theory*, p.45.
[49] A system's environment is 'the set of all objects a change in whose attributes affect the system and also those objects whose attributes are changed by the behaviour of the system'. See Hall & Fagan, 'Definition of system', p.20.
[50] Blauberg *et al*, *Systems theory*, p.49. Blauberg *et al* argue that the concept of an open system was important primarily for dealing with processes such as growth and metabolism rather than for developing a genuinely structural analysis of systems. See *ibid.* pp.50-1.
[51] Nettl, 'The concept of system', p.307.
[52] See A. Wayne Penn, 'Towards a new generation of systems models in political science', *Polity*, 4.3, Spring 1972, p.276.
[53] Bertalanffy, *General system theory*, p.31.

generalized systems irrespective of their particular kind, elements, and the "forces" involved'.[54] They search for structural isomorphies: 'correspondences in the principles that govern the behaviour of entities that are, intrinsically, widely different'.[55] However, Bertalanffy acknowledges that discovery of a structural isomorphy between systems constitutes only an 'explanation in principle' of the entity or process to be explained.[56] A full explanation involves determination of the 'conditions of development of individual phenomena and the specific laws governing these processes'.[57] In other words, focusing on structure illuminates only the organization of the system, not the processes that result in that organization. Restricting the study of systems to the study only of their organization or structure therefore has two limitations. First, structure is only one aspect of systems. Blauberg *et al* argue that Bertalanffy's method cannot reveal how the system operates: 'the object of investigation is taken as an integral one, and in order to preserve this most essential property, it is not analyzed but considered from the point of view of its behaviour as a whole'.[58] In other words, examining structure reveals only the holistic aspect of systems. Second, structures are static: 'It is not possible to perceive structure in a system unless the relationships among components with regard to particular variables are stable long enough for the relationship to be observed or to be deduced'.[59] Focusing on structure alone therefore restricts the kinds of systems it is possible to examine.

Because describing the structure of a whole does not constitute an explanation of the processes that take place within it, Blauberg *et al* argue that we must 'distinguish between the study of *a systems (complex) object* and *the systems study of such an object*'.[60] In other words, we must distinguish between examining complex systems and examining them from a systemic (holistic) perspective. The systemic approach 'proceeds from the fact that the specific features of an object (system) are not exhausted by the peculiarities of its constituent elements, but are rooted first and foremost in the

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[54] *Ibid.* p.32.
[55] *Ibid.* See also Jerone Stephens, 'An appraisal of some system approaches in the study of international systems', *International Studies Quarterly*, 16.3, Sep 1972, p.322.
[56] Bertalanffy, quoted in Blauberg *et al*, *Systems theory*, p.60.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] Blauberg *et al*, *Systems theory*, p.62.
[59] Andrew M. Scott, *The functioning of the international political system* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp.31-2.
[60] Blauberg *et al*, *Systems theory*, p.118.

character of the connections and relations between its elements'.[61] Yet a true systems study, Blauberg *et al* argue, must comprehend systems in both their integral and elemental aspects. Analysis and synthesis should not be separate, but 'two interdependent moments or stages in cognizing the whole, each of which is effected through the other'.[62] 'Cognition of the whole and its parts proceeds simultaneously: in singling out parts, we analyze them as elements of a given whole, and as the result of synthesis the whole appears as something dialectically dissected, consisting of parts'.[63] In this view, the difficulty with explaining the behaviour of complex wholes lies in appreciating simultaneously both their integral and elemental aspects: it lies in combining holistic and individualistic approaches. Without some conception of systems as wholes we cannot even consider their behaviour as systems. But this does not entail that system behaviour must be explained in terms of characteristics of the system as a whole. Both analytic and systemic perspectives are essential; the challenge is to show how the insights of both may be combined in a fuller understanding of complex systems.

Complexity, wholes, and the system concept

The issues arising in the preceding discussion of the nature of social complexity, the relation between parts and wholes, individualistic and holistic approaches, and general systems theory concern possible approaches to complex wholes. Spiro argues that '*anyone* who attempts to study politics scientifically must at least implicitly think of politics as though it were functioning as some sort of system'.[64] However, conceiving of politics as a system does not determine an appropriate form of explanation. Is the system a distinctive kind of whole? Does it require a distinctive form of explanation? What aspect of the system should we seek to explain, and in terms of what? Rosecrance divides international relations into historical periods and terms them systems: his objective is '*systematic empirical analysis*', which combines 'the systematic features of general explanatory concepts with the empirical

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[61] *Ibid.* p.119.
[62] *Ibid.* p.121.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] Herbert J. Spiro, 'An evaluation of systems theory', in James C. Charlesworth (ed.), *Contemporary political analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p.164.

content of detailed empirical analysis'.[65] In this approach, the system concept itself carries no explanatory weight. Waltz therefore denies that the approach is genuinely systemic: 'Rosecrance has not developed a theory; he has outlined a framework'.[66] According to Sullivan, system perspectives in International Relations 'assume that international systems *exist* and that these systems *behave*. What often appears as unrelated complexity and perhaps even random behaviour does, in fact, take on shape and form when viewed from system perspectives'.[67] However, he also issues a warning: 'It is one thing ... to assert that there is "organized complexity" and that organized international systems do indeed exist. It is something else to decide exactly how to visualize these systems or how to organize that complexity'.[68]

Although systemic approaches to international relations draw upon the international system as a source of explanations, it is doubtful whether functionalist or general systems approaches can be applied in this way. Hollis denies that it makes sense to construe 'social systems by analogy with organisms'.[69] Waltz argues that the presence of systemic effects 'does not in itself mean that the realm of international politics can be defined as a system in the sense in which that term us used by general-systems theorists'.[70] Nevertheless, we may draw upon such approaches heuristically, remaining cognizant that an inadequate explanation is also likely to be heuristically inadequate.[71] Thus Stephens observes that, in social science, 'functional systems analysis is used both for heuristic and for explanatory reasons ... but in international relations it seems that such analysis is often offered more for the former than for the latter reason'.[72] Young suggests that, despite the doubts about its broader

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[65] Richard N. Rosecrance, *Action and reaction in world politics: International systems in perspective* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp.5-6.
[66] Waltz, *Theory*, p.41.
[67] Michael P. Sullivan, *International relations: Theories and evidence* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p.153.
[68] *Ibid.* p.144.
[69] Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, p.104.
[70] Waltz, *Theory*, p.59.
[71] See Jerone Stephens, 'The logic of functional and systems analyses in political science', *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 13.3, Aug 1969, p.369.
[72] Stephens, 'An appraisal of some system approaches', p.329. Possible heuristic purposes include identifying 'structures that could possibly fulfil needs'.

theoretical ambitions, the general systems approach may serve more modest functions relevant to political analysis, such as classifying concepts:

> There is a variety of basically descriptive concepts within the framework of general systems theory that deal with types of systems, the various elements of internal organization of systems, and the interaction of systems with their environments, and that provide a good basis for a precise and operational description of political objects and phenomena.[73]

However, systems theorists in International Relations must look beyond functionalist and general systems approaches if they wish to develop nomothetic (explanatory) theories that draw upon the international system considered as a whole.

Where systemic approaches make direct explanatory claims, they draw upon the concept of the international system as a source of explanations. This implies that the object of explanation (whether properties of the parts or of the whole) is not satisfactorily explicable in analytic terms. However, it is essential to distinguish between systemic approaches as alternatives to and as complements to analytic approaches. Although Weaver called for the development of an alternative to analytic methods, this does not, as Blauberg *et al* show, make analytic methods inapplicable to complex systems. In fact, as Nagel suggests, the inadequacy of analytical methods for dealing with some complex wholes demonstrates only that those analytical methods we have at our disposal are inadequate, not that the whole in question is of a distinctive kind. If, as Blauberg *et al* suggest, analytic and systemic approaches are inherently linked, then the study of complex systems in one sense subsumes the dichotomy between individualistic and holistic approaches. Thus Little argues that the notion of organized complexity ('conceiving of a system as an organized set of relationships') embraces both mechanistic and organic approaches to systems.[74] Hollis goes further: if we rule out functionalism and argue merely that 'there are social facts and forces, which still bid us account for individual behaviour by reference to wholes with causal powers', this is likely to invite a compromise in which '"system" and "units" both contribute to outcomes by a process of mutual influence'.[75] If these scholars are right, the challenge for proponents of systemic perspectives is not merely to develop non-teleological

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[73] Oran R. Young, 'The impact of general systems theory on political science', *General Systems*, 9, 1964, p.243.
[74] Little, 'Three approaches', p.278.
[75] Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, p.113.

theories, but to show how systemic approaches complement analytic perspectives, thereby illuminating systems in all their aspects.

Waltz's systemic approach

This section outlines how the system concept is manifested in Waltz's explanatory strategy and in his substantive theory. It demonstrates how Waltz draws on Weaver's account of organized complexity, suggesting that he replicates Weaver's ambiguity about what a systemic approach should explain, and indicates some affinities between Waltz and the general systems theorists. However, whereas other systems theorists have pursued forms of functional analysis, Waltz attempts to show how structure causally affects unit behaviour. Further, Waltz's characterizations of systems and of systems approaches accentuate the role of both systemic and analytic perspectives. This section therefore highlights the tension between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting and his attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable.

Waltz's system concept

Waltz argues that much 'pointless work is done' in International Relations because crucial questions 'that should be asked at the outset of an inquiry are so often ignored'.[76] These questions mirror Weaver's discussion of organized complexity: they concern whether international politics permits use of analytic or statistical methods, or whether it 'permit[s] neither approach, but instead require[s] a systemic one'.[77] Theory, Waltz insists, is 'a means of dealing with complexity'; he intends a systemic approach to remedy 'the defects of present theories'.[78] He therefore suggests that we

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[76] Waltz, *Theory*, p.12.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.27; Waltz, *Theory*, p.1. Jervis echoes this sentiment: he aims to show that 'many of the methods that actors and social scientists use to understand the world are not suited to dealing with systems'. Jervis, *System effects*, p.29.

> try conceiving of political systems in ways compatible with usage in systems theory and in cybernetics. A system is then defined as a set of interacting units. At one level, a system consists of a structure, and the structure is the systems-level component that makes it possible to think of the units as forming a set as distinct from a mere collection. At another level, the system consists of interacting units.[79]

Two aspects of this definition merit closer scrutiny. First, the system is an abstract conceptualization, not a real entity; so, too, are aspects of systems such as its structure and units.[80] This must be so if the notion of a system is to be drawn upon in explanations: Waltz criticizes Hoffmann for moving too quickly 'from writing of political systems as intellectual constructs to hot pursuit of those systems as realities'.[81] The danger is that abstractions build in empirical content. Thus Reynolds objects that Easton's system is, in fact, 'partly based on empirical generalizations about a particular kind of polity'; Easton's 'assertions that there is an international society, an international economy and an international culture' therefore 'amount to little more than an expansion of notions derived from specific national or social contexts'.[82] Similarly, Reynolds questions whether the essential rules of Kaplan's balance-of-power system are 'more than historical generalizations based upon what statesmen apparently did at various times in European history'.[83]

Second, Waltz's system possesses emergent properties: properties not shared by the constituent units. Like the general systems theorists, Waltz identifies systems as complex wholes (not just aggregates) and argues that a system's structure gives it identity as a system. Thus Waltz criticizes Kaplan for concentrating on the variables within his systems rather than on their identities as systems. Waltz acknowledges that

> one has no system if it is not possible to describe its various states and to specify the variables that produce them. But to say only that leaves aside the prior question of what it is that makes the set a set instead of a mere collection of variables. Kaplan emphasizes the importance of this question rather than answering it. His "models" of each of his systems are not in fact

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[79] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.39-40. In constructing this definition, Waltz draws upon the works by Angyal, Bertalanffy and Watzlawick *et al*, cited above.
[80] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.80.
[81] *Ibid.* p.44.
[82] Charles Reynolds, *Theory and explanation in international politics* (Bath: Martin Robertson, 1973), p.36. Contrast Young, *Systems of political science*, pp.37-8.
[83] Reynolds, *Theory and explanation*, p.42. See also John J. Weltman, 'The processes of a systemicist', *The Journal of Politics*, 34.2, May 1972, pp.592-611.

> models but are mere collections of variables that are presumptively important for understanding international politics.[84]

Relatedly, Waltz argues that Morgenthau was ambivalent about the possibility of developing a rational theory of international politics because, '[w]ithout a concept of the whole, he could only deal with the parts'.[85] Weltman criticizes use of the system concept to refer merely 'to a given mass of data', with no effort made 'to give it the connotations of an entity with properties of its own'.[86] He finds nothing unsound in such usage, but points out that all social science 'must begin with a general assumption of interrelation in some sense or other'.[87] Because structure is an emergent property, Waltz's system concept contains more than mere interrelation. However, as Nagel shows, the question of whether analytic approaches are sufficient is not answered by pointing to emergent properties. Further, as Bertalanffy and Blauberg *et al* point out, to describe the structure of a whole is not to explain the processes that take place within it.

Waltz's adoption of a systemic approach is closely linked to a distinctly realist view of international politics. He argues, for example, that the

> texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked instead by dismaying persistence, a persistence that one must expect so long as none of the competing units is able to convert the anarchic international realm into a hierarchic one.[88]

Waltz insists that theories 'deal in regularities and repetitions and are possible only if these can be identified'.[89] He maintains, therefore, that the persistence of anarchy (and of recognizable patterns of relations within it) has powerful implications for International Relations theory:

> Internationally, different states have produced similar as well as different outcomes, and similar states have produced different as well as similar outcomes. The same causes sometimes lead to different effects, and the same effects sometimes follow from different

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[84] Waltz, *Theory*, p.55. See Morton A. Kaplan, *System and process in international politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957).
[85] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.26.
[86] John J. Weltman, 'Systems theory in international relations: a critique', *Polity*, 4.3, Spring 1972, p.322.
[87] *Ibid.* p.327.
[88] Waltz, *Theory*, p.66. See also p.113.
[89] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.26.

> causes. We are led to suspect that reductionist explanations of international politics are insufficient and that analytic approaches must give way to systemic ones.[90]

In other words, because outcomes in international politics do not follow directly from the actions of individual states, Waltz believes that the causes of those outcomes cannot lie in the actors alone. Nevertheless, because emergent properties do not themselves necessitate a systemic approach, Waltz's critique of analytic approaches in International Relations plays a crucial role in justifying his explanatory strategy.

Waltz argues that the analytic method, which he associates with classical physics, 'requires reducing the entity to its discrete parts and examining their properties and connections. The whole is understood by studying its elements in their relative simplicity and by observing the relations between them'.[91] He argues that this method 'works, and works wonderfully, where relations among several factors can be resolved into relations between pairs of variables while "other things are held equal"'.[92] But it is inadequate 'if outcomes are affected not only by the properties and interconnections of variables but also by the way in which they are organized'.[93] This account closely shadows Weaver's presentation of the limitations of analytic approaches when faced by organized complexity. However, it also replicates Weaver's lack of clarity about what aspects of wholes analytic approaches are unable to explain and, therefore, why systemic approaches are required. This failing is most apparent in Waltz's discussion of reductionism, a term he uses to denote any approach in which the whole is 'known through the study of its parts'.[94] Waltz describes *Man, the state and war* as having 'distinguished explanations of international politics ... according to the level at which causes are located'.[95] In *Theory*, he employed a 'still simpler division': 'Theories of international politics that concentrate causes at the individual or national level are reductionist; theories that conceive of causes operating at the international level as well are systemic'.[96] Waltz acknowledges that one cannot say a

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[90] Waltz, *Theory*, p.37.
[91] *Ibid.* p.39.
[92] *Ibid.*
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] *Ibid.* p.19.
[95] *Ibid.* p.18.
[96] *Ibid.*

priori whether the reductionist approach will suffice, but criticizes reductionist theories for failing to provide 'reliable explanations or predictions' about international politics.[97]

Waltz's critique of reductionist approaches conflates a form of explanation with a statement about what is being explained, thereby introducing a parallel confusion as to what systemic approaches can explain.[98] Reductionism is a mode of explanation: 'the whole is understood by knowing the attributes and the interactions of its parts' (the study of the whole is reduced to the study of its parts).[99] Thus Waltz complains that political scientists adopt a 'behavioural logic' which ignores questions of organization in favour of an exclusive focus on 'finding out who is doing what to produce the outcomes'.[100] The consequence of ignoring organization, he argues, is that its effects are arbitrarily parcelled out among actors as causes, leading to the 'infinite proliferation of variables'.[101] Yet Waltz also defines reductionist theory as 'a theory about the behaviour of parts', identifying it with an object (rather than a mode) of explanation.[102] The problem with this definition is that a theory about the behaviour of parts will not necessarily be reductionist: to describe the workings of a clock in terms of the theory of mechanics and the arrangement of the parts is to explain the behaviour of the clock's parts, but it is not reductionist. The issue turns on whether a theory is reductionist because of how it explains (by reference to the parts) or what it explains (the parts). Because Waltz defines systemic approaches in opposition to reductionist approaches, it is unclear whether he seeks to explain the workings of the system or to draw upon the system, considered as a whole, as a source of explanations. Waltz's theory employs structure (an aspect of systems considered as wholes) as a source of explanations, yet many aspects of his theoretical endeavours reflect a lack of clarity about whether he is trying to explain properties of the system, or to explain by drawing upon properties of the system.

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[97] *Ibid.* p.19.
[98] Waltz also confuses two sorts of reduction: explaining events in one sector in terms of those in another (for example, reducing politics to economics) and explaining wholes in terms of their parts.
[99] *Ibid.* p.18.
[100] *Ibid.* p.62.
[101] *Ibid.* p.65.
[102] *Ibid.* p.60.

This lack of clarity is apparent in Waltz's account of what a systemic approach explains:

> In international politics the appropriate concerns, and the possible accomplishments of systems theory are twofold: first, to trace the expected careers of different international systems, for example, by indicating their likely durability and peacefulness; second, to show how the structure of the system affects the interacting units and how they in turn affect the structure.[103]

Tracing system development involves examining systems as wholes. If such an exercise proceeds systemically, it is analogous to examining economies with reference to macroeconomic phenomena. In contrast, demonstrating how system structure affects the interacting units involves making behaviour the dependent variable: it involves drawing upon the structure (organization) of the system to explain the workings of its parts. Waltz even suggests that a systemic theory of international politics should show how the interacting units affect the structure: an *analytic* endeavour. Confusion arises because a systemic theory is only one part of a broader systems approach. Waltz insists that a 'systems approach is required only if the structure of the system and its interacting units mutually affect each other'.[104] In other words, in a complex system, structure and units are mutually affecting. A systemic theory, in which explanations draw on characteristics of the system (in the case of Waltz's theory, its structure), therefore represents only one part of a broader systems approach. Clarity is not aided by Waltz's failure adequately to distinguish between a systemic theory (which shows how structure affects behaviour and outcomes) and a systems approach that (somehow) combines systemic and analytic viewpoints. The crucial point, however, is that Waltz recognizes that a systemic perspective is not the only perspective on complex wholes: thinking in terms of systems subsumes the dichotomy between individualistic and holistic perspectives.

Waltz often suggests that a systemic theory explains outcomes rather than behaviour. He argues, for example, that a systemic approach should infer 'expectations about the outcomes of states' behaviour and interactions from a knowledge of systems-level elements'.[105] However, aspects of the system as a whole, such as its structure, affect outcomes by affecting behaviour: 'The concept of structure is based on the fact that units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting

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[103] *Ibid.* p.40.
[104] *Ibid.* p.58.
[105] *Ibid.* p.50.

produce different outcomes'.[106] Thus Waltz's substantive explanations are focused on great power behaviour and the consequences thereof.[107] His theory shows how the polarity of the system affects the form and outcomes of balancing behaviour.[108] In attempting to explain state behaviour, Waltz differs from previous systems theorists, who tended to adopt forms of functional analysis. Easton, for example, focused on questions of system maintenance, particularly how political systems deal with disturbances from their environments.[109] Kaplan argued that the 'main task of a theory of international politics is to investigate the institutional regularities that attend the course of international political life'.[110] Theory should be able to 'describe distinctive kinds of international systems and the conditions under which they are maintained'.[111] Although Rosecrance adopted an empirical approach, he too was interested in questions about system maintenance and transformation.[112] Rather than analyzing how structures function to maintain systems, Waltz seeks to show how the organization of a complex system affects behaviour within it. However, this does not make Waltz a (teleological) functionalist: his theory incorporates an attempt to specify causal links between structure and behaviour (the processes of selection and socialization).[113]

Waltz's systemic theory

Waltz's first step in constructing a systemic theory of international politics is to separate the structure of the system from the interacting units: 'Any approach or theory, if it is rightly termed "systemic",

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[106] *Ibid.* p.81.
[107] See *ibid.* chs.7-9. Although Waltz insists that his is a theory of international politics, not of foreign policy, this distinction has more to do with whether Waltz's theory generates complete explanations of state behaviour than whether it explains behaviour or outcomes. See Ch.9, below.
[108] See Ch.6, below.
[109] See Young, *Systems of political science*, pp.38-9, 44.
[110] Morton A. Kaplan, 'Problems of theory building and theory confirmation in international politics', in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba (eds.), *The international system: Theoretical essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p.13.
[111] Morton A. Kaplan, 'Toward a theory of international politics: Quincy Wright's *Study of international relations* and some recent developments', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2.4, Dec 1958, p.336.
[112] See Rosecrance, *Action and reaction*, p.9.
[113] See Ch.7, below.

must show how the systems level, or structure, is distinct from the level of interacting units'.[114] Although the 'aim of systems theory' is to show how structure and units 'operate and interact', Waltz insists that this requires 'marking them off from each other'.[115] He criticizes other theorists for failing to achieve this. Galtung is accused of including attributes of states in his definition of international structure, making his approach reductionist: 'Structure is a useful concept if it is seen as conditioning behaviour ... Defining international structure partly in terms of national attributes identifies those attributes with the outcomes one is trying to explain'.[116] Kaplan is accused of failing to establish the identity of a system as distinct from its parts. Kaplan

> frequently asks what the effect of the behaviour of states on the international systems may be. He cannot put the question the other way around, for he has no concept of the system's structure acting as an organizational constraint on the actors ... Since he cannot say how the system will affect the actors, his explanations or predictions can only be about the system itself – its equilibrium conditions, the extent of its stability, and the likelihood of its transformation.[117]

Waltz's theory is distinctive, therefore, insofar as it attempts to show how the organization of the system (its structure) affects behaviour within it. Lamenting that 'one is hard pressed to find a systems approach that views structure as a systems-level concept actually having some causal impact', Waltz insists that a 'theory of international politics can succeed only if political structures are defined in ways that identify their causal effects and show how those effects vary as structures change'.[118]

Waltz describes Kaplan as 'one of the few major theorists' who regards structure as having a causal impact.[119] However, Kaplan focuses on systems as forms of interaction rather than on structures as causal variables. Thus Kaplan is prepared, where Waltz is not, to view the international system as subsystem dominant: Kaplan asks whether states (subsystems) generate the conditions of action in a system through their interaction, or whether they behave as they do because the rules of the system appear to be given. He argues that, because there are only a few great powers, international relations is subsystem dominant: the international system is 'a set of relations that exist not as parametric

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[114] Waltz, *Theory*, p.40.
[115] *Ibid.*
[116] *Ibid.* p.31. Wendt makes a similar criticism of Waltz. See Chs.3-4, below.
[117] Waltz, *Theory*, p.56.
[118] *Ibid.* pp.50, 70.
[119] *Ibid.* p.50.

"givens" for the actors but as conditions that can be affected by their actions'.[120] Waltz describes this as 'the negation of a systems approach'.[121] However, although the notion of subsystem dominance may be inconsistent with the attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable, it is consistent with the notion that the examination of complex wholes requires both systemic and analytic perspectives. Jervis' emphasis on how structures are generated also casts doubt on the attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable. Jervis argues that as 'actions combine to constitute the environment in which the actors are situated and actors in turn change as the environment alters, the language of dependent and independent variables becomes problematic'.[122] Waltz's attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable therefore sets him apart from other systems theorists, who tend to emphasize both the analytic and systemic aspects of complex systems. Further, it establishes a deep tension between Waltz's general acceptance that a systems approach should show how structure and units interact and his theoretical attempt to explain behaviour in terms of structural forces.

Waltz argues that other systems theorists failed 'to contrive a definition of structure free of the attributes and the interactions of units. Definitions of structure must leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units, their behaviour, and their interactions'.[123] These factors must be omitted in order to 'distinguish between variables at the level of the units and variables at the level of the system' and to 'distinguish changes of structure from changes that take place within it'.[124] What remains is the arrangement of the units: a property of the system as a whole rather than of the individual units. As Waltz puts it: 'To define a structure requires ignoring how units relate with one another (how they interact) and concentrating on how they stand in relation to one another (how they are arranged or positioned)'.[125] Waltz incorporates three elements of arrangement in his definition of structure: the ordering principle; the functional differentiation of the units; and the distribution of capabilities.[126]

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[120] Kaplan 'Problems of theory building', p.15. See also Morton A. Kaplan, 'Systems theory', in Charlesworth (ed.), *Contemporary political analysis*, pp.160-2.
[121] Waltz, *Theory*, p.54.
[122] Jervis, *System effects*, pp.57-8.
[123] Waltz, *Theory,* p.79.
[124] *Ibid.* pp.79, 40.
[125] *Ibid.* p.80.
[126] See *ibid.* p.82.

Thus the structure of the international political system is defined in terms of anarchy, or the absence of hierarchical order (its ordering principle), the lack of functional differentiation between the units (a feature of the lack of hierarchical order), and the polarity of the system (the distribution of capabilities).[127] The link between structure and behaviour is forged by the assumption that 'states seek to ensure their survival'.[128] In order to survive in an anarchic system, states adopt self-help strategies: they 'do whatever they think necessary for their own preservation, since no one can be relied on to do it for them'.[129] If they fail to help themselves, states are likely to fall by the wayside. Thus structure affects behaviour in two ways: first, 'units worry about their survival, and the worry conditions their behaviour' (they are socialized to the system); second, those who adopt successful strategies survive (the system selects successful behaviours).[130] Either way, Waltz insists, balances of power result.

Waltz describes political structures as akin to force fields: 'Interactions within a field have properties different from those they would have if they occurred outside of it, and as the field affects the objects so the objects affect the field'.[131] His definition of the structure of the international political system must therefore be viewed in the context of his insistence that structure and units are mutually affecting: Waltz argues that structure 'is the concept that makes it possible to say ... how structures and units interact and affect each other'.[132] Consequently, although his systemic theory uses structure to explain behaviour, Waltz does not view structure as a cause like any other: structures are not causes 'in the sense meant by saying that *A* causes *X* and *B* causes *Y*'.[133] This reflects the tension in Waltz's work between his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system and his attempt to develop a nomothetic structural theory. Although Waltz argues that structures 'work to keep outcomes

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[127] See *ibid.* pp.88-99.
[128] *Ibid.* p.91. Some commentators draw attention to (and criticize the imprecision of) an alternative formulation of this assumption: states, 'at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination'. Yet whereas this formulation (which reflects Waltz's acknowledgement that motives *beyond* survival 'may be endlessly varied') arises only once, Waltz repeatedly emphasizes that he assumes only that states seek survival. See *ibid.* pp.91, 118; Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is anybody still a realist?' *International Security*, 24.2, Fall 1999, p.14; Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*, pp.52-3.
[129] Waltz, *Theory*, p.109.
[130] *Ibid.* pp.105, 92-3. See Ch.7, below.
[131] Waltz, *Theory*, p.73.
[132] *Ibid.* p.100.
[133] *Ibid.* p.74.

within narrow ranges', he insists that they are not agents or compensating devices.[134] Rather, they are sets of 'constraining conditions': they 'limit and mould agents and agencies and point them in ways that tend toward a common quality of outcomes even though the efforts and aims of agents and agencies vary'.[135] In other words, despite Waltz's efforts to isolate structure as an independent variable, his theory represents only one part of the relation between structure and units; consequently, structure is never the only cause in play in the international system. Outcomes are maintained within narrow ranges not because structure makes alternative outcomes impossible, but because structural and unit-level causes combine to produce these outcomes.[136] In reality, structure interacts with other causes to generate international relations, yet Waltz's theory depicts only one element of this process.

Waltz's theory is a balance-of-power theory: it

> is built up from the assumed motivations of states and the actions that correspond to them. It describes the constraints that arise from the system that those actions produce and it indicates the expected outcome: namely, the formation of balances of power.[137]

The theory is systemic because it shows how the structure of the system encourages balancing behaviour; unlike an analytic approach, it requires no assumption that states would pursue balances of power anyway. According to Waltz: 'Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive'.[138] Nevertheless, there is some ambiguity about precisely what the theory purports to explain. On the one hand, Waltz describes it as 'a theory about the results produced by the uncoordinated actions of states', suggesting that it explains outcomes rather than behaviour; on the other hand, he says that it explains 'why a certain similarity of behaviour is expected from similarly situated states'.[139] Even in Waltz's substantive theory, therefore, an ambiguity is present that can be traced back to Weaver: does a systemic approach explain properties of the whole or employ properties of the whole in its

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[134] *Ibid.* p.73.
[135] *Ibid.* pp.73-4.
[136] Were structures to limit the possible range of outcomes, then they would operate as causes in the sense that *A* causes *X* and *B* causes *Y*: the structure of the international political system would cause the range of possible outcomes to be this, not that.
[137] *Ibid.* p.118.
[138] *Ibid.* p.121.
[139] *Ibid.* p.122.

explanations? The problem derives, of course, from the fact that a systemic theory only provides one possible perspective on the workings of complex wholes. Keen to avoid the accusation that his theory is flawed because it explains only some aspects of state behaviour, Waltz tends to frame his conclusions in terms of behavioural tendencies or aggregate outcomes rather than to develop specific predictions about state behaviour. Nevertheless, his substantive explanations unambiguously link the polarity of an anarchic system to particular state behaviours.[140]

Conclusion

A consistent characteristic of Waltz's exposition of his explanatory approach is his failure to clarify precisely what a systemic theory is and what it explains. First, Waltz acknowledges that a systemic theory alone is insufficient: he argues that one's approach should allow 'for the handling of both unit-level and systems-level causes'.[141] Nevertheless, his theory isolates system structure as an independent variable. Second, Waltz is inconsistent about whether a systemic theory generates explanations which draw on properties of the system as a whole, or whether it attempts to explain properties of the system as a whole, or both. He is also, therefore, inconsistent about whether a systemic approach explains unit behaviour, outcomes at the level of the system as a whole, or both. Waltz's confusing use of terminology exacerbates his failure to clarify the precise nature of a systemic approach. He conflates five possible uses of the term 'systemic': to denote an approach that conceives of its subject matter as a complex system; to denote an approach that is not reductionist; to denote an approach that explains holistic characteristics of systems; to denote an approach that explains the behaviour of a system's units in terms of any aspect of the system considered as a whole; and to denote an approach that uses structure to explain state behaviour. Most significant is the failure consistently to differentiate between (what I term) a systems approach (which conceptualizes its subject matter as a complex system and implicitly acknowledges a role for both systemic and analytic perspectives), and (what I term) a systemic theory or perspective (which draws upon properties of the system as a whole in its

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[140] See Ch.6, below.
[141] Waltz, *Theory*, p.68.

explanations). This distinction encapsulates the fundamental tension in Waltz's work: he seeks to isolate structure as an independent variable despite conceptualizing international relations as a complex system.

Characterizations of systems approaches as incorporating both systemic and analytic perspectives are widespread in International Relations (although this point is often ignored by Waltz's critics). Buzan argues, for example, that systems can be examined either analytically or systemically:

> from the bottom up, explanations in terms of interactions among or within units seek to understand behaviour and outcomes in terms of the ways in which units at any level respond to one another's attributes and behaviours. Looked at from the top down, process is about the dynamics of a system.[142]

Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff argue that systems theory 'brings together two fundamental approaches': a focus on actors and interaction, and a focus on the structures that frame interactions.[143] Frankel argues that systems analysis can focus 'either upon the international system as a whole or on the state as a unit operating within this system'.[144] However, if systems theories subsume the division between holistic and individualistic approaches, how the two perspectives are to be combined remains unclear. Although Blauberg *et al* identify the problem, they do not offer a specific solution. Further, this chapter has suggested that the very idea of a systemic perspective is often poorly defined. Weaver identified the need for a new approach, but not the method. Functional explanation is illegitimate, whilst functional analysis (developed by many systems theorists) merely examines the workings of wholes, rather than drawing upon them in explanations. The general systems approach is not appropriate to international politics. Waltz's attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable represents a radical departure, but it sits uneasily with his characterization of international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting.

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[142] Barry Buzan, 'The level of analysis problem in international relations reconsidered', in Booth & Smith (eds.), *International relations theory today*, p.211.
[143] James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending theories of international relations: A comprehensive survey*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), p.105.
[144] Joseph Frankel, *Contemporary international theory and the behaviour of states* (Oxford: OUP, 1973), p.23.

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Waltz and his critics: explanatory debates in International Relations

This chapter examines two theoretical debates associated with Waltz's work: they address what are commonly referred to in International Relations as the level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems and are concerned, amongst other things, with what a systemic approach can explain. This chapter also examines two critiques of Waltz's explanatory strategy. The first, associated with scholars such as Buzan and Ruggie, concerns Waltz's narrow definition of structure and his restrictive conception of the scope of a systemic theory. The second critique, associated with scholars such as Wendt and Dessler, concerns the relation between Waltz's theoretical premises and his underlying beliefs about international relations. The purpose of examining these debates and critiques is to review prominent ideas about Waltz's explanatory strategy and to evaluate how they contribute to our understanding of how a nomothetic theory about complex systems can be developed. The following questions are therefore central. Do these debates and critiques illuminate what it means to conceptualize international relations as a complex system? Do they indicate what explanatory strategies are consistent with such a conceptualization? Do they shed light on Waltz's decision to pursue a mode of explanation apparently at odds with how he conceptualizes international relations? The debates and critiques are found to illuminate the sorts of problems that Waltz encounters in developing a systemic approach and to identify the explanatory weaknesses of his substantive balance-of-power theory. However, they do not convincingly get to grips with the relation between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a complex system and his decision to develop a nomothetic theory. They therefore also fail to address how Waltz's struggle to reconcile these two elements of his approach illuminates the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations.

The level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems

The level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems in International Relations concern what a theory can explain and in reference to what. In these debates, theorists have attempted to get to grips with the explanatory problem posed in the previous chapter: if we conceive of international relations as a system, should we try to explain aspects of the whole or its parts? Should these explanations draw on aspects of the whole or of the parts? These debates therefore speak to the question of what a systemic theory is (and should explain) and how a systemic theory fits into an integrated systems approach. Waltz's work features prominently in both debates. *Man, the state and war* was one of the first works explicitly to distinguish levels of analysis (images). Waltz identified three levels (individual, state, and system), though *Theory* examines only two (unit and system). Although Waltz does not explicitly address the agent-structure problem, discussions often refer to Waltz, whose theory is thought to embody an individualist approach. This section outlines the substantive issues at stake in these debates and reviews prominent contributions to them. It finds that Waltz's definition of levels is problematic and that his theory provides a truncated account of the relationship between agents and structures. However, it also finds that these debates do not directly engage with the puzzle posed by Waltz's attempt to explore a complex system by means of a theory that isolates one element of that system (its structure) as an independent variable.

The level-of-analysis problem

Singer argues that the level-of-analysis problem concerns how phenomena are 'sorted and arranged': in both the physical and the social sciences, 'the observer may choose to focus upon the parts or upon the whole, upon the components or upon the system'.[1] Singer believes the choice to be highly significant; he highlights 'the long-standing controversies between social psychology and sociology, personality-

[1] J. David Singer, 'The level-of-analysis problem in international relations', in Knorr & Verba (eds.), *The international system*, p.77.

oriented and culture-oriented anthropology, or micro- and macro-economics'.[2] In International Relations, he observes, scholars have

> roamed 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 pressures groups, social classes, elites, and individuals as the needs of the moment required.[3]

The difficulty, according to Singer, is that we want theoretical models to 'offer a highly accurate *description* of the phenomena under consideration', yet 'accurate representation of a complex and wide-ranging body of phenomena is extremely difficult'.[4] He draws an analogy with the fact that the globe cannot be projected in two dimensions without distortion, but points out that different projections may be adequate for different purposes. We must, he suggests, be equally tolerant in international relations: the 'responsible scholar must be prepared to evaluate the relative utility – conceptual and methodological – of the various alternatives open to him, and to appraise the manifold implications of the level of analysis finally selected'.[5] The chief criterion in evaluating models should be their explanatory power: 'the primary purpose of theory is to explain, and when descriptive and explanatory requirements are in conflict, the latter ought to be given priority, even at the cost of some representational inaccuracy'.[6]

Singer differentiates two levels of analysis in International Relations: systemic and state levels.[7] He describes the systemic level, which focuses on the 'total international system', as the only level that 'permits us to examine international relations in the whole'.[8] It enables scholars to 'study the patterns of interaction which the system reveals' and to 'generalize about' phenomena such as alliances, power configurations, system stability, and social norms.[9] However, Singer warns that systemic models tend to lack detail and to exaggerate 'the impact of the system upon the national actors' whilst discounting

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[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.* p.78.
[4] *Ibid.* pp.78-9.
[5] *Ibid.* p.77.
[6] *Ibid.* p.79.
[7] Singer acknowledges that other levels are possible and several scholars have proposed additional candidates. See Buzan, 'The level of analysis problem', pp.202-3; Nicholas Onuf, 'Levels', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1.1, March 1995, pp.36-7.
[8] Singer, 'The level-of-analysis problem', p.80.
[9] *Ibid.*

'the impact of the actors on the system'.[10] The 'most obvious advantage' of adopting the national state level of analysis is therefore that it 'permits significant differentiation' among actors.[11] At the state level, we can investigate 'the processes by which national goals are selected, the internal and external factors that impinge on those processes, and the institutional framework from which they emerge', issues ignored by systemic models.[12] However, Singer warns that, 'just as the nation-as-actor focus permits us to avoid the inaccurate homogenization which often flows from the systemic focus, it also may lead us into the opposite type of distortion – a marked exaggeration of the differences' among actors.[13] Singer therefore finds himself unable to present an 'overriding case' for preferring one level of analysis over the other: 'For a staggering variety of reasons the scholar may be more interested in one level than another at any given time and will undoubtedly shift his orientation according to his research needs'.[14] The problem, he concludes, is not to decide 'which level is most valuable to the discipline as a whole' but to realize 'that there *is* this preliminary conceptual issue and that it must be temporarily resolved prior to any given research undertaking'.[15]

The main problem with Singer's presentation of the level-of-analysis problem is that he slides between using 'level' to denote phenomena (what might be termed units, or objects, of analysis) and to denote explanatory perspectives (how, or in terms of what, a particular unit of analysis is explained). In other words, he slides between discussion of what scholars of international relations seek to explain and discussion of how these objects of analysis are best explained. Moul accuses Singer of inaccurately equating the problem of the relation between parts and wholes with controversies such as those between social psychology and sociology. In Moul's view, the first problem is concerned 'with different units of analysis', whilst the latter is concerned 'with the types of variables that explain a

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[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.* p.82.
[12] *Ibid.* p.85. Singer recognizes the phenomenological problem of whether state level models should examine supposedly objective factors or actors' perceptions of those factors. See *ibid.* p.86.
[13] *Ibid.* p.83.
[14] *Ibid.* p.90.
[15] *Ibid.*

particular unit's behaviour'.[16] In other words, choosing a particular unit of analysis (an object or phenomenon to study) is different from choosing between explanatory approaches. Moul argues that Singer's systemic and state levels are really different ways of explaining the behaviour of the same unit of analysis: the state. Singer's levels differ 'only in terms of the relative importance ascribed to "systemic", "external", or "environmental" *influences upon state behaviour*'.[17] Instead of debating the virtues of studying different phenomena or objects of analysis, Moul argues, Singer debates 'the utilities of various models of state behaviour'.[18] Moul therefore contends that Singer is wrong to warn against shifting between levels of analysis during a study. If levels denote alternative models of the behaviour of the same unit of analysis, rather than denoting different objects of study, then they offer a useful variation in perspective: one should 'shift back and forth assessing the contribution of particular types of variables to an explanation of a state's external behaviour'.[19]

Waltz's account of levels of analysis to some extent mirrors the inconsistency that Moul identifies in Singer. On the one hand, Waltz argues that 'theories of international politics, whether reductionist or systemic, deal with events at all levels ... Theories are reductionist or systemic, not according to what they deal with, but according to how they arrange their materials'.[20] In other words, theories are differentiated not according to what they seek to explain, but according to the variables that their explanations draw upon. This mirrors Singer's contention that systemic models emphasize the impact of the system on the actors and that state level models emphasize the influence of the actors on the system. On the other hand, Waltz uses 'levels' to denote locations where causes may be found: 'Reductionist theories explain international outcomes through elements and combinations of elements located at national or subnational levels'.[21] From here, Waltz quickly slips into associating systemic theories with system-wide outcomes and reductionist theories with unit-level outcomes:

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[16] William B. Moul, 'The level of analysis problem revisited', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 6.3, Sep 1973, p.495.
[17] *Ibid.* p.496.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Waltz, *Theory*, p.60.
[21] *Ibid.*

> Systems theories explain why different units behave similarly and, despite their variations, produce outcomes that fall within expected ranges. Conversely, theories at the unit level tell us why different units behave differently despite their similar placement in a system.[22]

This mirrors Singer's contention that systemic models facilitate generalizations about system-wide patterns, whilst state level models permit investigation of the nature of the actors. This inconsistency in Waltz's use of the term 'level' reflects his failure to differentiate clearly between drawing upon aspects of the whole in explanations and explaining properties of the system as a whole.

Waltz's core theoretical objective is to develop (what Singer would term) a systemic model of state behaviour: he seeks to show how the structure of the system affects state behaviour and the outcomes thereof. He therefore criticizes Singer for suggesting that the choice between levels of analysis is a 'matter of methodological or conceptual convenience', objecting that Singer ignores the 'contextual difference between organized politics within states and formally unorganized politics among them'.[23] In Waltz's eyes, the fundamental difference between hierarchy and anarchy is what makes a systemic approach necessary; the level-of-analysis problem cannot, therefore, be a matter of choice. This is illustrated by Waltz's statement, in the Preface to the 2001 edition of *Man, the state and war*, that he preferred the term 'image' to 'level of analysis' 'because one who thinks in terms of levels easily slips into thinking that choosing a level is merely a question of what seems to fit the subject matter and suits one's fancy'.[24] He insists that 'a wider understanding of international politics requires a systemic approach, which at once draws attention to third-image effects and enables one to comprehend all three "levels"'.[25] This demonstrates that, for Waltz, the level-of-analysis problem concerns how, not what, we explain. It also reveals that Waltz's inconsistency regarding levels stems from the tension underlying his whole approach. On the one hand, Waltz conceptualizes international politics as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. This appears to demand an integrated systems approach that comprehends both systemic and analytic models. On the other hand, Waltz attempts to isolate system structure as an independent variable. In doing so, he slips

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[22] *Ibid.* p.72.
[23] Singer, 'The level-of-analysis problem', p.77; Waltz, *Theory*, p.61.
[24] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.ix.
[25] *Ibid.*

into treating structure as an object of study existing independently of the interactions by which it was generated. Systemic explanations become studies of the (postulated) systemic level.

Hollis and Smith interpret the level-of-analysis problem, even in Singer's formulation, as a problem about how to explain: it concerns 'whether to account for the behaviour of the international system in terms of the behaviour of the nation states comprising it or vice versa'.[26] However, they argue that choosing between systemic and state-as-actor perspectives does not exhaust the problem. If states can be drawn upon in explanations (if their behaviour is not entirely determined by systemic forces), then a further level-of-analysis problem appears: 'Are we to account for the behaviour of the state in terms of the behaviour of its constituent bureaucracies (and other agencies), or vice versa?'[27] The problem is not even exhausted here: if state agencies are conceived of as independent causes of state behaviour, is the behaviour of those agencies to be accounted for in terms of the behaviour of individuals, or vice versa? At each stage of the level-of-analysis problem, Hollis and Smith argue, 'the "unit" of the higher layer becomes the "system" of the lower layer'.[28] Thus, for any unit, the level-of-analysis problem concerns whether to adopt a holistic or an individualistic explanatory perspective; it concerns whether explanatory primacy is assigned to structure or to action. The level-of-analysis problem is 'a methodological not an ontological debate: it refers to how best to explain and not to how the world really is'.[29] Hollis and Smith also contend that there is a level-of-analysis problem for interpretative (hermeneutic) approaches: it concerns, for example, whether 'social rules and institutions account for the performance of social roles, or vice versa'.[30] Although I do not pursue this line of thought, it is important to recognize that, in each layer of the level-of-analysis problem 'the debate is about whether analysis is to proceed "top-down" or "bottom-up" and, less obviously but no less importantly, whether the aim is to explain or to understand'.[31]

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[26] Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, p.7.
[27] *Ibid.* p.8.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.* p.203.
[30] *Ibid.* p.8.
[31] *Ibid.* p.197. Hollis and Smith in fact contend that it is far harder to integrate explanatory and interpretative approaches than to integrate holistic and individualistic approaches. See Martin Hollis

Buzan argues that International Relations is characterized by 'a pragmatic attitude towards levels of analysis': the mainstream position is that 'both reductionist and holistic approaches can and must be used if anything like a complete understanding of international relations is to be achieved'.[32] However, Buzan observes that the 'neat fit between the idea of levels, and the natural division of the subject matter into individuals, states and system, seems largely to have forestalled any intense enquiry into the concept of levels itself'.[33] Consequently, he suggests, it is unclear whether the level-of-analysis problem is primarily epistemological (about different approaches to knowledge) or ontological (about the number and type of entities thought to exist in the international political system).[34] Construed as ontological referents, levels of analysis denote units, 'organized on the principle of spatial scale', in which 'both outcomes and sources of explanation can be located'.[35] Buzan contends that 'much of the debate about levels of analysis has *de facto* taken place within this framework'.[36] Understood as an epistemological construct, levels of analysis refer to 'different types or sources of explanation for observed phenomena'.[37] According to Buzan, debate in International Relations has centred on three such levels: interaction capacity (the types and intensities of interaction possible within a given unit or system), structure (the principle by which units within a system are arranged), and process (how units interact within the constraints of interaction capacity and structure). Buzan argues that Waltz 'blurred the distinction' between ontological and epistemological conceptions of levels of analysis: in Waltz's theory, 'system and unit could be (and were) seen as both objects of analysis and sources of explanation'.[38]

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and Steve Smith, 'Two stories about structure and agency', *Review of International Studies*, 20.3, July 1994, p.248.

[32] Buzan, 'The level of analysis problem', p.200.

[33] *Ibid.* p.202.

[34] Buzan identifies this distinction with Moul's distinction between units of analysis (an ontological concern) and the types of variables that explain a particular unit's behaviour (an epistemological concern).

[35] *Ibid.* p.204.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.* p.203.

According to Buzan, Waltz's theory employs 'a single unit (system) plus a single source of explanation (structure)' and presents them as if they constitute 'a single level'.[39] He describes Waltz's focus on structure, ignoring the other possible sources of explanations, as 'lopsided', suggesting that it 'distorted the debate about levels of analysis'.[40] In effect, he argues, Waltz conflated 'the deeper philosophical debate about reductionist and holist approaches ... and the more pragmatic issues of levels of analysis', making the two indistinguishable.[41] Because Waltz's division between systemic and unit levels has been widely adopted, Buzan argues, other sources of explanation, particularly interaction capacity, have been obscured. The oppositional qualities associated with the debate between atomism and holism have been imposed onto the level-of-analysis problem. Thus Buzan differentiates questions about the relation between parts and wholes from questions about the sources of explanation that may be drawn upon in accounting for any particular object of analysis. Waltz's mistake, Buzan suggests, was not to distinguish structure from units, but to confine the debate to only these two levels, to blur the distinction between units of analysis and sources of explanation, and to assume that structure is the only source of explanation at the system level. According to Buzan, '[m]any of these problems can be solved by separating units of analysis from sources of explanation'.[42] The important issue in International Relations theory, he suggests, is not the relation between parts and wholes (which remains unresolved), but 'which units of analysis and which sources of explanation tell us most about any given event or phenomenon'.[43] This may change from case to case:

> In international relations generally, all the levels are powerfully in play. The important theoretical question is: if two or more units and sources of explanation are operating together, how are their different analyses to be assembled in a whole understanding?[44]

Both Moul and Buzan draw attention to the difference between questions about appropriate objects of analysis and questions about what is drawn upon in explaining (the behaviour or properties of) those objects of analysis. Singer tends to conflate these debates and his inconsistency is replicated by Waltz.

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[39] *Ibid.* p.207.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.* p.210.
[43] *Ibid.* pp.212-3.
[44] *Ibid.* p.213.

However, Waltz's distinction between systemic and reductionist theories is, at root, despite his inconsistencies, about approaches to explanation: reductionist theories explain properties of the system as a whole, and the behaviour of its units, in terms of properties of its units; systemic theories explain the behaviour (and properties) of units in terms of properties of the system as a whole. Yet even if we draw upon the level-of-analysis debate to construe Waltz as discussing approaches to explanation rather than objects of analysis, this does not explain the relation between Waltz's characterization of international relations as a complex system and his attempt to develop a theory in which system structure is isolated as an independent variable. Waltz's attempt to separate system structure from unit interaction prompts the worry that his discussion of approaches to explanation slips into a discussion of objects of analysis. Further, although examining the level-of-analysis problem allows us to distinguish questions about objects of analysis from questions about what is drawn upon in explaining them, it does not resolve the relation between the two. Moul, for example, believes that the level-of-analysis problem is (most helpfully construed as being) about units of analysis.[45] Buzan contends that it is (most helpfully construed as being) about approaches to explanation. Hollis and Smith agree with Buzan, but argue that questions about approaches to explanation involve questions about the nature of what is drawn upon in explanation (about objects of analysis).

The agent-structure problem

The agent-structure problem concerns the relation between parts and wholes in social systems. As commonly presented, it stems from the conjunction of 'two truisms about social life': first, 'human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live'; second, 'society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors'.[46] Despite the apparent intractability of this antinomy, Wendt contends that 'all social scientific theories embody an at least implicit solution' to the agent-

[45] This is probably the default interpretation in International Relations. See, for example, Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, *Contending theories*, p.28.
[46] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', pp.337-8. See also Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.443; Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.103-4.

structure problem: they situate 'agents and social structures in relation to one another'.[47] He also notes the many guises in which the problem is presented: problems about agents and structures, parts and wholes, and micro- and macro- perspectives

> all reflect the same meta-theoretical imperative – the need to adopt, for the purpose of explaining social behaviour, some conceptualization of the ontological and explanatory relationship between social actors or agents (in this case, states) and societal structures (in this case, the international system).[48]

It is the all-encompassing nature of the agent-structure problem that explains its uneasy relationship with the level-of-analysis problem. As Wendt indicates, the agent-structure problem engages consideration of both the explanatory and the ontological relationship between agents and structures: it encompasses both questions of the kinds of actors and systems there are and of how they are best explained. How we approach the agent-structure problem and, in particular, how we approach the relationship between the agent-structure and level-of-analysis problems therefore depends, in part, on how we construe the relationship between ontological and explanatory questions.[49]

Both Wendt and Dessler's presentations of the agent-structure problem reflect their favoured positions. Dessler argues that the problem refers to the difficulty of developing explanations that 'acknowledge and account for the powers of agents' whilst also recognizing 'the causal relevance of "structural factors", that is, the conditions of action'.[50] According to Wendt, the agent-structure antinomy suggests that structures and agents are 'theoretically interdependent or mutually implicating entities'; this, he argues, makes it plausible to believe that properties of agents and structures 'are *both* relevant to explanations of social behaviour'.[51] In other words, Wendt and Dessler advocate solutions to the agent-structure problem in which explanations draw on both agents and structures and in which, therefore, both agents and structures are ontologically irreducible (neither can be reduced to properties or effects of the other). However, both also accord priority to questions of ontology: they maintain that, before asking how best to explain the properties (or behaviour) of units or systems, we must

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[47] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.337.
[48] *Ibid.* pp.338-9.
[49] Wendt and Buzan, Jones & Little consider the two problems separately. Hollis & Smith, in contrast, insist that they are intimately connected.
[50] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.443.
[51] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.338.

establish whether systems and/or units exist as irreducible forms that may be drawn upon in explanation.[52] Construing the level-of-analysis problem as concerned with how best (not what) to explain, Wendt views the agent-structure and level-of-analysis problems as 'two distinct problems', the former being more fundamental.[53] This is controversial.[54] Hollis and Smith contend that explanatory questions (about how to explain particular social forms) are bound up with ontological questions (about what irreducible social forms exist).[55] Further, they contend that the agent-structure problem differs according to whether our aims are explanatory or interpretive.[56] The relation between the level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems ultimately turns on these deep questions about the relation between epistemology and ontology.[57] My focus, however, is on how these debates illuminate Waltz's approach and, thereby, the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations.

Wendt describes the agent-structure problem as 'really two interrelated problems, one ontological and the other epistemological'.[58] The ontological question (which, according to Wendt, is more important) concerns whether either agents or structures are ontologically reducible: whether either is reducible to properties or effects of the other. According to Wendt, neorealism treats states as ontologically primitive. Although neorealism seeks to explain state behaviour in structural terms, the states whose behaviour is structured are individual, pre-existing actors and the structure that constrains them arises from their actions. Thus Wendt argues that neorealism 'embodies an individualist ontology': it views

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[52] Thus a significant portion of Wendt's seminal essay on the agent-structure problem is taken up with discussion of how social structures may be said to exist independently of the actions and interactions by which they are generated.

[53] See Alexander Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 17.4, Oct 1991, p.387.

[54] Wendt and Dessler draw on a shared scientific realist epistemology which presents the problem as one of ontology. See Hollis & Smith, 'Two stories'.

[55] See Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, 'Beware of gurus: structure and action in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 17.4, Oct 1991, p.395.

[56] See Hollis & Smith, 'Two stories', p.246; Wendt, 'On constitution and causation'.

[57] For example, the form of the level-of-analysis problem that concerns approaches to explanation may be thought equivalent to one part of what Wendt describes as the epistemological aspect of the agent-structure problem, despite his contention that the two problems are distinct. See Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', pp.339-40.

[58] *Ibid.* p.339.

structure as 'constraining the choice of pre-existing state actors'.[59] By contrast, world-system theorists, Wendt argues, adopt a holist ontology in which structures are ontologically primitive: they

> define international system structures in terms of the fundamental organizing principles of the capitalist world economy which underlie and constitute states, and thus they understand the explanatory role of structures in structuralist terms as generating state actors themselves.[60]

In Wendt's account, therefore, neorealism and world-system theory, despite their differences, both make one unit of analysis (agents or structures) ontologically primitive. The only alternative, and Wendt's preferred solution to the agent-structure problem, is 'structurationism', which gives agents and structures 'equal and therefore irreducible ontological status'.[61] Thus Wendt views 'individualism, structuralism, and structurationism' as three possible responses to the ontological aspect of the agent-structure problem.[62]

Wendt argues that, as Singer formulated it, the level-of-analysis problem 'is a problem of explanation: of assessing the relative importance of causal factors at different levels of aggregation in explaining the behaviour of a given unit of analysis' (the state).[63] Wendt therefore criticizes Hollis and Smith's suggestion that the problem concerns 'whether to explain the units of the international system in terms of the system *or vice versa*'.[64] In this formulation, Wendt observes,

> the unit of analysis, the phenomenon to be explained, *changes*; first it is the behaviour of state actors, then the behaviour of the international system. This is a problem of ontology: of whether the properties or behaviour of units at one level of analysis can be reduced to those at another. It is a problem, in other words, of individualism vs. holism or, if the units of analysis are actors, of structure vs. choice.[65]

Thus Wendt differentiates the choice between competing explanations of a given unit (a level-of-analysis problem) from the determination of what units exist and how they come about (an agent-

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[59] *Ibid.* pp.335-6. Gilpin offers an alternative view, contrasting his own, bottom-up, neorealist approach with Waltz's top-down approach. See Robert G. Gilpin, 'The richness of the tradition of political realism', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its critics*, pp.302-3.
[60] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.335. Ruggie argues, in contrast, that Wallerstein and Waltz differ not in explanatory strategy but in how they characterize the international system: in terms of the hierarchical organization of exchange relations or the nonhierarchical ordering of political relations. See Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation', pp.132-3.
[61] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.339.
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap', p.387. Wendt cites Moul in support of this argument.
[64] Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, p.89 [italics added].
[65] Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap', p.388.

structure problem). He recommends that we 'reserve levels of analysis talk for questions about what drives the behaviour of exogenously given actors, and agent-structure talk for questions about what constitutes the properties of those actors in the first place'.[66] However, Wendt does not contend that the two problems are unrelated: at any given level of analysis 'there will typically be a problem of relating structure to agency'.[67] Thus he suggests that although Hollis and Smith set out to discuss levels of analysis, within each level they analyze (within each layer of the level of analysis problem as they set it up), 'the argument about holism and individualism is about issues of agency and structure, not levels of analysis'.[68]

Rather than separating issues of agency and structure and levels of analysis, Hollis and Smith contend that the agent-structure problem incorporates issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology:

> The basic *ontological* question is whether there is a real-world difference in kind in what systems-terms and unit-terms refer to. If so, how do systems relate to units? ... The basic *epistemological* question is how statements about international relations can be known, or at least rationally believed, to be true or false ... The basic *methodological* question is what forms of explanation or understanding are to be attempted and how they are to be achieved.[69]

They note that Wendt's 'sharp distinction' between the two problems is based on his insistence that ontological questions (about 'how many sorts of "entities" there are in the international arena, and of the relation between those which resist reduction to others') are primary.[70] They dispute this, refusing 'to see the level-of-analysis problem as merely an explanatory one', and insisting that it 'cannot be tackled in isolation from the view taken of what is meant by the international system, and that is an ontological question'.[71] They therefore draw attention to Waltz's contention that the structure of the international political system, like a market, grows out of the interactions of individual units but, once formed, becomes an independent force. System structure becomes 'a *cause* of unit behaviour. It is no

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[66] Alexander Wendt, 'Levels of analysis vs. agents and structures: part III', *Review of International Studies*, 18.2, April 1992, p.185.
[67] Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap', p. 388.
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] Hollis & Smith, 'Beware of gurus', p.394.
[70] *Ibid.* pp.394-5.
[71] *Ibid.* pp.403, 395. They argue that the level-of-analysis problem 'can be portrayed as explanatory only if a prior ontological position is presupposed, since treating the state as the unit to be analyzed at different levels of analysis requires a theoretically primitive state. This is a matter of ontology, not epistemology'. See *ibid.* p.403.

obstacle to treating a system as an entity with causal powers that it emerged from an original set of units and their relations'.[72] Further, they suggest,

> Waltz positively requires a causal notion of system structure. This is necessary not only if he is to avoid the charge of reductionism which he levels against other theories, but also if his theory is to explain that which it sets out to explain.[73]

Waltz's theory 'cannot work without the system acting as a real causal mechanism'.[74]

These debates about the nature and implications of the agent-structure problem, and about its proper standing in relation to the level-of-analysis problem, indicate the complexity that lurks behind any conceptualization of international relations as a complex system in which structure and units are inter-related. Any approach that adopts such a conceptualization must be clear not only about what it explains, and in terms of what, but also about what irreducible social forms it postulates and how knowledge of them is thought to be obtainable. In so doing, however, International Relations theorists must remain cognizant of the fact that the relation between ontology and epistemology is, and is likely to remain, a subject of considerable controversy. Debates about the agent-structure problem therefore also indicate the difficulties inherent in unpacking Waltz's ontology and epistemology. Such issues would be complex even if Waltz had provided a clear statement of his position on these matters. He makes no such statement, in part, no doubt, because *Theory* predates the terminological apparatus associated with the application to International Relations of the agent-structure problem. Yet there are also more substantive reasons for the difficulties inherent in drawing on the agent-structure problem to analyze Waltz's approach. Both Waltz's ontology and epistemology are obscured by the inconsistency between how he conceptualizes international relations and the assumptions he makes in constructing a systemic theory. In this sense, the main shortcoming of the agent-structure debate is its inability, as formulated, to engage questions about the relation between international politics, a conceptualization of international politics as a complex system, and a systemic theory of international relations.

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[72] *Ibid.* p.401.
[73] *Ibid.* p.402.
[74] *Ibid.* p.403.

Critiques of Waltz

This section considers two of the main areas in which Waltz's work has been criticized. The first critique focuses on Waltz's narrow definition of structure and his restrictive understanding of the scope of a systemic theory. The discussion draws on Buzan, Jones and Little's *The logic of anarchy* and Ruggie's 'Continuity and transformation in the world polity', both of which may be considered sympathetic to Waltz's project insofar as they engage directly with his attempt to develop a systemic theory of international politics. They also share a reconstructive agenda. *The logic of anarchy* was 'a systematic attempt to rebuild Structural Realism along much more open lines than Waltz's project, and to begin extending its logical framework outward to link up with other areas of International Relations theory'.[75] Ruggie's aim was to 'assess, modify, and extend' Waltz's approach 'on its own terms'; Ruggie hoped that a 'suitably amended and augmented neorealist formulation ... would go some way toward subsuming competing systemic theories'.[76] The second critique draws on analysis of the agent-structure problem to suggest that Waltz adopts an unsatisfactory individualist ontology; consequently, his theory is unable to comprehend, let alone explain, some of the most fundamental dynamics of international politics. This critique is unsympathetic insofar as it seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of Waltz's foundational premises.[77] The purpose of discussing these critiques is to evaluate whether they get to grips with the fundamental tension underlying Waltz's explanatory approach. The answer, in short, is that they do not do so satisfactorily. In some instances, not only is the puzzling relation between Waltz's theory and how he conceptualizes international relations overlooked, but its two elements are conflated.

Waltz's restrictive conception of structure and of systemic theory

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[75] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.6. See also pp.11-12.
[76] Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation', pp.133, 152.
[77] Although Wendt describes himself as a systemic theorist, he rejects Waltz's definition of systemic theory. See Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp.10-15.

One of Buzan, Jones and Little's aims was to develop a 'much more comprehensive and more open definition of structure' than that proposed by Waltz.[78] They criticize Waltz's contention that, 'since the system is composed of like units', the second tier of structure (functional differentiation) is absent from international relations.[79] Buzan suggests that functional differentiation drops out because Waltz believes in the existence of 'strong two-way interactions between organizing principle and functional differentiation of units'.[80] In other words, Waltz believes that 'similar units and anarchy are opposite sides of the same coin': 'anarchy tends to generate like units, and like units, by pursuing sovereignty, generate anarchy'.[81] Buzan points out how, in Waltz's approach, the competitive processes by which structure affects behaviour (selection and socialization) 'produce homogeneity of unit type'.[82] However, he suggests that 'Waltz's logic on this point relies on the transfer from microeconomics into international politics of a very specific, and very partial characterization of competition'.[83] Waltz 'discounts another side of the analogy from economic behaviour, which is the search for market niches, where differentiation of function provides (temporary) refuge from the full pressure of competition'.[84] In Buzan's view, the dynamics of convergence and differentiation 'are not mutually exclusive'; one way in which Buzan, Jones and Little push beyond Waltz's limited conception of the relation between structure and units is by making room for these dynamics to operate simultaneously.[85] Buzan concludes that Waltz takes 'an unnecessarily extreme view in asserting that an anarchy *must* have like units': this 'is not required by the logic of his theory, and does not follow from the essential defining condition of anarchy, which is the absence of central government'.[86] Buzan, Jones and Little incorporate functional differentiation back into their broader Structural Realism as an additional dimension of systemic change.

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[78] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.11.
[79] Waltz, *Theory*, p.101.
[80] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.39.
[81] *Ibid.*
[82] *Ibid.* pp.39-40.
[83] *Ibid.* p.40.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] *Ibid.* pp.41-2. Buzan associates Waltz's insistence that anarchy is characterized by like units with his refusal to consider the role of non-state units.

Ruggie presents a similar argument concerning Waltz's disregard for functional differentiation amongst the units of international politics. He argues that Waltz's theory 'provides no means by which to account for, or even to describe, the most important contextual change in international politics in this *millennium*: the shift from the medieval to the modern international system'.[87] He points out that Waltz believes the medieval system to have been anarchic, but insists that it would be historically inaccurate to attribute the difference between medieval and modern systems 'to differences in the distribution of capabilities among their constituent units'.[88] The problem, Ruggie suggests, is that, because functional differentiation drops out, 'a dimension of change is missing from Waltz's model'.[89] Ruggie argues that the modern and medieval systems are differentiated

> by *the principles on the basis of which the constituent units are separated* from one another. If anarchy tells us *that* the political system is a segmented realm, differentiation tells us *on what basis* the segmentation is determined. The second component of structure, therefore, does *not* drop out; it stays in, and serves as an exceedingly important source of structural variation.[90]

Ruggie therefore maintains that reincorporating functional differentiation within Waltz's definition of structure would give 'greater determinate content to the general constraints of anarchy deduced by Waltz'.[91] Cox, drawing on Ruggie, agrees: a 'major defect in Waltz's approach' is 'the inability of his theory to account for or to explain structural transformation'.[92]

In seeking to determine why Waltz's theory is unable to explain altered unit roles or to comprehend how states could develop new roles within an anarchic system, Buzan and Ruggie draw attention to the absence of functional differentiation in Waltz's definition of the structure of the international system. However, although they are right that the absence of functional differentiation severely limits the explanatory scope of Waltz's theory, they tend to sidestep the question of how Waltz's definition of structure reflects his explanatory strategy. In developing his definition of the structure of the international political system, Waltz's aim was not to accurately depict historical systems, but to

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[87] Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation', p.141.
[88] *Ibid.* p.142.
[89] *Ibid.*
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] *Ibid.* p.146.
[92] Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', p.243.

abstract from unit attributes and relations. His theory is premised on the isolation of system structure as an independent variable. Although it may turn out that Waltz's theory is weak because it ignores functional differentiation, this does not illuminate why Waltz thought it to be necessary to abstract from unit attributes. A similar point applies to Buzan's contention that, in Waltz's conceptualization of the international political system, anarchy generates like units and like units generate anarchy. This dynamic is not a feature of Waltz's theory, which infers (some aspects of) unit behaviour from system structure. If Waltz believes that the organization of the system and the nature of the units are mutually reinforcing, then this reflects not his theory, but his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system. Given the obvious gap between this conceptualization and Waltz's theoretical apparatus, inferring Waltz's beliefs about the nature of international relations from the logic of his theory does not contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the two.

Buzan argues that Waltz conflates system and structure: he suggests that Waltz wrongly took 'his *structural* theory to be the *system* level theory of international politics'.[93] Buzan maintains that, in 'various ways, Waltz's critics all think that systems theory needs to contain more than Waltz's structure'.[94] There are two ways in which this might be achieved. First, neorealism's explanatory scope might be extended, either by amending Waltz's definition of structure or by allowing systemic theories to draw on non-structural systemic properties in their explanations. Second, Waltz's systemic approach might be complemented by or combined with an analytic approach. Thus Buzan argues that, because a system consists of both structure and units, 'a system theory must logically incorporate both levels'.[95] He criticizes Waltz for treating the unit-level 'as a catch-all for everything that falls outside his definition of structure', arguing that a 'full system theory requires one to be as explicit about the unit level as about the system structure'.[96] This echoes Keohane and Nye's objection that Waltz makes 'the unit level the dumping ground for all unexplained variance'.[97] It also echoes Blauberg *et al*'s

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[93] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.28.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] *Ibid.*
[96] *Ibid.* p.47.
[97] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., '*Power and interdependence* revisited', *International Organization*, 41.4, Autumn 1987, p.746.

contention that an integrated systems approach must incorporate both systemic and analytic perspectives. Although Waltz confesses himself unable to say how systemic and analytic perspectives might be combined, this does not invalidate his attempt to develop a specifically systemic theory. In moving 'from a purely structural theory to a more fully systemic one', Buzan, Jones and Little retain Waltz's focus 'on the system level', though they seek to expand what counts at that level, to say more about the unit level, and to show more clearly how structure and units are connected.[98] Their critique therefore focuses on extending the scope of what Waltz termed a systemic theory rather than on resolving the relation between systemic and analytic perspectives.

Buzan criticizes Waltz's strict separation of structure (the 'sole system level component' in his theory) and interaction.[99] Buzan identifies 'a massive and vital interaction component that is systemic, but not structural' and which is, he believes, 'essential to give the notion of system meaning'.[100] He observes that Waltz's definition of structure (and also, therefore, the boundary between structure and interacting units) 'relies heavily on the distinction between the distribution of capabilities ... and the possession of them by individual units'.[101] In other words, Waltz invokes a distinction between relational (relative) and attributive (absolute) power. In Buzan's view, Waltz's insistence that attributive power is a unit-level phenomenon is misguided:

> There are at least two key aspects of absolute capabilities whose very nature, and not just their effects, are clearly *systemic* in character ... one is technological capabilities, and the other is shared norms and organizations. These factors not only affect the ability and the willingness of units to interact, but also determine what types and levels of interaction are both possible and desired. They are systemic even though they clearly fall outside the meaning of structure.[102]

Buzan's point is that although technology is an attributive capability, technological advance in an area such as communication, transport or information 'quickly transforms conditions of interaction for all units, and therefore transforms the system itself'.[103] For example, these technologies have made global

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[98] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.233.
[99] *Ibid.* p.66.
[100] *Ibid.* pp.66, 69. Buzan also observes that Waltz fails to distinguish fully between explanations based on a study of unit attributes and explanations based on a study of interactions.
[101] *Ibid.* p.67.
[102] *Ibid.* p.69.
[103] *Ibid.* p.70.

institutions possible. Buzan insists that the degree of technological and institutional development in the system has effects that are 'qualitatively different from the way the particular attributes of particular states affect their interactions with other individual states': it alters 'the quality and character of what might be called the *interaction capacity* of the system as a whole'.[104]

Interaction capacity consists of 'a set of variables that clearly belong within a system theory of international politics, but which are neither structural nor unit level in character'.[105] Buzan points out that Waltz 'presupposes an adequate level of interaction to make the political dynamics of socialization and competition operate'.[106] Yet

> for the great bulk of its history, the international system has not obeyed Neorealist logic, or at least has done so only very slowly and weakly, and on a regional rather than on a global scale. The reason is to be found in interaction capacity. For most of its history, the international system has been characterized by low levels of the technological and societal capabilities necessary for system-wide economic and military interaction.[107]

Thus Buzan suggests that there is

> a strong case for saying that interaction capacity ranks alongside structure as a "shoving and shaping" force on the interactions of the units throughout the system. It provides the essential third leg of a full system theory (units + interaction + structure).[108]

Ruggie also draws attention to levels of interaction as a characteristic of the overall system. He focuses on 'dynamic density', or 'the quantity, velocity, and diversity of transactions that go on within society', pointing out that Durkheim, on whom Waltz draws, believed that dynamic density profoundly affects the fundamental conditions of collective existence.[109] Ruggie criticizes Waltz for banishing 'such factors to the level of process, shaped by structure but not in turn affecting structure in any manner depicted by his model'.[110] Consequently, Ruggie argues, Waltz's model lacks 'not only a *dimension* of change' (functional differentiation) but 'a *determinant* of change'.[111]

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[104] *Ibid.*
[105] *Ibid.* p.72.
[106] *Ibid.* p.73.
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.* p.79.
[109] Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation', p.148.
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] *Ibid.*

Ruggie suggests three reasons for Waltz's neglect of dynamic density. First, changes in dynamic density have, historically, affected the internal organization of societies and, thereby, their functional differentiation, which Waltz ignores. Second, Ruggie contends that Waltz 'strives for, but fails fully to achieve, a generative formulation of international political structure'.[112] In a generative formulation, 'the deeper structural levels have causal priority'; the other levels operate 'only within a context that is already "prestructured" by the deeper levels'.[113] Thus, for example,

> we ask of the distribution of capabilities within the international system *what difference it makes* for the realization of the general organizational effects of the deep structure of anarchy ... That is how we determine the *systemic effects* of changes in the distribution of capabilities. We then go on to ask how these systemic effects in turn *condition* and *constrain* international outcomes.[114]

Ruggie suggests that, 'in linking theory to real-world outcomes', Waltz treats structure as descriptive, not generative.[115] Waltz relegates dynamic density to the unit level because it does not directly affect states' relative positions. Yet Ruggie argues that, were Waltz's model of structure generative, Waltz should ask how dynamic density mediates anarchy's effects on state behaviour: changes in dynamic density might, for example, affect the potential for effective great power management of the system. Finally, Ruggie argues that Waltz makes unit-level processes 'all product' and 'not at all productive'.[116] Because 'structural change ultimately has no source *other than* unit-level processes', Ruggie observes, Waltz 'exogenizes the ultimate source of systemic change' from his theory.[117] Consequently, Ruggie concludes, Waltz's conceptualization of how structure affects states contains 'a reproductive logic, but no transformational logic'.[118]

Buzan's focus on interaction capacity and Ruggie's focus on dynamic density reflect concerns about what Waltz's theory does not explain. However, neither author does justice to Waltz's contention that a systemic theory must separate structure and interacting units in order to show how the former affects

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[112] *Ibid.* p.150.
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] *Ibid.*
[115] *Ibid.* p.151.
[116] *Ibid.*
[117] *Ibid.* p.152.
[118] *Ibid.* Ruggie contends that, by making unit-level processes all product and not at all productive, Waltz overreacts against reductionism: Waltz 'adopts a methodological principle, and turns it into an ontological one'. See *ibid.* p.151.

the latter. Waltz's most recent account of why his theory did not incorporate dynamic density is elusive to the point of obscuration: he insists that dynamic density 'is not a part of a theory about one type of society or another', but 'a condition that develops in greater or lesser degree within and across societies'.[119] However, his response to critics is more helpful: 'Ruggie is saying that power does not tell us enough about the placement of states in the system. He is right, but he draws the wrong conclusion. Structures never tell us all that we want to know'.[120] Waltz here draws attention to the fact that his systemic theory is only one part of an integrated systems approach. Buzan and Ruggie fail to differentiate clearly between, on the one hand, expanding Waltz's definition of structure (and/or his conception of the scope of a systemic theory) and, on the other hand, developing an integrated systems approach. For example, Ruggie objects that Waltz's unit level is not at all productive. Yet this is to be expected of a theory that shows how structure affects unit behaviour. Further, it is not the case that Waltz believes units to be unproductive (in Ruggie's sense): he believes that structure emerges out of unit (inter)actions. There is, of course, a tension between Waltz's belief that structure and interacting units are mutually affecting and his attempt to develop a purely systemic theory, but this tension is not illuminated by Buzan and Ruggie's criticisms, whatever their merits in indicating what Waltz's theory cannot explain.

Waltz's foundational premises

Waltz criticizes reductionist theories (correctly, in Wendt's view) 'for ignoring the intervening role played by international system structures in the translation of domestic imperatives into foreign policy behaviour'.[121] In other words, Waltz rejects explanatory reductionism, in which unit behaviour and system properties are explained in terms of the attributes or relations of state agents. However, Wendt argues that, in attempting to show how structure affects behaviour, Waltz engages in a 'different and deeper' reductionism: Waltz's definition of structure is 'built up out of the ontologically primitive

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[119] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.30.
[120] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.329.
[121] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.341.

attributes of states'.[122] In other words, Waltz's theory is ontologically reductionist: it views structure as an effect of (defines it in terms of properties of) states. Neorealism, Wendt maintains, reduces 'the structure of the state system to the properties and interactions of its constituent elements'.[123]

> The distribution of capabilities is a function of state attributes, the lack of functional differentiation is a function of the fact that modern states all have the attribute of sovereignty, and even the fact that the states system is a competitive system in which power politics rules is a function of the fact that states are egoistic about their security. The sovereign, egoistic state endowed with certain capabilities, in other words is the ontologically given unit by the aggregation of which the structure of Waltz's system is constituted.[124]

Wendt's point is about the constitutive relationship between structure and units, not about how 'the structure of the states system shapes the behaviour of states'.[125]

> The point is not that neorealists engage in explanatory reductionism (which they do not) but rather that their definition of system structure is characterized by ontological reductionism. This definition leads to an understanding of system structures as only *constraining* the agency of preexisting states, rather than ... as *generating* state agents themselves.[126]

According to Wendt, the main problem with neorealism's ontological reductionism (its individualistic solution to the agent-structure problem) is that it 'fails to provide a basis for developing an explicit theory of the state'.[127] In other words, because neorealism views states as ontologically primitive, it cannot explain how states are constituted as sovereign actors. In Wendt's view, this is important not merely because it leaves neorealists unable to explain certain properties of states (those acquired in interaction), but because it severely limits the explanatory possibilities of a systemic approach:

> system structures cannot generate agents if they are defined exclusively in terms of those agents in the first place. The consequence of making the individual ontologically primitive, in other words, is that the social relations in virtue of which that individual is a particular kind of agent with particular causal properties must remain forever opaque and untheorized.[128]

Thus Waltz's individualism seriously compromises his 'efforts to build compelling *systemic* theories of international relations'.[129] According to Wendt, Waltz 'treats the self-regarding identities and interests

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[122] *Ibid.*; Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap', p.388.
[123] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.339.
[124] Wendt, 'Bridging the theory/meta-theory gap', pp.388-9.
[125] *Ibid.* p.388.
[126] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.342.
[127] *Ibid.* Contrast Buzan, Jones and Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.116-19.
[128] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.343.
[129] *Ibid.* p.344.

of states as given prior to interaction rather than as a socially constructed function of interaction'.[130] If so, then Waltz's theory can explain only how structure affects state behaviour, not how it affects properties of states themselves, particularly their interests and identities. In Wendt's view, only if we see identities and interests as constructed in interaction can we comprehend and explain the possibilities for change inherent in the international political system.

Ashley argues that Waltz's individualism fatally undermines any claim that neorealism is a genuinely structural theory. He argues that 'Waltz understands "international structure" not as a deep, internal relation prior to and constitutive of social actors but as an external joining of states-as-actors'.[131] He insists that although Waltz, in his theory, 'grants this structure a life of its own independent of the parts', Waltz never properly establishes the independence of the system as a whole: 'It is not established independent of the parts taken together, for it is never anything more than the logical consequence of the parts taken together'.[132] In fact, Ashley maintains, state-centricity is 'an ontological principle of neorealist theorizing'; consequently, neorealism 'cannot even comprehend' systemic concepts 'that are irreducible to logical combinations of state-bounded relations'.[133] According to Ashley, (genuine) structuralists posit a structural whole 'having an autonomous existence independent of, prior to, and constitutive of the elements'.[134] Waltz's theory, he insists, involves no conception of such a whole. Instead, Waltz's system is described 'from the idealized point of view of the lone, isolated state-as-actor, which cannot alone alter the whole and cannot rely on others to aid it in bringing about change in the whole's deepest structures'.[135] Consequently, system structure appears to be fixed and immutable. This is a common refrain. Cox argues that, because neorealism views the nature of men, states, and the state system as 'basic realities', it is 'a form of problem-solving theory': it

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[130] Wendt, 'Levels of analysis vs. agents and structures', p.182. See also Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46.2, Spring 1992, pp.391-425.
[131] Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', p.287.
[132] *Ibid.*
[133] *Ibid.* p.270.
[134] *Ibid.* p.286.
[135] *Ibid.* pp.287-8.

'takes the world as it finds it ... as the given framework for action'.[136] In other words, neorealism's inability to explain change derives from its view of structure as fixed and immutable; this view of structure derives, in turn, from Waltz's individualist solution to the agent-structure problem.

These arguments pinpoint how Waltz's theory gives a truncated account of the relationship between structure and units and how this limits the theory's explanatory power. However, it is important to recognize that Waltz's ontology appears to differ depending on whether we examine his statements about the nature of international relations (conceptualized as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting) or his definition of structure. Wendt infers an ontology from Waltz's definition of structure. He uses it to demonstrate the limited scope of Waltz's systemic theory and to indicate the sorts of change that it is unable to explain. However, Wendt does not investigate the manifest tension between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations and his approach to theory construction. Ashley's critique is, in this respect, similar: Waltz appears entitled to respond that because he sought to generate a causal theory, he did not theorize constitutive relations. Because post-positivist critiques of Waltz invariably use Waltz as a critical point against which to advance new modes of thinking, they tend to sidestep the puzzling question of what precisely Waltz means when he describes structure and interacting units as mutually affecting. Wendt's purpose, for example, is to advance a structurationist approach that 'sees agents and structures as "co-determined" or "mutually constituted" entities'.[137] Ashley advances a dialectical competence model of social action. Walker describes Waltz as an example of those realists 'who cling most tightly to the promised certainties of atemporal structuralism and positivist method'.[138] His aim, however, is not to understand Waltz but to recover realism's 'sensitivity to pluralism and history, and particularly to the problem of conceptualizing historical change'.[139]

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[136] Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', pp.211, 208.
[137] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.339.
[138] R. B. J. Walker, 'Realism, change, and international political theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 31.1, March 1987, p.66.
[139] *Ibid.* p.68.

Dessler explicitly distinguishes between Waltz's theory and ontology. Ontology, he asserts, 'refers to the concrete referents of an explanatory discourse'.[140] A theory's ontology 'is both the basis of its explanatory power and the ultimate grounding of claims it may have to superiority over rival theories': it 'constrains but does not determine correct explanations'.[141] In order to unpack the ontology of Waltz's approach, Dessler focuses on Waltz's account of the origins of social structures. Waltz draws on an analogy with Adam Smith's account of the origins of economic markets to argue that the structure of the international political system emerges from interaction: 'International-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended'.[142] From this account, Dessler infers 'a fundamental ontological distinction between structure at one level of the international system and interacting units at another'.[143] He interprets Waltz as arguing that the individual unit has ontological primacy: 'the unit precedes the system and through action generates structure'.[144] Like Wendt, Dessler acknowledges that Waltz theorizes structure as a causal force, but he insists that Waltz views structure, ontologically speaking, as 'the unintended positioning, standing, or organization of units that emerges spontaneously from their interaction'.[145] Waltz's structure is 'a by-product rather than a product of interaction. Not only is it unintended, but it is essentially impervious to attempts to modify it or control its effects'.[146] Dessler terms this a 'positional model' of structure: it incorporates 'those conditions of action that are (1) spontaneous and unintended in origin, (2) irreducible to the attributes or actions of individual units, and (3) impervious to attempts to change them or escape their effects'.[147]

In place of Waltz's positional model of structure, Dessler proposes a 'transformational model' in which structure is not a by-product of interaction, but refers 'to the social forms that pre-exist action': 'Social

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[140] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.445.
[141] *Ibid.* pp.444-5.
[142] Waltz, *Theory*, p.91.
[143] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.448.
[144] *Ibid.* p.449.
[145] *Ibid.*
[146] *Ibid.* p.450.
[147] *Ibid.* Dessler's characterization of Waltz's model as positional reflects his interpretation of Waltz's ontology, not the details of Waltz's actual tripartite definition of structure.

structure stands in relation to social action as language stands in relation to discourse'.[148] Language is not a cause; rather, it 'affects action by enabling certain possibilities of discourse and ... excluding others'.[149] Construing structure as materials for action, Dessler argues, reveals the integral link between structure and action: structure 'enables action and constrains its possibilities'; it is also 'the outcome as well as the medium of action'.[150] Dessler's is therefore a structurationist solution to the agent-structure problem:

> all social action presupposes social structure, and vice versa. An actor can act socially only because there exists a social structure to draw on, and it is only through the actions of agents that structure is reproduced (and, potentially, transformed).[151]

In Dessler's transformational model, structure consists of resources and rules. Waltz's positional model of structure incorporates resources (the distribution of capabilities) but not rules. Yet Dessler insists that rules have a role to play: 'it is not possible to create explanations of social action that do not rely at least implicitly' on rules.[152] Rules are the link between the conditions of action and action itself: knowing how to survive in an anarchic system 'means knowing the rules of the game'.[153] For example, Dessler contends that Waltz's notion of socialization implies the existence of rules: 'If Waltz's theory did not presume the existence of a set of rules constitutive of "the system" to which nations are socialized, it could not explain how state behaviour is constrained by structure'.[154] Crucially, Dessler argues, these rules are not, as in the positional ontology, unintentionally reproduced (and therefore fixed) parameters of action, but, as in the transformational ontology, 'material conditions of action which agents appropriate and through action reproduce or transform, possibly intentionally'.[155]

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[148] *Ibid.* p.452.
[149] *Ibid.* p.453.
[150] *Ibid.* p.452.
[151] *Ibid.* However, Dessler contrasts his conceptualization of structure as materials for action with Wendt's account of structure as something capable of generating states. See *ibid.* (fn.45).
[152] *Ibid.* p.459. Dessler describes a rule as 'in its most basic sense, an understanding about how to proceed or "go on" in given social circumstances'. See *ibid.* p.454.
[153] *Ibid.* p.459.
[154] *Ibid.* p.460. Dessler distinguishes constitutive rules (which make behaviour comprehensible) from regulative rules (which sanction behaviour), though he notes that 'constitutive rules have regulative implications, and vice versa'. See *ibid.* p.455.
[155] *Ibid.* p.461.

Dessler's objection to Waltz's positional ontology is that it 'limits structure to what is both irreducible to action and unintentional in origin' and therefore fails to recognize that international organizations, such as alliances, are intentionally produced structures and should be theorized as such.[156] Whereas Waltz treats these entities as unit-level phenomena, Dessler interprets them as (intentionally produced) structures: they are 'sedimented deposits that become conditions of subsequent interaction'.[157] Their rules may be reproduced or transformed by interaction, yet these structures cannot be reduced to interaction: an institution such as NATO is not just a product of interaction but a 'structure of rules that regulates and gives meaning' to behaviour.[158] Because the positional ontology does not recognize 'those features of the system's organization that are both irreducible to interaction and intentionally produced', Dessler argues, it does not exhaust the possibilities of structural theory.[159] In other words, the actual structure of the international system (the rules and resources by which actors are confronted) contains more than Waltz's definition of structure. This is beyond doubt, yet it is important to recognize that Waltz's definition of structure does not attempt to depict the organization of a historical system. Dessler tends to treat it this way, despite claiming to differentiate between Waltz's ontology and theory: he ignores Waltz's insistence that a systemic theory must isolate structure from units, leaving aside many variables that may in fact be important. Waltz's statement that structures are unintended appears in the context of a discussion of the organizing principle of international politics (anarchy). To say that anarchy and the distribution of capabilities are unintended is a long way from saying that all structural elements are unintended. Dessler, like other critics, offers a convincing appraisal of what Waltz's theory cannot explain, yet fails to get to grips with the fundamental tension underlying Waltz's entire approach.

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[156] *Ibid.* p.462.
[157] *Ibid.*
[158] *Ibid.* See Ch.8, below.
[159] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.462. Kratochwil argues that, because human behaviour is rule-governed, adequate explanations must take into account not only unintended consequences but also actors' reasons, because they influence expectations and hence help to determine the environment of action. See Friedrich Kratochwil, 'On the notion of "interest" in international relations', *International Organization*, 36.1, Winter 1982, p.27.

Conclusion

Although Waltz attempted to abstract from unit attributes in his definition of structure, Wendt insists that Waltz defines structure as ontologically reducible. Dessler focuses not on how structure is defined, but on Waltz's account of its emergence. Hollis and Smith acknowledge that Waltz conceives of structure as emerging from interaction, but insist that this is no barrier to it acquiring independent causal force. Yet despite these controversies about how Waltz's explanatory strategy is best interpreted, the critiques considered in this chapter provide compelling accounts of the ways in which the explanatory scope of Waltz's theory is limited. They demonstrate that the absence of functional differentiation limits the ability of Waltz's theory to account for variations in units' roles; they demonstrate how Waltz's theory fails to recognize the systemic implications of changes in interaction capacity (dynamic density); they demonstrate that, even if Waltz's theory can explain behaviour, it cannot explain the properties of actors themselves; they demonstrate how Waltz's theory is unable to comprehend how institutions alter the structural context of international politics. Although these critiques stem from different orientations and have different objectives, they are united in their focus on Waltz's definition of structure, a focus that also explains their inability to agree about how to interpret Waltz's explanatory strategy. Waltz's definition of structure and the theory that flows from it are only one part of his approach: Waltz also insists that international politics is characterized by organized complexity and suggests conceptualizing international relations as a system in which structure and units are mutually affecting. The critiques examined in this chapter all fail satisfactorily to get to grips with the relation between these two elements of Waltz's approach.

The debates surrounding the level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems in International Relations also fail to get to grips with these two elements of Waltz's approach. The previous chapter depicted the range and complexity of the ideas involved in conceiving of international relations as a system and pointed out how Waltz fails to clarify precisely what he takes a systemic approach to be. This uncertainty is reflected in the debates about the level-of-analysis and agent-structure problems. The

disagreement about whether levels are modes of explanation or objects of explanation reflects the basic ambiguity in Waltz's approach over the same issue. The relation between the two problems is even more complex. Just as Waltz is inconsistent in his use of the term 'level', so it is unclear what his position on the agent-structure problem would be: he describes unit and structural levels, for example, as 'at once distinct and connected'.[160] The fundamental obstacle to establishing Waltz's position on this issue, and therefore to adjudicating between differing accounts of his explanatory strategy, is the tension that pervades his entire approach. On the one hand, Waltz conceptualizes international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. On the other hand, he attempts to develop a nomothetic theory by isolating structure as an independent variable. There is little point in inferring an ontology from only one side of this tension without addressing the puzzle of how these two elements of Waltz's approach relate to one another.

[160] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29.

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System structure as independent variable: the limits of Waltz's explanatory strategy

The puzzle surrounding Waltz's explanatory strategy concerns how he translates his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system into a substantive theory of international relations. Chapter Two showed that Waltz differs from previous systemic theorists in defining system structure as a causal variable affecting state behaviour. Chapter Three suggested that Waltz's critics have failed satisfactorily to address the relation between how Waltz conceptualizes international relations and his narrower systemic theory. In other words, what stands out about Waltz's approach is that he develops a theory in which system structure is isolated as an independent variable, despite conceiving of international relations as a complex system in which structure and units are mutually affecting. This chapter examines the substance and implications of the relation between these two elements of Waltz's explanatory strategy. The first section explores Waltz's views about the nature of theory. It unpacks his attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable and demonstrates that his substantive balance-of-power theory should be interpreted as part of a broader explanatory strategy. The second section examines the limitations of Waltz's explanatory strategy, focusing not on the content of his substantive explanations, but on how his theory should be understood given his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system. It finds that the explanatory power of Waltz's theory is severely limited by his inability to show how structural and unit-level variables interact and by his failure to indicate how his theory can be employed as a source of heuristic insights. This chapter therefore confirms the significance of how Waltz conceptualizes international relations for how his substantive theory is understood. It also provides the basis for a fuller understanding of the problems involved in developing causal theories about complex systems.

Waltz's explanatory strategy

This section begins by considering the implications of Waltz's insistence that '[t]heory isolates one realm from others in order to deal with it intellectually'.[1] It suggests that Waltz views systemic theory as artificially representing only one aspect of international relations. This provides the basis for a closer analysis of Waltz's attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable. Waltz's explanatory strategy is broken down into four distinct stages: first, how he conceptualizes international relations; second, how he defines the structure of the international political system; third, how he uses his definition of structure to develop a systemic theory; fourth, how he construes the explanations this theory produces. Although Waltz is inconsistent, substantial evidence is adduced to suggest that his systemic theory should be viewed as only one part of a possible integrated systems approach. This interpretation of Waltz's work is applied back to the critiques considered in the previous chapter to show that the relation between Waltz's theory and how he conceptualizes international relations is fundamental to the question of how that theory comprehends international relations.

The nature of theory

The role of theories, Waltz insists, is to explain laws: they show why associations obtain and provide the means to control them. Whereas laws contain only descriptive terms, he argues, it is nonfactual 'theoretical assumptions' (or 'notions') which 'make explanation possible'.[2] For example, Newton assumed, unrealistically, that mass concentrates at a point. He could do so, Waltz suggests, because 'assumptions are not assertions of fact. They are neither true nor false ... [they] find their justification in the success of the theories that employ them'.[3] According to Waltz, a theory is 'a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a

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[1] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29.
[2] Waltz, *Theory*, p.10. Waltz does not explain how we arrive at theoretical notions, except to say that they are 'invented, not discovered': 'The longest process of painful trial and error will not lead to the construction of a theory unless at some point a brilliant intuition flashes, a creative idea emerges'. See *ibid.* pp.5, 9.
[3] *Ibid.* p.6.

domain and of the connections among its parts'.[4] In other words, a theory employs concepts to represent (but not descriptively) a segment of reality that is considered in isolation from everything else. Theories are 'related to the world about which explanations are wanted', Waltz argues, yet always remain distinct.[5] Reality is 'congruent neither with a theory nor with a model that may represent it'.[6] In fact, Waltz maintains, '[t]heory is artifice':

> In reality, everything is related to everything else, and one domain cannot be separated from others. Theory isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually ... The question, as ever with theories, is not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is useful. And usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predictive powers of the theory that may be fashioned.[7]

Waltz uses the concept of structure to isolate international politics as an artificially bounded realm:

> Neorealism develops the concept of a system's structure which at once bounds the domain that students of international politics deal with and enables them to see how the structure of the system, and variations in it, affect the interacting units and the outcomes they produce.[8]

The role of theories in shaping our understanding indicates their likely content: 'They will be about the organization of the subject matter. They will convey a sense of the unobservable relations of things. They will be about connections and causes by which sense is made of things observed'.[9] Thus Waltz emphasizes that theories simplify. The purpose of simplification is not to achieve descriptive accuracy, but 'to try to find the central tendency among a confusion of tendencies, to single out the propelling principle even though other principles operate, to seek the essential factors where innumerable factors are present'.[10] Simplification is achieved in four ways:

> (1) by isolation, which requires viewing the actions and interactions of a small number of factors and forces as though in the meantime other things remain equal; (2) by abstraction, which requires leaving some things aside in order to concentrate on others; (3) by aggregation, which requires lumping disparate elements together according to criteria derived from a theoretical purpose; (4) by idealization, which requires proceeding as though perfection were attained or a limit reached even though neither can be.[11]

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[4] *Ibid.* p.8.
[5] *Ibid.* p.6.
[6] *Ibid.* pp.6-7.
[7] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.22; Waltz, *Theory*, p.8.
[8] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29. See also Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The origins of war in neorealist theory', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18.4, Spring 1988, pp.615-6.
[9] Waltz, *Theory*, p.9.
[10] *Ibid.* p.10. Waltz contrasts a theoretical model, which seeks to explain, with a scale model, which attempts to simplify but maintain representational accuracy.
[11] *Ibid.*

These forms of simplification, Waltz suggests, are present in all theories: whatever the subject matter, 'we have to bound the domain of our concern, to organize it, to simplify the materials we deal with, to concentrate on central tendencies, and to single out the strongest propelling forces'.[12] Waltz's balance-of-power theory simplifies in three ways. First, it uses the concept of system structure to isolate international politics as a realm of inquiry. Second, its definition of structure abstracts from the attributes and relations of states. Third, it aggregates and idealizes state motives by assuming that states seek survival.

Waltz states that a 'systems approach conceives of the international-political system' as follows:

INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURE

↑ ↓

INTERACTING UNITS[13]

However, he differentiates between a systems approach, in which international relations is viewed as a complex system, and a systemic theory: 'In order to turn a systems approach into a theory, one has to move from the usual vague identification of systemic forces and effects to their more precise specification'.[14] In other words, a systemic theory depicts an artificially isolated realm of inquiry:

> Structural realism presents a systemic portrait of international politics depicting component units according to the manner of their arrangement. For the purpose of developing a theory, states are cast as unitary actors wanting at least to survive, and are taken to be the system's constituent units ... The range of expected outcomes is inferred from the assumed motivation of the units and the structure of the system in which they act.[15]

In order to isolate system structure as an independent variable, Waltz abstracts from many aspects of international politics. His definition of structure

> includes only what is required to show how the units of the system are positioned or arranged. Everything else is omitted. Concern for tradition and culture, analysis of the character and personality of political actors, consideration of the conflictive and accommodative processes of politics, description of the making and execution of policy – all such matters are left aside.[16]

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[12] *Ibid.* p.68.
[13] Waltz, *Theory*, p.40.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Waltz, 'The origins of war', p.618.
[16] Waltz, *Theory*, p.82. Waltz emphasizes that their 'omission does not imply their unimportance'.

Similarly, the assumption that states pursue survival does not constitute a complete description of state motivations: 'The assumption allows for the fact that no state always acts exclusively to ensure its survival. It allows for the fact that some states may persistently seek goals that they value more highly than survival'.[17]

Waltz insists that theories simplify (but are not descriptively accurate), that his definition of structure excludes many factors known to be important, and that the notion that states pursue survival is 'a radical simplification made for the sake of constructing a theory'.[18] In other words, there is a gap between how Waltz conceptualizes international relations and the assumptions and definitions he employs in his substantive theory, just as (Waltz contends) there is a gap between Newton's theoretical assumption that mass concentrates at a point and his beliefs about the nature of physical objects. Waltz's definition of structure does not depict the actual context of action facing any state, just as the assumption that states seek survival does not depict the full range of possible state motives. However, although there are several reasons why (and ways in which) assumptions may be unrealistic, it is unclear why a theory would deliberately exclude variables known (or believed) to be important.[19] In Waltz's case, the explanation is that his theory diverges from reality in a much more fundamental sense than can be captured merely by noting that the theory's substantive assumptions and definitions are not descriptively accurate. Whereas his balance-of-power theory isolates system structure as an independent variable, Waltz conceptualizes international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. In other words, Waltz's theory examines only one aspect of international relations. It lacks descriptive accuracy because it artificially separates structure and units in order to show how they interact: Waltz argues that one 'can ask how *A* and *B* affect each other, and proceed to seek an answer, only if *A* and *B* can be kept distinct'.[20]

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[17] *Ibid.* p.92.
[18] *Ibid.* p.91.
[19] I examine the question of whether (and in what way) assumptions may be unrealistic below.
[20] *Ibid.* p.40.

Waltz's attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable has wide-ranging implications for the content and explanatory power of his theory. If we conceive of structure not in terms of Waltz's theoretical definition, but as represented in the agent-structure antinomy (and as suggested by Waltz's contention that structure and units are mutually affecting), then structure is both (and simultaneously) medium and outcome of unit (inter)action. On the one hand, structure is the context in which action takes place, providing the resources for any particular action: it is drawn upon in action. On the other hand, structure is an outcome: it is generated by unit (inter)actions.[21] Further, structure operates in both guises simultaneously: any action both draws upon structure and (re)constitutes structure. Therefore, in order to isolate structure as an independent variable (in order to show how structure affects unit behaviour), Waltz has to suppress the process by which structure is (re)constituted. Waltz has to break into the circle in which structure affects units which, in turn, affect structure, in order to isolate structure as a cause of state behaviour. Further, he must do this in general terms. An inquiry into how a specific behaviour is influenced by structure might proceed by examining the behaviour to be explained and tracing the process of structural causation backwards in time.[22] In such an inquiry, the process by which those actions then affect the structure can safely be ignored. However, in order to isolate the process by which structure affects behaviour in general terms (that is, to examine the relationship between structure and units in general), the process by which units affect structure cannot merely be ignored: it must be theoretically suppressed. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to make assumptions about the nature of the units (states), for the nature of the units affects the nature of the structure formed by their interaction.

In order to suppress the process by which states affect structure, Waltz treats states as actors whose properties (interests and identities) are fixed but unexplained: in Wendt's terminology, he treats states as ontologically primitive. If, as Wendt suggests, structure affects interests and identities as well as behaviour, then structure (which is formed through interactions that draw on those interests and

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[21] Some specific structural artefacts may be intended, but the overall context for action is unintended.
[22] If process-tracing draws on implicit general theories that determine what sorts of causal links to trace, then it, too, will invoke hypotheses about the general relationship between structure and units. See Ch.5, below.

identities) will itself change as actor interests and identities change. In such a scheme, structure is not an independent variable: it is affected by (it changes as a result of changes in) the putative dependent variable (the units). In other words, the problem with conceiving of structure as affecting interests and identities as well as behaviour is that structurally induced changes of interests and identities will bring about reciprocal changes in structure. Only if actor interests and identities are assumed to be unchanging will structure appear to be an independent variable: it will generate behaviour that (re)constitutes structure in an unchanged form. This is the logic of Waltz's theory: he assumes states to have fixed interests (he treats state identities as given prior to interaction) and shows how structure constrains them to behave in ways that reproduce that structure. He is then able to ask how behaviour differs as structures change (as the distribution of capabilities changes), though he is unable to explain how those changes of structure come about. However, structure is not genuinely isolated as an independent variable. Rather, structure is continually reconstituted by state interactions, though in an unchanged form.[23] Further, structure is not the only cause of state behaviour: other causes are suppressed by the assumption that states seek only to survive. This explains Waltz's contention that structures are causes, but not in the usual sense.

Complex wholes and nomothetic theories

Although he attempts to isolate structure as an independent variable, Waltz denies that it is the sole cause of state behaviour: he describes Rosecrance's depiction of him as a 'structural determinist' as a 'most peculiar misinterpretation'.[24] The reason for isolating structure, Waltz insists, is that 'systems level and unit level must be carefully distinguished so that the effect of each on the other can be examined'.[25] In other words, the form of Waltz's balance-of-power theory should not disguise the fact that he conceptualizes structure and units as mutually affecting. However, Waltz is inconsistent about the precise nature of the relation between structure and units. (Are structure and units mutually affecting, or is it structural and unit-level causes? Are they mutually affecting, or do they interact?) In

[23] I consider whether it is possible to isolate structure as an independent variable in Ch.10, below.
[24] Waltz, 'Letter to the editor', p.680.
[25] *Ibid.*

an early article, Waltz asserts that we should ask questions like: how does political structure 'affect the relations of states ... How do the relations of constituent units and changes within them in turn affect the political structure?'[26] In *Theory*, he expresses the problem in two further forms: first, he argues that causes 'at the level of units and of systems interact'; second, he states that he defined structure restrictively 'because we want to figure out the expected effects of structure on process and of process on structure. That can be done only if structure and process are distinctly defined'.[27] Responding to Ruggie, Waltz insists that '[n]either structure nor units determine outcomes. Each affects the other'.[28] Responding to Ashley, however, he suggests that structure 'constantly interacts' with states.[29] In a later article, it is once again structural and unit-level causes that interact:

> Neorealism contends that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to traditional realism's unit-level explanations. More generally, neorealism reconceives the causal link between interacting units and international outcomes. Neorealist theory shows that causes run not in one direction, from interacting units to outcomes produced, but rather in two directions.[30]

These quotes reveal a clear gap between how Waltz conceptualizes international relations and the content of his theoretical definitions and assumptions. They also demonstrate that Waltz is unclear about the precise nature of that gap. There is, in principle, room in the notion that structure and units are mutually affecting for the relationship either to be causal or to be consistent with Wendt's preference for viewing agents and structures as mutually constitutive. The notion that structure and units interact, on the other hand, seems to suggest, implausibly, that structure and agents are similar kinds of thing (and that structure is an agent, which Waltz denies).[31] Neither of these notions, meanwhile, is identical with the simpler notion that causes interact: that causes of behaviour (and outcomes) are found in both structure and units. Waltz's difficulty is that he employs the concept of structure in two distinct ways and fails rigorously to distinguish them. On the one hand, he argues that

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[26] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International structure, national force, and the balance of world power', *Journal of International Affairs*, 21.2, 1967, p.229.
[27] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.68, 82.
[28] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.328.
[29] *Ibid.* p.338.
[30] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.34. Tellis argues that, because Waltz conceives of causes at the unit and structural levels as constantly interacting, he cannot provide deductive systemic models. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.80.
[31] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.74; Hollis & Smith, 'Two stories', p.247.

structure is what makes a set of units a system. In this sense, structure is part of what a system is and one explains how structure relates to units by showing what structure is: the relationship between structure and units is constitutive.[32] On the other hand, he attempts to isolate structure as a causal force in a balance-of-power theory. Although Waltz does not always make this distinction clear, it is a basic feature of his explanatory strategy. We can and should distinguish between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a system (consisting of a structure and interacting units) and his development of a systemic theory (in which structure is isolated as an independent variable). Although Wendt treats Waltz's definition of structure as if it were a conceptualization of international relations, he also (tellingly) acknowledges that neorealism develops 'a conception of the agent-structure relationship in international relations which recognizes the causal role of both state agents and system structures'.[33]

Mouritzen argues that the major difference between *Man, the state and war* and *Theory* is the latter's 'more pronounced nomothetic orientation'.[34] In other words, *Theory* attempts to develop what are known as covering-law explanations. This form of explanation is commonly associated with Hempel, who argues that an event or phenomenon 'is explained by subsuming it under general laws, i.e., by showing that it occurred in accordance with those laws, in virtue of the realization of certain specified antecedent conditions'.[35] In short, an event is explained by showing that it results from a set of circumstances (antecedent conditions) in accordance with certain general (covering) laws, which may be either strictly universal or probabilistic-statistical in form.[36] If Waltz pursues nomothetic explanations, then he seeks to explain by developing a theory from which general laws may be inferred. These general laws are then used to show how certain (classes of) events follow from certain

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[32] See Lukes, 'Methodological individualism reconsidered', pp.126-7; Wendt, 'On constitution and causation'.
[33] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.341.
[34] Mouritzen, 'Kenneth Waltz', p.69.
[35] Carl G. Hempel, 'Studies in the logic of explanation', in *Aspects of scientific explanation and other essays in the philosophy of science* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p.246. See also Carl G. Hempel, 'Aspects of scientific explanation', in *Aspects of scientific explanation*, p.345.
[36] See Carl G. Hempel, 'Explanation in science and history', in Robert G. Colodny, *Frontiers of science and philosophy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), pp.10, 13; Smith, 'Positivism and beyond', p.15.

sets of initial conditions. In other words, his theory explains by showing that certain behaviours follow from general laws about how structure affects state behaviour in stipulated conditions. This is, indeed, how Waltz's theory has usually been construed. Donnelly argues that structural realists 'have tended to adopt the so-called nomological-deductive model of social science. Theory is seen as a deductive system of propositions to explain the occurrence of law-like regularities in a carefully delimited domain of inquiry'.[37] Ruggie argues that 'Waltz explicitly adopted a hypothetico-deductive approach to formulating theory and the "covering law" protocol of explanation that is characteristic of the natural sciences and economics'.[38]

Waltz does not explicitly advocate a particular model of explanation (and he does not cite Hempel). However, his description of how a theory of international politics can be constructed is consistent with the nomothetic model: 'first, one must conceive of international politics as a bounded realm or domain; second, one must discover some law-like regularities within it; and third, one must develop a way of explaining the observed regularities'.[39] Further, Waltz's early work explicitly treats structure as a causal variable. He argues, for example that we should try to find out 'what is causally important' and criticizes other scholars for failing 'to distinguish structure as a causal factor in international politics'.[40] A later article criticizes Aron's belief that it is not possible to distinguish dependent from independent variables in international relations (though Waltz acknowledges that doing so is 'an uncertain undertaking').[41] Hempel insists that 'causal explanation is one variety' of nomothetic (covering-law) explanation.[42] To explain an event in terms of a covering law is, he argues, to indicate the 'causes or determining factors' of that event: 'the assertion that a set of events ... have caused the event to be explained, amounts to the statement that, according to certain general laws, a set of events of the kinds

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[37] Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*, pp.30-1. Hempel uses the term 'deductive-nomological' to refer to nomothetic explanations that invoke specifically universal (not probabilistic) laws. See Hempel, 'Aspects of scientific explanation', pp.345-6.
[38] Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity*, p.7. The term 'hypothetico-deductive' emphasizes the empiricist nature of covering-law explanation: theories are hypotheses from which explanations are deduced and tested against experience.
[39] Waltz, *Theory*, p.116.
[40] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Realities, assumptions, and simulations', in William D. Coplin (ed.), *Simulations in the study of politics* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1968), pp.106, 109.
[41] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', pp.25, 27.
[42] Hempel, 'Studies in the logic of explanation', p.250.

mentioned is regularly accompanied by an event' of the relevant kind.[43] In other words, causal explanations draw on explicit or implicit general laws that tie particular sets of conditions to particular outcomes. If so, and if Waltz attempts to isolate structure as an independent (causal) variable, then he may fairly be construed as aiming to generate nomothetic explanations.

The only reason for doubting that Waltz sought to generate nomothetic explanations is that, in *Theory*, he rarely describes structure as a cause. Instead, he tends to refer to 'systems-level' or 'systemic' causes, to structural 'constraints', or to the 'causal effects' of structures.[44] He also refers to the causal weight of 'systems-level factors', to expectations inferred from 'knowledge of systems-level elements', and to 'forces that operate at the level of the system'.[45] Where he does describe structure as a cause he insists that structure 'operates as a cause, but it is not the only cause in play'.[46] However, this does not imply that Waltz does not pursue nomothetic explanation, or that he does not attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable. The crucial statement is Waltz's insistence that structures are causes, but not 'in the sense meant by saying that *A* causes *X* and *B* causes *Y*'.[47] Rather than conceiving of structure as an ordinary cause, Waltz describes it 'as a constraining and disposing force': he refers to the 'constraints and incentives of the system' and maintains that structures 'shape and shove'.[48] There are two reasons why structure does not cause behaviour in the sense that *A* causes *X*. First, Waltz does not believe that structure determines state behaviour: his theory examines only one cause (structure). Second, structure is not actually an independent variable: it is generated in (inter)action and is the condition of further (inter)action. In this sense, the relation between structure and (inter)action is far closer to what Wendt would call constitution than causation.[49] Waltz tries to determine how state behaviour is affected by the structure of the international political system, but he is always wary that his attempt to isolate structural effects does not make structure into a cause like any other.

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[43] Carl G. Hempel, 'The function of general laws in history', in *Aspects of scientific explanation*, p.232.
[44] See Waltz, *Theory*, pp.57, 62, 68, 70.
[45] See *ibid.* pp.49, 50, 69.
[46] *Ibid.* p.87.
[47] *Ibid.* p.74.
[48] *Ibid.* p.69; Waltz, 'Reflections', pp.342-3.
[49] See Ch.10, below.

This suggests that Waltz attempts to develop a nomothetic theory but does not see the explanations it generates as providing a complete account of the relationship between structure and behaviour. In other words, Waltz's attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable in a systemic theory of state behaviour must be viewed in the context of his insistence that structure and units are mutually affecting. Waltz's systemic theory is only one part of a possible integrated systems approach. Although Waltz is inconsistent, he often presents his theory in this way. He states that a systems approach will be needed 'if outcomes are affected *not only* by the properties and interconnections of variables *but also* by the way in which they are organized'.[50] He adds that, in a systemic theory, only 'some part of the explanation of behaviours and outcomes is found in the system's structure'.[51] He reminds his readers that to 'claim that a theory contemplating only the internal condition of states does not sufficiently explain their external behaviour is not to claim that external behaviour can be explained without reference to internal condition': 'External conditions must be *part* of the explanation' of how states act.[52] He argues that we can understand the influence of unit-level variables only in the context of how structure constrains and disposes state behaviour.[53] Rather than adopting the only possible approach to complex systems, Waltz insists that he 'developed a way of thinking that had not been widely familiar': 'System and structure have become fairly common terms in political science discourse. Only in the most general way, however, had systemic approaches been used to show how a structure shapes and shoves the units of a system'.[54]

On this interpretation, *Theory* is fairly close in outlook to *Man, the state and war*. Concluding the earlier work, Waltz stated:

> The third image described the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.[55]

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[50] Waltz, *Theory*, p.39 [italics added].
[51] *Ibid.* p.73.
[52] *Ibid.* p.26 [italics added].
[53] See *ibid.* p.65.
[54] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.336. See also Buzan, 'The level of analysis problem', p.207.
[55] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.238.

This stance is replicated elsewhere. In another early piece, Waltz insists that we must 'take the unit view and the organizational view simultaneously and ask what effects different organizational conditions may have on the processes of conflict and the prospects for its resolution', adding that the 'structural factor is only one causal force operating among many'.[56] Likewise, in a later article, Waltz praises Kant for having understood that the 'causes of war lie not simply in states or in the state system; they are found in both'.[57] His most explicit statement appears in an interview from 1993. Responding to a question about the importance of the nature of domestic societies, Waltz states:

> I am tired of people who say, "You've got a theory of international politics; you need to include domestic politics". Well, don't these people understand anything about what a theory is? A theory has to be *about* something. It can't be about everything.[58]

He then elucidates further:

> I don't think that anybody under the sun would deny the statement that if you *could* have a single theory that would comprehend both international and domestic, both political and economic matters, all in one theory, hey, that would be a lot better than a simple theory of international politics. However, *nobody's thought of how to do it.*[59]

The thrust of this interpretation of Waltz is consistent with Singer's contention that the level-of-analysis problem must be 'temporarily resolved' prior to any particular inquiry.[60] In other words, Waltz seeks to isolate system structure as an independent variable in order to investigate how system structure affects state behaviour in international relations. He does not therefore believe that structure determines behaviour; nor does his definition of structure realistically depict the context for action facing actual state actors in international relations. As Buzan, Jones and Little argue: Waltz 'clearly recognizes that there is an interaction between structure and agency. But he insists that it is necessary to separate out the two levels of analysis'.[61] However, it is essential to recognize that there is a fundamental tension at the heart of Waltz's approach. Although this may be summarized as a tension between how Waltz conceptualizes international relations and the nature of the theory he seeks to

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[56] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Conflict in world politics', in Steven L. Spiegel and Kenneth N. Waltz (eds.), *Conflict in world politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1971), pp.456, 470.
[57] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, 25.1, Summer 2000, p.13.
[58] Halliday & Rosenberg, 'Interview with Ken Waltz', p.379.
[59] *Ibid.*
[60] Singer, 'The level-of-analysis problem', p.90.
[61] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.135-6.

develop, the tension plays out across four distinct stages in Waltz's explanatory strategy. First, he conceives of international relations as a complex system comprised of a structure and interacting units (which he describes as being mutually affecting). Second, he defines system structure in such a way that (and makes the necessary assumptions about state motives so that) structure is unchanging, even though it is not thereby actually isolated as an independent variable. Third, he uses these definitions and assumptions to develop a putatively nomothetic theory that shows how structure affects behaviour. Fourth, he contests that whatever the explanations generated by this theory might suggest, it only explains some aspects of state behaviour (and the outcomes thereof) in international relations.

Waltz's critics, reconsidered

These elements of Waltz's explanatory strategy are not satisfactorily differentiated by his critics. Buzan and Ruggie do not take sufficiently seriously Waltz's belief that a narrow definition of structure is a necessary component of a useful systemic theory. Waltz argues that failure to distinguish clearly between structure and interacting units

> makes it impossible to disentangle causes of different sorts and to distinguish between causes and effects. Blurring the distinction between the different levels of a system has ... been the major impediment to the development of theories about international politics.[62]

He admires 'Ruggie's fine and rich account of the historical transition from the medieval to the modern state', but asserts that it 'tells us nothing about the structure of international politics'.[63] In other words, Waltz recognizes that the medieval and modern international systems differ, but does not believe that structure explains the difference. Ruggie, because he conceives of structure as generative, wishes to include anything that affects how states relate to each other within a definition of structure. Waltz objects that this 'makes the criteria of inclusion infinitely expansible'.[64] If every change in a system is linked to a change of structure, the concept loses its any explanatory power: 'To call changes within systems changes *of* systems makes developing the notion of system into a theory of some explanatory

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[62] Waltz, *Theory*, p.78.
[63] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.328.
[64] *Ibid.* p.329.

power wholly impossible'.[65] Jervis recognizes that Waltz defined structure as he did in order 'to rigorously separate systemic from unit attributes', but observes that 'the cost is to leave little space for factors of considerable explanatory power'.[66] He is correct: what many of Waltz's critics refuse to recognize is that, in Waltz's explanatory strategy, structure can only explain anything if it does not explain everything.

Hollis and Smith argue that the point of departure in systemic theorizing 'is to see the international system as so strongly determining the behaviour of states that there is no need to consider what goes on within them'.[67] Having characterized *Theory* in these terms, they interpret Waltz's later insistence that structures merely shape and shove as a weaker position. In *Theory*, they argue, Waltz adopts

> a strict structural account of international relations, which commits him to seeing structures as real. In his more recent work we see him shifting to a softer notion of structure, one which gives more room for the internal make-up of the units to matter. This ambivalence leads to a serious question as to what Waltz takes as real and primary, structures or units.[68]

Waltz's explanatory strategy does raise questions about whether he takes structures or units to be real and primary: this is the focus of Wendt's critique. Such questions arise, however, not in virtue of a shift in position, but in virtue of the problematic relation between Waltz's development of a nomothetic systemic theory and his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system in which structure and units are mutually affecting. The problem with Hollis and Smith's interpretation is that they characterize Waltz as a holist based on a narrow reading of his explanatory strategy. They do not recognize the tension between Waltz's characterization of international relations as a complex system and his causal approach to explanation. As Mouritzen observes: *Theory* examines

> *one* explanatory factor only and demonstratively leaves out the rest from the domain of theory. But that does not imply that Waltz is blind to the importance of the non-selected factors for the explanation of both unit behaviour and certain systemic outcomes.[69]

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[65] Waltz, *Theory*, p.45.
[66] Jervis, *System effects*, p.108.
[67] Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, p.101.
[68] *Ibid.* p.105.
[69] Mouritzen, 'Kenneth Waltz', p.69.

Dessler recognizes that 'a strictly structural explanation of action ... will necessarily be incomplete'.[70] Nevertheless, he interprets Waltz's necessarily incomplete structural theory as if it were a complete view about what constitutes international relations. He argues that, in the ontology of Waltz's model, the units interact, generating structure, whilst the link between structure and units is only explanatory (not ontological).[71] He therefore interprets Waltz's depiction of how a systems approach conceives of the international political system as if it portrays two distinct types of relation:

INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURE

↑ ↓

INTERACTING UNITS

According to Dessler, 'the first (upward) arrow refers to the creation of system structure by unit interaction (postulated ontologically); the second (downward) arrow reflects the constraint imposed by structure on interaction (explained theoretically)'.[72] Waltz himself insists that the two arrows indicate the same sort of relation: 'Structural theory emphasizes that causation runs from structures to states *and* from states to structure'.[73] Admittedly, interpretation is confused by the fact that Waltz does not discuss ontology and tends to conflate his constitutive account of what structure is (and how it relates to acting units) with his causal account of how structure affects state behaviour. Yet the appropriate response is not to ignore Waltz's characterization of structure and units as mutually affecting. There must be something worth exploring given the contradictions between Dessler's claim that Waltz proceeds from the bottom up, Ruggie's claim that Waltz proceeds from the top down (the units being all product and not at all productive), and Waltz's insistence that structure, though generated in interaction, is itself 'a generative notion'.[74]

Even if Wendt is right that Waltz fails to keep unit characteristics out of his definition of structure, this does not mean that Waltz subscribes to an individualist ontology. The manner in which Waltz seeks to define structure does not represent his beliefs either about the nature of structure or about its relation to

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[70] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.444.
[71] See *ibid.* p.449.
[72] *Ibid.* fn.33.
[73] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.914.
[74] Waltz, *Theory*, p.72.

other aspects of the system. Dessler maintains that, in 'international relations theory, the statement "A system consists of a structure and interacting units" represents an ontological claim'.[75] Yet when assessing Waltz's ontology, both Dessler and Wendt focus not on Waltz's conceptualization of international relations, but on his definition of structure. Further, it is unclear how Wendt's substantive criticism of Waltz's definition of structure should be interpreted. If Wendt's point is that Waltz fails to make the system more than the sum of its parts (because he defines the system's structure in terms of its parts), then we face Nagel's question: is the claim that the system is more than the sum of its parts distinguishable from the claim that some characteristics of the system cannot be explained in terms of current theories about the properties and (inter-)relations of its parts? This is ultimately a question about the relation between ontology and epistemology, a question on which Wendt's views remain controversial. If Wendt's point is that Waltz's system emerges from the interaction of the units and has no possible existence in the absence of units, then he and Waltz agree: Wendt acknowledges that structures 'do not exist except by virtue of the agent- or unit-level properties and relations by which they are instantiated'.[76] In fact, this is a necessary feature of all social systems: to argue that a system might exist without units is to deny that it is a system at all.

Wendt criticizes Waltz's theory because it cannot explain how structure affects states' properties as well as their behaviour: it cannot explain how structures generate states as agents. Yet Waltz constructs his theory in this way precisely in order to isolate structure as an independent variable, a point that Wendt almost entirely ignores. In other words, Waltz makes empirically false assumptions about actors, treats structure as static, and describes only causal (not constitutive) processes in order to achieve a form of explanation in which a dependent variable (state behaviour) is explained (at least in part) in terms of variation in an independent variable (system structure). By proceeding in this way, Waltz implicitly poses a question that is fundamental for any theory that conceives of its subject matter as forming a complex system: how is it possible to explain when agents and structures are

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[75] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.445.

[76] Alexander Wendt, 'Identity and structural change in international politics', in Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds.), *The return of culture and identity in IR theory* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1996), p.47. Waltz insists that structures are defined 'in terms of the primary political units of an era', not specifically in terms of states. See Waltz, *Theory*, p.91.

mutually affecting?[77] Although Wendt, in accordance with his scientific realist epistemology, wishes to separate questions of what exists (ontology) from questions of how to explain (epistemology and methodology), in Waltz's explanatory strategy, these questions are tied together.[78] Wendt appears to acknowledge as much when he argues that the ontological aspect of the agent-structure problem 'concerns the nature of both agents and structures and, because they are in some way mutually implicating, of their interrelationship'.[79] Examining the relationship between the characterization of international relations as a complex system and causal approaches to explanation raises important questions with which International Relations theorists rarely engage: what explanatory strategies are most appropriate if agents and structures are mutually affecting and how are their explanatory claims best evaluated?

The limitations of Waltz's approach

The tension between Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a complex system and his development of a nomothetic, structural theory introduces a puzzle about how that theory is applied and about how its substantive explanations are interpreted. This section argues that Waltz's theory must be construed as offering only partial explanations: just as Waltz's structural theory addresses only part of the relation between structures and units, so the explanations derived from that theory draw on only one determinant of state behaviour (structure). The explanations are partial not in the sense that they are indeterminate, but in the sense that they appear as incomplete accounts when situated in terms of Waltz's broader explanatory strategy. Yet this raises a troubling question about how structural explanations can be incorporated within integrated explanations that draw on a range of explanatory factors. The first part of this section suggests that the explanatory power of Waltz's theory is severely limited by Waltz's inability to indicate what weight should be attributed to structural causes in

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[77] This is not to suggest that Waltz deliberately sought to engage with this problem, but to suggest that his approach invites us to consider how explanation should proceed if there is no obvious independent variable.

[78] Hollis and Smith contend that scientific realists artificially separate these questions by addressing questions of ontology in the context of an implicit epistemology.

[79] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.339.

determining state behaviour. Despite this failure, and despite the fact that the substantive explanations generated by his theory are, considered in isolation, likely to be inaccurate, Waltz insists that his theory illuminates something essential about how structure affects state behaviour. This raises the question of how Waltz's theory and substantive explanations may be evaluated. The second part of this section shows that critics have focused on trying to pin Waltz down to a particular epistemological stance rather than on asking how his explanations are best assessed. It shows that, although Waltz defends his theory as a source of essential insights about how structure affects behaviour, the theory cannot convincingly be construed as an ideal-type, not least because Waltz fails to show how it may be employed as a source of heuristic insights.

Partial explanations

Waltz's theory examines only a single cause of state behaviour (structure): it therefore provides only partial explanations of that behaviour. The point is not that Waltz's theory is incomplete, or that his explanations do not follow from his theoretical framework. His theory is, in principle, deductive and determinate: it explains how specific behaviours follow from specific configurations of the structure of the international political system.[80] The explanations generated by Waltz's theory are therefore partial because (and in the sense that) Waltz does not construe them as complete accounts of state behaviour. This is not a matter of whim: Waltz's explanatory strategy is premised on the contention that a theory may be nomothetic in form yet provide only partial explanations. Waltz conceptualizes international relations as a complex system in which the structure and units are mutually affecting. He defines system structure as unchanging and develops a nomothetic theory showing how this single independent variable (so defined) affects state behaviour. Yet he explicitly conceives of structure as providing only part of the story of international politics. He repeatedly insists that unit-level causes affect state behaviour. He also insists that structure emerges from unit interaction and is affected by changes in unit-level phenomena, though he excludes these processes from his systemic theory in

[80] Many theorists, including realists, have contended that Waltz's theoretical framework is incomplete in the sense that particular behaviours cannot be deduced from his definition of structure. See Ch.9, below. This section considers the form of Waltz's explanations, not their content.

order to represent structure as an independent variable.[81] In practice, the limitations of Waltz's systemic theory are similar to those of Rosecrance's systems framework. Rosecrance's approach 'neglect[s] and purposely obscure[s] internal variations within a single system' in order to take account 'of the change from system to system'.[82] Similarly, Waltz neglects and obscures unit-level phenomena in order to show how structure affects behaviour. His theory should not, therefore, be construed as presenting complete explanations.

Waltz remarks of Hobson's economic theory of imperialism that 'what claimed to be a general theory turned out to be only a partial one': 'although the theory does help to explain some imperialist policies, it is woefully misleading for others'.[83] The problem, Waltz suggests, is that although economic considerations enter into most imperialist ventures, 'economic causes are not the only causes operating nor are they always the most important one'.[84] A similar objection applies to Waltz's structural theory of state behaviour: although a state's placement in the system will affect much of its behaviour, it will rarely be the only factor and often not the most important one. However, it is important to distinguish between theories that generate flawed explanations of events they claim fully to explain and theories that knowingly exclude important variables. Waltz appears to be unsure which Hobson's theory is. On the one hand, Waltz states that Hobson 'claims to explain the most important of international-political events – not merely imperialism but also most, if not all, modern wars – and even to indicate the conditions that would permit peace to prevail'.[85] If the theory claims and fails to offer full explanations of these events, it is unsatisfactory. On the other hand, Waltz argues that 'the assigned causes may operate, yet other causes may deflect or overwhelm them'; he acknowledges that Hobson's theory 'does tell us something about changes in national policies and in international politics from the late nineteenth century onward'.[86] If a theory considers only a single cause and that cause may be overwhelmed, then that theory may usefully indicate how its independent variable affects its

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[81] See Waltz, 'Reflections', p.327; Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The emerging structure of international politics', *International Security*, 18.2, Autumn 1993, p.49.
[82] Rosecrance, *Action and reaction*, p.6.
[83] Waltz, *Theory*, p.36.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] *Ibid.* p.19.
[86] *Ibid.* pp.20, 36.

dependent variable even though its substantive explanations of particular events are unsatisfactory when considered in isolation. Such theories offer only partial explanations: although determinate in form, they are not claimed to offer complete explanations of variations in their dependent variables.[87]

Waltz describes the three images employed in *Man, the state and war* as 'partial'. He suggests in an early article that the 'first and second images are criticized not so much as being wrong but as being incomplete. Their partial qualities drive one to seek the more inclusive nexus of causes'.[88] He argues that the study of political philosophy should be accompanied by the development of partial theories: they 'elaborate, complicate, and contribute immediate relevance'.[89] In *Man, the state and war* itself, Waltz advises against 'assuming that there is a single cause that can be isolated by analysis and eliminated or controlled by wisely constructed policy', warning that 'all causes may be interrelated'.[90] He insists that the 'prescriptions directly derived from a single image are incomplete because they are based upon partial analyses. The partial quality of each image sets up a tension that drives one toward inclusion of the others'.[91] As Buzan recognizes: 'Waltz was fully aware that structural causes could never offer more than a partial explanation of international outcomes'.[92] Although Hempel also discusses partial explanations, he means something different from what I mean (and Buzan implies) in describing Waltz's theory as generating partial explanations. By a partial explanation, Hempel means an incomplete explanation in which the explanandum does not follow from the explanans with the implied specificity. In other words, a partial explanation predicts one of a class of events, but not the event itself.[93] The explanations generated by Waltz's theory are not partial in the sense that they are themselves incomplete (in the sense that they do not follow from the theory with the required

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[87] No theory's explanations are absolutely complete: all theories exclude some variables. However, many theories are sufficiently reliable that they may be treated, in practice, as complete.
[88] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Political philosophy and the study of international relations', in William T. R. Fox (ed.), *Theoretical aspects of international relations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), p.64.
[89] *Ibid.* p.67.
[90] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.229.
[91] *Ibid.* pp.229-30.
[92] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.23.
[93] See Hempel, 'Aspects of scientific explanation', pp.415-7.

specificity), but in the sense that Waltz does not interpret them as complete accounts of variation in their dependent variables.

Other scholars have also employed the notion of partiality. Groom and Light entitle one section of their guide to contemporary theory 'Partial theories of international relations', applying the term to, inter alia, foreign policy analysis, nationalism and Marxism.[94] Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff invoke a common distinction between 'partial, middle-range theories designed to explain a limited range of phenomena' and grand theories that purport 'to explain in a generalized way a wide range of international phenomena'.[95] They interpret Waltz, Morgenthau and Wallerstein as grand theorists and describe studies of, inter alia, integration, interdependence, regimes, and the democratic peace as mid-range. Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein claim to present 'not a "theory" of national security so much as an orienting framework that highlights a set of effects and mechanisms that have been neglected in mainstream security studies'.[96] They describe this framework as a 'partial perspective' and argue that it 'tells us as much about the substance of world politics as does a materialist view of the international system or a choice theoretic assumption of exogenous interests'.[97] None of these theorists defines the notion of partiality. As I use the term, a partial explanation is an explanation that follows from a theory yet is construed as forming only one part of a (putative) complete explanation of the phenomenon to which it applies. Theories that offer partial explanations therefore differ from theories which, because they ignore important variables, are simply flawed: theories that offer partial explanations are situated within broader explanatory strategies which represent the theory as only one part of a full account of their subject matter. Partial explanations therefore always invite questions

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[94] A. J. R. Groom and Margot Light (eds.), *Contemporary international relations: A guide to theory* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), p.91.

[95] Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, *Contending theories*, p.17. See also Reynolds, *Theory and explanation*, pp.51-2.

[96] Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Norms, identity, and culture in national security', in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.36.

[97] *Ibid.* Other scholars also describe theoretical approaches as perspectives. Although their purpose is usually to draw attention to limits in the explanatory power of these approaches, the implications for International Relations are rarely spelled out. See, for example, Robert O. Keohane, 'Neoliberal institutionalism: a perspective on world politics', in *International institutions and state power: Essays in international relations theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp.1-20.

about how they are to be combined in integrated (complete) explanations and about how they are to be interpreted when considered in isolation.

Waltz's claims about what his theory can and cannot explain are illuminated by thinking of his theory as generating only partial explanations. He argues, for example, that a theory of international politics

> can describe the range of likely outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change. It can tell us what pressures are exerted and what possibilities are posed by systems of different structure, but it cannot tell us just how, and how effectively, the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities.[98]

This implies that Waltz's theory isolates a particular cause (structure) rather than fully explaining a particular object of inquiry (state behaviour). Waltz subsequently indicates just this: 'Structurally we can describe and understand the pressures states are subject to. We cannot predict how they will react to the pressures without knowledge of their internal dispositions'.[99] The difficulty with these claims is that they misrepresent the nature of the partial explanations that Waltz's theory offers. Waltz's theory is, in principle, determinate: it shows what behaviour follows from certain structures. It therefore shows what (structural) pressures states are subject to, but also shows how they will respond (or at least how they would respond were structure the only cause in play). In claiming that his theory does not explain how states respond, Waltz emphasizes that behaviour is determined not only by structure but also by unit-level factors. Yet although this is the logic of Waltz's broader explanatory strategy, it is not the logic of his narrower theory: the theory explains how states respond if structure is the only cause in play and does not show how these responses are affected by the presence of other causes. The great problem with Waltz's theory, therefore, is how explanations that are determinate in form are to be interpreted as part of an explanatory strategy in which they are only part of the story.

Waltz insists that a systemic theory must 'indicate the comparative weights of systemic and subsystemic causes' and must 'show how forces and effects change from one system to another':

> We have to bring off the Copernican revolution that others have called for by showing how much of states' actions and interactions, and how much of the outcomes their actions and

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[98] Waltz, *Theory*, p.71.
[99] *Ibid.*

> interactions produce, can be explained by forces that operate at the level of the system, rather than at the level of the units.[100]

Waltz explicitly argues that this is part of separating structure and units in order to construct a theory. Unless one keeps unit attributes and interactions out of one's definition of structure, he maintains, one 'cannot even attempt to say how much the system affects the units'.[101] The fact that Waltz develops only a systemic theory rather than an integrated systems approach does not, therefore, remove the need to show how structural and unit-level forces interact:

> To say that it would be useful to view international politics from the systems level is not to argue that the system determines the attributes and the behaviour of states but rather to keep open the theoretically interesting and practically important question of what, in different systems, the proportionate causal weights of unit-level and of systems-level factors may be.[102]

This message is frequently reaffirmed in *Theory's* early chapters: 'If structure influences without determining, then one must ask how and to what extent the structure of a realm accounts for outcomes and how and to what extent the units account for outcomes. Structure has to be studied in its own right as do units'.[103] Waltz even criticizes Kaplan for offering 'no way in which the extent of system's influence and of subsystems' influence can be investigated'.[104]

In practice, the chapters of *Theory* devoted to developing Waltz's substantive balance-of-power theory and to applying it to empirical developments in international relations do not fulfil this promise. Waltz finds himself unable either to indicate what weight structure has in determining specific behaviours or to suggest how structural and unit-level factors interact.[105] Responding to his critics, Waltz acknowledged that the 'difficulty of sorting causes out is a serious, and seemingly inescapable, limitation of systems theories of international relations'.[106] His account of the difficulty focuses on 'the problem of weighing unit-level and structural causes': he cites the question of whether bipolarity or nuclear weapons contributed more to peaceful relations between the superpowers during the Cold

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[100] *Ibid.* pp.40-1, 69.
[101] *Ibid.* p.57.
[102] *Ibid.* pp.48-9.
[103] *Ibid.* p.78.
[104] *Ibid.* p.55.
[105] See Chs.6, 8, below.
[106] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.343.

War.[107] The difficulties that Waltz faces in attempting to weigh causes are significant. The theory itself cannot indicate what weight should be attributed to structure in specific instances because structure is the only cause it examines: it provides determinate explanations of what would be the case were structure the only cause in play.[108] If the theory were to attribute only a proportionate weight to structure, its explanations would become indeterminate unless other independent variables were also incorporated (with specified weights).[109] Although the weight of structural effects might be estimated through observation, this approach is question-begging: it depends on being able to distinguish between the effects of structural and unit-level causes, which is precisely the problem.[110] Lacking an account of how unit-level and structural causes interact, Waltz's theory can provide only the unelaborated prediction that states will balance preponderant power in an effort to secure their survival.

Because Waltz cannot specify the weight that should be attributed to structural causes in specific instances, he is unable to show how his theory can contribute to integrated explanations of state behaviour which draw on both structural and unit-level causes. He laments that although structures 'condition behaviours and outcomes', explanations 'are indeterminate because both unit-level and structural causes are in play'.[111] However, the partial explanations generated by Waltz's theory are not indeterminate. Rather, they are determinate yet likely to be wrong: they follow from Waltz's definition of structure and his assumptions about state motives, but are inaccurate because they exclude unit-level causes. Waltz claims that his theory explains something important about how structure affects behaviour even if its specific explanations are inaccurate. He argues that 'any theory

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[107] *Ibid.* See Ch.6, below.
[108] Moul insists that 'analyses of the international system cannot be used to determine the degree to which state behaviour is "environmentally or "systemically" controlled or the degree to which it results from particular attributes of states'. See Moul, 'The level of analysis problem', p.499.
[109] The (indeterminate) hypothesis that structural forces have a certain weight (structure remaining the only independent variable) is distinct from the (probabilistic, but determinate) hypothesis that a certain proportion of outcomes accord with the predictions of a theory examining only structural forces.
[110] Tellis argues that Waltz fails to provide determinate accounts of actual state behaviour: consequently, he cannot explain 'which specific behaviour is to be treated as significant in the context of the vast range of conduct usually visible in international politics'. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.76.
[111] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.343.

leaves some things unexplained' and insists that 'a structural theory is limited to making predictions and promoting the understanding of events at a level of generality appropriate to the theory'.[112] Yet it is hard to justify the contention that Waltz's theory illuminates how structure affects behaviour if there is no basis on which to assess the theory's substantive explanations. Further, there are grounds for believing that Waltz's theory partly obscures the relationship between structure and units. As Waltz conceptualizes international relations, structure and units are mutually affecting. One possible interpretation is that structure (in part) constitutes states as agents (or constitutes their possibilities for action), while structure is constituted by interaction. If so, then it does not make sense to treat structure as an independent variable or to ask how states would behave were structure the only cause in play: Waltz's theory not only excludes certain causes of state behaviour, but also misrepresents the relationship between structure and units by describing it in causal terms.

Evaluating Waltz's theory

The problem with evaluating Waltz's theory is that, although its explanations are determinate, Waltz conceives them as partial: he claims that they retain significance even if they do not (satisfactorily) explain specific cases. If so, there is little to be gained from evaluating those explanations directly: considered in isolation, they are likely to be inaccurate. As if acknowledging this, Waltz tends to formulate claims about what his theory can explain in general terms. He argues, for example, that his theory explains only 'the recurrent formation of balances of power': because 'only a loosely defined and inconstant condition of balance is predicted, it is difficult to say that any given distribution of power falsifies the theory'.[113] Waltz's thinking appears to be that although his theory 'cannot hope to predict specific outcomes', it remains useful because it still (somehow) illuminates how structure affects behaviour.[114] In other words, Waltz acknowledges that, because his theory examines only

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[112] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.30; Waltz, 'Reflections', p.344.
[113] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.119, 124.
[114] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.344. One might interpret Waltz as arguing that, because structural effects operate through selection, his theory can only explain outcomes, not specific behaviours. However, the process of selection derives from specific state behaviours which must themselves be explained if selection is to have explanatory weight. See Ch.7, below.

structure, its explanations are vague, but contends that those explanations are, nevertheless, insightful. However, Waltz mischaracterizes the explanatory problems he encounters. The partial explanations generated by his theory are not vague but inaccurate: the theory predicts that states always balance preponderant power.[115] Having considered Waltz's theory in the context of his broader explanatory strategy, we may infer that the theory is inaccurate because structure always interacts with other causes and is sometimes overwhelmed. Yet if so, the partial explanations generated by Waltz's theory will be useful when employed as a source of heuristic insights, rather than a source of deductive explanations. Two questions are therefore central to an evaluation of Waltz's theory. First, does Waltz's broader explanatory strategy reduce the significance of testing his theory's substantive explanations? Second, how can a nomothetic theory be employed as a source of heuristic insights?

Jones observes that Waltz's theory 'purports to identify and explain an orderly reality beneath the flux of events without making entirely clear either the ontological status of this reality or how we may have knowledge of it'.[116] He argues that, although Waltz adopts a positivist attitude toward testing, Waltz is not an empiricist: rather, pragmatism 'lies at the heart of the Neorealist position'.[117] In other words, Waltz believes neither that knowledge claims are justified only by experience (empiricism), nor that knowledge derives from (a priori) reason (rationalism), but that knowledge arises out of a dialogue between experience and reason (pragmatism), appearing as consensus, not objective (transcendental) certainty.[118] Jones notes that Waltz privileges structure over agent and efficient cause over intention, suggesting that this is inconsistent with an 'empiricist account of causation as constant conjunction'.[119] He also notes Waltz's belief that theories cannot 'be judged true or false. Rather, they are successful or unsuccessful'.[120] Jones interprets this as 'a form of Quinean pragmatism in which truth figures first and foremost as coherence':

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[115] Schroeder suggests that, historically, most states have failed to balance in most situations. See Paul Schroeder, 'Historical reality vs. neorealist theory', *International Security*, 19.1, Summer 1994, pp.108-48.
[116] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.182.
[117] *Ibid.* p.173.
[118] See *ibid.* pp.180-6; Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, chs.2-4.
[119] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.187.
[120] *Ibid.* p.188.

> Any reference which theoretical statements make to a possible world is ... not a matter of one-to-one reference of propositions to fact ... but rather an active, shaping, interpretative, or, in Waltz's terminology, an explanatory relation between human reason and the world.[121]

However, Jones insists that a thoroughgoing pragmatism is inconsistent with a 'positivist project of testing theories against the world'.[122] He accuses Waltz of 'an abrupt U-turn, as theory is welded back to the external world through a positivist characterization of the testing of hypotheses'.[123] Buzan, Jones and Little conclude that Waltz subscribes to 'a residual positivism inconsistent with the generally pragmatist tone of a majority of his remarks about theory and knowledge'.[124]

Although Jones identifies significant inconsistencies between Waltz's accounts of theory construction and of theory testing, his depiction of Waltz as an insufficiently thoroughgoing pragmatist is open to question. First, Waltz privileges structure over agency for methodological, not epistemological, reasons: Waltz develops a systemic theory not because he believes that systemic theories alone offer an avenue to knowledge, but because he believes that systemic theories are an essential yet under-developed part of an integrated systems approach. Second, it is unclear how Waltz's insistence that theoretical assumptions 'are neither true nor false' and that they 'find their justification in the success of the theories that employ them' should be construed.[125] Jones interprets it as a claim about the logic of validation: he surmises that Waltz cannot be an empiricist because he denies a simple correspondence between language and reality. Yet the context suggests (not unambiguously) that these comments pertain to the process of discovery: Waltz is pointing out that hypotheses need not be descriptively accurate.[126] If so, then it remains possible to interpret Waltz as an empiricist, provided that we clearly distinguish 'the psychological process of discovering hypotheses from the epistemological process of

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[121] *Ibid.* p.189.
[122] *Ibid.* p.191.
[123] *Ibid.* pp.189-90.
[124] *Ibid.* p.234.
[125] Waltz, *Theory*, p.6.
[126] On the relationship between the process of discovery and the logic of validation see Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, pp.59-62.

validating them'.[127] Third, although Waltz emphasizes the importance of testing theories, he does not describe testing in straightforwardly positivist terms:

> Testing theories is a difficult and subtle task, made so by the interdependence of fact and theory, by the elusive relation between reality and theory as an instrument for its apprehension. Questions of truth and falsity are somehow involved, but so are questions of usefulness and uselessness. In the end, one sticks with the theory that reveals most.[128]

Mouritzen argues that Jones magnifies 'the pragmatist flavour in certain Waltzian formulations'.[129] He proposes a 'Popperian interpretation' of Waltz's epistemology and methodology, arguing that it resolves all but one of the inconsistencies identified by Jones.[130] Mouritzen argues that 'Waltz obviously presupposes metaphysical realism' (an essential Popperian tenet): Waltz believes that 'reality exists independently from our language and theories about it'.[131] Mouritzen acknowledges Waltz's claim that theories are 'not descriptions of the real world' but are 'instruments that we design in order to apprehend some part of it', yet argues that because theories allow us to '*apprehend* some part of the world' they must be '*about* something, an independent real world'.[132] Another key Popperian tenet is that observation is theory-impregnated. Mouritzen cites Waltz's critique of induction as evidence that Waltz, like Popper, believes that reality 'can be grasped only through our conceptual/theoretical lenses'.[133] He adds that Waltz cannot, therefore, be a positivist and criticizes scholars such as Ashley, Cox, and Keohane for characterizing him as such. Mouritzen also indicates the similarities between Waltz's parsimony and Popper's advocacy of bold conjectures and between Waltz's anti-reductionism and Popper's anti-psychologism. He concludes that only one aspect of Waltz's approach is inconsistent with metaphysical realism: Waltz's 'doctrine that assumptions cannot be true or false'.[134]

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[127] *Ibid.* p.59. For example, Hollis and Smith interpret Lipsey as a positivist who employs an empiricist logic of validation but permits assumptions to contain more than is warranted by experience alone. See Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, pp.50-5.
[128] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.123-4.
[129] Mouritzen, 'Kenneth Waltz', p.84 (n.1).
[130] *Ibid.*
[131] *Ibid.* pp.70-1.
[132] *Ibid.* p.71. See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Theory of international relations', in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (eds.), *The handbook of political science*, Vol.8 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), p.8.
[133] Mouritzen, 'Kenneth Waltz', p.71.
[134] *Ibid.* p.79.

Mouritzen describes this as 'a (tactically convenient) slip of the tongue' on Waltz's part.[135] Mouritzen maintains that it is meaningful to discuss assumptions' correspondence with the real world and notes that Waltz sometimes does just this, attributing to Waltz the less controversial view that 'assumptions *need not* be descriptively accurate, if this impedes their simplicity'.[136]

Mouritzen raises crucial questions about Waltz's understanding of the relation between theory and reality. However, a Popperian interpretation of Waltz is open to doubt.[137] First, it is unclear whether Waltz believes that reality exists independently of theory and language. In *Theory*, Waltz argues: 'Theories do construct *a* reality, but no one can ever say that it is *the* reality'.[138] In his later work, he is even more forthright: 'Because of the interdependence of theory and fact, we can find no Popperian critical experiment'.[139] In other words, Waltz does not believe that reality and language are separate to the extent that experience constitutes an absolute and objective test of theoretical premises. Second, Waltz's claims about the relation between theory and reality arise in the context of his attempt to clarify the nature of theory. His primary focus in Chapter One of *Theory* is how theories are to be constructed (they must abstract from reality), not the exposition of a (philosophically) realist ontology in which language and reality are separate. Third, Mouritzen does not do justice to Waltz's claim about the status of theoretical assumptions and its implications for theory evaluation. Waltz does not merely argue that 'assumptions are not assertions of fact. They are neither true nor false'.[140] He argues that theory 'isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually' and that the question, 'as ever with theories, is not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is

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[135] *Ibid.*
[136] *Ibid.*
[137] Tellis employs a critical rationalist (Popperian) methodology to argue that Waltz's theory is 'internally deficient and externally incomplete' and that realists should attempt to construct 'a purely deductive and fully reductionist explanation of international politics'. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.89.
[138] Waltz, *Theory*, p.9.
[139] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.334. See also Waltz, 'Evaluating theories'.
[140] Waltz, *Theory*, p.6.

useful'.[141] This enables him to maintain that the question to ask of his assumption that states seek survival 'is not whether it is true but whether it is the most sensible and useful one that can be made'.[142]

Just as Mouritzen identifies elements of Waltz that are inconsistent with a pragmatist reading, so there are elements that are difficult to reconcile with a Popperian reading. Although Jones draws attention to inconsistencies in Waltz's account of theory construction and evaluation, he overstates the extent to which Waltz's claims are epistemological; likewise, Mouritzen overstates the extent to which Waltz's claims are ontological. One of the chief problems in evaluating Waltz's theory is that he adopts an unusual and complex methodological stance without presenting a clear statement of epistemology or ontology. Waltz conceptualizes international relations as a complex system in which structure and units are mutually affecting yet fails to indicate the relationship between this conceptualization and his theoretical assumptions. He seeks to develop a nomothetic theory by defining system structure so that it is unchanging, yet fails to address the question of how such a theory contributes to our understanding of international relations. In practice, Waltz provides little indication of how his theory is to be applied or of how his substantive explanations are to be interpreted. The theory's specific explanations are almost certain to be inaccurate because they ignore important variables, yet Waltz neither indicates how these explanations are to be combined with other partial explanations as part of an integrated explanation, nor shows how nomothetic explanations are to be applied heuristically. The closest Waltz comes to outlining a way of thinking about theory application and interpretation is in his emphasis on usefulness, a quality which, he suggests, characterizes theories, assumptions, definitions of structure, and even artificially isolated domains of inquiry. This implies, first, that Waltz believes his theory to be useful and, second, that its contribution to how we understand international relations can therefore (somehow) be assessed.

Waltz's emphasis on usefulness invites comparison with the instrumentalism embodied in Friedman's claims that theoretical assumptions are never 'descriptively "realistic"' and that a theory can only be

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[141] *Ibid.* p.8.
[142] *Ibid.* p.91.

tested by 'comparison of its predictions with experience'.[143] Friedman argues that the task of positive economics 'is to provide a system of generalizations that can be used to make correct predictions about the consequences of any change in circumstances'.[144] Theory fulfils a dual role: first, it is a 'language', serving as 'a filing system for organizing empirical material and facilitating our understanding of it'; second, it is 'a body of substantive hypotheses'.[145] A hypothesis, Friedman insists, is judged according to its 'predictive power for the class of phenomena which it is intended to "explain"': the descriptive accuracy of assumptions is not 'a test of the validity of the hypothesis *different from* or *additional to* the test by implications'.[146] In a passage redolent of Waltz, he argues that a hypothesis is important

> if it "explains" much by little, that is, if it abstracts the common and crucial elements from the mass of complex and detailed circumstances surrounding the phenomena to be explained and permits valid predictions on the basis of them alone. To be important, therefore, a hypothesis must be descriptively false in its assumptions; it takes account of, and accounts for, none of the many other attendant circumstances, since its very success shows them to be irrelevant for the phenomena to be explained.[147]

Friedman therefore contends that hypotheses represent reality in a simplified form. His point, Hollis comments, is that the '"assumptions" of every useful theory are always false, if treated as descriptions; but may still be "as if" true, a matter to be established in the same way as for any other hypothesis'.[148] The significance of treating reality as if it took another form is that theory can be used to explore 'idealizations or models which abstract from features of the actual world to a limiting case'.[149]

Like Waltz, Friedman does not argue that testing hypotheses against reality provides certainty: 'Known facts cannot be set on one side; a theory to apply "closely to reality", on the other. A theory is the way we perceive "facts", and we cannot perceive "facts" without a theory'.[150] He adds, again like Waltz, that theory construction 'is a creative act of inspiration, intuition, invention; its essence is the vision of

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[143] Milton Friedman, 'The methodology of positive economics', in *Essays in positive economics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953), pp.15, 9. Instrumentalism is associated both with positivists such as Friedman and with pragmatists such as Dewey. My interest here is in the parallels between Friedman and Waltz, not in how instrumentalism is best defined.
[144] *Ibid.* p.4.
[145] *Ibid.* p.7.
[146] *Ibid.* pp.8, 14.
[147] *Ibid.* pp.14-15.
[148] Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, p.55.
[149] *Ibid.* p.56.
[150] Friedman, 'The methodology of positive economics', p.34.

something new in familiar material'.[151] As Hollis observes, this allows theory to emerge 'as a source of surprising connections, fertile idealizations and new possibilities'.[152] However, it also corrupts the independence of language from reality on which a pure empiricism rests: experience cannot provide certainty if experience itself is theoretically constructed. The tension between Friedman's insistence that truth emerges via the testing of hypotheses and his acknowledgement that fact and theory are interrelated is less apparent in Waltz, who is keen to emphasize that the interrelation of fact and theory makes testing difficult.[153] The similarity between Friedman and Waltz is therefore most apparent in their treatment of theoretical assumptions, particularly in the importance they attach to the notion that assumptions can be unrealistic. Waltz argues that

> to ask whether the assumptions used in any theory or model are true is to ask an unimportant question, because the answer must always be "no". Assumptions are not true. Indeed, it is in the nature of assumptions that they are false. Assumptions are radical simplifications of the world. They are useful only because they are radical simplifications.[154]

He maintains that theories 'abstract from reality' and 'embody theoretical assumptions' and insists that explanatory power 'is gained by moving away from "reality", not by staying close to it'.[155]

Nagel argues that 'an assumption may be unrealistic in at least three senses'.[156] First, it may be 'unrealistic because it does not give an "exhaustive" description of some object'.[157] Second, it may be proved false by the evidence, in which case it is 'patently unsatisfactory'.[158] Third, relations may be stated with reference to ideal-types not actually encountered in experience. Such statements, Nagel observes, are not 'literally false of anything'; rather, when 'strictly construed, they are applicable to nothing actual'.[159] Theories formulated with reference to ideal-types explain pure cases: discrepancies may be attributed to the influence of factors not mentioned in the theory. Waltz frequently argues that

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[151] *Ibid.* p.43.
[152] Hollis, *The philosophy of social science*, p.58.
[153] See Waltz, 'Reflections', pp.334-6.
[154] Waltz, 'Realities, assumptions, and simulations', p.106.
[155] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.68, 10, 7.
[156] Ernest Nagel, 'Assumptions in economic theory', in Ryan (ed.), *The philosophy of social explanation*, p.133. Nagel criticizes Friedman for not distinguishing these senses.
[157] *Ibid.* p.134.
[158] *Ibid.* p.135. Nagel notes that an antecedent condition forming part of an assumption may not be realized, but that this makes the assumption inapplicable, not unrealistic.
[159] *Ibid.*

assumptions are unrealistic in Nagel's first sense: unlike descriptions, assumptions do not 'strive for accuracy'.[160] However, his assertion that assumptions are justified by the explanatory power of the theories employing them is closer to Nagel's third sense; this reflects Waltz's view that the 'if-then' statements of microeconomic theory 'are idealizations ... never borne out in practice'.[161] If Waltz conceives of his theory as an idealized account of how structure affects behaviour, then it may be claimed to embody a certain truth about international relations even if direct empirical applications are descriptively false. In fact, this often appears to be Waltz's position. Especially in his later work, he downplays the significance of accurate prediction, noting that '[e]conomic theory is impressive even when economists show themselves to be unreliable in prediction'.[162] He argues that theories 'help one to understand how a given system works' and suggests that part of a theory's credibility derives from 'the intellectual force of the theory itself'.[163] The implication is that Waltz's theory communicates something essential about international relations (it depicts the workings of a fundamental force: structure) even though its specific explanations are invariably inaccurate.

Waltz does not employ Friedman's argument that hypotheses can be 'as if' true, though he defends his theory by pointing out that assumptions may be unrealistic and that testing is difficult.[164] However, although it may be tempting to construe Waltz's theory as an idealization, there are two stumbling blocks. First, Nagel argues that factors excluded from ideal-type explanations 'can be systematically classified into general types' in order to develop laws about their effect on the pure case.[165] Thus he suggests that idealizations can serve as 'a powerful means for analyzing, representing, and codifying relations of dependence between actual phenomena'.[166] Waltz is notoriously unwilling to use his theory to develop accounts of the many phenomena excluded from his theory, or to develop hypotheses about how structure interacts with other phenomena. Instead, he emphasizes that '[t]esting

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[160] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.27.
[161] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.6, 91.
[162] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29.
[163] *Ibid.* p.31; Waltz, 'Reflections', p.336.
[164] This is not to say that neorealism is a degenerative research programme: the point is that Waltz denies the significance (even applicability) of straightforward testing of his theory, not that he employs ad hoc assumptions to prevent falsification. See Waltz, 'Evaluating theories'.
[165] Nagel, 'Assumptions in economic theory', p.135.
[166] *Ibid.*

theories is difficult', that 'precise specification' is impossible, and that theory 'cannot account for particularities'.[167] Second, whereas Waltz sets out to construct a causal theory, ideal types do not provide a basis for strictly causal explanation; rather, they shed light on reality (they provide heuristic insights).[168] Waltz's explanatory strategy therefore presents a double challenge to those seeking to apply his theory or to interpret his substantive explanations. On the one hand, Waltz cannot develop a genuinely causal account of structure because he conceptualizes structure and units as mutually affecting: although Waltz's theory is nomothetic in form, it generates only partial explanations. On the other hand, Waltz cannot claim that his theory reveals something essential about how system structure affects state behaviour without developing an account of how structure interacts with other causes and of how a nomothetic theory may be employed as a source of heuristic insights.

Conclusion

It is essential to distinguish between how Waltz conceptualizes international relations and the assumptions he employs in developing a systemic theory. Waltz characterizes international relations as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. The system can be examined from two perspectives: from the point of view of the whole (what Waltz terms the systems-level) or from the point of view of the units (what Waltz terms the unit-level). Waltz believes that the structure of the international political system emerges from unit interaction as an autonomous force that constrains and disposes subsequent behaviour. The presence of such a structure is what makes international relations a system and makes a systems approach necessary. These propositions underpin Waltz's explanatory strategy. They delineate how he conceives of international relations, determine which aspects of international relations he perceives to be in need of explanation, and constitute the context in which his substantive explanations must be assessed. In constructing a systemic theory, Waltz also makes a number of simplifications and assumptions. He argues that the influence of system structure on state behaviour has been under-theorized in International Relations.

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[167] Waltz, 'Reflections', pp.336, 334; Waltz, *Theory*, p.118.
[168] See Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' pp.860-1.

He argues that the generative and causal processes running in both directions between system structure and interacting units must be examined separately. In defining its independent variable, a systemic theory must therefore abstract (as much as possible) from unit attributes and relations: it must make unrealistic assumptions about unit-level forces. Consequently, a systemic theory can offer only partial explanations of state behaviour and the outcomes thereof, making testing difficult. These are methodological assumptions: they underpin a systemic theory that forms only one part of an integrated systems approach to international relations.

The limitations of Waltz's explanatory strategy arise from the fact that he construes a determinate theory that isolates structure as an independent variable as providing only partial explanations. Waltz's contention that systemic and unit-level causes both contribute to state behaviour immediately raises the question of what weight should be attributed to each set of causes, a question that Waltz finds himself unable to answer. The problem he faces is that his theory's substantive explanations are likely to be inaccurate when considered in isolation, yet he cannot show how they are to be combined with unit-level explanations. The notion that Waltz's theory provides idealized accounts of how structure affects behaviour is implausible. First, Waltz seeks to construct a genuinely causal theory. Second, Waltz does not explore how the basic dynamic idealized in his theory is affected by other, excluded, factors. Third, Waltz does not indicate how his theory may be employed as a source of heuristic insights. Waltz simply claims that his theory tells us something important about international relations despite the fact that its substantive explanations and predictions tend to be inaccurate. Rosecrance is led to suggest that Waltz 'wishes to have it both ways, to capture the relative freedom from empirical criticism that model-building enjoys, while at the same time gaining the credence and support offered by an empirical theory or set of generalizations'.[169]

Waltz is difficult to pin down to a particular epistemology. That is because the tension between Waltz's contention that structure and units are mutually affecting and his attempt to isolate system

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[169] Richard Rosecrance, 'International theory revisited', *International Organization*, 35.4, Autumn 1981, p.705.

structure as an independent variable is, in part, an epistemological tension. The question of how explanations are best constructed if agents and structures are mutually affecting extends beyond a debate about whether Waltz is an empiricist, rationalist, or pragmatist. Waltz's difficulties stem from the fact that his basic conceptualization of international relations construes structure in a manner that is very difficult to reconcile with causal explanation. If structure is what makes a collection of units into a complex system, then structure is part of what a system is, and also part of what makes the units what they are (such that they act differently than they would outside the system). The relation between structure and units is therefore better represented as constitutive than as causal: structure and units make each other what they are. This is what lies behind Waltz's difficulty indicating precisely how (and what) his theory explains. Because structure is made what it is by unit interaction, it cannot actually be isolated as an independent variable, but only defined such that it is unchanging. Structure affects how states behave, yet is not a cause in the usual sense. This is because structure is not a cause at all: it is the context, medium and outcome of action. Waltz cannot show how structure can be combined with other causes or used as a source of heuristic insight in integrated explanations because structures and agents are not the same kind of thing. Waltz's explanatory strategy therefore poses, but does not solve, the question of how explanation is possible if structure and units are mutually affecting.

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Beyond Waltz: alternative explanatory strategies in International Relations

The tension at the heart of Waltz's explanatory strategy arises from the unsuitability of explanatory approaches for investigating complex systems. Given Waltz's failure to develop a genuinely deductive nomothetic theory, and his inability to specify how his theory might be drawn upon heuristically, the question remains: how is explanation possible if structure and units are mutually affecting? The first section of this chapter addresses this problem by focusing directly on the agent-structure relationship. Specifically, it investigates the theoretical possibilities associated with treating structure as a constitutive notion (as in Waltz's conceptualization of international relations as a complex system), rather than straining to represent it in causal terms. In other words, it asks whether it is possible to derive explanatory claims from the contention that agents and structures are not merely mutually affecting, but are mutually constitutive. The purpose is to elucidate further the problems inherent in the attempt to develop explanatory theories about complex systems. This first section seeks to show that the notion of mutual constitution does not overcome, but merely replicates, the agent-structure antinomy. Attempts to construct explanations that accord with Wendt's insistence that agents and structures are mutually constitutive or co-determined therefore encounter precisely the problems faced by Waltz. First, how can constitutive relations be reconciled with causal explanation? Second, if agents and structures are examined separately, how are the two accounts to be recombined as integrated explanations? A focus on the notion of mutual constitution does not help to reconcile explanatory theory with complex systems.

The second section of this chapter examines two alternatives to Waltz's approach to complex systems. Constructivists focus on the notion that agents and structures are mutually constitutive, drawing

attention to processes of social construction and emphasizing the significance of factors excluded from Waltz's substantive theory, particularly norms and identities. Historians dispute the accuracy of the nomothetic model as a reconstruction of social explanation, particularly in its focus on developing general laws (rather than exploring particular instances). However, both constructivists and historians differ amongst themselves about whether their respective approaches are explanatory: about whether they develop or apply a causal theory. The purpose of examining constructivist and historical approaches is therefore twofold: to situate Waltz's approach in the context of available alternatives, and to draw out the difficulties involved in the application of theoretical ideas to substantive problems in international relations. Because Waltz's theory is not genuinely deductive, his applications of it tend to have two distinctive characteristics. First, like constructivists, Waltz uses his theory to draw attention to a factor (in his case, structure) postulated to be of general importance in explaining classes of phenomena. Second, like historians, Waltz examines specific cases, employing his theory indicatively as a guide to the factors that should be incorporated in integrated accounts of these cases. The second section of this chapter suggests that Waltz's substantive explanations fulfil the requirements neither of nomothetic explanation nor of systematic empirical inquiry. Rather, Waltz's substantive explanations take the form of theoretical commentary: a realist world-view is implicitly (but not deductively) drawn upon to ground incomplete accounts presented as if they were straightforwardly explanatory.

Mutual constitution and explanation

Waltz's theory is difficult to apply empirically not merely because it excludes important determinants of state behaviour (factors originating within states and their interactions rather than within the system considered as a whole), but also because it represents constitutive relations as if they were causal. This section explores whether structuration theory, which explicitly conceives of agents and structures as mutually constitutive, offers a more promising model for constructing substantive explanations of international relations. It begins by outlining the approach and indicating the major criticisms.

Methodological bracketing, the technique by which an ontology is converted into an explanatory approach, is presented and its limitations are outlined. The contention that agentic and structural perspectives should be explored separately is compared to Waltz's insistence that a systemic theory must artificially isolate system structure as an independent variable. The difficulties associated with recombining the two perspectives are related to Waltz's inability to show how his theory's insights might be incorporated within integrated explanations. The aim of this section is to show that a focus on mutual constitution does not overcome the agent-structure antinomy, but merely emphasizes the problems inherent in attempting to reconcile explanatory theory with complex systems.

Structuration theory

Giddens developed the theory of structuration, which seeks 'to show the interdependence of action and structure', in response to 'the lack of a theory of action in the social sciences'.[1] He criticizes the philosophy of action for neglecting central social scientific issues such as 'institutional analysis, power, and social change', and criticizes sociological conceptions of structure for failing to 'grasp the *time-space relations inherent in the constitution of all social interaction*'.[2] He argues that social structure is not abstract or immutable but is 'produced and reproduced in social interaction as its medium and outcome'.[3] In other words, structure is both drawn upon in action and the outcome of action. Social structures, such as institutions and configurations of power, cannot be separated from the actions that produce and reproduce them: action always occurs in a specific structural context that both makes it possible and constrains its form. Structuration theory therefore draws attention to

> the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution.[4]

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[1] Anthony Giddens, *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), pp.2-3. Although the term structuration originates with Giddens, the approach has since been more broadly developed. See Nigel J. Thrift, 'On the determination of social action in space and time', *Society and space*, 1.1, March 1983, pp.23-57.
[2] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.3.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.* p.5.

Giddens terms this the '*duality of structure*'.[5] By drawing attention to structure's role as both medium and outcome of action, he sought to transcend three dualisms: between voluntarism and determinism, between subject and object, and between statics and dynamics.[6] He sought to show that agency and structure presuppose one another, that society is produced and reproduced by knowledgeable actors, and that time can be incorporated into social analysis.

Like Waltz, Giddens recognizes the role of 'unintended consequences in the reproduction of social systems': 'The escape of human history from human intentions, and the return of the consequences of that escape as causal influences on human action, is a chronic feature of social life'.[7] However, Giddens rejects what he sees as the functionalist attribution of purposes, reasons and needs to social systems. Social reproduction, he contends, must be explained in terms of human individuals. In his analysis of human intentionality, Giddens acknowledges the significance of actors' self-awareness, but insists that this discursive consciousness 'does not exhaust the connections between "stocks of knowledge" and action'.[8] There is also '*practical consciousness*': tacit knowledge 'skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct'.[9] Practical consciousness is central to structuration theory and is related to Wittgenstein's notion of rule following, involving both drawing upon and reproducing rules.[10] Rules, Giddens argues, are 'media and outcome of the reproduction of social systems': structure is '[r]ules and resources, organized as properties of social systems'.[11] However, structure cannot be separated from action: '*rules and practices only exist in conjunction with one another*'.[12] Structuration is how a system, 'via the application of rules and resources, and in the context of unintended outcomes, is produced and reproduced in interaction'.[13] Thus Giddens depicts structure and agents as mutually dependent and describes their relationship in constitutive terms. Unlike Waltz,

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[5] *Ibid.*
[6] See Margaret S. Archer, 'Morphogenesis versus structuration: on combining structure and action', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 33.4, Dec 1982, pp.456-7.
[7] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.7.
[8] *Ibid.* p.57.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] See *ibid.* p.41. Giddens describes practical consciousness and social practices as 'mediating moments' between the dualisms he seeks to overcome. See *ibid.* p.4.
[11] *Ibid.* pp.65-6.
[12] *Ibid.* p.65.
[13] *Ibid.* p.66.

he does not seek to develop causal accounts of their interaction, but insists that action can only be understood as both drawing on and constituting structure, whilst structure can only be thought of as both deriving from action and constituting possibilities for action.

Wendt introduced structuration theory to International Relations as a 'solution to the agent-structure problem that conceptualizes agents and structures as mutually constituted or codetermined entities'.[14] It is therefore not a substantive theory of international relations, comparable to neorealism and world-system theory, but offers an alternative to 'their social ontologies'.[15] Structuration theory

> says something about what kinds of entities there are in the social world and how their relationship should be conceptualized, and as such it provides a conceptual framework or meta-theory for thinking about real world social systems, but it does not tell us what particular kinds of agents or what particular kinds of structures to expect in any given social system.[16]

Wendt insists that social ontologies have 'implications for the potential content of substantive theories about real-world social systems, and for the methodology that social scientists should use to study those systems'.[17] For example, neorealism's explanatory limitations derive from its ontology. Because it treats states as primitive units, neorealism 'sees system structures in the manner in which they appear to states – as given, external constraints on their actions – rather than as conditions of possibility for state action'.[18] Structuration theory's particular virtue, for Wendt, is that it specifically acknowledges the irreducible ontological status of both agents and structures: he hopes that it will provide a means to develop substantive explanations that integrate agentic and structural perspectives. Much therefore rests on our ability to differentiate substantive theories from their underlying ontologies and to show how ontologies are drawn upon in the construction of substantive theories.

Wendt defines structure 'in generative terms as a set of internally related elements'.[19] In other words, how elements relate to each other in a social structure is part of what it means to be an element of that

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[14] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.350.
[15] *Ibid.* p.355.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.* p.356.
[18] *Ibid.* p.342.
[19] *Ibid.* p.357. An internal relation is 'a connection between two things which is intrinsic to the identity of the first thing'. *New shorter Oxford English dictionary*, vol.2, p.2534.

structure: elements, such as states, 'cannot be defined or even conceived independently of their position in the structure'.[20] According to Wendt, this is a key divergence from neorealism:

> in contrast to the neorealist definition of international system structures as consisting of externally related, preexisting, state agents, a structurationist approach to the state system would see states in relational terms as generated or constituted by internal relations of individuation (sovereignty) and, perhaps, penetration (spheres of influence).[21]

In the structurationist model, structure does not cause behaviour, but defines 'possible transformations or combinations' of its elements.[22] 'Structures make a given combination or instantiation of elements possible, but they are not exhausted by whatever particular manifestation is actual'.[23] Nevertheless, structures themselves are 'instantiated by the practices of agents'.[24] The structure of the international system reflects 'recognition of certain rules and the performance of certain practices by states; if states ceased such recognition or performances, the state system as presently constituted would automatically disappear'.[25] Thus neither agents nor social structures are ontologically primitive: each is constituted by, but not reducible to, the other. 'Just as social structures are ontologically dependent upon and therefore constituted by the practices and self-understandings of agents, the causal powers and interests of those agents, in their own turn, are constituted and therefore explained by structures'.[26]

Structuration theory 'conceptualizes agents and structures as mutually constitutive yet ontologically distinct entities. Each is in some sense an effect of the other; they are "co-determined"'.[27]

Criticisms of structuration theory have focused not on its ontology, but on its explanatory power. Taylor insists that both agents and structures must be involved in social explanations: 'neither facts about individuals nor facts about social structures provide "rock-bottom" or "ultimate" explanations of social change'.[28] However, he rejects two key structurationist propositions: that 'social relations are

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[20] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.357.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.* p.359.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.* p.360.
[28] Michael Taylor, 'Structure, culture and action in the explanation of social change', *Politics and Society*, 17.2, 1989, p.117.

internal relations' and that 'structure and agents are *mutually constitutive*'.[29] He argues that, although they posses 'some descriptive merit', these propositions conflate agents and structures, preventing substantive explanation: 'With no analytical separation between the two ... I do not see how it is possible to unravel the causal interaction of action and structure ... over time and hence to explain social change'.[30] Archer allows that agents and structures are mutually constitutive, but still criticizes Giddens' ability to explain change. She argues that, although the duality of structure enfolds 'two views of social institutions' (as causes of action and as embodiments of action), the notion 'provides no analytical grip on *which* is likely to prevail under what conditions or circumstances'.[31] Giddens insists that the voluntarist/determinist dualism cannot be overcome simply by 'bringing the rival types of approach together, conjoining one to the other'.[32] Nevertheless, suggests Archer, the notion of the duality of structure does not transcend the agent-structure dualism, but embodies it: the two sides of the duality of structure 'are simply clamped together in a conceptual vice'.[33] Consequently, she argues, 'Giddens cannot acknowledge that structure and action work on different time intervals' and cannot provide theoretical purchase on the process of '*structuring over time*'.[34] If Taylor and Archer are right, structuration theory does not transcend the agent-structure antinomy, but merely redescribes it.

Bracketing

Bracketing is the method Giddens proposes for applying a structurationist ontology to social life. He describes 'institutional analysis' (in which 'structural properties are treated as chronically reproduced features of social systems') and the 'analysis of strategic conduct' (which focuses on how 'actors draw upon structural properties in the constitution of social relations') as 'two principal ways in which the study of system properties may be approached in the social sciences'.[35] However, he insists that these

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[29] *Ibid.* p.118.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Archer, 'Morphogenesis versus structuration', pp.458-9.
[32] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.2.
[33] Archer, 'Morphogenesis versus structuration', p.460.
[34] *Ibid.* pp.467-8.
[35] Anthony Giddens, *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p.288; Giddens, *Central problems*, p.80.

forms of analysis are divided 'only by a methodological *epoché*': they do not represent two sides of a dualism, but 'express a duality, the duality of structure'.[36]

> To examine the constitution of social systems as strategic conduct is to study the mode in which actors draw upon structural elements – rules and resources – in their social relations. "Structure" here appears as actors' mobilization of discursive and practical consciousness in social encounters. Institutional analysis, on the other hand, places an *epoché* upon strategic conduct, treating rules and resources as chronically reproduced features of social systems.[37]

In other words, the analysis of strategic conduct focuses on how agents create social life through their actions and interactions: 'Institutionalized properties of the settings of interaction are assumed methodologically to be "given"'.[38] Institutional analysis brackets the process by which actors create social life and asks how social institutions (both formal and informal) structure possibilities for action. There is a parallel between Giddens' analysis of strategic conduct and Waltz's attempt to suppress the process by which structure is created in action in order to examine how states draw on structure in their behaviour. Although Waltz suggests that a systems approach should also show how structures are affected by interaction, he never addresses this subject theoretically.

According to Giddens, institutional analysis and analysis of strategic conduct are unified by 'the "modalities" of structuration'.[39] Lying at the heart of the duality of structure, the modalities are 'drawn upon by actors in the production of interaction, but at the same time are the media of the reproduction of the structural components of systems of interaction'.[40] The modalities consist of interpretative schemes (produced as meaning in interaction but also drawn upon as mutual knowledge), power (utilized in interaction but also present as structures of domination), and norms (generated by the sanctioning of conduct in interaction but also drawn upon as institutionalized conduct). Their dual role, Giddens argues, provides the 'coupling elements whereby the bracketing of strategic or institutional analysis is dissolved in favour of an acknowledgement of their interrelation'.[41]

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[36] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.80. An epoché is a 'setting aside of assumptions and known facts in order to perceive the essence of a phenomenon'. *New shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol.1, p.840.
[37] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.80.
[38] Giddens, *The constitution of society*, p.288.
[39] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.81.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*

> When institutional analysis is bracketed, the modalities are treated as stocks of knowledge and resources employed by actors in the constitution of interaction as a skilled and knowledgeable accomplishment, within bounded conditions of the rationalization of action. Where strategic conduct is placed under an *epoché*, the modalities represent rules and resources considered as institutional features of systems of social interaction.[42]

Thus the modalities of structuration remind us that bracketing is a purely methodological device. The difference between institutional analysis and the analysis of strategic conduct, Giddens insists, is a matter of emphasis: each 'has to be in principle rounded out by a concentration upon the duality of structure'.[43]

Archer questions whether bracketing genuinely facilitates explanation. She argues that the duality of structure not only reproduces the voluntarist/determinist dualism, but '*itself* oscillates between the two divergent images it bestrides': it represents society as both innately volatile and chronically recursive.[44] Methodological bracketing, she maintains, reproduces this 'pendular swing between contradictory images': bracketing institutionalized properties represents social life as transformative (it is generated through conduct); bracketing strategic conduct represents social life as recursive (it reflects structural forms).[45] What we require, Archer insists, are

> theoretical propositions about when (more) recursiveness or (more) transformation will prevail – a specification which would necessitate unravelling the relations between structure and action. This Giddens refuses to give on principle because to specify their inter-relationship would involve dualistic theorizing. Yet, ironically, what does his bracketing device do other than traduce this very principle, since it merely transposes dualism from the theoretical to the methodological level – thus conceding its *analytical* indispensability?[46]

Archer's contention is that an emphasis on the importance of both structural and agentic perspectives is not in itself explanatory. She advocates a morphogenetic approach in which the interplay between agents and structures is examined over time.[47] However, Hollis and Smith object that the difficulty of reconciling structure and action 'is not met by treating them as if they took turns in shaping social

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[42] *Ibid.*
[43] Giddens, *The constitution of society*, p.288.
[44] Archer, 'Morphogenesis versus structuration', p.459.
[45] *Ibid.* p.466.
[46] *Ibid.* p.467.
[47] The morphogenetic approach deals in 'endless cycles of – structural conditioning/social interaction/structural elaboration – thus unravelling the dialectical interplay between structure and action'. See *ibid.* p.458.

phenomena'.[48] If so, then Archer's morphogenetic approach, too, is unable to show how explanations of social change can recognize the irreducible roles of both agents and structures.

Structuration and bracketing in International Relations

Wendt draws 'an explicit epistemological and methodological distinction' between the logics of structural and historical explanation: '"structural" analysis explains the possible, while "historical" analysis explains the actual'.[49] Historical explanations 'take the interests and causal powers of agents as given' and 'attempt to explain particular events by focusing on how those powers and interests are affected by the incentives facing actors'.[50] In contrast, structural explanations show those events to be 'instances of the possible ways of acting of social agents, where those possibilities are defined by the structurally determined causal powers and interests of those agents'.[51] Structural analyses therefore play a specialized explanatory role: although they may

> uncover "tendencies" for structures to be actualized in certain ways, neither generalization nor point prediction is an important aspect of structural explanations, and any attempt to use them to account directly for the production of particular events would risk overextending them beyond their proper explanatory domain.[52]

Systems theorists have tended to emphasize the limited nature of structural accounts.[53] Yet in Wendt's view, neorealism is not a structural approach at all, but a form of historical analysis: 'it stipulates the structural context and the interests and causal powers of agents and then attempts to answer the question "Why did state X do Y rather than Z?"'[54] According to Wendt, neorealism must, therefore, be supplemented by a structural analysis that shows 'how that state and its choices were possible in the

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[48] Hollis & Smith, 'Two stories', p.244.
[49] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.362.
[50] *Ibid.* p.364.
[51] *Ibid.* p.363. Structural analysis explains 'the causal properties of states in virtue of which their actions are possible'.
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] See, for example, Kaplan, *System and process*, unpaginated 'Preface'.
[54] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.364. Relatedly, Tellis characterizes neorealism as an attenuated form of situational determinism. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.74. Although Waltz denies that his theory explains specific behaviours, it certainly attempts to explain behaviour rather than to explain how structures are created and maintained.

first place'.[55] The problem is how historical and structural analyses are to be combined. For, as Wendt acknowledges, they are recursively related: 'each ultimately explains the properties of the central objects of the other'.[56]

Wendt argues that a complete explanation of state action 'explains both how that action was possible and why that possibility was actualized'.[57] It requires 'abstract structural analysis to theorize and explain the causal powers, practices, and interests of states, and concrete historical analysis to trace the causally significant sequence of choices and interactions which lead to particular events'.[58] This is the epistemological basis for Wendt's insistence that theories of international relations should be grounded 'in theories of both their principal units of analysis (state agents and system structures)'.[59] Wendt hopes to progress beyond neorealism by showing how the apparently immutable structure postulated by Waltz emerges as a set of possibilities for action in the first place. He hopes, thereby, to reveal the possibilities for change inherent in the international system but unrecognized by neorealism.[60] Moving beyond neorealism therefore requires the development of structural as well as historical approaches. Wendt recognizes the problem inherent in developing them simultaneously (if each explains the central objects of the other): he argues that it requires '"bracketing" first one and then the other explanatory mode, that is, taking social structures and agents in turn as temporarily given in order to examine the explanatory effects of the other'.[61] However, the notion that agents or structures can be treated as given for the purpose of constructing a particular type of theory brings us back to Waltz's effort to artificially isolate system structure as an independent variable. Wendt insists that structural and historical analysis are epistemologically interdependent and that the 'explanatory roles

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[55] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.363.
[56] *Ibid.* p.364.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Ibid.* p.365.
[60] See Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it'.
[61] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', pp.364-5. Wendt's acceptance that an approach can treat either agents or structures as given, even temporarily, appears to invoke precisely the sort of analytical dualism that Giddens sought to avoid. See Walter Carlsnaes, 'The agency-structure problem in foreign policy analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36.3, Sep 1992, p.258.

of agents and social structures cannot be understood apart from their interrelationship'.[62] However, he does not specify what form the individual structural and historical analyses should take. Further, like Waltz, he is unable to indicate how the two modes of analysis are to be (re)combined.[63]

Giddens argues that agents and structures 'presuppose one another' or are characterized by 'mutual dependence'; according to Wendt, they are 'mutually constitutive' or 'codetermined'.[64] Waltz neither uses such terminology nor explicitly discusses the agent-structure problem. He does not specify an ontology, focusing instead on methodological issues, and discusses the relation between structure and interacting units only sporadically. However, Waltz conceptualizes international relations as a system, defines structure and units as intrinsic constituents of systems, conceives of structure and units as mutually affecting, insists that a structural theory must suppress unit-level causes, and recognizes that complete explanations must reintroduce these suppressed factors.[65] There is little in this that clearly marks Waltz apart from Giddens, Wendt or Dessler. Dessler argues that structural theory

> "brackets", or sets aside, considerations of the agential powers underpinning action. It attempts to explain the various modes of enablement and constraint operative in given interactive settings, leaving aside considerations of the capacities and liabilities of the agents who respond to those conditions of action.[66]

He adds that, because social action derives from both structural and agentic forces, 'a strictly structural explanation of action (like its agential counterpart) will necessarily be incomplete. Structural theory alone does not provide and is not capable of providing a complete explanation of action'.[67] Were it not for Dessler's use of Giddens' terminology, the words could be Waltz's. Dessler insists that underlying conceptual schemes 'must recognize and make appropriate allowance for the workings of both agency and structure, even if each specific explanation does not exploit this allowance'.[68] Like Wendt, he

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[62] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.365.
[63] Wendt suggests merely that the notion that structural and historical analyses should proceed simultaneously establishes a structurationist research agenda for International Relations. See *ibid.* pp.365-9.
[64] Giddens, *Central problems*, pp.53, 69. Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.360.
[65] He does not seek, like Giddens, to avoid analytical dualism, but neither does Wendt or Dessler.
[66] Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.444.
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.* (fn.12).

criticizes Waltz for failing to make such allowances, but only because, like Wendt, he infers Waltz's conceptual scheme from his structural theory.

Whether Waltz should be read as adopting a simplistic bracketing device in order to deal theoretically with the mutually affecting relationship between structure and units in international relations depends on whether Dessler and Wendt are right to characterize Waltz's ontology as individualistic. However, it does not affect the central point: in order to produce substantive explanatory theories when agents and structures are mutually constitutive, we require a mode of explanation that is consistent with the notion of mutual constitution. Giddens rejects analytical dualism, arguing that institutional analysis and the analysis of strategic conduct are two sides of the same coin. However, he fails to clarify whether this rules out the possibility of developing explanatory theory: he neither stipulates the form that each analysis should take nor indicates how (indeed, whether) the two forms of analysis can be recombined in an integrated explanatory account. Rosenberg criticizes Giddens on the basis that structuration theory 'is not itself a substantive social theory offering to explain determinate historical phenomena: rather ... it is a tour of the modalities of human agency and social reproduction'.[69] Structuration theory is not even a methodology, let alone a substantive theory, but an ontology, the explanatory implications of which remain obscure. Giddens points out that naturalistic approaches (he cites Durkheim) 'tend to equate social causation and structural constraint as synonymous notions'.[70] However, his approach provides no account of how, or indeed whether, a causal notion of explanation can be applied to the (postulated) constitutive relationship between agents and structures.

The problem with combining Wendt's structural and historical analyses is not just that each assumes what the other explains, but that each assumes what is shown by the other to be false. Wendt argues that historical analyses 'take the interests and causal powers of agents as given' in order to explain particular events.[71] Yet events are manifestations of agency and structure: far from being exogenously

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[69] Justin Rosenberg, *The empire of civil society: A critique of the realist theory of international relations* (London: Verso, 1994), p.47. See also Dessler, 'What's at stake?' pp.442-3.
[70] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.80.
[71] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.364.

determined, the interests and causal powers of agents are themselves created in and through precisely the events putatively explained by treating agents as given.[72] Further, treating either agents or structures as given in order to develop explanatory theories has the consequence that the (putatively) constitutive relations between agents and structures (which cannot even be conceived in isolation) are (mis)represented in causal terms, replicating the problems with Waltz's theory. In other words, Dessler's incomplete explanations and Wendt's complementary analyses are on a par with Waltz's partial explanations. Despite their insistence that a structurationist ontology provides the basis for improved theory construction in International Relations, neither Wendt nor Dessler has reconciled that ontology with a causal approach to explanation. If the problem with structural and individualistic explanations is that 'the independent variable in each case remains unavailable for problematization in its own right', then this problem is replicated by approaches involving methodological bracketing.[73] The point is not that explanatory theory is a holy grail, or that the notion of mutual constitution is uninformative unless formulated in explanatory terms. The point is that if explanatory theory is the aim, then the notion of mutual constitution is not a basis for progressing beyond neorealism.

Alternative explanatory approaches in International Relations

If it is not possible to develop explanatory approaches that draw simultaneously on both structures and agents, then the challenge for explanatory theory is to show how partial explanations drawing on either agents or structures may be of heuristic value. This section explores the difficulties that this poses for Waltz by situating his explanatory strategy in terms of two alternative approaches in International Relations: constructivism and historical inquiry. The purpose is twofold: first, to show that doubts about whether an approach genuinely fulfils (or should even aim to fulfil) the requirements of the nomothetic model also haunt other groups of scholars; second, to show that Waltz is not the only scholar who fails to specify what is involved in developing and drawing upon theoretical ideas as

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[72] One may argue, following Archer, that the interests and causal powers of agents are created by previous events, but if our aim is to develop explanatory theories, this simply generates an infinite, and deterministic, regress.
[73] Carlsnaes, 'The agency-structure problem', p.250.

heuristic guides. Brief discussions of the kinds of explanations developed by constructivists and historians in International Relations reveal considerable doubts about whether their approaches are genuinely explanatory. Yet constructivists and historians are reluctant to specify what is involved in the heuristic contention that a variable is important or to indicate how partial explanations may be combined in integrated accounts. These discussions are drawn on to suggest that Waltz's attempts to apply his theory heuristically fulfil the requirements neither of deductive explanation nor of systematic empirical inquiry. Rather, Waltz's applications of his theory constitute theoretical commentary: his choices about which variables to consider are justified only by an implicit realist world-view.

Constructivism

Onuf introduced the term constructivism to International Relations, linking it to the agent-structure problem: constructivism 'emphasizes the continuous co-constitution of micro- and macrolevel phenomena'.[74] Adler argues that constructivism is: first, 'a *metaphysical stance* about the reality that scholars seek to know'; second, like structurationism, 'a *social theory* about the role of knowledge and knowledgeable agents in the constitution of social reality'; and third, a '*theoretical and empirical perspective*'.[75] He notes that constructivists in International Relations have 'often inadvertently "jumped around" the three levels, without specifying whether the points they are making are about metaphysics, social theory, or IR'.[76] Consequently, the constructivist label has been deployed in International Relations to denote both a broad insistence on the importance of social construction (compatible with a range of epistemological and methodological approaches) and a narrower attempt to find a middle ground between rationalism and post-positivist approaches.[77] Adler contends that all variants 'converge on an *ontology* that depicts the social world as intersubjectively and collectively

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[74] Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of our making: Rules and rule in social theory and international relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p.29. See David Dessler, 'Constructivism within a positivist social science', *Review of International Studies*, 25.1, Jan 1999, p.123 (fn.3).

[75] Emanuel Adler, 'Constructivism and international relations', in Carlsnaes, Risse & Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of international relations*, p.96.

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] See Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'The constructivist turn in international relations theory', *World Politics*, 50.2, Jan 1998, p.327

meaningful structures and processes'.[78] For nearly all constructivists, this includes an emphasis on 'the mutual constitution of agents and structures'.[79] Variation arises primarily in regard to epistemology: although most constructivists make 'interpretation an intrinsic part of *social* science' and focus on how things become what they are, Adler identifies 'wide epistemological disagreements'.[80] Some constructivists try to identify social mechanisms as the basis for causal or constitutive explanations, some attempt to derive explanations from thickly described narratives, and some adopt positivist approaches, but constructivists who are closely oriented toward critical social theory reject all such strategies.[81] Theorists have therefore differentiated conventional and critical constructivisms.[82]

The core constructivist claim is that the social world is constructed through social practices. The process is one of mutual constitution: social structures are constructed through interaction; properties of agents, particularly their identity and interests, are constructed through their participation in social (particularly normative) structures. As Wendt expresses it, constructivists are united by

> a concern with how world politics are "socially constructed", which involves two basic claims: that the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material ... and that these structures shape actors' identities and interests, rather than just their behaviour.[83]

Constructivists attempt to understand 'how the *material*, subjective and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality'.[84] The point is not merely that ideas have causal effects, nor that social reality is 'ideas all the way down'.[85] Rather, the point is that intersubjective ideas

> have constitutive effects on social reality and its evolution. When drawn upon by individuals, the rules, norms and cause-effect understandings that make material objects meaningful

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[78] Adler, 'Constructivism and international relations', p.100.
[79] *Ibid.* p.101. See also Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.326; Dale C. Copeland, 'The constructivist challenge to structural realism', *International Security*, 25.2, Fall 2000, p.190.
[80] Adler, 'Constructivism and international relations', p.101.
[81] See *ibid.*
[82] Hopf contrasts the 'conventional constructivist desire to present an alternative mainstream international relations theory' with approaches that are 'more closely tied to critical social theory'. See Ted Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism in International Relations theory', *International Security*, 23.1, Summer 1998, p.172. See also Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' pp.880-2; Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground: constructivism in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3.3, Sep 1997, pp.335-6.
[83] Wendt, 'Constructing international politics', pp.71-2.
[84] Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground', p.330.
[85] Copeland, 'The constructivist challenge', p.191.

> become the source of people's reasons, interests and intentional acts; when institutionalized, they become the source of international practices.[86]

Constructivism aims 'to "denaturalize" the social world': to 'reveal how the institutions and practices and identities that people take as natural, given, or matter of fact, are, in fact, the product of human agency, of social construction'.[87] Thus constructivists focus on the social construction of identities, on the constitutive power of norms, and on logics of appropriateness.[88] *The culture of national security*, for example, highlights 'the cultural-institutional context of policy' and 'the constructed identity of states, governments, and other political actors'.[89] Ruggie focuses on institutions, advocacy networks, non-governmental actors and transnational civil society.[90]

As a conventional (non-critical) approach, Ruggie argues that constructivism focuses on 'what happens *before* the neo-utilitarian model kicks in'.[91] In other words, it explores 'issues of identity and interest bracketed by neoliberalism and neorealism'.[92] Conventional constructivists make two key assertions about states and their environments: '(1) the environment in which agents/states take action is social as well as material; and (2) this setting can provide agents/states with understandings of their interests (it can "constitute" them)'.[93] Thus Walt argues that constructivism 'emphasizes how ideas and identities are created, how they evolve, and how they shape the way states understand and respond to their situation'.[94] However, it is unclear whether constructivists seek to develop explanatory claims, whether about identity construction, about the constitutive operation of norms, or about how behaviour is guided by logics of appropriateness. Hopf argues that conventional constructivists aim both to specify the 'conditions under which one can expect to see one identity or another' and to explain how

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[86] Adler, 'Constructivism and international relations', p.102. See also Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' pp.865-9.
[87] Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism', p.102.
[88] See Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.326.
[89] Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Introduction: alternative perspectives on national security', in Katzenstein (ed.), *The culture of national security*, p.4.
[90] See Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' pp.869-76.
[91] *Ibid.* p.867.
[92] Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.325.
[93] *Ibid.* pp.325-6.
[94] Stephen M. Walt, 'International relations: one world, many theories', *Foreign Policy*, 110, Spring 1998, p.41.

'identities imply certain actions'.[95] Checkel insists that conventional constructivists can 'challenge mainstream analysts on their own ground'.[96] Their critique of neorealists and neoliberals 'concerns not what these scholars do and say but what they ignore: the content and sources of state interests and the social fabric of world politics'.[97] Dessler argues explicitly that at least some 'constructivist empirical work should be assessed according to positivist standards'.[98] Farrell concurs: 'Positivist research from a constructivist approach is not easy, but it is doable and is being done'.[99] Adler argues that constructivism's main goal is to 'provide both theoretical and empirical explanations of social institutions and social change, with the help of the combined effect of agents and social structures'.[100]

However, constructivists have not provided a solution to the problem of how explanatory approaches can usefully draw on both agents and structures. Critics disagree about whether constructivists focus primarily on how structures constitute agents, making it difficult to explain change, or whether they focus excessively on agency, making if-then generalizations difficult to find.[101] In both cases, mutual constitution falls by the wayside. Wendt insists that states' actions affect 'the social structure in which they are embedded' and that their ability to act 'depends on the structure of shared knowledge into which they enter'.[102] However, he makes no attempt to combine these insights in substantive explanations. In light of the unsolved problem of how mutual constitution can be operationalized in explanatory theories, many constructivists emphasize ontological, rather than explanatory claims. Ruggie, for example, argues that constructivism's most distinctive features 'are in the realm of ontology, the real-world phenomena that are posited by any theory and are invoked by its

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[95] Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism', p.183.
[96] Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.325.
[97] *Ibid.* p.324.
[98] Dessler, 'Constructivism within a positivist social science', p.124.
[99] Theo Farrell, 'Constructivist security studies: portrait of a research program', *International Studies Review*, 4.1, Spring 2002, p.57.
[100] Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground', p.325.
[101] See Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism', p.180; David Dessler and John Owen, 'Constructivism and the problem of explanation', *Perspectives on Politics*, 3.3, Sep 2005, p.598.
[102] Wendt, 'Constructing international politics', p.77.

explanations'.[103] He adds that constructivism is not a theory 'but a theoretically informed approach to the study of international relations'.[104] According to Checkel,

> constructivists have convincingly shown the empirical value of their approach, providing new and meaningful interpretations on a range of issues of central concern to students of world politics. At the same time, constructivist theorizing is in a state of disarray. These researchers ... have made too rapid a leap from ontology and methods to empirics, to the neglect of theory development.[105]

Adler argues that methodology 'is the major missing link in constructivist theory and research'.[106] He adds that the constructivist 'quest for explaining causal processes requires the interpretive practice of uncovering intersubjective meanings', a practice that is at odds with the explanatory approach.[107]

If conventional constructivists are unable to develop theories that draw on both agents and structures, in what sense are their accounts explanatory? According to Hopf, constructivists provide alternative understandings of central themes in mainstream approaches (including anarchy, the balance of power, the relationship between identity and interest, and prospects for change), but also focus on their own puzzles, particularly identity and domestic and cultural variables.[108] However, Hopf argues that constructivism 'is an approach, not a theory': its method is 'interpretivist thick description'.[109] In other words, constructivists suggest what phenomena are profitably examined, but do not postulate general causal relationships between them. Constructivism does not specify

> the precise nature or value, of its main causal/constitutive elements: identities, norms, practices, and social structures. Instead, constructivism specifies how these elements are theoretically situated vis-à-vis each other ... The advantages of such an approach are in the nonpareil richness of its elaboration of causal/constitutive mechanisms in any given social context and its openness ... to the discovery of other substantive theoretical elements at work.[110]

Adler takes a similar view: although constructivism is not a theory, it can 'illuminate important features of international politics that were previously enigmatic and have crucial *practical* implications

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[103] Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' p.879.
[104] *Ibid.* pp.879-80.
[105] Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.338.
[106] Adler, 'Constructivism and international relations', p.109.
[107] *Ibid.* p.101.
[108] See Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism', p.172.
[109] *Ibid.* pp.196, 198.
[110] *Ibid.* p.197.

for international theory and empirical research'.[111] This suggests that the primary explanatory contribution of conventional constructivism is heuristic: it indicates that certain variables may be important in accounts of particular phenomena. However, if conventional constructivism is to play such a role, then it lacks two methodological guides: first, an account of the basis on which these variables are deemed important; second, an account of how different variables might ultimately be incorporated in a single, integrated, explanatory account.

Historical inquiry

Whether historical inquiry in International Relations is, or should attempt to be, an explanatory approach is a point of contention. Kavanagh argues that historical studies 'systematically describe and analyze phenomena': 'The emphasis is on explanation and understanding, not on formulating laws'.[112] However, he fails to explicate the nature of (and relation between) systematic description, analysis, explaining, understanding, and formulating laws; whether historical inquiry should be conceived of as an explanatory approach therefore remains unclear. Dichotomies enumerated in attempts to clarify the distinction between history and political science include the idiographic-nomothetic distinction, focus on the particular versus the general, commitment to complexity versus parsimony, narrative versus theoretical explanation, and interpretation versus explanation.[113] Even the meaning of the most common, the idiographic-nomothetic distinction, is contested. Levy outlines it as follows: 'Historians describe, explain, and interpret individual events or a temporally bounded view of events, whereas political scientists generalize about the relationship between variables and construct lawlike statements about social behaviour'.[114] He contrasts this with another common interpretation: 'that whereas social scientists aim for explanations that are based on theoretical models, historians seek narrative-based

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[111] Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground', p.323.
[112] Denis Kavanagh, 'Why political science needs history', *Political Studies*, 39.3, Sep 1991, p.482.
[113] See Colin Elman *et al*, 'Symposium: history and theory', *International Security,* 22.1, Summer 1997, pp.5-85; Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and boundaries: Historians, political scientists, and the study of international relations* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001).
[114] Jack S. Levy, 'Too important to leave to the other: history and political science in the study of international relations', *International Security*, 22.1, Summer 1997, p.22.

interpretations that emphasize factors unique to an individual event or episode'.[115] In other words, Levy characterizes the difference between history and political science in terms of what they examine, rather than the method according to which accounts are constructed: he insists that we can use theories to 'explain generalized patterns of social behaviour' and to 'help explain and interpret behaviour in a particular case or a series of events that are temporally and spatially bounded'.[116]

In Schroeder's view, the difference between political science and history reflects why history is studied and how explanations are arrived at, not the nature of the accounts generated.[117] He insists that historical accounts are nomothetic: 'even histories that are narrative-descriptive in form, including most work in international history, are clearly nomothetic in the sense that they develop hypotheses, assign particular causes for events and developments, and establish general patterns'.[118] Hempel also maintains that the nomothetic model is applicable to history, arguing that historical explanations show that an event 'was to be expected in view of certain antecedent or simultaneous conditions'.[119] He recognizes that historians may focus on accounting for particular events rather than on uncovering general laws, but insists that this tells us nothing about the explanatory role of general laws.[120] Hempel attempts to show that three types of explanation commonly associated with historical inquiry are consistent with the nomothetic model. Genetic (also termed narrative, or sequential) explanations aim to 'make the occurrence of a historical phenomenon intelligible' by 'exhibiting the principal stages in a sequence of events which led up to the phenomenon'.[121] Hempel argues that such accounts only make phenomena intelligible if each chronological stage is linked to its successor 'by virtue of some general principle which makes the occurrence of the latter at least reasonably probable, given the

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[115] *Ibid.* p.25.
[116] *Ibid.*
[117] See Paul W. Schroeder, 'History and international relations theory: not use or abuse, but fit or misfit', *International Security*, 22.1, Summer 1997, pp.64-74.
[118] *Ibid.* p.66.
[119] Hempel, 'The function of general laws', p.235. Hempel acknowledges that generalizations operationalized in historical explanations are likely to be unspecified and probabilistic, furnishing only partial explanations or explanation sketches. Further, they explain 'kinds or properties of events' not 'individual events'. See *ibid.* p.233.
[120] See *ibid.* p.231.
[121] Hempel, 'Explanation in science and history', p.21. See Andrew Bennett and Alexander L. George, 'Case studies and process tracing in history and political science: similar strokes for different foci', in Elman & Elman (eds.), *Bridges and boundaries*, p.147 (fn.23).

former'.[122] If so, then narrative accounts are nomothetic in form: (at least part of) each successive stage is linked to the previous stage by a general law, though each stage may also introduce additional descriptive material to which future stages are linked (by other general laws). What gives historical narratives explanatory weight are the general laws that justify linking phenomena in this manner.

Hempel also contests Dray's argument that historical explanations refer to reasons for action. Dray argues that 'what historians usually *mean*, in offering an explanation of a human action, simply does not coincide *conceptually* with showing an action's performance to have been deducible from other conditions in accordance with empirical laws'.[123] Historians usually seek to understand what an agent

> believed to be the facts of his situation, including the likely results of taking various courses of action ... and what he wanted to accomplish: his purposes, goals, or motives. Understanding is achieved when the historian can see the reasonableness of a man's doing what this agent did, given the beliefs and purposes referred to; his action can then be explained as having been an "appropriate" one.[124]

Hempel objects that to show an outcome to be appropriate or rational is not to explain it: an adequate explanation 'must provide good grounds for believing or asserting that the explanandum phenomenon did in fact occur'.[125] He insists that an explanation in terms of actors' reasons for action must account for the outcome by showing that it follows from a statement of initial conditions (including the actors' reasons for action) in accordance with a general law concerning appropriate or rational action in these circumstances: in other words, it must be nomothetic in form. Finally, Hempel criticizes the '*method of empathic understanding*', in which the historian 'imagines himself in the place of the persons involved in the events which he wants to explain' and thereby 'arrives at an understanding' of those events.[126] Hempel argues that this method 'does not in itself constitute an explanation': rather it is 'a heuristic device; its function is to suggest psychological hypotheses which might serve as explanatory principles in the case under consideration'.[127]

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[122] Hempel, 'Explanation in science and history', p.23.
[123] William Dray, 'The historical explanation of actions reconsidered', in Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *The philosophy of history* (London: OUP, 1974), p.68.
[124] *Ibid.* pp.68-9.
[125] Hempel, 'Explanation in science and history', p.26.
[126] Hempel, 'The function of general laws', p.239.
[127] *Ibid.* pp.239-40.

Some International Relations theorists, particularly those who favour a scientific realist epistemology, disavow the nomothetic model in favour of a focus on causal mechanisms.[128] Elman and Elman note increasing agreement between historians and political scientists on this point, arguing that historians 'have traditionally, if implicitly, favoured explanations that reveal causal mechanisms'.[129] They link the search for causal mechanisms to process tracing, observing that 'political scientists and historians are increasingly employing similar understandings of process tracing, path dependence, and causality'.[130] Bennett and George also make this link, describing process tracing as 'the attempt to trace empirically the temporal and possibly causal sequences of events within a case that intervene between independent variables and observed outcomes'.[131] However, a focus on causal mechanisms does not affect what explanation consists in. George initially proposed examining single cases as a means of testing causal claims inferred from statistical studies, not as a distinct form of explanation: his purpose was 'to establish whether there exists an *intervening process*, that is, a causal nexus, between the independent and the dependent variable'.[132] Elster describes nomothetic explanation and the search for causal mechanisms as differing only in emphasis: the latter reflects the scientific urge 'to produce explanations of ever finer grain'.[133] As Mandelbaum argues: what 'makes it possible to trace a continuous series between concrete events ... is a background knowledge of laws describing uniformities among given types of events'.[134] In other words, if tracing causal mechanisms is possible and carries explanatory weight, it is because it relies on general laws. We should therefore be wary of

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[128] See, for example, Wendt, *Social theory*, pp.79-83.
[129] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, 'Negotiating international history and politics', in Elman & Elman (eds.), *Bridges and boundaries*, pp.30-1.
[130] *Ibid.* p.29.
[131] Bennett & George, 'Case studies and process tracing', p.144. They acknowledge that how historians and political scientists use process tracing reflects their different interests.
[132] Alexander L. George, 'Case studies and theory development: the method of structured, focused comparison', in Paul Gordon Lauren (ed.), *Diplomacy: New approaches in history, theory, and policy* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1979), p.46.
[133] Jon Elster, *Nuts and bolts for the social sciences* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p.7.
[134] Maurice Mandelbaum, 'The problem of "covering laws"' in Gardiner (ed.), *The philosophy of history*, p.63.

suggestions that a focus on causal mechanisms constitutes a middle ground between nomothetic and historical explanation.[135]

Many historians deny that the narrative form is explanatory (in a nomothetic sense). Porter argues that historical narrative 'involves two kinds of understanding': first, there is 'the kind of understanding one gets by following a sequence of incidents in a given duration'; second an abstracted pattern may be used 'as a heuristic device that prompts questions about the similarity' between sequences.[136] Porter argues that these approaches 'proceed simultaneously in most cases, or become so interwoven that distinctions are impossible': descriptions draw on abstractions, but abstractions themselves derive from descriptions.[137] In other words, historical explanations draw on sequential and abstract understanding in equal measure: one cannot be reduced to the other. Narrative explains by 'casting up a number of plausible alternative lines of development and then realizing one of them'.[138] Collingwood also challenges the nomothetic model. He argues that historians are always concerned both with an event's outside (its physical details) and with its inside (the thought of its agents): they must never be 'concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other'.[139] The historian, Collingwood insists, 'must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent'.[140] Although the idealist approach to history is now discredited, many historians maintain that history is interpretive. Njolstad describes the historical past as 'an *intellectually constructed universe of possible past events*':

> the causes and reasons which are said to "explain" a particular historical event are only one of *many possible interpretations* of the linkage between it and other events equally established by empirical evidence – and equally open for rival interpretation.[141]

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[135] Bennett and George argue that 'typological theory' occupies just such a middle ground: it 'identifies recurring conjunctions of causal mechanisms and provides theories on the pathways through which these conjunctions produce effects'. See Bennett & George, 'Case studies and process tracing', p.157.
[136] Dale H. Porter, *The emergence of the past: A theory of historical explanation* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.1-2
[137] *Ibid.* p.4.
[138] *Ibid.* p.21.
[139] R. G. Collingwood, 'Human nature and human history', in Gardiner (ed.), *The philosophy of history*, p.24.
[140] *Ibid.* p.25.
[141] Olav Njølstad, 'Learning from history? Case studies and the limits to theory-building', in Nils Petter Gleditsch and Olav Njølstad (eds.), *Arms races: Technological and political dynamics* (London: Sage, 1990), pp.222-3.

Reynolds denies the very possibility of an objective history, arguing that judgements of historical truth reflect 'conventions agreed on by writers of history'.[142]

Critics of the nomothetic model argue that it misrepresents historians' actual practice. If so, then historical inquiry's standing as an explanatory approach depends on how empirical investigations draw on theoretical insights. Yet this aspect of historical inquiry remains obscure. Gaddis's assertion that historians 'embed theory within narrative' reveals little.[143] Schroeder argues that the goal of historical inquiry is a synoptic judgement: 'a broad interpretation of a development based on examining it from different angles to determine how it came to be, what it means, and what understanding of it best integrates the available evidence'.[144] He maintains that most historical controversies 'represent a conflict between differing synoptic judgements in which one version typically does not claim simply to refute and destroy another competing one, but to subsume and transcend it'.[145] As Schroeder points out, synoptic judgement is not limited to history: it may even represent a better reconstruction of how political scientists in fact proceed than the nomothetic model. However, he provides little insight into how synoptic judgements are formed or how they draw on underlying theories. Most scholars recognize that theory is intimately (if implicitly) involved in historical inference: Bull argues that good history 'is informed by an awareness of theoretical considerations; good theoretical work takes place in conjunction with historical study; both are essential'.[146] The problem lies not with historical methods, but with our limited grasp of what is involved in the notion that historical inquiry is informed by theoretical considerations. We lack a clear account of how systematic empirical studies draw on heuristic insights. The concern must be that if empirical accounts are claimed to draw on theories heuristically, and if these claims cannot reliably be assessed, then a theory may be sustained by its alleged heuristic value despite its deficiencies when considered in purely theoretical terms.

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[142] Reynolds, *Theory and explanation*, p.118.
[143] John Lewis Gaddis, 'In defense of particular generalization: rewriting Cold War history, rethinking international relations theory', in Elman & Elman (eds.), *Bridges and boundaries*, p.311.
[144] Schroeder', 'History and international relations theory', p.68.
[145] *Ibid.* p.69.
[146] Hedley Bull, 'International relations as an academic pursuit', in Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (eds.), *Hedley Bull on international society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), p.253.

Applying Waltz's partial explanations

The problems Waltz encounters when applying his theory to substantive problems in international relations stem from the fact that the theory generates only partial explanations. Because its deductive implications are likely to be inaccurate, the theory is most likely to prove valuable if it can be drawn upon heuristically to inform empirical investigation. Waltz therefore distinguishes between 'a theory and its application': he argues that often 'people who in effect are trying to *apply* a theory think they are *elaborating a new theory*, or *enlarging* a theory'.[147] His point is that variables considered when applying a theory are not necessarily part of the theory itself. For example, the fact that applications of neorealism may refer to unit-level variables does not entail that the theory itself should refer to those variables. Thus Waltz insists that 'balance of threat' is not 'a new theory', but

> part of a description of how makers of foreign policy think when making alliance decisions ... In moving from international-political *theory* to foreign-policy *application* one has to consider such matters as statesmen's assessment of threats, but they do not thereby become part of the theory.[148]

Waltz also draws a distinction between theory and analysis: 'Much is included in an analysis; little is included in a theory'.[149] The implication is that theories are not applied deductively, but are drawn upon to indicate what factors are likely to be important in certain situations. Substantive explanations can therefore draw on more than one theory and refer to factors not considered by a particular theory. Waltz's theoretical definition of structure abstracts from the properties and relations of states, but he acknowledges that applications of his theory must take these factors into consideration. In other words, Waltz's theory tells us something important about how structure affects behaviour, despite the fact that its deductive implications are inaccurate. Its primary explanatory role, therefore, is heuristic.

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[147] Halliday & Rosenberg, 'Interview with Ken Waltz', p.385.
[148] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.916. See Walt, *The origins of alliances*.
[149] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', *Security studies*, 6.1, Autumn 1996, p.56.

A theory is heuristic if it serves 'to indicate or stimulate investigation' or 'to find out or discover something'.[150] An ideal-type explanation is a classic example of a heuristic device: it sets out defining characteristics of a phenomenon around which variation can be measured.[151] Waltz claims that his theory lays out a defining characteristic of the international political system: that state behaviour is affected by the structure of the system. However, he fails to investigate how this central process is affected by other, non-structural, variables. This is merely one way in which Waltz fails to indicate how his theory may be drawn upon heuristically: he also fails to explain how his insight (that state behaviour is affected by a structure of opportunities and constraints) may be combined with other insights (derived from other partial theories) in integrated explanations. In other words, Waltz does not indicate how insights derived from a theory that examines only one aspect of a complex system can contribute to integrated explanations that present (putatively) complete accounts of systemic phenomena by describing the interaction of all the primary variables. Constructivists and historians are also guilty in this regard: constructivists do not indicate how processes of identity construction interact with rationalist logics in integrated explanations; historians do not elucidate how systematic empirical inquiry draws on theoretical ideas. Hasenclever *et al* suggest that, when explanatory insights are combined,

> variables must not merely be lumped together, they must be *integrated*, with their mutual relationship clearly specified. Otherwise there is a significant danger of ending up with some sort of "grab-bag" theorizing, where the "theory" consists of a set of unrelated explanatory variables and "explaining" amounts to trying out independent variables until one is found that matches the case at hand.[152]

The problem with Waltz's applications of his theory is that the relationship between his substantive explanations and the theory itself is unclear. In his empirical accounts, Waltz appears to switch back and forth between expounding the logic of his narrow balance-of-power theory, describing how he believes that the international political system actually operates, and an inconsistent composite of the two. For example, he argues that hegemonic behaviour induces balancing responses, yet insists that

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[150] Antony Flew (ed.), *A dictionary of philosophy* (London: Picador, 1984), p.147; *New shorter Oxford English dictionary*, vol.1, p.1228.
[151] See Gordon Marshall (ed.), *A dictionary of sociology* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p.274.
[152] Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer and Volker Rittberger, 'Integrating theories of international regimes', *Review of International Studies*, 26.1, Jan 2000, p.6.

structures 'shape and shove; they do not determine the actions of states'.[153] He adds that European balancing against US preponderance 'is not inevitable': Europeans may value US dominance because it prevents a new leader from emerging in Europe.[154] This illustrates how Waltz attempts to defend the usefulness of his theory by indicating how structural and unit-level forces interact. Yet the status of these accounts is problematic: Waltz's claims about European interests are not derived from any explicit theoretical logic, let alone from the logic of his narrow balance-of-power theory. Further, they do not express Waltz's belief about how the system actually works: these accounts do not show how units and structure are mutually affecting. Ultimately, Waltz's empirical writings tend toward a form of theoretical commentary that fulfils the requirements neither of deductive explanation nor of systematic empirical inquiry: he fails to distinguish between genuine theoretical insights, implicit (and therefore unjustified) presumptions, and observable feature of situations. Waltz is not alone in this. According to Hoffmann, Aron simultaneously pursued two activities he 'never fully distinguished: journalism, or commentaries of current events ... and theoretical writings'.[155] Waltz's problem is that he draws on his theory neither deductively nor in accordance with a stipulated heuristic procedure: consequently, realist presumptions inform his substantive explanations in an ad hoc and unjustified manner.

Conclusion

Wendt argues that structuration theory's power derives from its embodiment of a solution to the agent-structure problem that 'subsumes and points beyond neorealism and world-system theory', showing them to 'leave important gaps in the theorization of the two basic building blocks of international relations theory, states and international system structures'.[156] Giddens argues that 'structure is both enabling and constraining' and insists that social theory should 'study the conditions in the

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[153] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.24.
[154] *Ibid.* p.26.
[155] Stanley Hoffmann, 'Raymond Aron and the theory of international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29.1, March 1985, p.13.
[156] Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', pp.337, 361-2.

organization of social systems that govern the interconnections between the two'.[157] However, neither Giddens nor Wendt has found a way to generate explanatory claims that draw on both structures and agents: in this sense, structuration theory merely redescribes the agent-structure problem and replicates the problems encountered by Waltz. Carlsnaes claims to identify a scholarly consensus that neither agents nor structures determine the other: they 'are both, in the final analysis, independent variables in an inextricably intertwined temporal process'.[158] Yet the underlying problem encountered by Waltz is that the mutually affecting relationship between units and structure in a complex system cannot satisfactorily be represented in the language of explanatory theory. The immediate consequence is that partial theories that focus on only one dimension of the mutually affecting relationship between agents and structures cannot (helpfully) be deductively applied, but must be drawn upon heuristically.

Constructivists and historians both fail to elucidate how theoretical ideas are drawn upon heuristically. Constructivists point to factors that they consider to be important but which are excluded from Waltz's theoretical model, but do not show how these factors may be incorporated in integrated explanations that draw on a range of variables. The underlying problem is that the notion of mutual constitution is not, in itself, explanatory. As Finnemore and Sikkink observe: although 'constructivists frequently bracket structure, then agency, to understand their mutual constitution', this does not clarify how structural and agentic variables interact to produce outcomes.[159] Historians are reluctant to describe exactly how systematic empirical inquiry draws upon theoretical ideas. Ruggie suggests that, 'in its causal explanations, constructivism adheres to narrative explanatory protocols', in which causality is established 'through a process of successive interrogative reasoning between explanans and explanandum'.[160] Yet this is either a form of process tracing that ultimately relies on something close to the nomothetic model or a form of explanation that draws on theoretical insights in an unspecified manner. Thus historical inquiry does not provide a model for how explanatory theories can be utilized as a source of heuristic insights. The point is not that constructivists or historians should alter their

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[157] Giddens, *Central problems*, pp.69-70.
[158] Carlsnaes, 'The agency-structure problem', p.246.
[159] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52.4, Autumn 1998, p.911.
[160] Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' p.880.

methods, or that explanatory theory is the sole legitimate form of inquiry. Rather, International Relations lacks a form of explanatory theory adequate for comprehending complex systems. It also lacks adequate guides to how partial explanatory insights may be drawn upon heuristically.

Waltz's theory generates only partial explanations: consequently, it cannot (helpfully) be deductively applied. In practice, Waltz's empirical accounts, as Part II of this thesis will show, are a mixture of deductive claims, empirical observations, attempts to explain why the deductive claims are inaccurate, and putatively general theoretical claims the origins of which are unspecified. Waltz never fully confronts the limitations of his theory or the consequent difficulties in applying it empirically. Nevertheless, it is helpful to distinguish between the sorts of claims that Waltz makes as a theorist and as an empirical commentator. As a theorist, he insists that structure must be narrowly defined and that state interests must be treated by assumption. As an empirical commentator, he is willing to specify particular interests and to indicate how they may be affected by system structure. He even suggests that norms and identities have a role. The problem with Waltz's applications of his theory is that the substantive explanatory claims that emerge are neither deductive nor the result of systematic empirical inquiry. Consequently, Waltz drifts into an unsatisfactory form of theoretical commentary in which substantive explanations derive neither from the theory itself nor from a structured attempt to draw on it as a source of heuristic insights. This undermines the validity of Waltz's substantive explanations and obscures whatever insights his theory might legitimately offer.

Part II

Waltz's applications of his theory

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Structural pressures in superpower politics: fitting theory to events

Because of the factors they exclude, partial explanations are, considered in isolation, unlikely to constitute accurate accounts of specific instances of international relations. The empirical application of the theories from which they derive is therefore fraught with difficulty. If Waltz's theory claims only that balances of power are likely to form, its utility is limited. If it illuminates an essential dynamic of the international political system (that states seeking to survive in anarchic conditions adopt self-help strategies), how is this insight applicable to outcomes beyond the immediate formation of balances of power? This chapter examines Waltz's efforts to apply his theory to the superpower relationship during the Cold War. It investigates to what extent Waltz's substantive explanations (those with specific empirical content) derive directly from the logic of his theory and to what extent they involve heuristic application of the theory's insights. This chapter therefore also examines how Waltz incorporates non-structural factors excluded from the logic of his theory into his substantive explanations. The notion of an integrated explanation is developed to represent how the heuristic insight that structure is important may be employed: only through a systematic study drawing on a range of potentially important factors is it possible to demonstrate how focusing on structure improves explanations. Waltz's substantive explanations generally fail to meet these standards: they fulfil the requirements neither of explanatory theory (they are not deductive) nor of systematic empirical inquiry (they ignore pertinent factors). In practice, Waltz's substantive explanations are a form of theoretical commentary, in which incomplete accounts are shaped by an implicit realist world-view.

One problem with evaluating Waltz's empirical arguments is that it is often difficult to determine his substantive views with certainty. For example, Waltz argues that even the Chinese civil war and Sino-

Soviet split could not disrupt the superpower balance during the Cold War, presenting this as evidence of the peacefulness of bipolar systems.[1] However, the argument is presented as a simple assertion: consequently, it is unclear whether Waltz is claiming to uncover an essential feature of bipolar systems or commenting on how things turned out it practice. It is also unclear to what extent the claim is based on an appreciation of the nuances of the Sino-American, Sino-Soviet and superpower relationships during the early Cold War. It is often unclear to what extent Waltz intends empirical claims to stand as tests of his theory and to what extent he is entwining a theoretical perspective with a somewhat partial account of empirical developments: in other words, shaping theory to events. The Chinese example typifies how Waltz employs empirical material. His substantive arguments and explanations constitute neither deductive applications of his theory, nor the results of a systematic empirical study: rather, they constitute a partial 'making sense' of things. Consequently, the status of the ensuing claims often remains unclear: are they claims about the essential nature of international relations, for example, or merely about particular aspects of international relations to which other commentators have not (in Waltz's opinion) paid sufficient attention? Waltz is a committed nonconformist: he not only adopts minority intellectual positions on theoretical issues, but is quick to express dissatisfaction with US policy, for example on nuclear deterrence, Vietnam, and NATO. Although he rarely presents explicit policy advice, it is often unclear whether Waltz simply believes it important to express alternative perspectives, or whether he seeks to press more substantive claims about the conduct of international relations.

Bipolarity and the superpower relationship

Waltz argues that although the Cold War international system was not as durable as its multipolar predecessor, bipolar systems are more peaceful.[2] Whilst acknowledging the significance of nuclear

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[1] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.169.

[2] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.45. Jervis describes this as the 'main conclusion of Waltz's theory'. See Jervis, *System effects*, p.110. See also Dale C. Copeland, 'Realism and the myth of bipolar stability: toward a new dynamic realist theory of major war', *Security Studies*, 5.3, Spring 1996, pp.29-89.

deterrence, he insists that the primary reason for the peacefulness of the Cold War was the clarity of structural imperatives in a bipolar system: 'In a world in which two states united in their mutual antagonism far overshadow any other, the incentives to a calculated response stand out most clearly, and the sanctions against irresponsible behaviour achieve their greatest force'.[3] He argues, for example, that in the 1930s the Western democracies failed to counter the rising threat of German revisionism until war itself brought a balancing coalition into being. By contrast, he suggested in 1964, the bipolar system displays, even in peacetime, 'a clarity of relations that is ordinarily found only in war'.[4] Expressed simply: in a bipolar world, 'the international system is more likely to dominate'.[5] This section reviews Waltz's arguments that bipolar systems are more peaceful than multipolar systems. It investigates whether those arguments derive directly from the logic of Waltz's theory and examines how Waltz approaches the task of synthesizing the insights of his theory with other explanatory factors. It shows that Waltz's accounts of multipolar and bipolar systems are not directly derived from the logic of his theory. Waltz's account of bipolarity does not explain the Cold War: it reflects the Cold War. Further, Waltz's use of historical material to support his arguments fulfils the requirements neither of theoretical explanation nor of systematic empirical inquiry.

Multipolarity

Waltz recognizes that states have two means of balancing power: 'internal efforts (moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies) and external efforts (moves to strengthen and enlarge one's own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one)'.[6] He therefore observes that balancing differs in bipolar and multipolar systems: 'Where two powers contend, imbalances can be righted only by their internal efforts. With more than two, shifts in

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[3] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.172-3.
[4] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', *Daedalus*, 93.3, Summer 1964, p.901. The aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis may have displayed a clarity of relations unusual even for bipolarity.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Waltz, *Theory*, p.118.

alignment provide an additional means of adjustment, adding flexibility to the system'.[7] Balancing in multipolar systems may therefore require a state to 'overcome the pressure of ideological preference, the pull of previous ties, and the conflict of present interests in order to add its weight to the side of the peaceful'.[8] An obvious risk, Waltz suggests, is that states will pass the buck. He laments, for example, that instead of responding to Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, 'British and French leaders could hope that if their countries remained aloof, Russia and Germany would balance each other off or fight each other to the finish'.[9] A further problem with flexibility of alignment is that states must satisfy potential or actual partners with whom they have 'some but not all of their interests in common'.[10] In multipolar systems, Waltz argues, 'there are too many powers to permit any of them to draw clear and fixed lines between allies and adversaries and too few to keep the effects of defection low'.[11] Unable to risk the defection even of allies with divergent interests, states may be dragged into conflicts against their better judgement, a dynamic Waltz associates with the outbreak of war in 1914.[12] Waltz's association of flexibility of alignment and war-proneness inverted the received wisdom: that uncertainty 'generates a healthy caution'.[13] In Waltz's opinion, this view unrealistically assumes that all states will 'oppose any threatening state and ... be willing to ally with any other'.[14]

Waltz's account of multipolar systems is open to challenge in respect of both its theoretical logic and its use of historical examples. Examined in isolation, Waltz's theory explains only why states balance in anarchic systems. Whether flexibility aids efficient balancing depends, as Waltz makes clear, on non-structural factors such as ideological preference. Thus it follows from Waltz's actual theory, in which structure is the sole causal variable, that states will oppose any threatening state and be willing to ally with any other. Yet when Waltz applies his theory to substantive empirical problems, he draws

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[7] *Ibid.* p.163.
[8] *Ibid.* p.164.
[9] *Ibid.* p.165. Mearsheimer also argues that failure to balance contributed to World War II. See John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future: instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, 15.1, Summer 1990, p.23.
[10] Waltz, *Theory*, p.166.
[11] *Ibid.* p.168.
[12] On the inconsistency between passing the buck and being dragged into war see Ch.9, below.
[13] Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', p.899.
[14] *Ibid.* p.900.

attention to the significance of non-structural factors: the reasons why states may buck-pass or chain-gang are excluded from Waltz's actual theory but included in his substantive explanations. This is to be expected: Waltz acknowledges that his theory provides only a partial explanation of substantive empirical developments in international relations. He excluded non-structural factors from his theory not because he believed them to be of negligible importance but in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. However, in discussing flexibility of alignment in multipolar systems, Waltz does not merely acknowledge that a structural explanation is an idealized or partial account: he maintains that structure is trumped by other factors. This casts doubt upon the utility of Waltz's theory: unless system structure is of central importance, the attempt to isolate it as an independent variable and to apply the resulting explanations is unnecessary.

A partial explanation may be employed heuristically to illuminate behaviour and outcomes that do not follow directly from the logic of the theory. In such cases, although the partial explanation does not provide a satisfactory account when considered in isolation, incorporating the insight it offers within an integrated explanatory account remains useful. In respect of Waltz's theory, the claim would be that an awareness of how system structure influences outcomes can enhance an integrated explanation by drawing attention to a factor (structure) otherwise likely to be ignored. However, an integrated explanation that draws on Waltz's theory as a heuristic guide would have to pay detailed attention to the interplay between structure and other factors. Waltz's account of great power behaviour in multipolar systems cannot be represented in this way: it pays scant attention to any factor other than structure. Waltz's account of the Franco-British response to remilitarization of the Rhineland, for example, is seriously truncated. Even in an avowedly realist interpretation, the asymmetry of British and French interests and the role of the Abyssinia crisis in undermining the Stresa front would be crucial. Waltz makes no mention of these factors and also ignores, inter alia, perception (especially in Britain) that the Versailles settlement had been overly punitive, the weakness of the League of

Nations, and the strength of the British pacifist movement.[15] Waltz does not demonstrate how focusing on structure enhances understanding, but simply assumes power balancing to be the dominant explanatory factor. He asserts that Britain and France passed the buck and infers that balancing is inefficient in multipolar systems. His account is neither deductive nor descriptive: rather, it employs assumptions unsupported by theory or history to recreate an implicit, if superficial, realist world-view.

Bipolarity

Waltz maintains that bipolar systems are structurally disposed toward peaceful relations between the two great powers because these powers are largely self-dependent: 'Internal balancing is more reliable and precise than external balancing. States are less likely to misjudge their relative strengths than they are to misjudge the strength and reliability of opposing coalitions'.[16] The inequality between the two major powers and the rest, Waltz argues, makes alliances less significant. Whereas Germany was tied to Austria-Hungary in 1914, the US could dissociate herself from Britain and France during the Suez crisis: 'Enjoying a position of predominance, the United States could continue to focus its attention on the major adversary while disciplining its allies'.[17] Even more strikingly, Waltz argues, 'two "losses" of China in the postwar world – first by the United States and then by the Soviet Union – were accommodated without disastrously distorting, or even much affecting, the balance between America and Russia'.[18] In a bipolar system, therefore, the major constraints 'arise from the main adversary and not from one's own associates'.[19] Although the great powers may compete, that competition is guided by the clarity of structural imperatives: fearing a gain for the other side, 'the powers in a bipolar world promptly respond to unsettling events'.[20] Thus Waltz commented, in the 1970s, that the US's

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[15] See, for example: F. S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its life and times, 1920-46* (Leicester University Press, 1986); Paul Kennedy, 'The tradition of appeasement in British foreign policy, 1865-1939', in *Strategy and diplomacy 1870-1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp.15-39.
[16] Waltz, *Theory*, p.168.
[17] *Ibid.* p.169. R. Harrison Wagner suggests that the US response to the Suez crisis demonstrates the importance of alliances. See 'What was bipolarity?' *International Organization*, 47.1, Winter 1993, p.95.
[18] Waltz, *Theory*, p.169.
[19] *Ibid.* p.170.
[20] *Ibid.* p.171.

'responses are geared to the Soviet Union's actions, and theirs to ours, which has produced an increasingly solid bipolar balance'.[21] He concludes that, in comparison with multipolar systems, bipolar systems are characterized by independence rather than interdependence of parties, clarity rather than confusion of dangers, and certainty rather than confusion of responses.[22]

Although Waltz seeks to show how multipolar and bipolar systems differ, thus demonstrating the importance of system structure, his theory explains only that states pursuing survival in an anarchic system will balance and that more balancing options are available in multipolar systems. His general account of the nature of bipolar systems draws heavily on the particular history of the Cold War. Thus it exhibits a tension between the proposition that alliances can do little to affect the balance of power and the contention that, because each great power fears gains by the other, 'few changes in the world at large or within each other's national realm are likely to be thought irrelevant'.[23] Whether allies substantially affect the overall balance of power will depend, in any bipolar system, on the degree of inequality between the major powers and the rest. Waltz observed in 1979 that '[n]ever in modern history have great powers been so sharply set off from lesser states and so little involved in each other's economic and social affairs'.[24] That this observation forms the centrepiece of Waltz's account of bipolar systems demonstrates the extent to which Waltz uses historical material not to test his empirical accounts but to generate them. Even so, Waltz's examples are superficial. His retrospective judgement that neither the Chinese civil war nor the Sino-Soviet split substantially affected the balance of power ignores how events were perceived at the time.[25] Khong shows how the Chinese civil war influenced US thinking about Korea in 1950.[26] Gaddis suggests that Nixon saw China as a

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[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.* pp.171-2.
[23] *Ibid.* p.171. See also Jervis, *System effects*, p.118; Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks', p.142; Wagner, 'What was bipolarity?' p.89.
[24] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.151-2.
[25] Waltz's substantive explanations give truncated accounts not only of non-structural factors but also of their own central component: power balancing. See Rosemary Foot, 'The study of China's international behaviour: International Relations approaches', in Ngaire Woods (ed.), *Explaining international relations since 1945* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), pp.259-79.
[26] See Yuen Foong Khong, 'The United States and East Asia: challenges to the balance of power', in Woods (ed.), *Explaining international relations*, pp.184-5.

crucial element in the balance of power.[27] Tucker argues that Carter 'looked to an alignment with China to curb the Soviet Union'.[28] Whichever way it is examined, a single case cannot ground a conclusion that allies are unimportant in bipolar systems.[29] As with the contention that great powers in bipolar systems are likely to see few changes in the world as irrelevant, Waltz's argument is not a genuine structural inference but a retrospective reflection of the Cold War.

One of Waltz's most striking inferences about bipolar systems concerns the risk of over-reaction: 'Bipolarity encourages the United States and the Soviet Union to turn unwanted events into crises, while rendering most of them relatively inconsequential'.[30] It is hard to see how over-reaction can be derived from Waltz's theory; rather it appears that, when two evenly matched great powers are vastly superior to any other states, peripheral incidents should not pose significant threats to their survival. Nevertheless, Waltz presents over-reaction as an implication of bipolarity: 'The clarity with which dangers and duties are defined in a bipolar world easily leads the country that identifies its own security with the maintenance of world order to overreact'.[31] In 1964, he acknowledged the tension in the argument, commenting of the doctrine of containment that the 'habits of the cold war are so ingrained and the dangers of a bipolar world so invigorating that the defensive country is easily lead to overreact'.[32] What this reveals, of course, is the absence of genuine contradiction: over-reaction is a characteristic of a specific historical period (the Cold War), not of bipolar systems in general. In fact, all of Waltz's substantive examples of over-reaction are US foreign interventions, inviting the conclusion that he is more focused on how US policy deviated from the course of enlightened self-interest than on the abstract implications of bipolarity.[33] He observes, for example, that only 'Japan, Western Europe, and the Middle East are prizes that if won by the Soviet Union would alter the

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[27] See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: A critical appraisal of American national security policy during the cold war*, rev. ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p.294.
[28] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, 'China and America: 1941-1991', *Foreign Affairs*, 70.5, Winter 1991-92, p.86.
[29] Wagner suggests that, had the loss of West Germany been bearable, the Cold War might not have occurred. See Wagner, 'What was bipolarity?' p.88.
[30] Waltz, *Theory*, p.172.
[31] *Ibid.* pp.207-8.
[32] Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', p.903.
[33] On realist opposition to US foreign policy aims see Halliday & Rosenberg, 'Interview with Ken Waltz', p.373.

balance of GNPs and the distribution of resources enough to be a danger'.[34] Nevertheless, the US has, since 1945, 'responded expensively in distant places to wayward events that could hardly affect anyone's fate outside of the region'.[35]

Waltz's opposition to US involvement in Vietnam illustrates his approach to US foreign policy during the Cold War. In 1964, he warned against expanding US interests in Southeast Asia: 'since no gain for Communist China is likely to benefit the Soviet Union, American concern should be confined to maintaining its reputation and avoiding distant repercussions'.[36] He re-emphasized this in 1967:

> Because no realignment of national power in Vietnam could in itself affect the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union – or even noticeably alter the imbalance of power between the United States and China – the United States need not have intervened at all.[37]

In fact, he argued later, no 'vital interest of either great power was at stake, as both Kissinger and Brezhnev made clear at the time'.[38] Waltz also decried US objectives:

> If Communism is the threat to Southeast Asia, then military forces are not the right means for countering it. If insurrection is the problem, then it can hardly be hoped that an alien army will be able to pacify a country that is unable to govern itself.[39]

However, he objected to arguments about the decreased utility of force in a nuclear world: Vietnam demonstrated not the weakness but 'the *limits* of military force'.[40] These are important insights, yet neither recognition of the absence of genuine US strategic interests in Vietnam nor appreciation of the limits of military force require Waltz's complex theoretical machinery. In fact, Waltz suggests that those who use Vietnam to question the utility of force in the modern world 'fail in their analyses to apply their own historical and political knowledge'.[41] If so, it is doubtful that the 'international-political insignificance of Vietnam can be understood only in terms of the world's structure'.[42] Although it is true that defeat was tolerable because '[n]o matter what the outcome, the American-

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[34] Waltz, *Theory*, p.172.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', p.903.
[37] Waltz, 'International structure, national force', p.226.
[38] Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons', p.18.
[39] Waltz, 'International structure, national force', p.227.
[40] Waltz, *Theory*, p.190.
[41] *Ibid.* p.189.
[42] *Ibid.* p.190.

Russian duopoly would endure', we do not require Waltz's theory to recognize that wars may fail to alter the distribution of power.[43]

Waltz also associates over-reaction to peripheral dangers with periods of clear US superiority during the Cold War: states that enjoy 'a margin of power over their closest competitors are led to pay undue attention to minor dangers and to pursue fancies abroad that reach beyond the fulfilment of interests narrowly defined in terms of security'.[44] He identifies two ways in which the US has justified its adventurism: by exaggerating the threat and by claiming to act for the good of others. In fact, Waltz suggests, these justifications became one: the US associated her security interests with maintaining a certain international order. For countries at the top, he adds, 'this is predictable behaviour. They blend necessary or exaggerated worries about security with concern for the state of the system'.[45] Yet if this is predictable behaviour, it is not predicted by Waltz's theory, which generates no expectations about the ends states may pursue beyond survival. Waltz's criticism of America's aspirations to change the system, and of its 'unnecessary and foolish employment of force', fall comfortably outside the scope of his theory.[46] Waltz suggests that national leaders have never 'expressed more overweening ambitions' than did Kennedy and Johnson, but explains that 'never in modern history has a great power enjoyed so wide an economic and technological lead over the only other great power in the race'.[47] This may be an accurate diagnosis of the state of superpower relations in the 1960s, but it undercuts any argument that the peacefulness of the Cold War is explicable in terms of bipolar competition. The basic difficulty that Waltz faces in explaining anything other than balancing behaviour is that his theory does not provide the necessary tools: attempting, nevertheless, to provide explanations, Waltz merely undermines his own theory.[48]

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[43] *Ibid.* p.191.
[44] *Ibid.* p.205.
[45] *Ibid.* p.200.
[46] *Ibid.* p.201.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] For example, Waltz's persistent warnings against US adventurism in the post-Cold War era are hard to reconcile with his contention that the bipolar structure of the international system provides powerful explanations of the same behaviour during the Cold War. See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The new world order', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 22.2, Summer 1993, pp.187-95.

Although Waltz argues that system structure can explain important elements of state behaviour, he insists that the 'size of the two great powers gives them some capacity for control and ... insulates them with some comfort from the effect of other states' behaviour'.[49] This invites questions about how structure affects international relations. If great powers are insulated from others' actions, are they thereby insulated from the effects of structure? Can great powers control or avoid structural effects? If great powers 'have more to say about which games will be played and how', can structure be represented as an independent variable?[50] Waltz also argues that the

> solidity of the bipolar balance permits middle states to act with impunity precisely because they know that their divergent actions will not measurably affect the strength of the Soviet Union or the United States, upon which their own security continues to rest.[51]

Yet if all states have great freedom of movement in bipolar systems, then structure is of minimal importance in explaining state behaviour. Waltz maintains that the weak 'lead perilous lives': they 'operate on narrow margins. Inopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results'.[52] He may therefore be interpreted as arguing that when survival is at stake lesser states face the greatest danger: when their survival is guaranteed by a superpower ally, they 'enjoy the freedom of the irresponsible'.[53] However, this would be to move well beyond the logic of Waltz's theory. Further, it does not convincingly depict the Cold War. Britain and France were not able to act with impunity in 1956: although Suez did not signal the end of European influence in the Near East, 'neither Britain nor France would again aspire to play a major role in the region'.[54] Yet France was able to act with relative impunity when withdrawing from NATO's integrated command structure and developing her own nuclear deterrent: her actions neither significantly affected the balance of power, nor diminished the protection afforded by NATO's nuclear umbrella.[55]

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[49] Waltz, *Theory*, p.159. See also pp.154, 194, 209.
[50] *Ibid.* p.194.
[51] Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', p.887. See also Waltz, *Theory*, p.184.
[52] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.194-5.
[53] *Ibid.* p.185. Mearsheimer argues that in bipolar systems great powers demand allegiance from minor powers, who therefore find it difficult to retain their autonomy. See Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.14.
[54] M. E. Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War: A history to 1995*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1996), p.410.
[55] See A. W. DePorte, *Europe between the superpowers: The enduring balance*, 2nd ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1986), p.234.

Non-structural aspects of superpower accommodation

One of the problems with applying a partial explanatory theory to substantive empirical problems is how factors excluded from the theory itself are incorporated into substantive explanations. As suggested in the previous section, one potential solution is to adopt a systematic empirical mode of inquiry, employing theoretical insights heuristically as elements of integrated explanations. Such a strategy would provide a basis for extending the scope of Waltz's substantive explanations beyond the narrow logic of his theory. Yet Waltz does not, in general, develop integrated explanations that demonstrate how our understanding of empirical developments in international relations is enhanced by attention to structure. His appreciation of the sorts of factors that a satisfactory integrated explanation would have to consider is restricted by a residual realist world-view: he asserts, for example, that the 'biggest changes in the post-war world are the shift from multipolarity to bipolarity and the introduction of nuclear weapons'.[56] This section explores how Waltz weaves non-structural factors into his account of superpower relations. It examines, first, his account of the contribution of nuclear weapons to the absence of superpower conflict during the Cold War and, second, his treatment of other non-structural factors excluded from the logic of his theory. Waltz's discussion of nuclear weapons is found to demonstrate one limitation of the attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable: Waltz cannot comprehend how changes in non-structural factors bring about changes in structure itself. Meanwhile, although Waltz makes numerous suggestive comments about the importance of other non-structural factors, his substantive explanations fail to do them justice.

Nuclear weapons

Waltz's work on nuclear weapons is best known for his contention that their controlled spread 'will promote peace and reinforce international stability'.[57] However, it is his account of the relationship

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[56] See Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons', p.2.
[57] *Ibid.* p.28. See also Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The spread of nuclear weapons: A debate renewed* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003).

between nuclear weapons and system structure that best illustrates the problems he encounters attempting to apply a partial explanatory theory. Wagner argues that nobody has stated clearly the relationship 'between the bipolarity of the postwar system and the distribution of nuclear weapons technology'.[58] Nevertheless, this relationship has been a prominent feature of debates about how superpower conflict was avoided during the Cold War. The main point of contention has been whether nuclear weapons reinforced the pacific effects of bipolarity or constituted the primary cause of what Gaddis termed the 'long peace'.[59] Waltz argues that nuclear weapons enhanced the pacific effects of bipolarity: the stability of two-party balances is 'reinforced by second-strike nuclear weapons'.[60] Gaddis agrees that bipolar systems tend to be peaceful and that the relative mutual independence of the superpowers was beneficial, but contends that what really made the difference in producing caution was 'the workings of the nuclear deterrent'.[61] In fact, he suggests, the superpowers' nuclear superiority 'maintained a façade of Soviet-American bipolarity long after the reality of it had begun to disappear'.[62] Although Mearsheimer argues that Europe's post-war peace resulted from a combination of bipolarity, the equal military balance, and nuclear weapons, much of his worry about the emergence of multipolarity concerns the distribution of nuclear weapons.[63] Copeland rejects Waltz's argument that, because the superpower peace predated Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons, bipolarity must be the crucial factor. He observes that, prior to the emergence of Mutually Assured Destruction, the world came frighteningly close to major war: it 'was a long peace only in retrospect'.[64]

Although he insists that system structure affects the chances of peace, Waltz also contends that the 'probability of major war among states having nuclear weapons approaches zero'.[65] He applies this

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[58] Wagner, 'What was bipolarity?' p.78. Jervis argues that Waltz placed greater stress on the importance of nuclear weapons in his later work. See Jervis, *System effects*, p.122 (fn.107).
[59] For a different view see John Mueller, 'The essential irrelevance of nuclear weapons: stability in the postwar world', *International Security*, 13.2, Autumn 1988, pp.55-79.
[60] Waltz, *Theory*, p.195; see also pp.174-5.
[61] John Lewis Gaddis, 'The long peace: elements of stability in the postwar international system', *International Security*, 10.3, Spring 1986, p.121.
[62] John Lewis Gaddis, 'The essential relevance of nuclear weapons', in *The United States and the end of the Cold War: Implications, reconsiderations, provocations* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p.113.
[63] See Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future'.
[64] Copeland, 'Realism and the myth of bipolar stability', p.30.
[65] Waltz, 'The origins of war', p.627.

logic to the end of the Cold War, suggesting that the Soviet Union's peaceful decline can be explained 'in two words: nuclear weapons'.[66] As Jervis points out, however, the explanatory importance of system structure is undermined by Waltz's argument that, because second-strike capabilities make war prohibitively costly, nuclear weapons would pacify relations even between lesser powers.[67] The problem emerges because Waltz seeks to explain more of state behaviour than follows from pursuit of survival alone: he attempts, in his substantive explanations, to push beyond the limited logic of his theory. If second-strike capabilities make war prohibitively costly, then states cannot do more to secure survival in an anarchic system than to acquire them. Yet Waltz insists that states armed with second-strike capabilities continue to compete: 'each state still has to take care of itself as best it can. Nuclear states continue to compete militarily'.[68] Although this reflects the reality of the Cold War, it does not follow from Waltz's theory, which explains only how states behave in pursuit of survival. Even the heuristic insight offered by Waltz's theory does not suggest how states are likely to behave if survival is reasonably assured. The proposition that states continue to pursue self-help strategies even when survival is not at stake may be consistent with the realist claim that politics is the struggle for power (it may even describe the historical Cold War) but it is not justified by Waltz's theory.[69] Waltz maintains that, '[w]hatever the weaponry and however many states in the system, states have to live with their security dilemma, which is produced not by their wills but by their situations'.[70] But the great boon of nuclear weapons, if there is one, is that second-strike capabilities do solve the security dilemma: as Waltz himself points out, deterrence is absolute.[71]

For states pursuing survival, achieving second-strike capability might be an alternative to balance-of-power politics, or a form of internal balancing that obviates the need to compete directly with rival powers. Either way, second-strike capabilities appear to alter the imperatives that, Waltz maintains,

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[66] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.187.
[67] See Jervis, *System effects*, p.123.
[68] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.328.
[69] See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p.25.
[70] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.186-7. On the security dilemma see Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the security dilemma', *World Politics*, 30.2, Jan 1978, pp.167-214.
[71] See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Nuclear myths and political realities', *American Political Science Review*, 84.3, Sep 1990, pp.731-45.

follow from the structure of the system. In the absence of nuclear weapons, war may be necessary in order for a state to survive: when rivals have second-strike capabilities, war is no longer an option. However, Waltz views technology as a response to the self-help imperatives of an anarchic system and rejects the notion that how states respond to structural imperatives alters the nature of those imperatives.[72] Instead of acknowledging that structural imperatives themselves have changed, Waltz maintains that a 'unit-level change has dramatically reduced a structural effect', or even that 'a unit-level cause may negate a systems-level effect'.[73] Weber advocates a different view: deterrence 'has engendered a structural change in the international system'.[74] He argues that acquisition of second-strike capabilities altered a basic principle of the superpower relationship: 'the ever-present possibility of recourse to force'.[75] In a system characterized by Mutually Assured Destruction, Weber suggests, the superpowers 'place their interest in the maintenance of the international political system ahead of their continuing struggle for relative gains'.[76] They 'take on a new function – "joint custodianship" of the system'.[77]

Weber's disagreement with Waltz is, in effect, about the nature of structure. Waltz does not deny that unit-level phenomena cause structural changes, but insists that it is hard to imagine such changes either overcoming anarchy or radically altering the distribution of capabilities.[78] Weber's argument therefore reveals the limitations of Waltz's theory as the basis for substantive empirical explanations. By isolating system structure as an independent variable, Waltz's theory excludes from its explanatory purview the process by which the structure of constraints and opportunities facing international actors is renewed and reshaped by their actions and interactions. Developments such as nuclear technology

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[72] In contrast, Mearsheimer tends to treat the character of military power as a feature of the system. See Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.12.
[73] Waltz, 'The origins of war', p.626; Waltz, *Theory*, p.202. Waltz insists that the end of the Cold War did not alter the structure of the system: 'bipolarity endures, but in an altered state', with different implications. See Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.52.
[74] Steve Weber, 'Realism, détente, and nuclear weapons', *International Organization*, 44.1, Winter 1990, p.63.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] *Ibid.* pp.63-4.
[77] *Ibid.* p.64.
[78] See Waltz, 'Reflections', p.328. Waltz acknowledges that structural change 'begins in a system's unit, and then unit-level and structural causes interact'. See Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.49.

alter not only the character and resources of actors but also the possibilities for action inherent in the situations they confront, yet Waltz's theory brackets this logic. Waltz therefore denies that nuclear weapons alter the structure of the international political system. In practice, however, Waltz's substantive explanations do acknowledge that nuclear weapons changed the possibilities for action inherent in the situations confronted by the great powers. His substantive explanations thereby demonstrate the limitations of a partial explanatory theory that isolates system structure as an independent variable. They also demonstrate its dangers: by separating structure from action, Waltz's theory obscures the connection between developments at the actor level and changes in the structure of opportunities and constraints faced by all actors.

Other non-structural factors

Waltz's attempt to incorporate nuclear weapons into systemic explanations does not exhaust his attention to non-structural factors. His account of superpower accommodation in the 1970s, for example, explicitly invokes non-structural factors and processes that extend well beyond the narrow logic of nuclear deterrence. He argues that 'the passage of time makes peaceful coexistence among major competitors easier. They become accustomed to one another; they learn how to interpret one another's moves and how to accommodate or counter them'.[79] He adds that 'competitors become like one another as their competition continues ... The increasing similarity of competitors' attitudes, as well as their experience with one another, eases the adjustment of their relations'.[80] He acknowledges that tension may be high in a bipolar system but emphasizes the counterpoint: 'pressure to moderate behaviour is heavy'.[81] He recognizes that the superpowers 'may have found it harder to learn to live with each other in the 1940s and '50s than more experienced and less ideological nations would have', but argues that the pressures of a bipolar world 'make the two great powers conservative'.[82] These observations raise questions about how structure affects states. The implication of Waltz's attention to

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[79] Waltz, *Theory*, p.173.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] *Ibid.* p.174.
[82] *Ibid.* pp.174-5.

learning, moderating behaviour, overcoming ideology, and actors developing similar attitudes is that structure affects not just behaviour and outcomes but the nature of states themselves (their interests and identities).[83] It also suggests that Waltz's substantive explanations should be able to portray how structural effects interact with state interests (perhaps with state identities and international norms), even though such factors cannot be incorporated within a theory premised on isolating system structure as an independent variable. In practice, however, Waltz's substantive explanations do not live up to this promise.

Waltz argues that, in the 1970s, American aims 'shifted from changing the system to maintaining the system and working within it' and that this 'profound change in the definition of the American mission marks the maturation of the bipolar world'.[84] He highlights two aspects of mature bipolarity: the distribution of capabilities became less skewed once America's exceptional post-war economic dominance was reduced; and the superpowers learnt 'to behave as sensible duopolists should – moderating the intensity of their competition and cooperating at times to mutual advantage while continuing to eye each other warily'.[85] Although significant, these developments give little overall sense of how international relations have been transformed since 1945. For example, Waltz makes no mention of how decolonization and the development of international institutions, in conjunction with the spread of communication technologies, provided an increasingly dense normative context for international politics in general and the superpower relationship in particular.[86] His discussion of 'maturation' is exclusively focused on the US, even ignoring competing conceptions of détente.[87] In fact, what Waltz terms the maturation of a bipolar world is closely correlated with US retrenchment

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[83] See Ch.7, below.
[84] Waltz, *Theory*, p.203.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] On aspects of global transformation ignored by Waltz see Hedley Bull, 'The revolt against the West', in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp.217-28.
[87] See Mike Bowker and Phil Williams, *Superpower détente: A reappraisal* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1988), ch.3; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and confrontation: American-Soviet relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1994), ch.2.

and relative decline.[88] Waltz asserts that the 'Nixon doctrine announced the shift' to mature bipolarity.[89] Yet the Nixon doctrine, associated with US withdrawal from Vietnam, heralded a unilateral adjustment of US commitments: it is not evidence that superpower behaviour 'changed in the direction one may expect it to take so long as the world remains bipolar'.[90] It is hard to interpret Waltz's association of the Nixon Doctrine with the maturity of a bipolar world as anything other than the counterpoint to his inability to explain America's Cold War interventions. The failure of détente and continuation of US foreign adventures in the 1970s and 1980s reveal not only the limitations of Waltz's account of bipolarity, but also the inability of his theory to illuminate anything but the broadest outlines of superpower relations during the Cold War.[91]

Waltz's substantive explanations rarely do justice to factors not directly implicated in power politics. For example, Waltz recognizes that, although they are excluded from his theory, individual personalities may be important: he acknowledges that a 'small-number system can always be disrupted by the actions of a Hitler and the reactions of a Chamberlain'.[92] This raises questions about how structural imperatives interact with other factors and, therefore, about the mechanisms linking structure to behaviour. But Waltz does not address these questions, retreating instead to the hope that the pressures of a bipolar world will strongly encourage future leaders 'to act internationally in ways better than their characters may lead one to expect'.[93] Similarly, Waltz's nod to Gorbachev's role in ending the Cold War eventually invokes structure to explain the attempted reforms:

> Brezhnev's successors, notably Andropov and Gorbachev, realized that the Soviet Union could no longer support a first-rate military establishment on the basis of a third-rate economy. Economic reorganization, and the reduction of imperial burdens, became an externally imposed necessity.[94]

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[88] See Robert W. Tucker, 'America in decline: the foreign policy of "maturity"', *Foreign Affairs*, 58.3, 1980, pp.449-84.
[89] Waltz, *Theory*, p.203.
[90] *Ibid.* p.204. See Bowker & Williams, *Superpower détente*, p.43; Keith L. Nelson, *The making of détente: Soviet-American relations in the shadow of Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.80-1.
[91] See Nelson, *The making of détente*, pp.147-51.
[92] Waltz, *Theory*, p.175.
[93] *Ibid.* p.176.
[94] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.50. Gorbachev's role in the end of the Cold War is discussed in Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev factor* (Oxford: OUP, 1996). On external causes of Soviet behaviour

Waltz also largely ignores normative elements of international politics, restricting the scope of rules developed in superpower relations to behaviour explicable in terms of individual self-interest: 'Between parties in a self-help system, rules of reciprocity and caution prevail'.[95] He argues that 'first steps toward agreement do not lead to second and third steps' because, relying 'for their security on their own devices, both countries are wary of joint ventures'.[96] But this explains neither why initial cooperative steps can be taken nor why they falter when they do.[97] Waltz suggests that 'when the great-power balance is stable ... concern for absolute gains may replace worries about relative ones', but his conception of superpower management lacks any normative content whatsoever.[98] The notion that management occurs when a collective good (restoration of the balance of power) is generated as a by-product of conflict adds little to our understanding of international affairs.[99]

Conclusion

The primary problem that Waltz faces when attempting to apply his theory to specific empirical problems in international relations is the limited logic of the theory: it explains only that, in self-help systems, states balance power in an attempt to secure their survival. Although this theoretical insight may illuminate an important aspect of international politics, it does not, on its own, differentiate between multipolar and bipolar systems, let alone explain superpower relations during the Cold War. In fact, Waltz's account of bipolarity tends to reproduce features of the Cold War rather than to explain them. Further, the vision of the Cold War that Waltz reproduces is distinctly realist: Waltz largely ignores factors not directly related to the dynamics of power politics. Thus, for example, Waltz ignores the significance of historical accident: Jervis suggests that the importance of the Korean war in

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see Daniel Deudney and John G. Ikenberry, 'The international sources of Soviet change', *International Security*, 16.3, Winter 1991/92, pp.74-118.

[95] Waltz, *Theory*, p.175. Waltz suggests elsewhere that rules and institutions are made and sustained by the predominant power. See Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Globalization and governance', *PS: Political science and politics*, 32.4, Dec 1999, pp.698-9.

[96] Waltz, *Theory*, p.175.

[97] See Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and neoliberalism.* Waltz ignores not only the potential for cooperation, but also the possibility that peaceful coexistence involves normative accommodation.

[98] Waltz, *Theory*, p.195. See Weber, 'Realism, détente, and nuclear weapons', p.64.

[99] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.204.

justifying increased defence spending 'casts doubt on any theory which implies that the main characteristics of the international politics of the 1950s and 1960s were the product of factors deeply rooted in the international system'.[100] In order to develop substantive explanations of broad applicability, Waltz has to show how structural forces interact with those non-structural factors excluded from his theory. This demands balanced and integrated empirical accounts that demonstrate the utility of thinking about the influence of system structure. Yet Waltz's substantive explanations tend to reproduce a simplistic world-view rather than to examine the actual interaction of structural and non-structural factors. Waltz's use of history to support his arguments is accurately characterized by Schroeder's comment about Layne's attempt to show that states always balance against hegemons: 'Armed with neo-realist theory, he knew what was essentially to be found in the historical record at the outset, and this helped him find it'.[101]

Waltz's substantive explanations of the role of nuclear weapons reveal what his theory denies: unit-level developments have consequences for the situations of international actors and for possible action in those situations. This is not to suggest that structure is unimportant as a determinant of social outcomes. Rather, it suggests that, because Waltz's theory attempts to isolate system structure as an independent variable, it obscures the relation between structure and action. Waltz's description of the developing superpower relationship in the 1970s suggests that good explanations will have to attend to the general context of the relationship, to the development of norms, and to changes in state interests and identities over time. Waltz's substantive explanations are therefore disappointing: they replicate a realist world-view in which non-structural factors are assumed to be less significant than power and rational calculations of self-interest. The key point, however, as with Waltz's unsatisfactory account of bipolarity, is that Waltz is set in the wrong direction by his attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable. He acknowledges that both structural and non-structural causes 'make the world more or less peaceful and stable': he chose to develop a structural theory because structural effects are

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[100] Robert Jervis, 'The impact of the Korean war on the cold war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 24.4, Dec 1980, p.589.
[101] Schroeder, 'Historical reality vs. neorealist theory', p.147. See Christopher Layne, 'The unipolar illusion: why new great powers will rise', *International Security*, 17.4, Spring 1993, pp.5-51.

'usually overlooked or misunderstood'.[102] However, isolating structure as an independent variable generates a theory that, on its own, explains very little. Waltz's primary failing is therefore his refusal to take seriously the task of developing integrated explanations that employ theoretical insights in a heuristic manner: he is too willing to retreat to superficial theoretical commentary. Perhaps Waltz was disappointed at the prospect of heuristic, rather than nomothetic, explanation. Yet by seeking to extend the scope of his explanations beyond the logic of his theory without properly showing how structural and non-structural factors are to be combined, Waltz merely draws attention to the significance of non-structural factors, thus undermining his theory's explanatory utility.

[102] Waltz, *Theory*, p.175.

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Linking structure to behaviour: socialization and causal theory

Perhaps the greatest obstacle Waltz faces in developing substantive explanations of empirical developments in international relations is his inability to specify the mechanisms by which the structure of the international political system influences unit interaction. The root of the problem is Waltz's attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable. Having made the case that international relations should be conceived of as a complex system in which structure and interacting units are mutually affecting, Waltz proceeds, in the interests of nomothetic explanation, to develop a narrow conception of structure that abstracts from interaction altogether. It should therefore be no surprise that Waltz's theory is ill suited to the task of specifying the precise relationship between structure and interaction. Nevertheless, a causal explanation must do more than depict regularities between the structure and process of international relations: it must specify causal mechanisms.[1] It is not sufficient to assert merely that in bipolar systems great powers behave more cautiously: a causal explanation must indicate how structure affects behaviour. This chapter examines Waltz's efforts to specify the mechanisms linking system structure to state behaviour in international relations.

How structure affects behaviour

This section shows that Waltz fails to identify causal mechanisms linking structure to behaviour. Because he conceptualizes structure and units as mutually affecting, Waltz's efforts to describe how structure affects behaviour inevitably reintroduce the notion that structure itself derives from action:

[1] Theories do not merely identify associations: they 'show why those associations obtain'. See Waltz, *Theory*, p.5.

precisely the notion that his theory attempts to suppress. This section therefore demonstrates the conceptual and theoretical inadequacy of an explanatory model in which structure is isolated as an independent variable. Waltz's difficulties uncovering genuine causal mechanisms result in two models of structural effects: socialization links structure directly to behaviour; selection links structure to the consequences of behaviour. Within this framework, Waltz also presents two inconsistent accounts of socialization: one associated with emulation and embodying a quasi-causal logic, the other embodying the claim that structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. Selection effects, meanwhile, are shown to derive from state behaviour. Both socialization and selection are shown to depend on the idea that behaviour can become normalized: their analysis therefore requires detailed inquiry into the mutually affecting relationship between structure and interacting units. Finally, this section shows that, although Waltz sets out to construct a causal theory linking structure to unit behaviour, in practice he conceives of structure as affecting the very interests and ideas that his theory treats by assumption.

Two models of structural effects

In one formulation, Waltz states that an 'international-political theory serves primarily to explain international-political outcomes' and that a systemic approach infers 'expectations about the outcomes of states' behaviour and interactions from a knowledge of systems-level elements'.[2] In other words, a theory of international politics explains not state behaviour but (some) system-wide outcomes, such as (in)stability.[3] A s*ystemic* theory of international politics explains these outcomes (partly) in terms of system structure, which causes actions 'to have consequences they were not intended to have'.[4] This model of how structure affects international politics involves unintended consequences: structure 'intervenes between interacting units and the results that their acts and interactions produce', generating unintended outcomes.[5] In the presence of such structural effects, reductionist theories are bound to fail: 'One cannot infer the condition of international politics from the internal composition of states,

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[2] *Ibid.* pp.38, 50. See also pp.39, 71.
[3] I discuss the relation between theories of international politics and of foreign policy in Ch.9, below.
[4] Waltz, *Theory*, p.107.
[5] *Ibid.* p.79.

nor can one arrive at an understanding of international politics by summing the foreign policies and the external behaviours of states'.[6] Thus Waltz criticizes Morgenthau and Kissinger for interpreting the system in terms of the characteristics of the constituent units.[7] In order to take such analyses seriously, Waltz argues, 'we would have to believe that no important causes intervene between the aims and actions of states and the results their actions produce. In the history of international relations, however, results achieved seldom correspond to the intentions of actors'.[8]

Waltz's claim that the structure of the international political system generates unintended outcomes mirrors his account of the genesis of social structures, which draws on an analogy with the micro-economic theory of the market:

> From the coaction of like units emerges a structure that affects and constrains all of them. Once formed, a market becomes a force in itself, and a force that the constitutive units acting singly or in small numbers cannot control.[9]

However, even if Waltz is correct that structure is an unintended consequence of interaction, it does not follow that structure then intervenes between behaviour and outcomes, generating further unintended consequences. Markets affect behaviour as well as outcomes:

> The market is a cause interposed between the economic actors and the results they produce. It conditions their calculations, their behaviours, and their interactions ... A market constrains the units that comprise it from taking certain actions and disposes them toward taking others.[10]

In other words, structure does not intervene between behaviour and outcomes, but affects behaviour directly: 'Systems theories explain why different units behave differently and, despite their variations, produce outcomes that fall within expected ranges'.[11] System-wide outcomes, in this view, derive from international political behaviour. The extent to which the international system is characterized by interdependence, or is effectively managed by the great powers, depends, ultimately, on unit behaviour: characteristics of the system as a whole are affected by structure only to the extent that

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[6] *Ibid.* p.64.
[7] Waltz describes Kissinger as arguing that '[r]evolutionary states make international systems revolutionary'. See *ibid.* p.63.
[8] *Ibid.* p.65.
[9] *Ibid.* p.90.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.* p.72.

structure affects behaviour.[12] Hence Waltz argues that a structural change 'gives rise to new expectations about the outcomes that will be produced *by the acts and interactions* of units whose placement in the system varies with changes in structure'.[13]

In this behavioural model of how structure affects international politics, structure 'shapes and shoves the units'.[14] Systems theories 'explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it'.[15] In contrast to the unintended consequences model, the behavioural model suggests that the structure of the system causes individual units to behave differently than they might have done otherwise: 'The concept of structure is based on the fact that units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting produce different outcomes'.[16] However, Waltz does not uniformly prefer a behavioural to an unintended consequences model of structural effects. He argues, for example, that 'structure affects actions and outcomes': 'some causes of international outcomes are the result of interactions at the unit level ... others are located at the structural level'.[17] It is unclear whether Waltz is suggesting that structure affects outcomes directly, or that outcomes are affected through behaviour. The uncertainty derives from the tension between Waltz's claim that international politics is a complex system (that structure and interacting units are mutually affecting) and his nomothetic approach to explanation (his attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable). Recognizing that an analytic approach to complex systems is insufficient, Waltz seeks to show that states' behaviour is affected by their placement in the system and that outcomes are therefore not explicable through analysis of individual (inter)actions. However, isolation of system structure as an independent variable is an artificial

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[12] According to Schroeder, neorealists argue that 'the broad outcomes of international politics derive more from the structural constraints of the states system than from unit behaviour'. See Schroeder, 'Historical reality vs. neorealist theory', p.108. He is right to emphasize that outcomes depend on structure, but wrong to suggest that they depend on structure rather than behaviour.

[13] Waltz, *Theory*, p.70 [italics added].

[14] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.78. Tellis objects that the 'critical task' of a systemic theory of international politics is to explain 'the behaviour of its constituent units'. Simply explaining why outcomes recur 'falls short of what may be expected of a structural theory of international politics'. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.75.

[15] Waltz, *Theory*, p.72.

[16] *Ibid.* p.81.

[17] Waltz, 'The origins of war', pp.617-8. See also Waltz, *Theory*, p.43.

device: structure is really both the medium and outcome of social action. Waltz's uncertainty about precisely how structure affects international politics reflects the problems associated with representing complexity in causal terms and the fact that Waltz conceptualizes structure as only one cause among many. The unintended consequences and behavioural models of structural effects constitute claims that outcomes are not explicable through analysis of individual (inter)actions: they do not detail the mechanisms through which structure affects international politics.

Waltz's difficulties in determining the nature of structural effects indicate the problems associated with attempts to develop an approach that is not just systemic, but integrates holistic and individualistic perspectives. In order to provide complete explanations of behaviour and outcomes in a complex system, we would need to explicate both sides of the mutually affecting relationship between the structure of the international political system and its interacting units. That is, we would have to combine systemic and analytic approaches, thereby overcoming the agent-structure antinomy. Not only do we lack a method of combination, we lack a language: such a theory could not be framed in causal or nomothetic terms, as there could be no genuinely independent variable. Thus Harrison is wrong to suggest that, for Waltz, 'organized complexity manifests itself in terms of the role of *unintended consequences* of interaction within the international system'.[18] Organized complexity is manifested in the mutually affecting relationship between system structure and interacting units. Unintended consequences are only one aspect of this complexity: hence Waltz's ambivalence between the unintended consequences and behavioural models of structural effects. In practice, Waltz does not address the problem of integrating systemic and analytical insights, but attempts to show how system structure affects both behaviour and outcomes: 'In a systems theory, some part of the explanation of behaviours and outcomes is found in the system's structure'.[19] The approach's limitations are indicated by Waltz's acknowledgement that his theory merely enables us 'to say why the range of expected outcomes falls within certain limits; to say why patterns of behaviour recur'.[20]

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[18] Ewan Harrison, 'Waltz, Kant and systemic approaches to international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 28.1, Jan 2002, p.148.
[19] Waltz, *Theory*, p.73.
[20] *Ibid.* p.69.

Socialization and selection

Waltz's attempt to unpack how structure affects behaviour starts with the contention that the international system is competitive: 'States coexist in a competitive arena. The pressures of competition cause them to behave in ways that make the threats they face manageable, in ways that enable them to get along'.[21] These pressures are manifested in two forms, associated with changes in behaviour and the consequences of behaviour respectively: socialization and selection (or competition) are 'two aspects of a process by which the variety of behaviours and of outcomes is reduced'.[22] Socialization is associated with the behavioural model of structural effects: states alter their behaviour in response to the situations in which they find themselves. Waltz argues that 'the units that survive in competitive systems are those with the ability to adapt': 'Success in competitive systems requires the units of the system to adopt ways they would prefer to avoid'.[23] Waltz often associates socialization with imitation, arguing that states 'tend to emulate the successful policies of others'; this is the aspect of his treatment of socialization that commentators tend to emphasize.[24] Thus he argues that US and Soviet military doctrines 'tended to converge': '[m]ilitary competition between the two countries produced its expected result: the similarity of forces and doctrines'.[25] France and Britain, meanwhile, were, during the Cold War, 'in the second-ranking powers' customary position of imitating, with a time lag, the more advanced weapons systems of their wealthier competitors'.[26] However, Waltz indicates that the 'effects of competition are not confined narrowly to the military realm. Socialization to the system should also occur'.[27] This suggests that socialization is broader than emulation: it involves more than imitating a single successful actor.

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[21] Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons', p.12.
[22] Waltz, *Theory*, p.77. Waltz often refers to 'selection' as 'competition'. I use the term 'selection' in order to preserve the distinction between competition and its effects. Jervis also contrasts socialization and selection; Buzan, Jones and Little contrast socialization and competition. See Jervis, *System effects*, p.104; Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.39-40.
[23] Waltz, 'Globalization and governance', p.697.
[24] Waltz, *Theory*, p.124. See, for example, Buzan, Jones and Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.40.
[25] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', pp.46-7.
[26] Waltz, 'The stability of a bipolar world', p.898.
[27] Waltz, *Theory*, p.127.

Waltz's description of the socialization of a pair of actors also suggests a broader understanding:

> *A* influences *B*. *B*, made different by *A*'s influence, influences *A* ... *B*'s attributes and actions are affected by *A*, and vice versa. Each is not just influencing the other; both are being influenced by the situation their interaction creates.[28]

Two features of this account stand out: first, in contrast to the logic of emulation, each actor influences the other; second, socialization affects not only behaviour, but also actors' properties. These are also prominent features of Watzlawick *et al*'s analysis of the relationship between George and Martha, the central protagonists of Albee's play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*[29] Following Watzlawick *et al*, Waltz suggests that George and Martha's behaviour 'cannot be apprehended by taking a unilateral view of either member': their relationship cannot be 'resolved into a set of two-way relations because each element of behaviour that contributes to the interaction is itself shaped by their being a pair. They have become parts of a system'.[30] This account of socialization, in which actors generate a structure that sets the terms of their continuing interaction, reminds us that structures and the constraints they impose arise from interaction: structural constraints are constituted by others' reactions.[31] This broader account also suggests the merits of thinking about socialization in terms of norms, learning and the development of actor identities and interests. However, although he discusses it in some detail, Waltz does not draw upon this conception of socialization when applying his theory empirically: an account of socialization that draws explicit attention to how structure develops out of unit interaction is not easily reconciled with a causal theory that isolates structure as an independent variable.

Selection is associated with the unintended consequences model of structural effects: the focus is not on behaviour, but on its consequences.[32] According to Waltz, some behaviour is suited to the demands of a competitive system: states that behave in these ways tend to survive (be successful). Other

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[28] *Ibid.* p.74.
[29] See Edward Albee, *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).
[30] Waltz, *Theory*, p.75. See Watzlawick *et al*, *Pragmatics of human communication*, pp.152-7.
[31] Jervis suggests that, where Waltz draws on Watzlawick *et al* his approach has elements in common with structurationism. See Jervis, *System effects*, p.108.
[32] Feaver insists that 'realist theories are as much about the *consequences* of behaviour as about the *determinants* of behaviour'. See Peter D. Feaver, 'Correspondence: Brother can you spare a paradigm? (Or was anybody ever a realist?)', *International Security*, 25.1, Summer 2000, p.166.

behaviour is ill suited to the demands of a competitive system: states that behave in these ways tend to fall by the wayside.[33] In other words, competitive systems 'develop structures that reward or punish behaviour that conforms more or less nearly to what is required of one who wishes to succeed in the system'.[34] Self-help behaviour becomes the norm because states who adopt it survive and flourish. This outcome arises whether or not actors intend it: 'patterns emerge and endure without anyone arranging the parts to form patterns or striving to maintain them'.[35] Thus Waltz insists that balance of power theory explains 'a result (the recurrent formation of balances of power), which may not accord with the intentions of any of the units whose actions combine to produce that result'.[36] Waltz denies Keohane's claim that, in order to explain state behaviour, neorealism has to assume that states respond rationally to their situations.[37] According to Waltz, his theory 'says simply that if some do relatively well, others will emulate them or fall by the wayside' (though he offers no empirical examples).[38] This seems to imply that socialization and selection are complementary: structural effects are generated 'through socialization of the actors and through competition among them'.[39] States either adopt appropriate behaviour or they suffer the consequences: fear of unwanted consequences stimulates states to adopt appropriate behaviour. Yet Waltz does not specify which process can be expected in what circumstance.[40] His formulation of balance of power theory is strikingly ambivalent: it is a theory 'about the results produced by the uncoordinated actions of states' (a formulation consistent with selection), which 'leads us to expect states to behave in ways that result in balances forming' (a formulation that suggests socialization).[41]

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[33] Keohane criticizes Waltz's discussion of selection on the grounds that states do not regularly disappear. See Keohane, 'Theory of world politics', p.173. But Waltz tends to emphasize that states 'wax and wane' and that great powers 'come and go', rather than suggesting that states are eliminated. See Waltz, 'Reflections', p.331.
[34] Waltz, *Theory*, p.92.
[35] *Ibid.* p.77.
[36] *Ibid.* p.119.
[37] See Keohane, 'Theory of world politics', p.167; Waltz, 'Reflections', p.331.
[38] Waltz, *Theory*, p.118. See also p.77. Tellis criticizes Waltz for conceptualizing anarchy as 'able to penalize certain state behaviours ex post, even if it never quite compels any unique kind of state behaviours ex ante'. He argues that this denudes Waltz's systemic approach 'of what is most distinctive to every structural explanation: the emphasis on structure as the fully efficient cause of all unit actions'. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.79.
[39] Waltz, *Theory*, p.74. See also Jervis, *System effects*, p.104.
[40] See, however, Waltz, *Theory*, p.76.
[41] *Ibid.* pp.122, 125.

Although Waltz appears to imagine socialization and selection proceeding hand in hand, social selection in fact depends on actor behaviour. What it means for inappropriate behaviour to be punished is that the state does less well than those states who behave appropriately.[42] Waltz seems to recognize this when he argues that a unit 'can behave as it pleases', but will 'fare badly if some of the other parties are making reasonably intelligent decisions ... The situation provides enough incentive to cause most of the actors to behave sensibly'.[43] This suggests that selection involves an implicit rationality assumption: selection operates only because other actors are behaving sensibly (responding rationally to the situation). However, the problem goes deeper than this, for the circumstances demanding a rational response are themselves created by (rational) action. That is, just as selection operates because other actors are behaving sensibly, so those actors behave sensibly because the circumstances they face involve other actors behaving sensibly. In other words, there is no given situation to which actors can respond sensibly or not: the situation is constructed by how they act (though modes of action may become normalized). As Waltz observes: the 'terms of political, economic, and military competition are set by the larger units of the international-political system'.[44] Where selection operates, it is generated through competition. Selection is therefore explicable in terms of behavioural responses to situations, placing determinants of behaviour in a position of central importance. Socialization, rather than selection, is the crucial phenomenon: only if states are socialized can modes of behaviour become normalized, allowing selection to operate against a background of normalized behaviour.

Understanding how behaviour becomes normalized involves examining how behaviour both draws upon and creates social structures. This cannot be achieved with a causal theory that isolates structure as an independent variable: structural theories bracket the process by which structure is created in interaction. Nevertheless, Waltz's account of the socialization of a pair of actors invokes processes of

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[42] One difference between social and natural selection is therefore that, in the former, success is relative (doing better than others do), not absolute (reproducing). See Wendt, *Social theory*, p.321.
[43] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.331.
[44] Waltz, 'Globalization and governance', p.698.

construction and constraint operating simultaneously: behaviour is shaped by the very interaction that creates the system.

> Each acts and reacts to the other. Stimulus and response are part of the story. But also the two of them act together in a game, which ... motivates and shapes their behaviour. Each is playing a game, *and* they are playing the game together. They react to each other and to the tensions their interactions produce.[45]

In this account, the idea that action both creates and draws upon (is enabled and constrained by) structure is central to how structure affects international politics. Although it finds no place in Waltz's theory, this idea illuminates a number of his theoretical difficulties. For example, Waltz argues that selection operates whether or not it is understood by actors: 'results can be predicted whether or not one knows the actors' intentions and whether or not they understand structural constraints'.[46] But if selection effects are understood by actors, then selection does not operate: rather, actors adjust their behaviour. Further, if actors recognize that their cumulative behaviour creates selection effects, they have taken the first step toward managing complexity.[47] Understanding that agents create structures as well as responding to them also highlights a limitation of emulation as a model of international political behaviour: it ignores the possibility of innovation. Resende-Santos argues that competitive pressures 'need not lead to emulation. Competition should just as well lead to innovation'.[48] How else are those strategies that other states emulate developed?[49]

What structure affects

Waltz's theory suggests that 'the placement of states in the international system accounts for a good deal of their behaviour'.[50] However, Waltz recognizes that structure does not determine behaviour,

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[45] Waltz, *Theory*, p.75. For an illuminating discussion of game-playing as a metaphor for social interaction see Hollis & Smith, *Explaining and understanding*, ch.8.
[46] Waltz, *Theory*, p.76. See also p.192.
[47] Jervis maintains that 'system effects change as actors learn about them'. See Jervis, *System effects*, p.253.
[48] João Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the emulation of military systems: military organization and technology in South America, 1870-1930', *Security Studies*, 5.3, Spring 1996, p.207.
[49] See Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.40-1; Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the arms race: How the United States and the Soviet Union develop new military technologies* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp.7-8.
[50] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.45.

even if actors are assumed to be rational: 'Success in foreign policy depends upon the ability of political leaders to set sensible goals for their nation: to figure out what interest requires and resources permit'.[51] This raises the question of whether structure merely affects strategies for achieving given interests, or affects interests themselves. For example, Waltz suggests that the 'constant possibility that force will be used limits manipulations, moderates demands, and serves as an incentive for the settlement of disputes'.[52] He argues that what 'one might want to do in the absence of structural constraints is different from what one is encouraged to do in their presence'.[53] He maintains that 'structure limits and moulds agents and agencies'.[54] Does structure constrain behaviour that embodies pre-given interests, or are interests framed (partly) in response to situations? According to rhetoric, Waltz observes, the basic Cold War cleavage

> was between capitalist democracy and godless communism. But by the size of the stakes and the force of the struggle, ideology was subordinated to interest in the policies of America and Russia, who behaved more like traditional great powers than the leaders of messianic movements.[55]

This is consistent with the notion that bipolarity encouraged cautious behaviour but left the superpowers' ideological flames undimmed. Waltz also suggests, however, that these states, 'isolationist by tradition, untutored in the ways of international relations, and famed for impulsive behaviour, soon showed themselves – not always and not everywhere, but always in crucial cases – to be wary, alert, cautious, flexible, and forbearing'.[56] It is difficult to believe that the imperative toward caution had no influence on superpower interests and aims, even their identities.

Waltz does discuss how situations affect objectives: he argued in 1979 that, since Vietnam, 'American aims have shifted from changing the system to maintaining the system and working within it'.[57] He criticizes Hoffmann for having trouble 'thinking of bipolar and multipolar structures as themselves

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[51] Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign policy and democratic politics: The American and British experience* (London: Longmans, 1968), p.15.
[52] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.113-4.
[53] *Ibid.* p.107.
[54] *Ibid.* p.74.
[55] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The politics of peace', *International Studies Quarterly*, 11.3, Sep 1967, p.201.
[56] *Ibid.* See also Waltz, *Theory*, pp.172-3.
[57] Waltz, *Theory*, p.203.

affecting the aspirations and behaviour of states'.[58] He even suggests that behaviour feeds back into interests: 'Habits shaped by international conditions may continue to inform a nation's policy even when conditions have changed'.[59] Further, Waltz frequently indicates that structural forces affect actor identities. He argues that structure 'affects both the interactions of states and their attributes'.[60] He claims that the 'identity as well as behaviour of leaders is affected by the presence of pressures and the clarity of challenges'.[61] He observes that we 'do not cease to be ourselves when situations strongly affect us, but we become ourselves and something else as well'.[62] Competition, he argues, 'produces a tendency toward the sameness of the competitors'.[63] Waltz's empirical commentaries also refer to state identities. Waltz argues that multipolar systems are war prone because 'strategy is at least partly made for the sake of attracting and holding allies': 'One has to become attractive enough in personality and policy to be considered a possible choice'.[64] He maintains that the US did not become a great power because of a change in political culture, but 'because of the pressures that the international political system exerted'.[65] He insists that if the 'national characters' of European states and the US 'have changed since the war, it is largely because their and our international positions have become profoundly different'.[66] He suggests that an Atlantic imperium would be hard for the US to construct because the weak, 'fearing the loss of their identity, limit their cooperation with the stronger'.[67] Waltz's theory may bracket processes of identity formation in order to isolate structure as an independent variable, but identity plays a key role in Waltz's understanding of international relations.

Socialization, identity and norms

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[58] *Ibid.* p.47.
[59] Waltz, 'The politics of peace', p.202.
[60] Waltz, *Theory*, p.100.
[61] *Ibid.* p.176.
[62] *Ibid.* p.75.
[63] *Ibid.* p.127.
[64] *Ibid.* pp.165-6.
[65] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.191.
[66] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.332.
[67] Waltz, *Theory*, p.201.

The previous section has shown that Waltz fails to operationalize either socialization or selection as causal mechanisms linking the structure of the international political system to state behaviour. In fact, both socialization and selection depend on the notion that structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. In practice, Waltz conceives of structure as affecting state interests and identities as well as behaviour, despite the fact that his theory treats interests by assumption in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. This section examines Waltz's application of his theory to the socialization of the Soviet Union into international society. It suggests that a full understanding of socialization requires the concepts of learning, norms, and identity, concepts that have no place in Waltz's causal theory. Finally, this section explores the obstacles facing any attempt to operationalize these concepts as part of a causal theory. It thereby demonstrates that, even if Waltz's substantive explanations contribute little to our understanding of specific empirical developments in international relations, they may still illuminate the pitfalls of a nomothetic approach to explanation.

Soviet socialization

Waltz's clearest example of state socialization into international society is his brief discussion of early Soviet foreign policy. In contrast to his broader account of socialization, which recognizes how both structure and identities are generated through interaction, this discussion observes merely that Soviet behaviour was affected by the structure of the system:

> The Bolsheviks in the early years of their power preached international revolution and flouted the conventions of diplomacy. They were saying, in effect, "we will not be socialized to this system". The attitude was well expressed by Trotsky, who, when asked what he would do as foreign minister, replied, "I will issue some revolutionary proclamations to the peoples and then close up the joint". In a competitive arena, however, one party may need the assistance of others. Refusal to play the political game may risk one's own destruction. The pressures of competition were rapidly felt and reflected in the Soviet Union's diplomacy. Thus Lenin, sending foreign minister Chicherin to the Genoa Conference of 1922, bade him farewell with this caution: "Avoid big words". Chicherin ... was to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric for the sake of working deals. These he successfully completed with that other pariah power and ideological enemy, Germany.[68]

In keeping with Waltz's difficulty showing precisely how structure affects behaviour, the focus is on outcomes. Waltz does not identify causal links between structure and behaviour and does not examine

[68] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.127-8. See also Jervis, *System effects*, p.105.

whether the pressures of competition affected Soviet interests or identity: he observes only that they were reflected in Soviet diplomacy.

The central problem in assessing Soviet socialization is the relation between ideology (interests) and foreign policy. Although interpretations of early-Soviet foreign policy are notoriously complex, Jacobson differentiates two core views. The first draws on the image of a totalitarian and ideological state. It maintains that early Soviet foreign relations 'were driven primarily by revolutionary ideology', that the ultimate aim was 'destruction of capitalism by direct insurrectionary offensive', and that 'the conduct of normalized political and commercial relations was not genuinely representative of Soviet foreign policy'.[69] The second interpretation draws on documents detailing contacts between European and American diplomats, politicians, and representatives and their Soviet counterparts in the 1920s. It suggests that 'the survival and consolidation of the revolution in Russia became the paramount concern of Lenin's foreign relations sometime between 1917 and 1921' and that 'the security of the early Soviet state depended on preserving the status quo in Europe that had been established by 1921'.[70] These conflicting interpretations reveal the difficulty with an account of socialization that focuses exclusively on behaviour. For the central question is whether the relative normalization of Soviet foreign relations by 1924 (when the Soviet government was recognized by all great powers except the US), reflected adjusted Soviet interests (even the development of a Soviet identity as a member of international society), or disguised continuing commitment to a revolutionary ideology.

Because the First World War was interpreted as an imperialist conflict presaging imminent proletarian revolution, Bolshevik foreign policy plans, Armstrong argues, were limited to calling

> for an immediate and unconditional peace, not in the expectation that it would be accepted by any imperialist government, but on the assumption that it would be rejected and that such rejection would form the catalyst for a global revolutionary uprising.[71]

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[69] Jon Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union entered world politics* (London: University of California Press, 1994), p.2.
[70] *Ibid.* p.3.
[71] David Armstrong, *Revolution and world order: The revolutionary state in international society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.130. See also Teddy J. Uldricks, 'Russia and Europe: diplomacy, revolution, and economic development in the 1920s', *The International History Review*, 1.1, Jan 1979, pp.56-7.

On 8 November 1917, the Bolsheviks appealed for a just and democratic peace without annexations or indemnities. As Armstrong describes it, this challenged both the central tenets of the Westphalian system and 'the particular order then prevailing, including the colonial system and the claim of the great powers to special rights and privileges'.[72] However, this revolutionary approach was not the only element of Bolshevik policy: Walt argues that, until the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in March 1918, 'the continuing threat of German invasion led Lenin and Trotsky to invite support from the Entente – as a hedge against renewed fighting with Germany and as a way to discourage Western intervention'.[73] Armstrong suggests that the Brest-Litovsk negotiations marked a turning point: they 'forced the Bolsheviks to cast aside any illusions about the nature of the international realities that confronted them'.[74] Facing significant internal opposition, Lenin was forced to fundamentally adapt the Marxist approach to international relations. In order to 'demonstrate that the goal of world revolution was compatible with working for the survival of Soviet Russia', Lenin was forced to acknowledge Soviet existence as 'a state in a world of other states with which it was obliged to coexist'.[75] In Armstrong's view, therefore, Brest-Litovsk marked the beginning of the socialization of the Soviet Union into international society.

According to Armstrong, Lenin 'advanced the notion of a "socialist fatherland" in an attempt to show that consolidating Bolshevik power and defending the Soviet state were not just compatible with advancing the interests of socialism world-wide – the two were virtually synonymous'.[76] Lenin suggested that domestic consolidation should take precedence over a world revolution the timing of which was uncertain and that the Soviet state must increase its military strength. He argued, further, that 'a "breathing space" was required during wliich Soviet power could be consolidated in Russia' and that 'the current epoch should be seen as a "transitional period" between capitalism and socialism'.[77] Finally, Lenin proposed that 'all decisions should take the form of "dual policies", which attempted to

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[72] Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, pp.132-3.
[73] Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and war* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.135.
[74] Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, p.135.
[75] *Ibid.* p.136.
[76] *Ibid.* p.137.
[77] *Ibid.* p.138.

integrate short-term tactical expediency with the longer-term strategic goal of world revolution'.[78] In Armstrong's view, the combined effect was twofold: on the one hand, it impelled the Soviet Union 'towards increasingly state-like behaviour, which inevitably implied some degree of "socialization"'; on the other hand, 'the Soviet state retained a parallel identity as a revolutionary force intent upon undermining international society'.[79] Allied policy reflected this contradictory message. Walt observes that 'the Allies backed several desultory efforts to eliminate Bolshevik rule in Russia while simultaneously engaging in sincere but erratic attempts to reach a modus vivendi with the Soviet regime'.[80] He also points out how British desire to profit from Russia's distress overcame doubts about intervention: a weakened Russia posed less of a threat to Britain's imperial interests.[81]

Brest-Litovsk does not unambiguously mark the beginnings of a more conciliatory foreign policy. Walt's focus on the policies of the Entente powers provides a counterpoint to Armstrong's account. Walt argues that, despite their suspicion, the Entente powers 'would have considered supporting the Soviet regime had the Bolsheviks been willing to resume fighting'.[82] Their growing interest in intervention reflected the situation on the western front and fear that the Bolsheviks were under German control. Although the Bolsheviks offered economic concessions in May 1919, Walt argues that 'these gestures did not reverse the growing perception of the Soviet regime as unfriendly and illegitimate'.[83] In his view, Brest-Litovsk therefore marked not the beginning of Soviet socialization, but an increase in Entente antagonism. Uldricks draws attention to the 1919-20 Russo-Polish war, arguing that the Soviet Union viewed the conflict as a revolutionary opportunity.[84] Although the eventual failure of the Soviet offensive led to the adoption of peaceful coexistence as 'a primary tenet of Soviet foreign policy', Uldricks suggests that the 'search for security through revolution' did not

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[78] *Ibid.* p.139. These concepts provided the basis for the doctrines of peaceful coexistence and socialism in one country.
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] Walt, *Revolution and war*, p.147.
[81] See *ibid.* p.152.
[82] *Ibid.* p.135.
[83] *Ibid.* p.139.
[84] See Uldricks, 'Russia and Europe', p.59.

cease until after the failure of the 1923 KPD uprising.[85] This raises the question of whether socialization consists in recognition of the sovereign statehood of the former revolutionary state by the existing members of international society, or whether it involves a deeper normative commitment on the part of the former revolutionary state.

A conciliatory approach does not necessarily indicate successful socialization. Armstrong argues that 'Soviet diplomacy continued to reflect the divided personality of the Soviet state throughout the 1920s and early 1930s': the Bolsheviks could neither renounce their commitment to international revolution nor 'avoid the necessity of relations with other states'.[86] According to Walt, 'Soviet efforts to build more normal relations were repeatedly compromised by ... their continued commitment to world revolution'.[87] Uldricks argues that, even by 1924, it was clear that the new course in Soviet foreign relations 'had not alleviated Bolshevik fears of another imperialist assault on the USSR'.[88] The central problem was the lack of certainty in other states as to whether peaceful coexistence was merely a tactic, or 'implied a long-term commitment to a policy of integrating the Soviet Union within the state system through acceptance of the prevailing norms of the Westphalian international society'.[89] This problem is of fundamental importance for assessing Soviet socialization. Waltz suggests that Soviet diplomacy at Genoa reflected structural pressures: the Soviet Union felt compelled to abandon its revolutionary approach. In fact, however, Chicherin suggested, elusively, that 'although the "old social order" was destined to disappear, its system of international relations could be accepted by Moscow pending its demise'.[90] Armstrong concludes that, even without Rapallo, there was 'little likelihood of the leading Western powers changing their view of Soviet Russia as a deeply subversive

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[85] *Ibid.* pp.60, 65. Uldricks argues that, from this point, the Comintern lost its rationale as a revolutionary organization and became little more than a tool of Soviet foreign policy.
[86] Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, p.139.
[87] Walt, *Revolution and war*, p.175.
[88] Uldricks, 'Russia and Europe', p.68.
[89] Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, p.140. Armstrong argues that even the Soviet regime was divided on this question. 'Stalin and the Comintern tended to take the view that peaceful coexistence was simply another form of struggle against capitalism'. 'Chicherin and especially Litvinov argued that peaceful coexistence implied a much more fundamental reorientation of Soviet foreign policy in line with the Soviet Union's primary identity as a state in a world of states'.
[90] *Ibid.* p.143.

force whose behaviour, whether conciliatory or belligerent, proceeded from the same revolutionary purpose'.[91]

Limitations in Waltz's account of Soviet socialization

Two related themes arise out of this brief discussion of early Soviet foreign policy: they reflect both difficulties of interpretation and areas in which Waltz's account falls short. First, is socialization best thought of as a policy (or process), or as an outcome?[92] Should we concentrate on Soviet attempts to gain acceptance and on efforts by other members of international society to influence Soviet policy, or should we treat socialization as an outcome (setting the mechanisms to one side)? To formulate the problem in a manner bearing on Waltz's difficulties showing how structure affects behaviour: do Soviet intentions matter? Are structural effects reducible to the behaviour of other actors? Does structure generate certain kinds of behaviour regardless of the intentions and behaviour of individual actors? Second, does socialization involve learning? That is, did the relative normalization of Soviet behaviour reflect expedience (disguising an unaltered ideology), the adjustment of interests to a new and unexpected set of circumstances (the survival of a single revolutionary state), or the development of a new conception of the Soviet Union's role in the world? In terms of Waltz's difficulties showing how structure affects international politics: did structure affect behaviour, interests or identities?

Ikenberry and Kupchan, focusing on the manner in which hegemons project power, argue that socialization occurs when '[e]lites in secondary states buy into and internalize norms that are articulated by the hegemon and therefore pursue policies consistent with the hegemon's notion of international order'.[93] This suggests that the hegemon must be proactive in order for socialization to occur, but that normative internalization is the outcome. Finnemore and Sikkink also stress the proactive role of parties already participating in the norms to which other actors are socialized: they

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[91] *Ibid.* p.144.
[92] See Cameron G. Thies, 'Sense and sensibility in the study of state socialization: a reply to Kai Alderson', *Review of International Studies*, 29.4, Oct 2003, p.544.
[93] G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', *International Organization*, 44.3, Summer 1990, p.283.

argue that 'socialization involves diplomatic praise or censure, either bilateral or multilateral, which is reinforced by material sanctions and incentives'.[94] Alderson shares the emphasis on normative internalization: socialization is '*the process by which states internalize norms originating elsewhere in the international system*'.[95] However, his focus is on what constitutes internalization, rather than on how socialization is affected by the behaviour and intentions of either the putatively socialized state or the actors amongst whom the relevant norms originate.[96] Checkel, likewise, emphasizes the outcome (normative internalization) rather than the conditions with which it is associated: socialization is 'a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community. Its outcome is sustained compliance based on the internalization of these new norms'.[97] Whether socialization involves normative internalization is of essential importance, but it cannot be addressed aside from discussion of the behaviours and intentions of the relevant parties. For example, Armstrong suggests that in the American and French cases, the revolutionary state sought to be socialized.[98] Waltz's broader account of socialization emphasizes that norms are generated through interaction, yet the centrality of interaction to how structure affects international politics is obscured both by his narrower association of socialization with emulation and by his failure to focus on internalization.

Checkel criticizes Waltz's use of the term 'socialization' (according to which 'states are compelled to emulate the self-help balancing behaviour of the most successful actors in the system'), objecting that it makes no reference to social context and is 'driven by no process of internalization'.[99] This is true of Waltz's emphasis on emulation, his focus on behaviour rather than interests and identities (especially in relation to Soviet socialization), and his difficulties identifying causal mechanisms linking structure and action. However, Checkel ignores Waltz's broader account of socialization, in which norms both emerge from interaction and are drawn upon in action. Resende-Santos explicitly addresses Waltz's

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[94] Finnemore & Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics', p.902.
[95] Kai Alderson, 'Making sense of state socialization', *Review of International Studies*, 27.3, July 2001, p.417.
[96] See Thies, 'Sense and sensibility', pp.546-7.
[97] Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International institutions and socialization in Europe: introduction and framework', *International Organization*, 59.4, Fall 2005, p.804.
[98] See Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, pp.66-9, 77, 104-5.
[99] Checkel, 'International institutions', p.806. See also Alderson, 'Making sense of state socialization', p.416.

more 'sociological definition', but considers it 'highly problematic': the notion that actors 'internalize the norms and customs of the larger social system, and learn to behave within these accepted ranges ... is a highly social definition for a highly asocial theory of international politics'.[100] Resende-Santos advocates defining socialization as the outcome of a demonstration effect: 'The success of some units and the attractiveness (that is, proven success) of their institutions and practices induce others to copy them'.[101] In other words, Waltz's broader account of socialization is unsatisfactory because it does not clearly identify independent variables. In Waltz's narrower focus on emulation, by contrast, the structure of the system causes states to prioritize survival and therefore to imitate successful practices. In practice, Waltz's empirical work employs this narrower conception. Hints of an account of socialization that draws attention to the social construction of structural forces are apparent in Waltz's assertion that the 'socialization of nonconformist states proceeds at a pace that is set by the extent of their involvement in the system' and in Walt's suggestion that socialization is the process by which both sides 'acquire greater information'.[102] However, like Waltz's, Walt's account of the socialization of Bolshevik Russia consists primarily of claims about behavioural outcomes.

Wendt argues that giving socialization an exclusively behavioural focus reduces its significance.[103] He associates socialization with social learning, operating through agents' 'capacities for cognition, rationality, and intentionality'.[104] Similarly, Ikenberry and Kupchan describe socialization as 'a process of learning in which norms and ideals are transmitted from one party to another', whilst Checkel emphasizes the switch from 'a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness'.[105] Checkel suggests that agents may behave appropriately either by 'learning a role – acquiring the knowledge that enables them to act in accordance with expectations', or by adopting 'the interests, or

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[100] Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the emulation of military systems', p.208.
[101] *Ibid.*
[102] Waltz, *Theory*, p.128; Walt, *Revolution and war*, p.43.
[103] See Wendt, *Social theory*, p.102.
[104] *Ibid.* p.324.
[105] Ikenberry & Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', p.289; Checkel, 'International institutions', p.804.

even possibly the identity, of the community of which they are a part'.[106] He contrasts appropriate behaviour with strategic calculation: when behaviour is strategic 'there can – by definition – be no socialization and internalization. No switch from a logic of consequences to one of appropriateness has occurred'.[107] Nye argues that realist conceptions of learning are limited to strategic adjustment: 'states learn by responding to structural changes in their environment or ... adjust their behaviour to changes in the payoff matrix'.[108] He therefore differentiates simple and complex learning: 'Simple learning uses new information merely to adapt the means, without altering any deeper goals in the ends-means chain'; complex learning 'involves recognition of conflicts among means and goals in causally complicated situations, and leads to new priorities and trade-offs'.[109] Haas draws a similar distinction between learning and adaptation: learning is 'the process by which consensual knowledge is used to specify causal relationships in new ways'; adaptation 'is the ability to change one's behaviour ... without having to revaluate one's entire program and the reasoning on which that program depends for its legitimacy'.[110]

To assert that the pressures of competition were reflected in Soviet diplomacy is not to deny that learning took place. However, learning is not easily incorporated within a theory that treats interests and identities by assumption in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. Although Waltz acknowledges that revolutionary regimes may obey international rules 'because the pressures of their external situations overwhelm their internally generated aims', he also emphasizes (in relation to the Soviet Union) that, if 'pressures are strong enough, a state will deal with almost anyone'.[111] His interpretation of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War (her 'intentions may be extraordinary', but

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[106] *Ibid.* Rather than contrasting role-playing and identity change, Thies, following Wendt, discusses role-identities. See Thies, 'Sense and sensibility', pp.545-6; Wendt, *Social theory*, pp.227-9, 257-9.
[107] Checkel, 'International institutions', p.809. See also Alderson, 'Making sense of state socialization', p.423.
[108] Joseph S. Nye, Junior, 'Nuclear learning and US-Soviet security regimes', *International Organization*, 41.3, Summer 1987, p.372. Tellis argues that real learning cannot be derived 'from a structural theory of the kind generated by Waltz'. See Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.82.
[109] Nye, 'Nuclear learning', p.380.
[110] Ernst B. Haas, 'Collective learning: some theoretical speculations', in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock (eds.), *Learning in US and Soviet foreign policy* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), pp.72, 75.
[111] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.63, 166.

'her behaviour has not been') also suggests adaptation rather than learning.[112] If Bolshevik commitment to the security of a Soviet state (rather than to international revolution) represents learning rather than adaptation, then Waltz's theory has limited explanatory power. Yet Waltz's broader account of socialization through interaction suggests a place for learning, norms and identity in a model of how the structure of the international system affects state (inter)action. Their importance is also implicit in Waltz's contention that system structure and interacting units are mutually affecting. Further, Waltz does, in practice, refer to learning, norms and identity throughout his theoretical and empirical work (though often in truncated form).[113] They are firmly excluded only when Waltz sticks rigorously to his attempt to isolate system structure as an independent variable. This suggests a broader point: any causal analysis of norms, learning and identities is likely to be problematic. For norms are constructed as well as constraining and enabling; learning is (in part) a response to circumstances that are (in part) constructed through action; and identities, like structures, are both formed through interaction and drawn upon in interaction.

Learning, norms, identities

Finnemore and Sikkink define a norm as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity'.[114] One of the chief problems in any analysis of norms is therefore to show that patterned behaviour is caused by norms: to identify causal mechanisms as well as outcomes.[115] Waltz was well aware of this problem. He accused Morgenthau of deriving rules from the results of states' actions and prescribing them to actors as duties: 'A possible effect is turned into a necessary cause in the form of a stipulated rule'.[116] Alderson outlines the main approaches to norms. Realists argue that norms reflect

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[112] Waltz, 'Nuclear myths', p.737. See also Waltz, 'The emerging structure', pp.47, 49; Robert G. Herman, 'Identity, norms, and national security: the Soviet foreign policy revolution and the end of the Cold War', in Katzenstein (ed.), *The culture of national security*, pp.271-316.
[113] See Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.461.
[114] Finnemore & Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics', p.891.
[115] See Farrell, 'Constructivist security studies', p.62.
[116] Waltz, *Theory*, p.120. He has the same concern about Kaplan's treatment of socialization. See *ibid.* p.52.

the distribution of power: they are 'imposed by the strong ... on the weak'.[117] Liberal institutionalists argue that norms 'arise and are followed because they help self-interested egoists overcome collective action and coordination problems'.[118] Constructivists argue that norms 'work by creating shared meanings rather than by restraining behaviour': 'the dissemination of international norms shape state behaviour through the reconstitution of conceptual categories rather than by changing a payoff structure external to the actor'.[119] Whilst rationalist approaches tend to reduce norms to interests, Alderson suggests that the constructivist approach is also problematic: 'norms are placed centre-stage but the causal mechanisms linking them to behavioural outcomes are left obscure'.[120] The difficulty with identifying mechanisms is that norms are constructed through interaction. This is reflected in Finnemore and Sikkink's focus on norm origins and the process of norm emergence: 'Norms do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behaviour'.[121] It is also reflected in Alderson's insistence that socialization is not mechanistic: rather, it '*enables* agents to articulate aspirations, to work together, and to become self-directed actors'.[122] Norms, constructed through interaction, constrain and enable subsequent action and interaction. Consequently, they are difficult to isolate as causal variables.

One way of addressing norms in international relations has been through the concept of regimes, defined as 'principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area'.[123] The regime concept is intended to show that norms are neither mere reflections of state interests nor entirely divorced from power realities. However, Krasner's contention that regimes should be viewed as 'intervening variables standing between basic causal factors on the one hand and outcomes and behaviour on the other' does not illuminate how norms can be isolated as

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[117] Alderson, 'Making sense of state socialization', p.421.
[118] *Ibid.*
[119] *Ibid.*
[120] *Ibid.* p.422.
[121] Finnemore & Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics', p.896.
[122] Alderson, 'Making sense of state socialization', p.428.
[123] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Structural causes and regime consequences: regimes as intervening variables', in Stephen D. Krasner (ed.), *International regimes* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.1.

causal variables.[124] Hurrell argues that a 'good deal of the compliance pull of international rules derives from the relationship between individual rules and the broader pattern of international relations'.[125] International law does not merely consist of specific rules but is 'constitutive of the structure of the state system itself': the common sense of being part of a legal community is 'the crucial link between the procedural rules of state behaviour and the structural principles which define the character of the system and the identity of the players'.[126] This broader normative and institutional context of international relations is largely ignored by Waltz, yet affords an important perspective on socialization: it draws attention to the process by which actors recognize each other as states (members of international society). Thus Armstrong describes the dilemma that

> in order to function as a state in a society of states, Soviet Russia needed to assume many of the attributes of other states, and accept some of the rules – if not outright membership – of what it believed to be a world system fundamentally antagonistic to itself.[127]

However, a focus on the broader normative and institutional context points toward the notion that normative principles, such as sovereignty, help to constitute states as actors, a notion that poses particular difficulties for causal explanatory frameworks.[128]

Norms also raise broader questions about the nature of social scientific enquiry. Finnemore and Sikkink observe that, as with all motivations for action, we 'can only have indirect evidence for norms'.[129] They add, however, that because norms 'embody a quality of "oughtness" and shared moral assessment, norms prompt justifications for action and leave an extensive trail of communication among actors'.[130] In other words, we can judge whether norms exist by examining actors' reasons for action. But this raises the question of whether actors' reasons can be incorporated within causal

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[124] *Ibid.*
[125] Andrew Hurrell, 'International society and the study of regimes: a reflective approach', in Volker Rittberger (ed.), *Regime theory and international relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.59. See also Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer & Volker Rittberger, 'Interests, power, knowledge: the study of international regimes', *Mershon International Studies Review*, 40.2, Oct 1996, p.212.
[126] Hurrell, 'International society', p.59. See also Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: A study of order in world politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1977).
[127] Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, p.120. See also p.303.
[128] See Hasenclever *et al*, 'Interests, power, knowledge', p.211.
[129] Finnemore & Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics', p.892.
[130] *Ibid.*

analyses of behaviour.[131] Kratochwil and Ruggie raise a related problem about regimes. They argue that, because regimes are constituted by actors' convergent expectations, regimes have an 'inescapable intersubjective quality': they are not just patterned behaviour, but are characterized by 'principled and shared understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of social behaviour'.[132] If so, regime analysis is inconsistent with a focus 'on the "objective" forces that move actors in their social interactions'.[133] Kratochwil and Ruggie conclude that regime analysis must be opened up to a more interpretive epistemology.[134] However, the issue is not particular to regimes: they also question the place of norms in causal analyses. Unlike initial conditions in nomothetic explanations, they argue, 'norms can be thought of only with great difficulty as "causing" occurrences. Norms may "guide" behaviour, they may "inspire" behaviour, they may "rationalize" or "justify" behaviour, they may express "mutual expectations" about behaviour', but they are not mechanistic causes.[135] Although it may be possible to correlate subjective meanings with behavioural responses, this reduces meanings to behaviours, vitiating the purpose of examining shared understandings rather than behaviour.[136] If subjective meanings are the stuff of social life, then not only do social scientists study interpretations, their study itself must be interpretive.[137]

The move toward interpretivism is replicated in respect of learning. Levy argues that the difference between adaptation and learning is not whether experience leads to changes in beliefs, but 'whether learning has a causal impact on behaviour'.[138] Learning, he argues, involves a 'two-stage causal chain in which learning occurs and then causally influences behaviour', resulting in variation in how actors respond to environmental change.[139] The challenge, therefore, is to 'specify where on the causal chain

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[131] See Neufeld, 'Interpretation', pp.39-61.
[132] Friedrich Kratochwil and John Gerard Ruggie, 'International organization: a state of the art on an art of the state', *International Organization*, 40.4, Autumn 1986, p.764.
[133] *Ibid.*
[134] See *ibid.* p.766.
[135] *Ibid.* p.767.
[136] See Neufeld, 'Interpretation', p.42.
[137] See *ibid.* pp.43-4.
[138] Jack S. Levy, 'Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield', *International Organization*, 48.2, Spring 1994, p.297.
[139] *Ibid.*

learning occurs and how it interacts with other variables'.[140] Levy identifies a number of problems with a causal approach to learning. For example, in contrast to genuine learning, history may be used instrumentally to justify action, reversing the postulated causal relationship between inferences from past events and beliefs.[141] Alternatively, existing belief systems, operational codes, or interests may 'shape both the interpretation of historical experience and current policy preferences', making causal inferences spurious.[142] A deeper problem, however, is to identify a causal relationship between belief and action: that is, to operationalize 'the simplified images of reality that decision makers rely on in interpreting events' in nomothetic explanations.[143] Knopf describes studies of learning as part of a wider reflectivist turn in International Relations. He suggests that the immediate goal of learning research should not be explanatory theory but 'descriptive inference': we 'need to determine as an empirical matter whether shared learning even occurs or could be a plausible outcome'.[144] Although Wendt argues that descriptive inference is explanatory, he characterizes it as constitutive, not causal.[145] Further, in arguing that socialization 'is in part a causal process of learning identities', Wendt invokes a 'broad' understanding of causation: it is to be understood not in terms of causal mechanisms, but as analogous to the notion of a 'market mechanism'.[146] Wend thereby reintroduces the problems Waltz encounters in attempting to reconcile notions such as learning with causal explanation.

Ruggie argues that Waltz 'strives for, but fails fully to achieve, a generative formulation of international political structure'.[147] Constructivists have extended this critique, arguing that structure (in part) generates actor identities and interests. Wendt argues that collective meanings 'constitute the

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[140] *Ibid.* p.304.
[141] See *ibid.* p.306.
[142] See *ibid.* p.307.
[143] Philip E. Tetlock, 'Learning in US and Soviet foreign policy: in search of an elusive concept', in Breslauer & Tetlock (eds.), *Learning*, p.27.
[144] Jeffrey W. Knopf, 'The importance of international learning', *Review of International Studies*, 29.2, April 2003, p.196. See also Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton: University Press, 1994), ch.2.
[145] See Wendt, 'On constitution and causation', pp.103-4.
[146] Wendt, *Social theory*, p.82.
[147] Ruggie, 'Continuity and transformation', pp.150-1. Harrison argues that many of the ambiguities in neorealism stem from Waltz's failure to make structure fully generative. See Ewan Harrison, *The post-Cold War international system: Strategies, institutions and reflexivity* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.32-3.

structures which organize our actions' and that actors 'acquire identities – relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self – by participating in such collective meanings'.[148] However, he also insists that identities play a role in generating structures: 'transformations of identity and interest ... are transformations of structure'.[149] This reveals the problem with incorporating identities into a causal framework: because identities both generate structures and are generated by structures, independent variables are in short supply. Waltz attempts to avoid this problem (which, nevertheless, remains inherent in his claim that structures and interacting units are mutually affecting) by artificially isolating structure as an independent variable. However, he is inconsistent: he also discusses how structure affects actor interest and identities and how unit interaction generates structures. Buzan, Jones and Little therefore interpret him as arguing that 'anarchy tends to generate like units, and like units, by pursuing sovereignty, generate anarchy'.[150] Harrison argues that neorealism employs 'a reflexive logic focusing on processes of identity construction and socialization arising from the generative consequences of anarchy'.[151] Wendt, retreating from his earlier position, criticizes Waltz's understanding of how (not whether) structure affects actor identities and interests.[152] The difficulty with all such arguments is what drives the system: if agents and structures are mutually constitutive, how are concrete developments in international relations to be explained?

Conclusion

Ruggie describes neorealism as 'physicalist in character'; he depicts neorealism's ideational elements (Waltz's limited reference to norms, identities, socialization, etc.) as anomalous.[153] This chapter has drawn attention to the role that such concepts actually play in Waltz's attempt to identify how structure affects international politics: Waltz presents an account of socialization in which actor identities are (in part) constructed through interaction and argues that structure affects interests and identities, not

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[148] Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it', p.397.
[149] *Ibid.* p.393. See also Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem', p.342.
[150] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.39.
[151] Harrison, *The post-Cold War international system*, p.28.
[152] See Wendt, *Social theory*, pp.324-36.
[153] Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' p.865.

just behaviour. Waltz's emphasis on how structure affects identity is recognized by those who detect in neorealism an 'incipient theory of the state'.[154] However, the value of Waltz's insight is limited by his inability to identify causal mechanisms linking the structure of the international political system to the behaviour of its units. According to Finnemore and Sikkink, '[r]ecognition that state identity fundamentally shapes state behaviour, and that state identity is, in turn, shaped by the cultural-institutional context within which states act, has been an important contribution of recent norms research'.[155] Ikenberry and Kupchan argue that 'socialization is a two-way process', whilst Armstrong argues that it involves a 'two way interaction between revolutionary state and international society'.[156] This chapter has supported such claims, showing that Waltz's arguments, too, rely on a conception of structure and interacting units as mutually affecting. Yet it has also indicated the tension between such arguments and a nomothetic approach to explanation. Even if Waltz's substantive explanations contribute little to our understanding of empirical issues such as Soviet socialization into international society, they do illuminate the difficulties involved in adopting a causal approach to complex systems.

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[154] See Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, pp.41, 116-9; Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the emulation of military systems', p.193.
[155] Finnemore & Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics', p.902.
[156] Ikenberry & Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', p.293; Armstrong, *Revolution and world order*, p.155.

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Why NATO outlived its purpose: the perils of prediction

Waltz downplays the significance of prediction for theory evaluation: he insists that structural theories are limited to making predictions at an appropriate level of generality and that his theory 'cannot hope to predict specific outcomes'.[1] He also suggests that a theory may be impressive even if its predictions are not: 'Since theory abstracts from much of the complication of the world in an effort to explain it, the application of theory in any realm is a perplexing and uncertain matter'.[2] The reason that applying structural theories is uncertain and that Waltz's theory cannot predict specific outcomes is that his theory, like any theory that attempts to isolate structure as an independent variable, generates only partial explanations: because it excludes variables relevant to the outcomes under consideration, it cannot generate reliable predictions about those outcomes. Thus Waltz argues that his theory explains the pressures and possibilities states face, but not their responses: it indicates how structure constrains behaviour, but not how structure interacts with other variables to generate particular actions. Yet this does not mean that partial theories cannot generate predictions at all. Rather, it means that their predictions are likely to be inaccurate because they derive from consideration of only one explanatory factor. As with Waltz's retrospective explanations, therefore, the challenge is to show how the raw predictions derived from examining the theory in isolation can be integrated with the predictions derived from other partial theories to generate helpful accounts of what the future may hold.

Despite his reluctance to allow his theory's raw predictions to be evaluated, Waltz emphasizes that the usefulness of an artificially isolated domain of inquiry depends on the 'explanatory and predictive

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[1] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.344.
[2] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29.

powers' of the theories produced.[3] He also criticizes reductionist theories for failing to provide 'reliable explanations or predictions' and criticizes Kaplan's inability to explain or predict how the system affects the actors in international politics.[4] Further, he suggests that one of the virtues of a systemic theory is that 'some successful predictions can be made without paying attention to states'.[5] In practice, Waltz does offer a number of predictions claimed to be derived from his theory. He argues, for example, that over-reaction to peripheral dangers is predictable behaviour for dominant states in bipolar systems. He predicted in 1993 that new great powers would emerge after the end of the Cold War, asserting in 2000 that multipolarity 'is developing before our eyes' (and that it is doing so 'in accordance with the balancing imperative').[6] His clearest predictions concern the likely demise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) following the disintegration of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) and later the Soviet Union. Waltz insists, in relation to the aftermath of World War II, that 'realist theorists would surely have predicted the collapse of the allied coalition upon the morrow of victory'.[7] Applying this logic to NATO and to the end of the Cold War, Waltz argued that, although NATO's continuation may make sense in the interim, '[i]n the long run, it does not'.[8] Later, Waltz attempted to explain why this prediction had proved inaccurate.[9]

This chapter examines Waltz's account of why NATO outlived its purpose, evaluating the difficulties involved in employing a partial structural theory as a predictive tool. It focuses particularly on Waltz's attempt to justify the failure of his earlier predictions, seeking to derive lessons about the empirical application of a partial theory. It seeks to show that Waltz's work on NATO uncomfortably combines two perspectives: those of theorist and commentator. In the guise of a theorist, Waltz is keen to emphasize the limitations of a structural theory and the predictions it can offer, whilst continuing to suggest that his theory explains something important about state behaviour. In the guise of a

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[3] Waltz, *Theory*, p.8.
[4] *Ibid.* p.19. See also p.56.
[5] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.331.
[6] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.37. See also Waltz, 'The emerging structure'.
[7] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.331.
[8] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.75.
[9] See Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War'; Kenneth N. Waltz, 'NATO expansion: a realist's view', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 21.2, August 2000, pp.23-38.

commentator, however, Waltz seeks to draw on his theory directly: first as a source of predictions about NATO's likely fate in the post-Cold War international system; second, as a source of insights about why the original predictions were not borne out. In this guise, he requires the theory to do more work than it can bear. Consequently, he is forced to invoke quasi-theoretical claims having no origin in his actual theory. The predictive and explanatory claims developed by Waltz the commentator are inconsistent with the analysis of his theory's limitations offered by Waltz the theorist. Further, because they derive neither from a specified theory nor from systematic empirical inquiry, these claims constitute further evidence of Waltz's tendency to slip into theoretical commentary: he draws on an implicit realist world-view to ground allegedly (but not genuinely) explanatory claims. Having distinguished between the arguments of Waltz the theorist and commentator, this chapter draws on theoretical work on security communities to indicate the sorts of ideas that lie beyond the reach of a causal, structural theory.

This chapter proceeds from the premise that an evaluation of Waltz's predictions, and, particularly, of his attempts to explain why they were inaccurate, illuminates the problems involved in applying a structural theory to substantive empirical problems. Mearsheimer suggests that social scientists should offer predictions despite the fact that the 'conditions required for the operation of established theories are often poorly understood'.[10] This chapter suggests that Waltz's predictions should be assessed precisely because theory application is poorly understood. Some theorists are sceptical about theoretical prediction in International Relations. According to Hellmann and Wolf, 'specific – that is, potentially falsifiable – predictions are rare'.[11] According to Lebow and Risse-Kappen, general theories 'do not aspire to make specific predictions. They attempt to predict broad trends, or responses to those trends, and rarely concern themselves with the timing of either'.[12] Schweller and Wohlforth warn that theories of international relations 'are not deterministic enough to rule out categorically the

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[10] Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.9.
[11] Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf, 'Neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and the future of NATO', *Security Studies*, 3.1, Autumn 1993, p.5.
[12] Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Introduction: international relations theory and the end of the Cold War', in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), *International relations theory and the end of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.2.

possibility of specific, complex and path-dependent events'.[13] Gilpin argues that 'the social sciences cannot and never will be able to predict major historical discontinuities, or perhaps even minor ones for that matter; like evolutionary biology, ours is at best an explanatory and not a predictive science'.[14] Nevertheless, Waltz's theory does predict that states seeking to survive in an anarchic system balance power. If the theory's predictions are of limited utility, this reflects its scope, not its predictive ability. The challenge for a theory the predictions of which are, when considered in isolation, too general to be helpful, is to show how (whether) that theory can, nevertheless, usefully be applied.

Why NATO outlived its purpose: neorealist arguments

This section presents a chronological account of Waltz's arguments about NATO and its post-Cold War role. It also draws attention to significant divergent opinions in the academic community and highlights important milestones in NATO's evolution. It then treats Waltz's arguments thematically, identifying four distinct propositions: first, a prediction, directly derived from Waltz's theory, that European balancing against the US will result in NATO's collapse; second, a contention that, although NATO did not immediately collapse, it no longer fulfils the same functions; third, a claim that the original prediction was wrong only because of foolish US policies; fourth, a contention that the original prediction is still likely to be borne out, but that theory cannot indicate when. The purpose is to identify the points at which Waltz's arguments extend beyond the logic of his theory and rely on substantive empirical hypotheses, or on reflections about the nature of theory itself.

Waltz's approach: substance and context

The North Atlantic Treaty (April 1949) instantiated a collective defence pact between Canada, the US and ten European states. Although primarily focused on the emerging Soviet threat, NATO also

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[13] Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, 'Power test: evaluating realism in response to the end of the Cold War', *Security Studies*, 9.3, Spring 2000, p.65.
[14] Robert G. Gilpin, 'No one loves a political realist', *Security Studies*, 5.3, Spring 1996, p.4.

manifested an American interest in encouraging European cooperation: in 1955 it provided a forum that made (West) German re-armament possible. NATO is now widely recognized as 'the most successful and most highly institutionalized multilateral alliance in history'.[15] Writing in 1979, Waltz described NATO as 'a treaty of guarantee rather than an old-fashioned alliance'.[16] His point was partly that nuclear deterrence reduced the value of alliances. Primarily, however, he was drawing attention to the disparity in capabilities between the US and her allies (as between the USSR and her allies), a disparity that enabled the superpowers to disregard those allies' divergent interests at will.

> Disregarding the views of an ally makes sense only if military cooperation is relatively unimportant. This is the case in NATO ... The United States, with a preponderance of nuclear weapons and as many men in uniform as all of the Western European states combined, may be able to protect her allies; they cannot possibly protect her.[17]

Waltz observes that doubts over the credibility of the US commitment to defending Europe 'caused Britain to remain a nuclear power and France to become one, but it did not destroy NATO. The Alliance holds together because even its nuclear members continue to depend on the United States'.[18] He concludes that, '[i]n fact if not in form, NATO consists of guarantees given by the United States to its European allies and to Canada'.[19]

By concentrating purely on NATO's military aspect, Waltz paints a limited picture. The preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty affirms the signatories' determination 'to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law'.[20] Article Two commits them to contributing 'toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being'.[21] NATO's non-military role was reaffirmed in the 1967 Harmel

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[15] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 'Introduction: the end of the Cold War in Europe', in Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye and Stanley Hoffmann (eds.), *After the Cold War: International institutions and state strategies in Europe, 1989-1991* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.2.
[16] Waltz, *Theory*, p.182.
[17] Waltz, 'International structure, national force', p.219.
[18] Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons', p.9.
[19] Waltz, *Theory*, p.169.
[20] See www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/treaty.htm.
[21] *Ibid.*

Report, which stated that the 'ultimate political purpose of the Alliance is to achieve a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe'.[22] Cornish argues that 'NATO has been, since its foundation, not only a military alliance but also a community of shared values, historical, political, cultural and economic'; according to Hellmann and Wolf, this is the dominant view 'among officials of Western governments and analysts'.[23] Risse-Kappen argues that NATO institutionalized a pluralistic security community: although the 'Soviet threat strengthened the sense of common purpose among the allies, it did not create the community in the first place'.[24] However, to discern a nascent security community in 1949 may be to overstate the case. Deutsch defined a 'security-community' as a group of people who agree 'that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of "peaceful change"', that is, 'by institutionalized procedures, without resort to large-scale physical force'.[25] Although he hoped that a transatlantic security community would develop, he considered it 'hardly necessary to point out', in 1957, 'that the North Atlantic area is not already integrated. It is not a security-community'.[26]

Even if NATO did not institutionalize an existing security community, Weber insists that US pursuit of multilateralism within NATO after 1955 was a political strategy, designed to transform Europe into an integrated defence community 'that would transform the global balance of power'.[27] This mirrors Mandelbaum's contention that, although NATO began 'as a guarantee pact', after the Korean war it became 'a full-fledged peacetime military organization'.[28] Jervis tells a similar story: although NATO consisted of a political guarantee, American leaders originally viewed it as an instrument for making

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[22] See www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/b671213a.htm (article 8).
[23] Paul Cornish, *Partnership in crisis: The US, Europe and the fall and rise of NATO* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997), p.4; Hellmann & Wolf, 'Neorealism, neoliberalism, and the future of NATO', p.28 (n.1).
[24] Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Collective identity in a democratic community: the case of NATO', in Katzenstein (ed.), *The culture of national security*, p.372.
[25] Karl W. Deutsch *et al*, *Political community and the North Atlantic area: International organization in the light of historical experience* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.5.
[26] *Ibid.* p.118.
[27] Steve Weber, 'Shaping the postwar balance of power: multilateralism in NATO', in John Gerard Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism matters: The theory and praxis of an institutional form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.234.
[28] Michael Mandelbaum, *The nuclear revolution: International politics before and after Hiroshima* (New York: CUP, 1981), p.153.

'Europeans feel secure so that they could get on with the task of economic recovery'.[29] Until the Korean war, therefore, 'the organization remained largely symbolic'.[30] After Korea, Jervis argues, American leaders feared that Europe itself was at risk. Thus one important consequence of the war 'was the militarization of NATO; the transforming of a paper organization built on a symbolic American commitment to a force capable of resisting Soviet attack'.[31] Although Waltz's 1979 insistence that NATO was a treaty of guarantee rather than an alliance does not capture these nuances, views about NATO's role and purpose have always varied. Brodie noted the following range in 1973:

> Some are convinced that NATO played an enormous security role in the past and still has an important constructive function to perform; others think that its role in the past was indeed very great but that it seems to lack a mission today. Still another view is that we have always exaggerated the importance of NATO.[32]

If Waltz's 1979 view was contentious, his arguments in 1993 were no less striking. In June 1990, NATO foreign ministers issued the 'Message from Turnberry', extending 'the hand of friendship and cooperation' to the Soviet Union and committing NATO members to building 'a new peaceful order in Europe, based on freedom, justice and democracy'.[33] In July, NATO leaders affirmed that the 'Alliance must and will adapt': they stated that NATO and the WTO 'are no longer adversaries' and resolved to enhance the alliance's 'political component'.[34] The new strategic concept developed at the November 1991 Rome summit reaffirmed the alliance's political role and shifted its military focus away from the Soviet threat and toward a broader emphasis on European stability. The alliance, based on 'common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law', was to ensure 'a stable security environment in Europe, based on the growth of democratic institutions' and to serve 'as a transatlantic forum for Allied consultations on any issues that affect their vital interests'.[35] New security concerns included 'the adverse consequences of instabilities that may arise from the various economic, social

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[29] Jervis, 'The impact of the Korean war', p.569.
[30] *Ibid.* p.571.
[31] *Ibid.* p.580.
[32] Bernard Brodie, *War and politics* (London: Cassell, 1974), p.338.
[33] Ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council, June 1990: www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900608b.htm.
[34] 'London declaration on a transformed North Atlantic alliance': www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900706a.htm, articles 1, 6, 8.
[35] www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c911107a.htm, articles 15, 20.

and political difficulties, including ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes, which are faced by many countries in central and eastern Europe'.[36] The Rome summit also created the North Atlantic Cooperation Council as a forum for cooperative relations with non-member states. In July 1992, NATO began monitoring (soon enforcing) the UN arms embargo and economic sanctions in the Adriatic (in relation to the Yugoslav crisis). In October, NATO began monitoring the UN flight ban over Bosnia and by 1993 was offering air support to UNPROFOR.[37] Waltz, meanwhile, was arguing that 'what war-winning coalitions do on the morrow of victory is collapse', and that this is what we should expect of NATO.[38]

Waltz argues that, after World War II, European states perceived the USSR as a threat: 'Their inclination was, therefore, to go to the American side rather than to try to balance against it'.[39] The logic of his 1993 position, therefore, is that NATO was one manifestation of a balancing response against the USSR: 'Without the shared perception of a severe Soviet threat, NATO would never have been born'.[40] Once the major threat disappeared, however, the alliance became unsustainable: overwhelming power (now wielded by the US) 'does not attract, rather it repels'.[41] Waltz therefore expected NATO to collapse after the end of the Cold War as European states shifted from balancing against the USSR to balancing against the sole remaining superpower. He acknowledged that NATO was not collapsing quickly, but argued that this was due to the nature of the preceding conflict: because it was 'cold' rather than 'hot', the 'compulsion to think immediately about power redistribution was absent'.[42] Waltz also predicted that 'American withdrawal from Europe will be slower than the Soviet Union's': the US would strive to maintain its position in the system.[43] In fact, Waltz

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[36] *Ibid.* article 9.
[37] On the implications of NATO's role in the former Yugoslavia see Greg L. Schulte, 'Former Yugoslavia and the new NATO', *Survival*, 39.1, Spring 1997, pp.19-42; Beverly Crawford, 'The Bosnian road to NATO enlargement', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 21.2, August 2000, pp.39-59.
[38] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.190.
[39] *Ibid.* Nevertheless, Waltz refuses to recognize Walt's balance-of-threat approach as an improvement on his own balance-of-power theory. See Stephen M. Walt, 'Why alliances endure or collapse', *Survival*, 39.1, Spring 1997, p.158.
[40] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.76.
[41] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.190.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.76. See also p.49.

acknowledged, 'America, with its vast and varied capabilities, can still be useful to other NATO countries, and NATO is made up of willing members'.[44] Europeans might, therefore, naively hope that the US will wield overwhelming power benignly. Nevertheless, Waltz expected that European states would 'move toward the weaker side ... in the next decade or so'.[45] Because they will no longer 'want to be constrained by the United States acting through NATO', he argued, 'NATO's days are not numbered, but its years are'.[46]

Thus in 1993 Waltz was confident that although NATO had not yet collapsed, it would. However, in January 1994, NATO launched the Partnership for Peace program, significantly increasing the extent of its cooperation with individual non-member states, including Russia.[47] In February, NATO was involved in its first combat operation, shooting down four Bosnian Serb planes for violating the UN flight ban. In August 1995, NATO forces carried out the aerial bombardment of Bosnian Serb positions which led to the Dayton peace negotiations (later contributing 60,000 troops to IFOR). In September, NATO published its enlargement study, which argued that there was both a need and an opportunity to build improved security in the Euro-Atlantic area and that it could be achieved without recreating dividing lines.[48] In May 1997, the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed (and a Permanent Joint Council created) and in July 1997 the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were invited to begin accession negotiations. In March 1999, NATO launched Operation Allied Force, attempting to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo through aerial bombardment of Serb infrastructure and positions. These activities reflected the alliance's continuing shift away from a simple notion of collective defence and toward a more political role, incorporating democracy-promotion, deeper engagement with non-members, closer cooperation with European institutions, a broad commitment to European stability, peacekeeping, willingness to engage in out-of-area operations, and even a humanitarian agenda. Hoffmann also draws attention to NATO's role as an

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[44] *Ibid.* p.76.
[45] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.190.
[46] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.76.
[47] See John Borawski, 'Partnership for Peace and beyond', *International Affairs*, 71.2, April 1995, pp.233-246.
[48] See www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/enl-9501.htm

important forum in which US-European relations were played out (at least in the period between the two Iraq wars).[49]

In 2000, Waltz insisted that although NATO's survival and expansion were 'contrary to expectations inferred from realist theories', they did not invalidate or cast doubt on those theories.[50] In fact, he argued, the expectation that NATO would dwindle and ultimately disappear had, in a 'basic sense', been borne out: 'NATO is no longer even a treaty of guarantee because one cannot answer the question, guarantee against whom?'[51] His point was that although the institutional form may have survived, NATO had 'lost its major function'.[52] In Waltz's view, NATO became, during the 1990s, primarily 'a means of maintaining and lengthening America's grip on the foreign and military policies of European states'.[53] Focusing on US opposition to the development of a separate European security and defence identity and on her desire to enlarge the alliance, Waltz interpreted NATO's continued existence as evidence that institutions 'serve what powerful states believe to be their interests'.[54]

> The error of realist predictions that the end of the Cold War would mean the end of NATO arose not from a failure of realist theory to comprehend international politics, but from an underestimation of America's folly. The survival and expansion of NATO illustrate not the defects but the limitations of structural explanations. Structures shape and shove; they do not determine the actions of states.[55]

In other words, Waltz's predictions about NATO were wrong only because the US failed to comply with structural pressures, something his theory could not predict. This, Waltz argued, illustrates a broader point about theory application: 'Realist theory predicts that balances disrupted will one day be restored. A limitation of the theory, a limitation common to social science theories, is that it cannot say when'.[56] Waltz therefore concluded that his core predictions were still likely to be borne out.

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[49] See Stanley Hoffmann, 'US-European relations: past and future', *International Affairs*, 79.5, Oct 2003, p.1031.
[50] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.18.
[51] *Ibid.* p.19.
[52] *Ibid.* p.20.
[53] *Ibid.*
[54] *Ibid.* p.21.
[55] *Ibid.* p.24.
[56] *Ibid.* p.27.

Since Waltz presented these arguments, NATO has continued its transformation, enlarging further, enhancing its collaboration with other institutions and with non-member states, and bolstering its out-of-area capabilities. The decision to invoke Article 5 to provide assistance to the US after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks provided a new impetus to reform, leading to the development of a new strategic concept for defence against terrorism. May 2002 saw the creation of the NATO-Russia Council, whilst Cornish describes the November 2002 Prague meeting as NATO's 'transformation summit', with members agreeing to admit seven new members and to field a new NATO Response Force.[57] In March 2003, agreement was reached on the 'Berlin Plus' arrangement allowing the EU access to NATO equipment and planning assets; in Cornish's view, this 'promises to yield the long-awaited settlement of the complex debate about Europe's security institutions'.[58] In August 2003, NATO took command of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul. However, Cornish argues that the Iraq war brought NATO 'close to collapse': he suggests that the dispute over possible assistance to Turkey placed the alliance's credibility 'in the balance'.[59] Hoffmann takes a softer view, describing the Turkish dispute as 'slightly absurd', but agrees that US unilateralism has posed serious new questions about NATO's continuing role.[60] Hoffmann notes that President Bush not only sidelined NATO in regard to Iraq, but has shown no inclination 'to return to the old institutional game'.[61] Cornish suggests that 'NATO's transformational agenda alone will not be sufficient to ensure the alliance's survival as the West's main political-military security organization'.[62]

Waltz's arguments

Four distinct arguments made by Waltz about the future of NATO are identifiable:

(1) Europe will balance against the US 'in the next decade or so', resulting in NATO's collapse;

(2) Waltz's predictions were correct: NATO was a treaty of guarantee, but is no longer;

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[57] Paul Cornish, 'NATO: the practice and politics of transformation', *International Affairs*, 80.1, Jan 2004, p.64.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Ibid.* p.63.
[60] Hoffmann, 'US-European relations', p.1034.
[61] See *ibid.* pp.1034-6.
[62] Cornish, 'NATO', p.73.

(3) Waltz's predictions were inaccurate only because the US failed to comply with structural imperatives;

(4) NATO may still be expected to collapse, but theory alone cannot determine when.

Argument (1) – NATO will collapse 'in the next decade or so'

The only prediction that Waltz makes about NATO's likely post-Cold War fate is his 1993 contention that the war-winning coalition can be expected to collapse. The remainder of his arguments are *post hoc* qualifications of this prediction. The expectation itself may be divided into two. First, there is a claim, derived 'from theory and from history', that war-winning coalitions collapse, from which it is inferred that NATO, too, will disappear.[63] Second, there is a claim that the alliance's collapse may not be imminent, because of the nature of the conflict that preceded it, but that it will happen within a decade. According to Waltz, the expectation that war-winning coalitions collapse is an example of the sort of prediction that can be made without reference to state characteristics, because we can say with confidence how we would 'expect any state so placed to act'.[64] In *Theory*, Waltz argues: 'If two coalitions form and one of them weakens, perhaps because of the political disorder of a member, we expect the extent of the other coalition's military preparation to slacken or its unity to lessen'.[65] This is the logic of Waltz's expectations for NATO in the post-Cold War international system: the prediction that war-winning coalitions collapse, he insists, 'follows from balance-of-power theory'.[66] Elsewhere, however, Waltz is keen to qualify the expectations that can be derived from his theory: 'Structural theory, and the theory of balance of power that follows from it, do not lead one to expect that states will always or even usually engage in balancing behaviour'.[67] This is because balancing is merely one among many survival strategies: states 'try various strategies ... Balancing is one of them;

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[63] Waltz, 'The new world order', p.190.
[64] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.332.
[65] Waltz, *Theory*, p.126.
[66] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.332.
[67] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.38.

bandwagoning is another'.[68] Given the possibilities, Waltz argues, the recurrence of balancing behaviour constitutes 'impressive evidence supporting the theory'.[69]

Waltz's desire to qualify a prediction claimed to follow from his theory captures the problems inherent in applying partial explanations. Waltz claims that balancing behaviour follows from his theory, but insists that we should not therefore expect all states to balance. His point is that structure is not the sole cause of state behaviour: predictions based on structure alone are therefore likely to be inaccurate. Nevertheless, Waltz claims that his theory captures an important aspect of international relations: the fact that balancing recurs indicates that structure is a significant determinant of state behaviour. Waltz's prediction that NATO will collapse also illustrates another problem of theory application. In Waltz's approach, institutions are a feature of states' particular relations, not of how they stand in relation to each other: consequently, they do not belong in a structural theory. If the expectation that NATO (the institution) will disappear is inferred from the expectation that European states will balance against the newly preponderant US, then it matters what NATO is. A war-winning coalition (what Waltz expects to collapse) is not identical to a treaty of guarantee, nor to the institutional forms that may grow up around it. Waltz's theory, considered narrowly, predicts nothing about the fate of the institutional remnants of a collapsed war-winning coalition.[70] Thus Waltz's predictions about NATO as an institutionalized form must draw on his theory heuristically rather than applying it deductively. Further, the secondary prediction that NATO's collapse will take about a decade cannot be derived from Waltz's theory at all. Its status is therefore unclear. Does Waltz believe that the timing of the collapse of victorious coalitions can be linked theoretically to the nature of the preceding conflicts? Is Waltz simply attempting to fit the theory to the facts (given that NATO's collapse did not appear imminent in 1993)? The link between Waltz's theory and his prediction about the timing of NATO's collapse remains obscure.

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[68] *Ibid.*
[69] *Ibid.* p.39.
[70] Mearsheimer also argued (in 1990) that NATO was likely to cease to function as an alliance, but suggested that it 'may persist on paper'. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.5.

Argument (2) – NATO was primarily a treaty of guarantee, but is no longer

Waltz's claim that his predictions about NATO's impending collapse have not been proved wrong (because NATO no longer operates as a treaty of guarantee) forms part of his response to criticisms of (neo)realism for depreciating the importance of institutions. Waltz contends that NATO's survival 'shows why realists believe that international institutions are shaped and limited by the states that found them and have little independent effect'.[71] The argument proceeds as follows. Institutionalists are wrong to take the durability of NATO's institutional form as evidence of 'the autonomy and vitality of institutions'.[72] Although a 'deeply entrenched international bureaucracy can help to sustain the organization', it is states that determine both whether institutions continue to have a purpose, and what that purpose may be.[73] Rather than surviving in its original form, NATO has become a tool of US foreign policy: 'The Bush administration saw, and the Clinton administration continued to see, NATO as the instrument for maintaining America's domination of the foreign and military policies of European states'.[74] In other words, focusing on the survival of an institutional remnant tells us little unless we also examine its purpose, which is determined by state actors. NATO's survival and expansion, Waltz maintains, 'tell us much about American power and influence and little about institutions as multilateral entities'.[75] Realism 'reveals what institutionalist "theory" obscures': international institutions reflect great power interests.[76]

Waltz argues that NATO was a treaty of guarantee but is no longer: now it is merely an instrument of American interests. Yet if Waltz is right to think of NATO (during the Cold War) as an American guarantee to her allies (rather than as an old-fashioned alliance), then it is hard to conclude that NATO was ever anything other than a tool of American interests. In Waltz's account, the US, through NATO, provided military protection against the Soviet threat; in return, she gained leverage over European

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[71] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.18.
[72] *Ibid.* p.20.
[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid.* p.21.
[75] *Ibid.* p.20.
[76] *Ibid.* p.21. See John J. Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security*, 19.3, Winter 1994-94, pp.5-49.

defence policies during the Cold War.[77] Although Waltz contends that NATO has, since the Cold War, become an instrument of US interests, he also acknowledges that European states may value the continued US involvement in European affairs. If so, then the Cold War and post-Cold War cases are similar: the US continues to gain leverage over European policies in exchange for her contribution to European security.[78] Waltz's insistence that NATO is a guarantee against a now absent threat therefore obscures the continuity in NATO's functions. NATO was never merely a guarantee: it was also, more generally, a forum in which relations between the US and her allies were (and continue to be) played out. By describing NATO as a treaty of guarantee, Waltz exposed the asymmetry of the relationship between the US and her allies: his point concerned not merely the distribution of capabilities, but also how bipolarity and second-strike capabilities altered the role of alliance systems. Waltz's conception of NATO as a treaty of guarantee reconciled the existence of Cold War alliance systems with his contention that bipolarity is peaceful because the superpowers can disregard their allies. However, this structural insight captures only one aspect of alliance relations.

Argument (3) – the US failed to act in accordance with structural imperatives

Waltz argues that his predictions were wrong because US behaviour did not conform to structural imperatives. In his view, President Clinton advocated NATO enlargement in response to domestic pressures: Clinton needed to demonstrate effective foreign policy leadership in order to offset the failure of his Bosnian policies, to attract the support of East European voters and of the arms industry, and to prevent the Republicans using the issue to their advantage in the 1994 congressional elections.[79] Criticizing enlargement, Waltz emphasizes the tendency for victors to 'act in ways that create future enemies'; he predicts that this will be the consequence of extending NATO's influence 'over what used

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[77] In this account, incidents such as French withdrawal from NATO's integrated command structure represent dissatisfaction with the tradeoff; the fact that French withdrawal did not, in practice, damage NATO illustrates the asymmetry of the relationship between the US and her allies.
[78] Mearsheimer describes NATO as 'an American tool for managing power' during the Cold War. Mearsheimer, 'The false promise', p.14.
[79] See Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', pp.21-2.

to be the province of the vanquished'.[80] He cites NATO expansion as an example of a policy that 'only an overwhelmingly powerful country could afford, and only a foolish one be tempted, to follow'.[81] He argues that, although the US cannot prevent a new balance of power from forming, its expansionist policies are likely to 'hasten its coming'.[82] However, although Waltz draws on US domestic politics to explain why his predictions were wrong, state interests play no role in his theory. In order to isolate structure as an independent variable, Waltz treats state interests as given, assuming only that states seek to survive. His claims about how US interests feed into state behaviour cannot, therefore, be theoretically derived. Waltz criticizes Keohane for wrongly emphasizing 'the failure of realist predictions while rightly emphasizing the limitations of the theory when standing alone'.[83] Yet in trying to explain why his predictions failed, Waltz neglects to emphasize the limitations of his theory when considered in isolation. Instead, he draws on domestic political variables excluded from his theory, but without specifying how these variables interact with structure to generate state behaviour.

Waltz's account of the conflict between structural and domestic variables in regard to US policy exemplifies his failure to identify clear causal mechanisms linking structure to action. In the logic of selection, structure affects the outcomes of behaviour: this is consistent with Waltz's claim that US behaviour is likely to induce (hasten) a balancing response. In the logic of socialization, structure affects states' conceptions of their interests: this is consistent with Waltz's contention that 'NATO's expansionist policy illustrates how the absence of external restraints on the United States affects its policy'.[84] Waltz may be right that the logics of socialization and selection point in the same direction: US expansionism is likely to induce a balancing response. Yet neither logic is clearly specified. In order for selection to operate, structure must affect state behaviour: the actions of the balancing states must be affected by the structure of the system. This places the emphasis on socialization: on how the structure of the system influences state interests. It is easy to see why lesser states might perceive

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[80] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Globalization and American power', *The National Interest*, 59, Spring 2000, p.55.
[81] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.38.
[82] *Ibid.*
[83] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.332.
[84] Waltz, 'NATO expansion', pp.26-7.

balancing against a preponderant power to be in their interests. It is less easy to see how unipolarity affects US interests.[85] In fact, Waltz suggests that a unipolar structure does not constrain US interests at all: 'the sole remaining great power has behaved as unchecked powers have usually done. In the absence of counterweights, a country's internal impulses prevail'.[86] If so, then Waltz's theory cannot shed any light on US policy. Waltz's failure to identify causal links between system structure and US behaviour therefore casts grave doubt on the theoretical status of his arguments: it invites suspicion that Waltz refers to his theory merely in an attempt to give weight to his opposition to US policy.

Argument (4) – theory cannot determine timing

According to Waltz, his theory predicts that states will balance, but cannot say when a particular balance will be restored, a limitation common to social science theories. However, Waltz does not indicate why social science theories share this characteristic. In practice, his balance-of-power theory is unable even to say whether a specific balance will be restored. This is because it generates only partial explanations: although it indicates that structural pressures encourage states to balance, it does not show how structure interacts with other variables to generate specific behaviours. A systemic theory, Waltz insists, 'deals with the pressures of structure on states and not with how states will respond to the pressures'.[87] Yet not all social science theories attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable: the fact that Waltz's theory generates only partial explanations does not explain why social science theories are, in general, unable to 'say when "tomorrow" will come'.[88] Theories are not necessarily limited to offering partial explanations. Explanatory theorists should seek to show how different variables interact to produce outcomes, either by developing complete theories or by indicating how partial theories generate heuristic insights. The major deficiency of Waltz's approach (and the primary cause of his theory's predictive inadequacies) is the absence of any account of how

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[85] On the implications of unipolarity see Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar politics: Realism and state strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
[86] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.24.
[87] *Ibid.* p.27.
[88] *Ibid.*

his theory may contribute to integrated accounts that draw on a range of explanatory variables. In practice, Waltz's predictions about NATO's post-Cold War role do refer to variables excluded from his theory. However, the procedure according to which structural and non-structural variables are integrated is unspecified. Waltz's predictions are inadequate not because of limitations common to all social science theories, but because Waltz fails to provide any account of how he combines structural and non-structural variables in his explanatory accounts.

The limitations of a causal approach

This section shows how Waltz's substantive arguments about NATO's post-Cold War role differ in what they imply about the explanatory power of his theory from what Waltz indicates elsewhere. It suggests that Waltz is profitably thought of as operating in two guises: as theorist and as commentator. The division reflects the difficulties of applying a theory that generates only partial explanations: as a theorist, Waltz recognizes the limitations of a structural theory; as a commentator, he is keen to show that his theory contributes to our understanding of substantive empirical problems. This section finds that many of Waltz's substantive arguments cannot be derived from his theory: they are, at best, instances of theoretical commentary, drawing on implicit theoretical propositions. This section then indicates some aspects of NATO's post-Cold War role that any causal, structural theory would be unable to comprehend. It shows that the notion of a security community refers to the process by which interaction affects system structure: precisely the process that Waltz suppresses in order to isolate system structure as an independent variable. It shows that Waltz's inability to comprehend how NATO affects the structure of possibilities facing state actors blinds him to the genuine European interest in maintaining US involvement in Europe's security architecture. The aim is therefore to draw out the limitations of a causal theory when applied to substantive problems in international relations.

Waltz the theorist; Waltz the commentator

A prominent theme of *Theory* is Waltz's recognition of the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations. He warns, for example, that it is difficult to find or state theories 'with enough precision and plausibility to make testing worthwhile' and laments that '[n]othing seems to accumulate, not even criticism'.[89] Similarly, much of Waltz's discussion of why his predictions about NATO were proved wrong is characterized by awareness of his theory's limitations. He emphasizes repeatedly that, because structure is not the only relevant variable (it shapes and shoves, but does not determine behaviour), his theory cannot accurately predict specific outcomes. He insists that balancing is not inevitable (it 'depends on the decisions of governments'), recognizes that state policies reflect domestic impulses as well as structural imperatives, and acknowledges that a partial theory can only suggest why certain behaviours are likely to recur.[90] However, Waltz's work on NATO is also characterized by more specific and forthright predictions, explanations, claims and assertions. He insists that war-winning coalitions collapse on the morrow of victory, that NATO's years are numbered, and that the 'decline of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe entailed the decline of the United States in the West'.[91] He explicitly predicts that European states will balance against the US in the next decade or so and, consequently, that NATO will collapse. He even suggests that the nature of the preceding conflict determines the speed of the collapse. These claims are problematic not only on account of their accuracy, but also because of the disjunction between the implication that Waltz's theory can ground specific predictions and the modesty of the explicit claims that Waltz makes about his theory's explanatory power.

The disjunction between Waltz's substantive arguments about NATO's post-Cold War role and his more modest claims about his theory's explanatory power suggests that Waltz operates in two guises: as commentator and as theorist. As a theorist, Waltz is aware of the problems that accompany any attempt to operationalize structure as an independent variable: he acknowledges that his theory cannot generate specific predictions, yet insists that it captures big and important ideas. As a commentator, Waltz deploys his theory in support of much bolder and more specific claims. The problem that this

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[89] Waltz, *Theory*, pp.15, 18.
[90] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.37.
[91] Waltz, 'The emerging structure', p.75.

generates is how the substantive claims of Waltz the commentator draw on the theory about which Waltz the theorist is so modest. Mearsheimer opines that International Relations theories should offer predictions even though the 'highly complex' nature of political phenomena means that precision would require theoretical tools 'superior to those we now possess'.[92] Predictions, he argues,

> can inform policy discourse. They help even those who disagree to frame their ideas, by clarifying points of disagreement. Moreover, predictions of events soon to unfold provide the best tests of social science theories, by making clear what it was that given theories have predicted about those events.[93]

Mearsheimer emphasizes that those who venture to predict 'should proceed with humility, take care not to claim unwarranted confidence, and admit that later hindsight will undoubtedly reveal surprises and mistakes'.[94] His warning is well advised: no theory is likely to be both complete and unfailingly accurate. However, there is also a deeper problem: if the complexity of international relations makes precise prediction impossible, then how can theories be tested? How are the implications of an avowedly partial theory to be assessed? In what way can such a theory inform policy discourse or clarify points of disagreement?

The problem with many of Waltz's substantive claims about NATO's post-Cold War role is that they do not follow from the logic of his theory. Waltz's theory, considered in isolation, merely indicates that states who seek to survive in an anarchic system are likely to balance power and that the polarity of the system may affect the options open to them. It cannot, therefore, ground anything so particular as the claim that European states will balance against the US in the next decade or so. Waltz's attempt to predict NATO's fate, and later to defend his predictions, illustrates the fact that accurate predictions and explanations cannot be achieved merely by examining structure. The problem, therefore, is how postulated insights about the relation between structure and behaviour can contribute to integrated accounts that draw on more than one variable. Waltz does not present an explicit solution to this problem. Although Waltz's defence of his predictions draws on non-structural variables (he relies, for example, on insights into domestic politics and the durability of institutions), he offers no account of

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[92] Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.9.
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] *Ibid.*

how he arrives at particular arguments. The prediction that European states will balance in a decade or so cannot be directly derived from Waltz's theory: it requires some conception of how structure and interests interact to produce specific behavioural outcomes. Yet if Waltz employs a conception of how structure and interests interact, then it is entirely implicit. The suspicion must be that Waltz's conception of how structure and interests interact derives neither from a fully specified theory nor from detailed examination of the historical record, but from an implicit and unjustified realist world-view. For example, Waltz's arguments about the survival of NATO's institutional form do not seem to constitute a test of his theory, but to reflect a presumption that institutions reflect great power interests.

Many of Waltz's arguments about NATO are in fact examples of theoretical commentary. They fulfil the requirements neither of explanatory theory (they are not deductive) nor of systematic empirical inquiry (no attempt is made to examine the factual or historical record in detail). Rather, they reflect implicit dispositions and assumptions. Recognizing (correctly) that his theory is unlikely to generate accurate deductive explanations, Waltz wishes to insist, nevertheless, that it explains big and important things. Yet the arguments of Waltz the commentator do not and cannot support such a claim, for the arguments do not derive from a clear attempt to apply the theory either deductively or heuristically. Waltz does not attempt to demonstrate how focusing on system structure improves our understanding of NATO's post-Cold War role. Rather, he presents numerous assertions, the theoretical basis of which remain obscure, as if they were theoretically derived arguments. Waltz's failure to specify how his theory can be operationalized as a source of heuristic insights or to specify how he arrives at particular arguments has two unsatisfactory consequences. First, Waltz claims theoretical legitimacy for arguments based on implicit and untested propositions: where these arguments are sound, he represents them as if they support his theory. Second, by claiming that his substantive arguments derive from the application of a theory, Waltz buttresses what may be no more than opinion with the credibility that accompanies theoretical arguments. Despite Mearsheimer's hope that developing and testing predictions may inform policy discourse, the sorts of predictions and arguments offered by Waltz in respect of NATO are more likely to confuse policy discourse by corrupting the distinction between opinion and theory.

The problems that Waltz encounters in applying his theory to a specific empirical problem such as NATO's likely post-Cold War role stem from the difficulties of developing a nomothetic theory about complex systems. In order to ground an explanatory approach, Waltz attempts to isolate structure as a causal variable: he suppresses the process by which state interactions reconstitute system structure, treating state interests by assumption. Consequently, his theory generates only partial explanations: it suggests what would happen were structure the only cause in play. However, because structure is not really an independent causal variable, Waltz is unable to identify clear causal mechanisms linking structure to behavioural outcomes. Waltz's attempt to show how a causal structural theory illuminates questions about NATO's likely post-Cold War role therefore encounters two significant obstacles: first, predictions are likely to be inaccurate because they draw only on a single variable; second, it is not possible to trace causal mechanisms. Although Waltz never explicitly addresses these issues, the disjunction between Waltz the theorist and Waltz the commentator indicates that he is (sometimes) aware of the problems involved in applying a partial explanatory theory. Nevertheless, the question of why NATO outlived its purpose indicates both the dangers and the limitations of a causal approach to system structure. The chief danger is that, unable to derive helpful predictions directly from the theory, a theorist will draw on implicit propositions to ground arguments illicitly claimed to be theoretically derived. The chief limitation is that a causal approach premised on isolating system structure as an independent variable is unable to comprehend how an institution such as NATO affects system structure.

NATO as a security community

Waltz's description of NATO as an American guarantee of her allies' security obscures the other roles that NATO has played, especially in the crucial transitional period between the Message from Turnberry and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the organization's future was unclear. Nye and Keohane argue that, as the Cold War ebbed, American officials quickly sought to find ways of bolstering NATO: they cite President Bush's suggestion that NATO relates 'to basic values, not just

military tasks' and Secretary of State Baker's references to possible environmental and diplomatic roles.[95] They insist that the key initiatives on NATO reform 'came from member states, particularly the United States'.[96] This appears to support Waltz's contention that NATO quickly became an instrument of US policy and that the fate of international institutions is ultimately determined by states. However, Nye and Keohane also examine ways in which NATO served US interests other than as an arena for exercising influence. For example, they draw attention to NATO's signalling role:

> NATO's June 1990 decision to change its doctrine was an important collective signal to the Soviet Union about the future structure of European security. And the creation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and the acceptance of eastern observers at NATO meetings and headquarters signalled a concern for security beyond NATO's traditional boundaries.[97]

This suggests that institutions played a deeper role in US diplomacy than is captured by the notion that NATO was merely a tool of US interests. Keohane argues that not only the US but also France, Britain, Germany and even the USSR 'used international institutions in their strategies of adaptation to the structural changes of 1989-91'.[98]

Waltz not only downplays the widespread institutionalization of European and transatlantic relations since 1949, but also underplays the significance for intra-European relations of US involvement (through NATO) in Europe. Joffe accepts that the US protected Europe against a Soviet threat, but maintains that another aspect of US involvement is 'widely neglected': 'the protector's role as pacifier – as the key agent in the construction of an interstate order in Western Europe that muted, if not removed, ancient conflicts and shaped the conditions for cooperation'.[99] Joffe argues that the US security guarantee not only provided the 'cornerstone of the global Soviet-American balance', but 'built the indispensable foundation for future cooperation' among European states.[100] Mearsheimer also emphasizes how the US's 'hegemonic position in NATO' during the Cold War 'mitigated the effects of

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[95] Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane, 'The United States and international institutions in Europe after the Cold War', in Keohane, Nye & Hoffmann (eds.), *After the Cold War*, p.119.
[96] *Ibid.* p.123.
[97] *Ibid.* p.124.
[98] Robert O. Keohane, 'Institutional theory and the realist challenge after the Cold War', in Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and neoliberalism*, p.288.
[99] Josef Joffe, 'Europe's American pacifier', *Foreign Policy*, 54, Spring 1984, pp.67-8.
[100] *Ibid.* pp.68-9.

anarchy on the Western democracies and facilitated cooperation among them'.[101] Scholars disagree about whether US involvement helped to create a security community. Joffe argues that, after 1945, Western Europe became a security community 'where interstate rivalry and the competition for advantage persist but where force is no longer the natural adjunct of policy'.[102] Art, whilst recognizing the importance of the US presence for peaceful European relations, warns against assuming that Europe now constitutes a pluralistic security community: it 'is both wrong and dangerous to believe that security and power no longer motivate the Western European states in their relations with one another'.[103] Waltz acknowledges Art's 'realist expectation' that, without US involvement through NATO, Europe will lapse into a security competition, but argues that it 'further illustrates the dependence of international institutions on national decisions'.[104] However, Waltz's theory is poorly equipped to judge the extent to which institutions reflect great power interests.

In Waltz's theory, the process by which interactions reconstitute system structure is suppressed. It is therefore not possible for Waltz, within the logic of his theory, to conceive of institutions except as reflecting the structural imperatives that are, in that theory, the sole determinants of state behaviour. The logic of security communities, however, is that interactions affect the structure of possibilities facing state actors. According to Deutsch, a security-community denotes the attainment 'of institutions and practices strong enough and widespread enough to assure ... dependable expectations' of peaceful change.[105] Adler and Barnett associate stable peace with transnational communities having three characteristics: members 'have shared identities, values, and meanings'; interaction takes place face-to-face and in numerous settings; relations 'exhibit a reciprocity that expresses some degree of long-term interest and perhaps even altruism'.[106] If interactions acquire these characteristics, then the structure of the system is not one in which states must rely solely on their own efforts in order to survive: structure

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[101] Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', p.47.
[102] Joffe, 'Europe's American pacifier', p.67.
[103] Robert J. Art, 'Why Western Europe needs the United States and NATO', *Political Science Quarterly*, 111.1, Spring 1996, p.2.
[104] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', pp.25-6.
[105] Deutsch *et al*, *Political community*, p.5.
[106] Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'A framework for the study of security communities', in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security communities* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p.31.

has been altered by institutionalized interaction. Weber argues that multilateralism (the institutional form partly adopted by NATO) is not only a dependent variable in need of explanation, but also has an 'autonomous causal impact on outcomes': principles and institutions are not only outcomes but '"shape" the balance of power and affect its evolution over time'.[107] In other words, the form of particular interactions affects the structure of possibilities in the system, especially as that system evolves over time. Waltz's theory can provide no analytical grip on this dynamic. An analyst drawing solely on Waltz's theory cannot even comprehend how security communities might emerge, let alone judge whether institutions merely reflect state interests, or judge when (if) Europe became a security community.

Waltz's theory, like any theory that treats structure as an independent variable, cannot comprehend how behaviour feeds back into structure itself. Waltz infers from what he presumes to be the anarchic structure of the international political system that states balance in order to survive. His theory offers no basis for understanding how institutions may alter the structural incentives facing states. Ruggie points out that (neo)realism is unable to comprehend Central and East European states' pursuit of NATO membership. He insists that they were 'not driven primarily by specific threats to their security': rather, they 'were asking for affirmation that they belong to the West'.[108] Kramer observes that, during the 1990s, 'East European officials consistently emphasized the nonmilitary benefits of joining NATO': they argued that it could serve as an 'effective stabilizer for the democratic changes and sweeping economic reforms underway in their own societies'.[109] Kramer argues that NATO had, by 1991, 'evolved into a key organ for the "pluralistic security community" of democratic industrialized states'.[110] With 'the gradual entrenchment of democracy in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, those countries became informal members of the pluralistic security community. The enlargement of NATO merely formalized that status'.[111] Waltz largely ignores the role of Central and

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[107] Weber, 'Shaping the postwar balance of power', pp.235, 269.
[108] Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity*, p.232.
[109] Mark Kramer, 'Neorealism, nuclear proliferation, and East-Central European strategies', in Kapstein & Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar politics*, p.428.
[110] *Ibid.* p.427.
[111] *Ibid.*

East European states in defining NATO's new role and bringing about enlargement: his theory does not equip him to understand why these states would want to align themselves with the US. His theory cannot comprehend how incongruities between regimes and the power distributions in which they were created can emerge and be sustained. It cannot comprehend how, in Krasner's words, regimes, once established, 'may feed back on the basic causal variables that gave rise to them in the first place'.[112]

Although Waltz recognizes the Western European interest in maintaining NATO, the notion that state behaviour reflects structural imperatives demands that he views this interest as a temporary anomaly: European states will soon balance against the preponderant power. Other scholars believe both that NATO's European members have a deeper interest in sustaining US involvement in Europe and that they see NATO as a means of achieving this. According to Richardson, Britain 'perceived NATO as the sine qua non of the post-Cold War settlement'.[113] During the Cold War, she argues, 'British defence policy had become so integrated with NATO policy that it was difficult to separate the two'.[114] Weber argues that, for Germany, 'NATO is still part of the integrative logic of international institutions that legitimate its expanding political, economic and security roles'.[115] Former German foreign minister Genscher argues that the Dayton process offered 'the most striking proof that also after the end of the Cold War American engagement is indispensable for security and stability in Europe'.[116] Art claims that 'no European government envisioned a Europe without an American presence' after the Cold War.[117] Asmus concurs: the whole of Europe has 'accepted the United States

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[112] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Regimes and the limits of realism: regimes as autonomous variables', in Krasner (ed.), *International regimes*, p.358.
[113] Louise Richardson, 'British state strategies after the Cold War', in Keohane, Nye & Hoffmann (eds.), *After the Cold War*, p.158.
[114] *Ibid.* p.159.
[115] Steve Weber, 'A modest proposal for NATO expansion', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 21.2, August 2000, p.94.
[116] Hans-Dietrich Genscher, 'The transatlantic partnership: an alliance for peace and progress', in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *No end to alliance. The United States and Western Europe: Past, present and future* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p.14.
[117] Art, 'Why Western Europe needs the United States', p.6.

as a permanent European power, not just a temporary protector'.[118] Waltz's theory is unable to comprehend such views not only because it treats state interests by assumption, but, more importantly, because it cannot comprehend how NATO has altered the structure of possibilities facing European states. Waltz's theory may indicate something about how structure affects behaviour. It may even inform our expectations about NATO's continuing role. However, because it treats structure as a causal variable, Waltz's theory can comprehend little of the complexity of institutionalized international relations.

Conclusion

Many of Waltz's predictions and arguments about NATO's post-Cold War role derive neither from deductive application of his theory nor from systematic empirical study (drawing on the theory as a heuristic tool). This reflects the challenges involved in applying a theory that generates only partial explanations. Because Waltz's theory suppresses the link between interaction and structure in order to isolate structure as an independent variable, it is unable to comprehend how the institutionalization of the alliance through time has affected the structure of possibilities facing states in (what has become) a transatlantic security community. Waltz's theory therefore not only generates partial explanations, but is a poor guide to the sorts of empirical developments that a theorist seeking to understand NATO's likely post-Cold War role should look out for. Waltz's tendency to slip into theoretical commentary is not inevitable: he could be more rigorous in applying his own insistence that his theory should not be expected to predict specific developments. However, the division between Waltz the theorist and commentator is understandable: believing that his theory reveals something important about the basic dynamics of international relations, Waltz is keen to demonstrate this in specific cases. Further, no theory that isolates structure as an independent causal variable could comprehend how structure also becomes a dependent variable. In other words, no causal theory could generate deductive explanations both about how state behaviour is affected by system structure and about how interaction affects

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[118] Ronald D. Asmus, 'NATO's double enlargement: new tasks, new members', in Clay Clemens (ed.), *NATO and the quest for post-Cold War security* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.61.

structure. Consequently, although constructivist insights about how security communities develop may help us to understand NATO's evolution, they take us no closer to an integrated explanatory approach.

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Foreign policy and the realist research programme: improving causal explanations

Responding to Rosecrance's review of *Theory*, Waltz describes himself as having written 'a theory of international politics and not a theory of foreign policy'.[1] He acknowledges that explanations of state behaviour require 'a theory of foreign policy as well as a theory of international politics', but insists that 'system level and unit level must be carefully distinguished so that the effect of each on the other can be examined'.[2] In other words, although complete explanations will refer to both structural and unit-level variables, theories about each must be developed separately. Thus *Theory* investigates how structure affects state behaviour, whilst *Foreign policy and democratic politics* sought 'to determine the ways in which the internal politics of democracies affect their external policies'.[3] Waltz is sceptical about the prospects of uniting the two approaches in an integrated theory: 'Students of international politics will do well to concentrate on, and make use of, separate theories of internal and external politics until someone figures out a way to unite them'.[4] This chapter explores the implications for the realist research programme of Waltz's insistence that his theory cannot explain foreign policy. It argues that Waltz's position reflects a confusion: because its dependent variable is state behaviour, his theory is a theory of foreign policy. Waltz's point is that his theory does not offer complete accounts of state behaviour: it only generates partial explanations. This is misunderstood by scholars who argue that neorealism can be applied (evaluated) as a theory of foreign policy. It is also misunderstood by realists who argue that neorealism's explanatory power can be enhanced through the addition of unit-level variables. Incorporating unit-level factors corrupts Waltz's attempt to isolate

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[1] Waltz, 'Letter to the editor', p.680.
[2] *Ibid.* pp.680-1.
[3] Waltz, *Foreign policy and democratic politics*, p.17.
[4] Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', p.57.

structure as an independent variable: it does not point toward a causal theory that integrates systemic and unit-level perspectives.

Neorealism as a theory of foreign policy

This section asks how a theory of foreign policy differs from a theory of international politics. It also asks what is involved in using a theory such as Waltz's to contribute to explanations of foreign policy. Waltz's distinction between theories of international politics and of foreign policy is inconsistent: the unifying theme is that his theory cannot generate complete explanations of state behaviour. Thus Waltz distinguishes between theory development and theory application: he maintains that the factors referred to in particular explanations do not reflect what can be incorporated in general causal theories. This section also explores Elman's contention that '[n]eorealist theories *can* be expected to perform as theories of foreign policy'.[5] It argues that Elman fails to recognize the partial nature of Waltz's theory: whereas Elman asks only what neorealism's dependent variable is, the more important question is how a theory that generates only partial explanations can most helpfully be applied to substantive issues in international relations. This section therefore demonstrates that the notion of partial explanation holds the key to understanding how Waltz's theory may be improved.

Explaining foreign policy

According to Smith, foreign policy analysis seeks to generalize about the sources and nature of state behaviour, 'focusing on the decision-making process in its varying aspects'.[6] In other words, foreign policy analysis focuses on unit-level causes of state behaviour. Smith argues that foreign policy analysis is 'the most obvious source of theories of foreign policy behaviour'.[7] He insists, however, that

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[5] Colin Elman, 'Horses for courses: Why *not* neorealist theories of foreign policy?' *Security Studies*, 6.1, Autumn 1996, p.22.
[6] Steve Smith, 'Theories of foreign policy: an historical overview', *Review of International Studies*, 12.1, Jan 1986, p.14.
[7] *Ibid.* p.13.

all perspectives on international relations that treat states as actors 'contain statements about foreign policy'.[8] Any theory of state behaviour is therefore a theory of foreign policy: theories of foreign policy are 'intrinsic to theories of international relations'.[9] If Smith is right, then theories of foreign policy are identified by their dependent variable: they may draw on different independent variables (on particular systemic or unit-level factors), but they all seek to explain state behaviour. Thus Smith describes Waltz, along with Kaplan and Rosecrance, as seeking 'to explain the foreign policy behaviour of the state from a systems viewpoint'.[10] He also notes that Waltz sees theories as competitive, not complementary: 'each, by focusing on a certain level of analysis, imposes a bias on the data'.[11] The implication is that 'the study of foreign policy cannot afford to ignore the structure of the international system'.[12] Yet Smith maintains that 'the international systems level can only deal with certain long-term and general trends in foreign policy behaviour. On its own it is not sufficient to constitute a theory of foreign policy'.[13] In other words, although Waltz's theory explains foreign policy behaviour, it provides only a partial explanation: a complete explanation would refer to both structural and unit-level variables.

According to Holsti, decision-making approaches reject attempts to characterize the state as 'a unitary rational actor': they focus on internal processes, 'with special attention directed at decision makers and their "definitions of the situation"'.[14] However, an interpretive approach, the purpose of which is to understand actors' perceptions, beliefs, or shared meanings, should not be confused with an explanatory approach that draws on unit-level variables as causes of state behaviour. A unit-level theory of foreign policy may treat reasons as causes, or treat decisions as consequences of other factors, for example through models of organizational behaviour. Smith argues that, if decision-makers misperceive or are unaware of pertinent causal processes, then 'what decision-makers think

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.* p.16.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.* p.17.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Ole R. Holsti, 'Models of international relations and foreign policy', *Diplomatic History*, 13.1, Winter 1989, pp.29-30.

they are doing' may help make their choices comprehensible, yet be of 'limited use in *explaining* the foreign policy of their state'.[15] However, credible attempts to explain decisions without reference to actors' reasons must specify causal mechanisms linking the postulated explanatory factors to decision outcomes. Waltz's inability to trace the mechanisms by which states are socialized into particular modes of behaviour therefore damages neorealism's credibility as a theory of foreign policy. Nevertheless, a theory in which structure affects behaviour (even if the causal mechanisms are unclear) is distinct in kind from a theory in which structure affects the consequences of behaviour. Unlike a theory in which structure only affects outcomes, a theory in which structure affects behaviour directly is a theory of foreign policy. Because it invokes processes of socialization to explain state behaviour, and because social selection operates only if system-wide behaviour is driven by structural imperatives, Waltz's theory may be construed as a theory of foreign policy.

Waltz's confusion about theories of foreign policy

Armstrong argues that '[m]odern American realism has developed into a neorealist strand focused on the structure and outcomes of the international system, and a neoclassical strand concerned with the behaviour of states'.[16] Wendt also differentiates 'aggregate behaviour' from 'unit behaviour', insisting that Waltz explains 'patterns of state behaviour at the aggregate or population level', not the behaviour of individual states.[17] These distinctions are not sustainable. Waltz expresses the explanatory scope of his theory in terms of aggregate claims (such as the recurrence of balancing behaviour) not because structure affects outcomes directly (short-circuiting behaviour), but because his theory offers only partial explanations of state behaviour. Because his theory excludes numerous relevant variables, it cannot provide reliable explanations or predictions of particular instances of state behaviour. Rather than claiming the impossible for his theory, Waltz indicates that, if structure is an important factor, we should expect structural imperatives to be reflected in patterns of behaviour in international relations.

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[15] Steve Smith, 'Describing and explaining foreign policy behaviour', *Polity*, 17.3, Spring 1985, pp.605-6. See also Holsti, 'Models of international relations', p.41.
[16] David Armstrong *et al*, 'American realism and the real world', *Review of International Studies*, 29.3, July 2003, p.401.
[17] Wendt, *Social theory*, p.11.

This emphasis on system-wide outcomes does not alter the logic of his theory, which shows how system structure affects state behaviour. Waltz's theory suggests that states that wish to survive in an anarchic system will balance power, either by forming alliances or through internal efforts. This logic can straightforwardly be applied to individual states: the fact that the theory's explanations are unlikely to be helpful in specific cases does not mean that the theory is not a theory of foreign policy. The important point is that, because Waltz's theory generates partial explanations, it is unlikely, considered in isolation, to provide reliable explanations or predictions of the behaviour of individual states in particular circumstances.

Waltz's own account of whether his theory explains foreign policy is responsible for the confusion. He argues, for example, that an 'international-political theory serves primarily to explain international-political outcomes. It also tells us something about the foreign policies of states and about their economic and other interactions'.[18] Waltz's theory does not link structure directly to outcomes: it attempts to show that, whatever their goals, states balance power. Waltz's contention that his theory primarily explains outcomes is therefore only comprehensible given what follows: because the theory only examines one cause of behaviour (structure), it may be inaccurate when other factors dominate, yet because structure is a powerful factor, balancing is still likely to be a common behaviour. In other words, Waltz argues that systemic theories of international politics explain structurally induced behaviour. Using the same logic, he argues that theories of foreign policy explain behaviour that deviates from the balance-of-power model:

> A theory about foreign policy is a theory at the national level. It leads to expectations about the responses that dissimilar polities will make to external pressures. A theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations while claiming to explain only certain aspects of them. To think that a theory of international politics can in itself say how the coping is likely to be done is the opposite of the reductionist error.[19]

Thus the confusion about whether Waltz's theory is a theory of foreign policy arises primarily from his insistence that theories of foreign policy employ unit-level variables to explain how states cope with structural pressures. Waltz slides from defining theories according to what they explain into

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[18] Waltz, *Theory*, p.38.
[19] *Ibid.* p.72.

categorizing theories according to the causes they examine.[20] Nevertheless, the underlying point is clear: because Waltz's theory excludes unit-level causes, it only explains one aspect of state behaviour.

Waltz's recent work is less ambiguous. He argues, for example, that systems theories

> tell us about the forces to which the units are subjected. From them, we can draw some inferences about the expected behaviour and fate of the units: namely, how they will have to compete with and adjust to one another if they are to survive and flourish. To the extent that the dynamics of a system limit the freedom of its units, their behaviour and the outcomes of their behaviour become predictable.[21]

Here, Waltz presents the same argument about the limitations of structural theories when applied to individual cases of state behaviour, but without the conflation of unit-level theories (theories that draw on unit-level variables) and theories of foreign policy (theories that explain state behaviour). His point is that his theory explains foreign policy behaviour only to the extent that it is caused by structure.[22] In other words, his theory generates only partial explanations of foreign policy behaviour. When responding to Elman's insistence that neorealism should be evaluated as a theory of foreign policy, Waltz argues that his theory, like any theory of international politics, is 'able to explain some matters of foreign policy', but has 'to leave much of foreign policy aside'.[23] Nevertheless, he denies that his theory is a theory of foreign policy: the fact that *Theory* answers 'some questions about foreign policy with more or less precision – usually less – does not turn it into a dual theory'.[24] He reasons as follows: 'An international-political theory can explain states' behaviour only when external pressures dominate the internal dispositions of states, which seldom happens. When they do not, a theory of international politics needs help'.[25] In other words, Waltz's point is not that his theory does not explain state behaviour, but that it should not be mistaken for a theory that offers complete explanations.

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[20] See Colin Elman, 'Cause, effect, and consistency: a response to Kenneth Waltz, *Security Studies*, 6.1, Autumn 1996, p.59.
[21] Waltz, 'The origins of war', p.618.
[22] Waltz's theory can also explain only some international political outcomes: the continuities. See Waltz, *Theory*, pp.67-73.
[23] Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', p.54.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.* p.57.

Waltz believes that his theory captures an important dynamic of international relations (that structure constrains state behaviour), despite the fact that, because it examines only a single variable, specific explanations may not be helpful. He is therefore eager to prevent the theory being evaluated solely on the basis of its application to specific cases. To criticize balance-of-power theory for not explaining 'the particular policies of states', he argues, is to 'mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy'.[26] Interpreted literally, this undermines the value of Waltz's theory: if theories of foreign policy use unit-level variables to explain particular state policies, then there is little need for a systemic approach. Waltz also misrepresents his own theory, which *can* generate explanations of particular state actions. His point is that a structural theory may not be a reliable guide to individual cases: a complete account of particular state policies would draw on unit-level variables as well as on system structure. Waltz therefore distinguishes between 'a general theory' and 'a particular explanation': general theories isolate independent variables in artificially bounded realms of inquiry, whereas particular explanations draw on a range of explanatory factors.[27] Kaplan presents a similar argument: a theory of international politics 'will have nothing to say about specific international situations. There will be a definite gap between the theory and its application'.[28] However, it is not the case that a general theory of international politics has nothing to say about specific situations: rather, the application of a general theory that examines only system structure may not be illuminating. Waltz and Kaplan's point is that general theories do not incorporate the range of variables that may be employed in particular explanations.

Waltz's confusion about whether his theory should be regarded as a theory of foreign policy stems from the fact that it generates only partial explanations: Waltz is keen to prevent neorealism being evaluated as a complete account of foreign policy behaviour. Waltz's difficulty in specifying causal mechanisms, which undermines neorealism's credibility as theory of foreign policy, also stems from the fact that the theory generates only partial explanations. Although it is the only variable examined by Waltz's theory, structure is not, in fact, the sole cause of state behaviour. Yet because structure is

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[26] Waltz, *Theory*, p.121.
[27] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.916.
[28] Kaplan, 'Toward a theory of international politics', p.345.

the only variable it examines, Waltz's theory cannot illuminate how structure interacts with other variables in producing foreign policy decisions. Waltz acknowledges the 'bothersome limitations' that arise 'from the problem of weighing unit-level and structural causes'.[29] However, Waltz's failure to provide any indication of how structure and unit-level factors interact in generating behaviour is just as significant as his inability to determine what weight should be ascribed to structural causes. Because Waltz cannot indicate how structure affects domestic actors and agencies, he cannot specify causal mechanisms linking system structure to foreign policy behaviour. Waltz's inability to unpack the mechanisms by which structure affects behaviour severely dents the credibility of his theory, whether in regard to specific instances or recurrent behaviour. The problems stem from the fact that the theory generates only partial explanations: this is the key factor in the debate over whether neorealism should be construed as a theory of foreign policy.

Elman's argument: neorealism is a theory of foreign policy

Elman asks whether 'critics and proponents of neorealist theories have appropriate expectations about the kinds of questions those theories are suited to answer'.[30] In particular, he asks whether neorealism, ostensibly a theory of international politics, can be employed as a theory of foreign policy. He defines theories of foreign policy as making 'determinate predictions for dependent variable(s) that measure the behaviour of individual states'.[31] Determinacy has nothing to do with specificity: it 'is a logical, not an empirical, quality'.[32] Predictions are determinate if they follow deductively from theories. A theory of foreign policy may, therefore, generate only partial explanations: Christensen and Snyder insist that theories of foreign policy need not explain 'all aspects of a state's foreign policy'.[33] In other words, a theory from which it follows deductively that states act in certain ways in certain situations is a theory of foreign policy, even if the theory indicates little about other situations. Indeed, Elman finds 'no convincing epistemological or methodological reasons why neorealist theories should not be

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[29] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.343.
[30] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.9.
[31] *Ibid.* p.12.
[32] *Ibid.* p.13.
[33] Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks', p.138 (fn.3).

used to predict an individual state's behaviour'.[34] However, Elman's analysis qualifies his original definition. He insists that theories of foreign policy indicate what individual states will do in specific circumstances: 'Predictions about aggregate state behaviour, such as the statement "states will balance against a threatening concentration of power", are not foreign-policy predictions'.[35] But if a theory shows deductively that an individual state will balance against a threatening concentration of power, then the theory is, on Elman's original definition, a theory of foreign policy: the prediction concerns the behaviour of an individual state. This suggests that Elman's assessment of neorealism's suitability as a theory of foreign policy focuses on its ability to explain particular behaviour in particular circumstances, not on its ability to explain foreign policy in general.

Elman assesses four objections to employing neorealism as a theory of foreign policy. The first is that 'neorealist arguments fail to produce a single determinate behavioural prediction'.[36] Elman observes that different secondary assumptions, for example about whether state motivations are revisionist or status quo, generate 'distinct predictions about both state behaviour and international outcomes'.[37] However, he argues that this 'poses no challenge to the use of different neorealist theories as theories of foreign policy'.[38] Problems arise only if '*individual* neorealist theories fail to provide a single prediction of state behaviour'.[39] According to Elman, disagreement over whether states seeking to survive in an anarchic system should maximize relative power gains (offensive realism) or minimize relative power losses (defensive realism) 'fosters the appearance of indeterminacy'.[40] He maintains that, 'to the extent that neorealist theories fail to clearly specify their assumptions, variables and the links between them, they are flawed as theories of foreign policy'.[41] However, underspecification can be solved through greater 'clarity and rigour'.[42] In Elman's view, therefore, neorealism can, in

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[34] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.12.
[35] *Ibid.* p.13.
[36] *Ibid.* p.21.
[37] *Ibid.* p.22. See Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's status-quo bias: what security dilemma?' *Security Studies*, 5.3, Spring 1996, pp.90-121.
[38] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.26.
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.* p.30.
[42] *Ibid.* p.32.

principle, be employed as a theory of foreign policy. In other words, neorealist theories appear indeterminate because of uncertainty about how states should act, but can be employed as theories of foreign policy if this aspect is specified more clearly. Yet Waltz's theory says nothing about how states should act: it indicates only that states seeking to survive in anarchic systems balance power. Whereas the debate about whether states attempt to maximize power or security concerns empirical fact, Waltz treats state aims by assumption in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. Debates about how states actually behave cannot make his theory appear indeterminate.

Elman suggests that 'logical ambiguity, where even a *fully specified* theory predicts multiple possible outcomes', is a greater problem than underspecification.[43] He argues, for example, that 'Waltz's theory produces indeterminate predictions of balancing pathologies – both chainganging and buck-passing can be deduced from the structural features of multipolar systems'.[44] In Elman's view, this ambiguity prevents Waltz's theory 'from being usefully employed as a theory of foreign policy'.[45] However, Waltz's theory cannot generate indeterminate predictions: if the theory is indeterminate, then it will not generate predictions; if it is determinate, then two contrary predictions cannot both be deduced. The problem Elman identifies concerns specificity, not determinacy.[46] Waltz's theory predicts that states balance. In many cases, this prediction is too general to be helpful. Consequently, Waltz's analysis of empirical cases tends to draw not only on his theory, but also on unit-level variables (though often in an unspecified way). Christensen and Snyder point out that Waltz links the instability of multipolar systems to two different and inconsistent structural tendencies: he associates World War I with states being chained to reckless allies and World War II with buck-passing.[47] Yet neither behaviour follows deductively from Waltz's theory. These behaviours derive from a postulated interaction of structural

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[43] *Ibid.* p.30.
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] *Ibid.* p.31.
[46] Several scholars do argue that Waltz's theory is logically indeterminate. Powell argues: 'What have often been taken to be the implications of anarchy do not really follow from the assumption of anarchy', but from 'other implicit and unarticulated assumptions about the states' strategic environment'. Glaser describes his 'contingent realism' as correcting neorealism's deductive logic. See Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in international relations theory: the neorealist-neoliberal debate', *International Organization*, 48.2, Spring 1994, p.314; Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as optimists: cooperation as self-help', *International Security*, 19.3, Winter 1994/95, pp.51-2.
[47] See Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks', p.138.

and unit-level variables. They do not, therefore, imply anything about the determinacy of Waltz's theory. Elman suggests that 'logical ambiguity may be cured by adding more variables that permit greater control over two equally plausible predictions'.[48] This indicates that he conflates theory with theory application, and that he misunderstands why Waltz's theory generates only partial explanations: Waltz excludes unit-level variables in order to isolate system structure as an independent variable.

The second objection to employing neorealism as a theory of foreign policy is that 'unit-level influences will interfere to make systemically derived behavioural predictions inaccurate'.[49] Elman observes three strategies adopted by neorealists: they have developed 'determinate and "exhaustive"' theories that exclude unit-level variables, 'probabilistic' theories that exclude unit-level variables, and 'determinate and exhaustive' theories that incorporate unit-level variables.[50] Elman maintains that theories of each type should be employable as theories of foreign policy. He argues that scholars who develop exhaustive theories from which unit-level variables are excluded 'know that they have excluded occasionally pertinent unit-level material' and that their theories will sometimes produce inaccurate predictions.[51] Yet if scholars deliberately exclude variables known to be important, then their theories are not complete (exhaustive), but partial: the theories are claimed to be valuable even though predictions will be inaccurate when the excluded variables predominate.[52] Such theories face the same problems as Waltz's when asked to explain the foreign policy of an individual state. Elman construes probabilistic theories as acknowledging that 'a residual and implicit set of unspecified variables may affect the outcome'.[53] If so, then they also generate partial explanations: they differ from Waltz's theory only if they specify actual probabilities. However, any probabilistic theory will face the same problems generating probability estimates that Waltz encounters. According to Elman, 'Waltz accepts the importance of being able to *deduce* when unit-level factors are likely to matter

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[48] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.32.
[49] *Ibid.* p.21.
[50] *Ibid.* p.33. An exhaustive theory generates complete explanations: it incorporates all relevant variables.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] Elman suggests that such theories are accepted because their authors are not dogmatic falsificationists. It has nothing to do with falsificationism: such theories do not claim to offer complete explanations, but to capture important aspects of phenomena.
[53] *Ibid.* p.34.

most'.[54] Yet Waltz finds it impossible to deduce the relative weight of systemic and unit-level causes from a structural theory. Elman's suggestion that probability estimates might be derived inductively begs the question of which phenomena are caused by systemic and which by unit-level variables.

Elman considers three problems with adding unit-level variables to systemic theories. He rejects the view that parsimonious theories are superior, the notion that incorporating unit-level variables means that a theory is no longer neorealist, and the notion that including unit-level variables would constitute a degenerative problem-shift in the neorealist research programme.[55] However, he does not examine the key problem with adding unit-level variables to neorealist theories: Waltz's theory isolates structure as an independent variable. Waltz does not consider unit-level factors to be unimportant: rather, he suppresses the process by which behaviour, drawing on unit-level variables, feeds back into structure, in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. Elman cannot be right to suggest that adding unit-level factors 'may provide a different account of state motivation'.[56] Systemic theories do not attempt to describe or explain state motivation, but treat it by assumption. In analyzing or describing a specific case in the real world, it may be beneficial to combine elements of different theories to provide an integrated account, but this is irrelevant to the task of theory construction. Elman frequently slips from discussing the nature of neorealist theories into discussing questions of theory application. For example, he includes in a list of neorealism's core components the assumption that states 'weigh options and make decisions based primarily on their strategic situation and an assessment of the external environment'.[57] Such an assumption plays no role in Waltz's theory. At best, it describes how states in fact act, which may be relevant to theory application, but it cannot be a feature of a theory that isolates system structure as an independent variable.

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[54] *Ibid.* p.35.
[55] See *ibid.* pp.38-9.
[56] *Ibid.* p.40.
[57] *Ibid.* p.20.

The third objection to employing neorealism as a theory of foreign policy is 'that neorealist models rely on an evolutionary selection mechanism, and so cannot be used predictively'.[58] Elman argues that, if neorealist theories are to explain state behaviour, 'they must specify a mechanism that shows why, when faced with particular circumstances, states act one way rather than another'.[59] In his view, neorealism relies upon 'a weak form of rationality – states select less costly strategies over their more expensive alternatives'.[60] However, 'some proponents and critics' argue that neorealism relies on a 'mechanism of evolutionary selection'.[61] If so, Elman observes, neorealism cannot be used as a theory of foreign policy: evolutionary models 'only purport to explain the *prevalence* of behaviour – they have little to say about why particular units do or do not behave in that way'.[62] As Elman recognizes, Waltz is unclear about whether he relies 'on rationality, evolutionary selection or socialization'.[63] In other words, Waltz fails to identify plausible causal mechanisms. Elman rightly rejects the view that structure affects behaviour through selection. Social selection operates through behaviour: it occurs because states act in certain ways.[64] A systemic theory that specifies selection as a mechanism must therefore explain how state behaviour brings selection into play. Waltz also denies relying on a rationality assumption. His theory indicates that states balance, not that they weigh costs: the latter is a possible feature of how states respond to situations. Incorporating a rationality assumption would make a structural theory capable of generating complete explanations. Waltz's theory generates partial explanations precisely because he does not assume that states respond rationally to situations: their responses derive from the complex interplay of structural and unit-level factors. Socialization, in other words, cannot be reduced to rational adaptation.

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[58] *Ibid.* p.21.
[59] *Ibid.* p.42.
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] *Ibid.* p.43.
[64] Social selection differs from evolutionary selection because the social environment is constituted by other actors.

Finally, Elman considers the claim that neorealist theories cannot explain foreign policy because they 'provide only very broad, nonspecific foreign-policy predictions'.[65] For example, the expectation that states will balance may be consistent with a broad range of actual behaviours. Elman points out that neorealism does rule out some behaviour, for example, other-regarding behaviour.[66] Further, even if neorealists do not predict specific foreign policy behaviour, Elman suggests that we can apply a '"prosurvival" logic to the analysis of policy content'.[67] In other words, neorealism predicts that, if a state has to choose between two specific policies, 'it should choose that policy which best ensures state survival'.[68] Elman therefore denies that neorealism's dependent variables are 'substantively too general to permit scholars to make foreign-policy predictions'.[69] However, Elman's argument involves inferring properties of neorealist theories from heuristic applications of their insights. Waltz's theory does not predict that states adjudicate between options according to a pro-survival logic: it predicts that, insofar as state behaviour is driven by structural factors, states will balance. Any other inferences rely, at least implicitly, on some conception of how structural and unit-level variables interact in producing behaviour. In other words, inferences concerning how states choose between options are matters of theory application, not of theory development. Further, such inferences involve heuristic, not deductive, theory application: they draw on unit-level as well as structural variables. As elsewhere, Elman ignores the most important obstacle to employing Waltz's theory as a theory of foreign policy: that it generates only partial explanations. It is essential to distinguish the theory's raw predictions (that states will balance) from hypotheses about how system structure may be combined with unit-level factors in integrated accounts of specific foreign policy behaviour.

Advancing the realist research programme

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[65] *Ibid.* p.46.
[66] See *ibid.* pp.25-6; Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it'.
[67] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.46.
[68] *Ibid.* pp.46-7.
[69] *Ibid.* p.47.

This section assesses realist attempts to apply and to improve neorealism. First, it examines two of Elman's examples of applications of Waltz's theory that 'combine systemic theory with domestic-level variables': Christensen and Snyder's inquiry into balancing in multipolar systems and Posen's inquiry into the development of military doctrines.[70] It then examines the debate between offensive and defensive realists, and the developing neoclassical realist research programme. The principal theme of this section is whether Waltz's theory can be improved by adding unit-level variables. Structural theorists often employ unit-level factors in substantive explanations. Haggard and Simmons note that, 'since structure alone is a poor predictor of regime characteristics and national policies, "structural" theories must continually revert in an ad hoc way to domestic political variables'.[71] Katzenstein argues that, because neorealist predictions are too general to tell us anything 'about the content of the national security policies of states', studies of national security typically import variables from other fields and graft them onto neorealism's orienting framework.[72] This section recognizes that good explanations refer to a range of variables: its purpose is to ask whether unit-level factors can be incorporated within Waltz's theory without corrupting his explanatory strategy. It makes two related arguments. First, realists mistakenly interpret Waltz's theory as generating complete explanations: consequently, they attempt to improve it by adding unit-level variables. Second, realists conflate theory and heuristic theory application: factors employed in substantive explanations cannot necessarily be incorporated within a theory premised on isolating system structure as an independent variable. Realists are right to criticize the utility of Waltz's theory. However, they underestimate the challenge of combining structural and unit-level variables in a unified nomothetic theory about a complex system.

Realist applications of Waltz's theory

Christensen and Snyder identify a tension between Waltz's theory and practical applications of it: whereas the theory 'addresses properties of the international system', scholars applying Waltz's ideas

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[70] *Ibid.* p.37. See Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks'; Barry R. Posen, *The sources of military doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the world wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
[71] Haggard & Simmons, 'Theories of international regimes', p.501.
[72] Katzenstein, 'Introduction', p.26.

'have normally used them as a theory of foreign policy'.[73] This is problematic, they contend, 'because for a particular state in particular circumstances, any foreign policy and its opposite can sometimes be deduced from Waltz's theory'.[74] Waltz links the instability of multipolar systems to two opposite risks: chainganging and buck-passing, associated with World Wars I and II, respectively. Because he is a systemic theorist, Christensen and Snyder argue, this is acceptable: Waltz deduces 'that multipolarity is structurally prone to instabilities, and the two major cases of this century illustrate his theory suitably'.[75] For scholars who use neorealism to explain foreign policy, however, it is problematic:

> To explain, predict, or prescribe alliance strategy in particular circumstances, they need to specify which of the two opposite dangers – chainganging or buck-passing – is to be expected in those circumstances. An explanation that can account for any policy and its opposite is no explanation.[76]

However, it is not the case that any foreign policy and its opposite can be deduced from Waltz's theory: only balancing can be deduced. Waltz discusses both chainganging and buck-passing, citing them as evidence of the instability of multipolar systems, but neither behaviour is deducible from his theory. Waltz's discussion is not deductive: rather, he develops hypotheses about how structure and unit-level variables interact to produce these behaviours. His point is that states have more options in multipolar systems than in bipolar systems: in the latter, structural imperatives are clearer. Although Waltz fails to specify how he believes structural and unit-level variables interact, this reflects the limitations of his theory applications, not the (in)determinacy of his theory.

Christensen and Snyder argue that Waltz's theory 'must be cross-fertilized with other theories before it will make determinate predictions at the foreign policy level'.[77] By incorporating factors such as perception, they propose to complicate Waltz's 'specification of the state's position in the international system', such that 'knowing the polarity of the system and the perceived offense-defense balance will theoretically suffice to predict the alliance behaviour of states'.[78] However, Christensen and Snyder

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[73] Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks', pp.137-8.
[74] *Ibid.* p.138.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] *Ibid.*
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] *Ibid.* and fn.7. On the offense-defense balance see Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, 'What is the offense-defense balance and can we measure it?', *International Security*, 22.4, Spring 1998,

confuse determinacy and specificity. Waltz's theory is determinate: it predicts that states will balance. Because it examines only one variable (structure), the theory cannot deductively explain how the interaction of structural and unit-level variables results in behaviour that falls outside the balance-of-power logic. How structure interacts with other factors to produce chainganging or buck-passing, Waltz insists, is a question of theory application: 'However good or bad my brief explanation of what happened in Europe prior to World War II may be, an explanation is not a theory'.[79]

> The question is not what should be included in an account of foreign policies but what can be included in a theory of international politics. A theory is not a mere collection of variables. If a "gap" is found in a theory, it cannot be plugged by adding a "variable" to it.[80]

Christensen and Snyder aim to 'explain the opposite alliance choices of the European great powers before World Wars I and II'.[81] Waltz objects not to their aim, but to their method: they start with Waltz's theory and add those 'variables from security dilemma theory and from perceptual theories that are necessary to derive a theoretically determinate and historically accurate account'.[82] In other words, they attempt to develop a version of Waltz's theory that generates complete explanations of specific foreign policy behaviours. They fail to recognize that the limitations of Waltz's theory derive from the difficulty of isolating independent variables in complex systems.

Posen attempts to explain 'how military doctrine takes shape and how it figures in grand strategy' by weighing 'bureaucratic, "power political", technological, and geographic influences'.[83] He uses 'organization theory and balance of power theory', represented by Allison's *Essence of decision* and Waltz's *Theory*, respectively, 'to analyze interwar French, British, and German military doctrine'.[84] He 'test[s] these two theories by deducing specific propositions from them' about three aspects of military doctrine: 'its offensive, defensive, or deterrent character; its coordination with foreign policy (political-

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pp.44-82; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'Offense-defense theory and its critics', *Security Studies*, 4.4, Summer 1995, pp.660-91; Stephen Van Evera, 'Offense, defense, and the causes of war', *International Security*, 22.4, Spring 1998, pp.5-43.

[79] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.916.

[80] *Ibid.*

[81] Christensen & Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks', p.139.

[82] *Ibid.*

[83] Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, p.7.

[84] *Ibid.* See Graham Allison, *Essence of decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

military integration); and the degree of innovation it contains'.[85] According to Posen, although balance of power theory 'can predict some details of military doctrine' from states' positions in the system, it 'predicts heterogeneity along the dimension of offense-defense-deterrence'.[86] It also 'predicts closer integration of a state's military doctrine with the political aspects of its grand strategy than does organization theory' and 'predicts a tendency toward innovation'.[87] Posen concludes that organization theory 'does correctly predict organizational tendencies', but that much interwar behaviour is explained by states' '"structural" positions'.[88] However, although Posen employs *Theory* as his model of balance of power theory, none of these propositions is directly deducible from Waltz's theory. Posen's claims about what balance of power theory predicts concern states' responses to structural imperatives. Good explanations of how states respond to their situations are almost certain to draw on both structural and unit-level variables. Indeed, military doctrine reflects 'both national and international influences. It represents the state's response to the constraints and incentives of the external world'.[89] This suggests that Posen does not apply Waltz's theory deductively, but explores how structural and unit-level variables interact to produce particular policies.

Posen acknowledges that Waltz 'might quarrel' with how his theory is used: Posen pulls it toward

> "Realpolitik", with which it is closely identified, but not synonymous. Waltz stresses the influence of general systemic constraints and incentives on the behaviour of all states, and on the behaviour of the system as a whole. Students of "Realpolitik" focus on how these general constraints and incentives combine with the unique situations of individual states to lead them to specific foreign or military policies.[90]

In other words, Posen does not even attempt to apply Waltz's theory deductively: instead, he analyzes how states in fact respond to particular constraints and incentives. Rather then testing organization and balance of power theory, Posen contrasts two world-views which suggest that different variables help to make sense of the same sorts of behaviour. He argues that the 'comparative case method

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[85] Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, pp.7-8.
[86] *Ibid.* p.40.
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ibid.* pp.225, 228.
[89] *Ibid.* p.38.
[90] *Ibid.* pp.34-5.

allows the scholar to sample a range of variables identified as important by each theory'.[91] Applying the two theories competitively 'is analogous to the use of different lenses': each theory 'allows us to view some aspects of the same phenomenon more clearly (albeit at the cost of reducing the visibility of other aspects)'.[92] The dividend is not improved understanding of either theory's explanatory power, but a 'more focused understanding of military developments between the wars'.[93] It is therefore misleading for Elman to describe Posen as a leading exponent of 'neorealist readings of foreign policy'.[94] Posen's study neither develops a theory, nor applies a theory deductively: for all its virtues, it does not point towards a unified explanatory theory of complex systems.

Offensive and defensive realism

Assessing realist work from the early 1990s, Frankel noted that the major debates were not 'between traditional realism and structural realism, but among different versions of structural realism', including offensive and defensive realism.[95] Mearsheimer associates defensive realism with Waltz's assumption that states are not 'inherently aggressive', but 'merely aim to survive'.[96] According to Waltz, the 'first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system'.[97] Mearsheimer, a self-declared offensive realist, disagrees: 'the structure of the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other'.[98] In his view, the 'overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power'.[99] However, realists also disagree about whether offensive and defensive realism are variants of structural realism at all. Disagreement is partly due to proliferating neologisms: these include 'postclassical realism' (Brooks),

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[91] *Ibid.* p.8.
[92] *Ibid.*
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.10 (fn.9).
[95] Benjamin Frankel, 'The reading list', *Security Studies*, 5.1, Autumn 1995, p.185. The distinction was first outlined by Snyder, who used the terms 'aggressive' and 'defensive'. See Jack Snyder, *Myths of empire: Domestic politics and international ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), ch.1.
[96] John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), p.19.
[97] Waltz, *Theory*, p.126.
[98] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, p.3.
[99] *Ibid.* p.2

'paleo-realism' (Deudney), 'functional realism' (Finel), 'contingent realism' (Glaser), 'motivational realism' (Kydd), and 'neoclassical realism' (Rose).[100] Yet disagreement about what the debate between offensive and defensive realism entails outweighs disagreement about which theorist falls into what camp. Three broad positions are discernible: first, that offensive and defensive realism are attempts to clarify what anarchy implies for state behaviour; second, that they are attempts to explain how states respond to structural incentives and constraints; third, that they are attempts to describe how states behave. Each position highlights a different aspect of the problems inherent in developing a nomothetic theory that progresses beyond neorealism by incorporating unit-level variables.

Scholars such as Glaser, Kydd and Labs maintain that offensive and defensive realism are variants of structural realism which differ over whether anarchy forces states to maximize power or security.[101] Glaser, for example, argues that defensive realism corrects 'deductive flaws' in Waltz's argument: it argues that security-seeking states weigh the risks of cooperation and competition; it emphasizes the importance of the offense-defense balance; and it questions whether states assume the worst about their adversaries' intentions.[102] He maintains that the offensive realist disagreement with Waltz and with defensive realism is also 'a deductive question'.[103] In other words, the debate between offensive and defensive realism concerns what Waltz's definition of system structure implies for state behaviour. However, Waltz's theory does not generate inferences about whether states seek to maximize power or security, or whether they weigh the risks of cooperation and competition. Waltz assumes that states seek to survive and infers that they will balance. If the debate between offensive and defensive

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[100] See Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling realisms', *International Organization*, 51.3, Summer 1997, pp.445-77; Daniel Deudney, 'Dividing realism: structural realism versus security materialism on nuclear security and proliferation', *Security Studies*, 2.3/4, Spring/Summer 1993, pp.7-36; Bernard I. Finel, 'Black box or Pandora's box: state level variables and progressivity in research programs', *Security Studies*, 11.2, Winter 2001/02, pp.187-227; Glaser, 'Realists as optimists'; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in sheep's clothing: why security seekers do not fight each other', *Security Studies*, 7.1, Autumn 1997, pp.115-54; Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy', *World Politics*, 51.1, Oct 1998, pp.144-72.

[101] See Charles L. Glaser, 'The necessary and natural evolution of structural realism', in Vasquez & Elman (eds.), *Realism and the balancing of power*, p.267; Kydd, 'Sheep in sheep's clothing', p.114; Eric J. Labs, 'Beyond victory: offensive realism and the expansion of war aims', *Security Studies*, 6.4, Summer 1997, p.4.

[102] Glaser, 'The necessary and natural evolution', p.270.

[103] *Ibid.*

realism indicates that Waltz's theory is indeterminate (that balancing behaviour cannot be deduced from the conjunction of anarchy and the assumption that states seek to survive), then it is unlikely that any realist variant is genuinely deductive.[104] There are three other possibilities. First, both offensive and defensive realists attempt to generate complete explanations of state behaviour within Waltz's framework. Second and third, the debate does not actually concern the deductive logic of Waltz's theory: it concerns either how structural and unit-level variables interact, or how states in fact behave.

Mearsheimer argues that 'the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals'.[105] He applies this offensive realist logic to the full spectrum of state behaviour. Unlike Waltz, he does not emphasize that structure is only one explanatory factor among many: he insists simply that states seek to maximize power. He argues, for example, that there 'are no status quo powers in the international system': great powers 'almost always have revisionist intentions'.[106] Even Mearsheimer's discussion of his theory's limitations indicates that he interprets it as generating complete explanations. In contrast to Waltz's recognition that his theory will be inaccurate whenever structural forces do not predominate, Mearsheimer merely acknowledges that there are some cases that offensive realism should be able to explain but cannot, arguing that '[a]ll theories face this problem'.[107] Zakaria's critique of defensive realism also focuses on its ability to generate complete explanations. In his view, defensive realists assume that 'a rational state expands only to achieve security': divergent behaviour is explained through unit-level variables.[108] This, he argues, severely limits the approach's explanatory power.

> The international system pressures states towards moderate behaviour only; anything else must be explained at some other level of analysis because it cannot be a rational response to the international environment. Thus defensive realism's systemic explanation of state behaviour actually explains very little foreign policy behaviour.[109]

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[104] Glaser, for example, asserts, rather than demonstrates, that defensive realist claims follow deductively from basic neorealist assumptions.
[105] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, p.21.
[106] *Ibid.* p.2.
[107] *Ibid.* p.10.
[108] Fareed Zakaria, 'Realism and domestic politics', *International Security*, 17.1, Summer 1992, p.191.
[109] *Ibid.* p.192.

Zakaria overstates how much state behaviour is immoderate. More importantly, he implies, like Mearsheimer, that theories should generate complete explanations: the problem with defensive realism is that it only explains some behaviour. However, if offensive and defensive realists try to generate complete explanations within a neorealist framework, then they ignore the fact that Waltz is forced to suppress unit-level variables in order to isolate structure as an independent variable.

Edelstein and Elman both argue that the debate between offensive and defensive realism concerns how states respond to systemic incentives and constraints. Edelstein argues that offensive and defensive realists differ over how 'beliefs about other states' intentions affect ... grand strategic choices'.[110] Elman argues that they differ over 'the appropriate general strategy' in an anarchic environment.[111] Mearsheimer and Zakaria add weight to this account of the debate. According to Mearsheimer, both offensive and defensive realism view great powers as 'concerned mainly with figuring out how to survive in a world where there is no agency to protect them from each other'.[112] According to Zakaria, defensive realists argue that, given systemic constraints and incentives, '[a]nything beyond a moderate, incremental foreign policy is unnecessary and counterproductive'.[113] In other words, these scholars represent the debate as being about how states respond to an anarchic environment, rather than about what follows from anarchy. The crucial difference is that, whereas the implications of anarchy follow from structure alone, states' choices, strategies, and decisions derive from the interaction of structural and unit-level variables. Waltz therefore insists that his theory can explain the constraints and incentives that states face, but not how they respond. If states' responses to situations involve both domestic and systemic factors, and if the debate between defensive and offensive realism concerns how states respond, then defensive and offensive realism are not systemic theories. If they are unified theories, incorporating both structural and unit-level variables, then we require an account of how they manage to overcome the agent-structure antinomy in a causal theory. The alternative is that offensive and defensive realism are not theories at all, but hypotheses about how states in fact behave.

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[110] David M. Edelstein, 'Managing uncertainty: beliefs about intentions and the rise of great powers', *Security Studies*, 12.1, Autumn 2002, p.1.
[111] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p.27.
[112] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, p.21.
[113] Zakaria, 'Realism and domestic politics', p.192.

Jervis argues that offensive and defensive realism differ over whether conflict is avoidable.[114] Frankel argues that they differ over whether security is plentiful or scarce.[115] According to Schweller and Wohlforth, the debate is concerned with the content of 'state interests and motivations'.[116] What these scholars have in common is the view that offensive and defensive realists differ over questions that are, at least in principle, empirically resolvable. Finel is less sure:

> it is not completely clear to what extent the debate between offensive and defensive realists is a debate over deductive logic or a debate over interpretation of the empirical record, although both sides claim their arguments are both deductively sound and empirically supported.[117]

Nevertheless, to the extent that the debate concerns empirical fact rather than deductive logic, it ceases to be about how Waltz's theory can be improved. Waltz attempts to isolate structure as an independent variable in a causal and deductive systemic theory. Because he suppresses the process by which state behaviour feeds back into system structure, his theory generates only partial explanations. Waltz acknowledges that good explanations are likely to have to draw on unit-level variables as well as on his theory, and this is reflected in his own applications of his theory. However, substantive debates about how states in fact behave do not carry implications for the deductive logic of Waltz's theory. They may demonstrate the limitations of a causal approach to complex systems, but they do not carry realism closer to a unified causal theory of international politics.

Neoclassical realism

Rose argues that neorealism is a theory of international politics: it explains 'the outcomes of state interactions'.[118] Offensive and defensive realism, in contrast, are theories of foreign policy: offensive realism 'argues that systemic factors are always dominant'; defensive realism argues 'that systemic

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[114] See Robert Jervis, 'Realism, neoliberalism, and cooperation: understanding the debate', *International Security*, 24.1, Summer 1999, pp.48-9.
[115] See Frankel, 'The reading list', p.185.
[116] Schweller & Wohlforth, 'Power test', p.72.
[117] Finel, 'Black box or Pandora's box', p.188 (fn.2).
[118] Rose, 'Neoclassical realism', p.145.

factors drive some kinds of state behaviour but not others'.[119] Neoclassical realism, Rose argues, is also a theory of foreign policy, but one which 'explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables'.[120] According to Rose, defensive realism is flawed 'because its first-order systemic argument does not account for much actual behaviour': defensive realists 'contract out the bulk of their explanatory work to domestic-level variables introduced on an ad hoc basis'.[121] Offensive realism is misguided because, in order to show how states respond to their environments, 'one must analyze how systemic pressures are translated through unit-level intervening variables'.[122] Neoclassical realists

> point out that there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour. Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter.[123]

Neoclassical realists also 'examine the strength and structure of states relative to their societies, because these affect the proportion of national resources that can be allocated to foreign policy'.[124] Neoclassical realism, Rose argues, is a theory of foreign policy that links 'clearly specified independent, intervening, and dependent variables in a direct causal chain'.[125]

According to Rose, 'systemic pressures and incentives may shape the broad contours and general direction of foreign policy without being strong or precise enough to determine the specific details of state behaviour'.[126] In other words, systemic factors limit the 'foreign policy choices considered by a state's leaders at a particular time', rather than forcing the selection of one policy over another.[127] This identifies neoclassical realism closely with neorealism: Waltz also argues that structures 'shape and shove. They do not determine behaviours and outcomes'.[128] Yet Rose insists that neoclassical realism offers a 'distinct methodological perspective': 'analysts wanting to understand any particular case need to do justice to the full complexity of the causal chain linking relative material power and foreign

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[119] *Ibid.* p.146.
[120] *Ibid.*
[121] *Ibid.* p.151.
[122] *Ibid.* p.152.
[123] *Ibid.* pp.146-7.
[124] *Ibid.* p.147.
[125] *Ibid.* p.167.
[126] *Ibid.* p.147.
[127] *Ibid.*
[128] Waltz, 'Reflections', p.343.

policy outputs'.[129] From a neoclassical realist perspective, (neo)realism 'is a theoretical hedgehog: it knows one big thing, that systemic forces and relative material power shape state behaviour'.[130] Rose insists that scholars 'who cannot move beyond the system will have difficulty explaining most of what happens in international relations'.[131] In other words, neoclassical realism differs from neorealism not over what Waltz's theory can explain, but over the appropriate theoretical response to its limitations: neoclassical realists do not accept that a theory may generate only partial explanations. This raises the question of how neoclassical realism overcomes the agent-structure antinomy in developing a causal theory that draws on both structural and unit-level variables. Rose provides no account of how this may be achieved: he merely asserts that both sets of variables are incorporated within the same causal chain. Given the problems that Waltz encounters, however, it is hard to see how this can be the case. Neoclassical realists may examine factors that intervene between situational imperatives and state behaviour, but they do not demonstrate how a causal theory that draws on both structural and unit-level variables may be constructed.

'Instead of assuming that states seek security', Rose argues, 'neoclassical realists assume that states respond to the uncertainties of international anarchy by seeking to control and shape their external environment'.[132] If so, then neoclassical realism is not even a theory of foreign policy, let alone an attempt to progress beyond the limitations of Waltz's approach by combining structural and unit-level insights. Rather, neoclassical realism is a theory (or account) of how structure is shaped by state behaviour: it shows how state actions affect their environments. Yet Rose insists that neoclassical realism recognizes how systemic forces shape state behaviour. If so, then it lacks a clearly identifiable independent variable. Does structure affect behaviour, or does behaviour affect structure? This is the challenge posed by the agent-structure antinomy to those who would develop explanatory theories about international relations. According to Schweller, neoclassical realists 'have not rejected systemic theory but instead incorporated its insights': 'While not abandoning Waltz's insights about international

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[129] Rose, Neoclassical realism', p.165.
[130] *Ibid.*
[131] *Ibid.*
[132] *Ibid.* p.152.

structure and its consequences, neo-classical realists have added first and second image variables ... to explain foreign policy decision making and intrinsically important historical puzzles'.[133] However, like Rose, Schweller merely asserts that it is possible to combine structural and unit-level variables: he does not confront the obstacles to doing so. Neoclassical realism has greater plausibility as a world-view that emphasizes the importance of what it terms intervening variables than as a nomothetic theory. Rose even acknowledges a preference for 'theoretically informed narratives'.[134] If the aim is to develop a nomothetic theory, then neoclassical realism does not progress beyond the limitations of Waltz's partial explanations.

Conclusion

Although Waltz's denial that his theory can be employed as a theory of foreign policy is mistaken, his insistence that it can offer only partial explanations of state behaviour contains an important insight for those realists who attempt to incorporate unit-level variables within the neorealist framework. Waltz insists that to add 'something that one believes has been omitted requires showing how it can take its place as one element of a coherent and effective theory'.[135] In other words, additional variables must respect the theory's original logic. The logic of Waltz's theory is that the process by which state behaviour feeds back into system structure must be suppressed in order to isolate structure as an independent variable. Waltz assumes that states seek to survive and asks how structure affects the behaviour of such actors. He does not consider unit-level factors unimportant. Rather, he is unable to combine structural and unit-level variables in an integrated theory. Waltz's critics are right to doubt the utility of his theory. Examined in isolation, the theory's predictions are inaccurate, yet Waltz fails to specify how it may be drawn on as a source of heuristic insights. This does not mean, however, that a better explanatory theory can easily be developed. Zakaria argues that 'a good account of a nation's foreign policy should include systemic, domestic, and other influences, specifying what aspects of the

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[133] Schweller, 'The progressiveness of neoclassical realism', pp.317-8.
[134] Rose, 'Neoclassical realism', p.153.
[135] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.916.

policy can be explained by what factors'.[136] Waltz would agree, but to identify the problem is not to identify the solution. Neither offensive, defensive, nor neoclassical realism provides a solution. Waltz believes that '[s]omeone may one day fashion a unified theory of internal and external politics. Until that day comes, the theoretical separation of domestic and international politics need not bother us unduly'.[137] He is wrong: the separation should bother us. However, it should not permit an empirical focus on particular variables to be mistaken for a causal theory of foreign policy that successfully integrates systemic and unit-level perspectives.

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[136] Zakaria, 'Realism and domestic politics', p.198.
[137] Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', p.57.

Conclusion

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Conclusion

That explanatory theory in International Relations is an inherently limited cognitive form should be no surprise. Even theorists within the explanatory mould (primarily, but not exclusively, rationalists) acknowledge that their approach offers only limited insight into areas of international relations considered important by both explanatory theorists and their critics.[1] Keohane, for example, acknowledges the limited nature of rationalist approaches to (systemic) change, ideational factors and domestic politics. Neorealism's inability to explain (systemic) change is a prominent feature of post-positivist critiques, but is also recognized by rationalists. Waltz acknowledges that structural change begins in the units and so is not addressed by his theory, whilst Keohane suggests that rationalist theory may 'help us understand the direction of change in world politics, if not always its precise extent or the form that it takes'.[2] Ruggie could stand for many others in objecting that ideational factors such as 'identities, norms, aspirations, ideologies, or simply ideas about cause-effect relations' tend to be discounted and poorly understood in rationalist approaches.[3] Addressing this deficiency, Goldstein and Keohane acknowledge that, in realist and institutionalist models, 'preferences and causal beliefs are given, and attention focuses on the variation in the constraints faced by actors. Most analysts who rely on such approaches have relegated ideas to a minor role'.[4] Keohane also recognizes that rationalist approaches do not pay 'sufficient attention to domestic politics. It is all too obvious that domestic politics is neglected by much game-theoretic strategic analysis and by structural explanations

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[1] I use the term explanatory theory rather than rationalism in order to encompass not merely those approaches that explicitly assume instrumental rationality, but any approach pursuing causal or deductive explanation.
[2] Robert O. Keohane, 'International institutions: two approaches', in *International institutions*, p.168.
[3] Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?' p.855.
[4] Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and foreign policy: an analytical framework', in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and foreign policy: Beliefs, institutions, and political change* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.4.

of international regime change'.[5] Neoclassical realists, amongst others, have failed to show how unit-level variables can successfully be incorporated alongside structure in a nomothetic theory.

Given the willingness of rationalists to acknowledge where their approaches fall short (if not to grant equal validity to alternative approaches), it is surprising that the peculiar character and limitations of Waltz's explanatory strategy have not been more widely recognized.[6] Explanatory theorists and their critics alike have, in general, failed to engage with the fact that Waltz excludes important factors (including ideational and domestic determinants of systemic change) not because he considers them unimportant, but because he cannot reconcile them with a strictly nomothetic approach to explanation. Four factors make this neglect particularly surprising. First, explanatory theorists have ignored the tension between Waltz's limited, structural theory and his conceptualization of international relations as a complex system (in which structure and units are mutually affecting), despite the fact that Waltz is assumed to exemplify an explanatory approach. Second, explanatory theorists have ignored the difficulties that Waltz encounters because he adopts a nomothetic model of explanation, despite the fact that explanatory theory relies, at least implicitly, upon the same nomothetic model. Third, explanatory theorists and their critics have failed to ask what kinds of explanations Waltz's theory generates, despite the fact that the limitations of rationalist explanations lie at the heart of the debate between rationalists and their critics. Fourth, these theorists have declined to examine the particular difficulties Waltz encounters in applying his theory to substantive problems in international relations, despite the central role of theory testing in the explanatory approach. In general, Waltz's substantive theory has been evaluated without due regard either to its place within his broader explanatory strategy or to the nature and scope of the explanations it generates.

This chapter reviews Waltz's explanatory approach and provides an indicative account of what it reveals about the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations. It is divided into four

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[5] Keohane, 'International institutions', p.173.

[6] Smith criticizes rationalists for attempting to establish their own epistemological commitments as the ground on which reflectivist approaches (which reject those commitments) should be evaluated. See Smith, 'The discipline of international relations', p.386.

sections. The first section outlines Waltz's explanatory strategy, showing how an appreciation of the relationship between Waltz's substantive theory and how he conceptualizes international relations sheds light on both his theoretical manoeuvrings and his substantive explanations. The second section examines the concepts of system and structure and their role in explanatory approaches. It argues that these concepts are unavoidably bound up with questions about holism and individualism and about agents and structures: consequently, they are hard to reconcile with the causal, deductive approach that epitomises explanatory theory. The third section argues that Waltz's substantive explanations are not genuinely deductive and that Waltz therefore provides no clear account of how precisely he arrives at particular explanatory claims. It argues that, although this failing is replicated across explanatory approaches in International Relations, there is no accepted alternative to the nomothetic model. The fourth section examines the prospects for progress in explanatory theory in International Relations, noting recent attempts to move beyond the notion of mutual constitution. It argues that if theories provide only partial insights, we would benefit from more rigorous accounts of what is involved in applying them heuristically. It suggests that there is much to be gained from examining the nature and limitations of the explanatory strategies currently in use in International Relations.

Waltz's explanatory strategy: nature and implications

Waltz's theory is not only an attempt to show how state behaviour and the outcomes thereof are affected by the structure of the international political system. It is also, and just as importantly, an attempt to conjoin a nomothetic model of explanation and a conceptualization of international politics as a complex system. It is commonplace to draw attention to Waltz's scientific aspirations, but the crude observation that his attempt to formalize realism as a deductive theory is ultimately unsuccessful obscures the ways in which Waltz's work illuminates the limits of explanatory theory in International Relations. Waltz's approach raises two sets of questions. The first concerns whether explanatory theory in International Relations is equipped to deal with organized complexity, wholeness, systems, and structures. The tension at the heart of Waltz's approach stems from his attempt to develop a nomothetic theory in which structure is isolated as an independent variable, despite concciving of

international relations as a complex system in which structure and units are mutually affecting. His insistence that structure does not determine behaviour but only establishes constraints (which operate whether recognized by actors or not) cannot be understood except if his theory is placed in the context of his broader explanatory strategy. The second set of questions concerns how (whether) explanatory theories can improve our understanding of international relations if they are not genuinely deductive. Waltz's substantive explanations cannot be evaluated without addressing the problem that they are not deductively derived: we therefore require an account of how and in what ways an explanatory theory can be a source of heuristic insights.

Waltz criticizes Hoffmann for defining structure 'as a collection of items presumed somehow to have an important bearing on the conduct of foreign policy and on the outcomes of national interactions'.[7] Because the factors to which Hoffmann draws attention are at different levels (some are properties of the units, some of the system as a whole), Waltz argues that he 'produces a confusion of causes and a mingling of causes and effects'.[8]

> The practical effect of combining different levels in one definition of structure is to make it impossible to answer, and even to impede asking, such important questions as these: How does the structure defined as configuration of power affect the characteristics of states – their aspirations, their choice of means, and possibly even their internal organization? And, conversely, how sensitive are different international structures to variations in the internal organization and behaviour of the separate states?[9]

This reveals the tension at the heart of Waltz's explanatory strategy. As Waltz conceptualizes international politics, structure affects units and units affect structure: a systems approach attempts to uncover the nature of these mutually affecting processes. In this light, Waltz appears most unlike an explanatory theorist. Further, because structures affects unit attributes as well as behaviour, Waltz appears rather less susceptible to critiques of the ontology of his approach than if his definition of structure is examined in isolation. However, Waltz believes that properties of units and of the system as a whole must be rigorously separated if a systems approach is to be developed. In other words,

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[7] Waltz, *Theory*, p.46.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

explanation proceeds by isolating independent variables. In this light, the explanatory theorist with a truncated definition of structure suddenly emerges.

Although Waltz's explanatory strategy manifests a deep tension between the mode of explanation he pursues and how he conceptualizes international relations, it is essential to situate his substantive theory in terms of his broader explanatory strategy. Only by doing so is it possible to understand the meaning and significance of statements like the following: 'Critics of neorealist theory fail to understand that a theory is not a statement about everything that is important in international-political life, but rather a necessarily slender explanatory construct'.[10] Waltz's theory only represents one part of the mutually affecting relationship between structures and units; it therefore only illuminates one aspect of international relations. Snyder argues that criticism of neorealism for painting 'a partial and misleading picture of international life ... betrays a misunderstanding of what might be called the theoretical dilemma of the social sciences'.[11]

> No theory can give a full explanation of reality; it can only spell out the logical relations of the variables within its purview. This means, first, that all theories must fail a strict empirical test; at best they can only be tentatively confirmed by observing parallel tendencies in reality. Second, it means that any purportedly complete explanation of reality must draw on several theories.[12]

The difficulty therefore, is to combine insights from different theories. The problem, Snyder argues, is that any attempt to develop an integrated account drawing on all relevant variables 'risks degenerating into mere case-by-case description. For any single theory, it is enough that it highlights "a small number of big and important things"; that is all that Kenneth Waltz ... claims for his theory'.[13]

Waltz is committed to developing causal and deductive explanations despite conceiving of structure and units as mutually affecting: in this sense, he is an archetypal explanatory theorist. However, the tension between his commitment to deductive explanation and his broader appreciation of the complex dynamics of international relations is a prominent feature of his applications of his theory. Because

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[10] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.32.
[11] Glenn H. Snyder, 'Process variables in neorealist theory', *Security Studies*, 5.3, Spring 1996, p.167.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*

very little can be deductively derived from Waltz's theory, his substantive explanations tend to exceed the scope of the theory. Waltz's efforts to show how the implications of bipolarity differ from those of multipolarity mirror rather than explain the course of the Cold War. His efforts to explain how nuclear weapons affected the superpower relationship reflect the tension between his theory and how he conceptualizes international relations: in keeping with his theory, he characterizes nuclear technology as a unit-level development; in keeping with his view that structure and units are mutually affecting, he implicitly acknowledges that nuclear technology altered the structure of the system. Although Waltz seeks, as an explanatory theorist, to uncover causal links between system structure and state behaviour, ultimately he fails. Further, he acknowledges, in keeping with how he conceptualizes international relations, that structure is not a cause in the usual sense. Waltz's substantive explanations tend to hint at notions, such as changes in state identities and interests, that are consistent with how he characterizes international relations but are excluded from his narrower theory. Although he attempts to develop predictions about the consequences for NATO of the end of the Cold War, he is forced to amend them in light of developments, many of which he was slow to recognize. Waltz's applications of his theory suggest a theorist who is convinced that his theory tells us something important about how structure affects behaviour and outcomes, but who finds that this something cannot be satisfactorily captured by a deductive mode of explanation.

Waltz's approach would be enhanced by an account of how theories that fail to generate deductively complete explanations may be drawn upon as sources of heuristic insights. However, an examination of Waltz's explanatory strategy also generates a number of other insights about how theories may be improved. The debate about whether Waltz's theory explains foreign policy reflects Waltz's insistence that his theory should not be thought of as providing complete accounts of state behaviour: this indicates the need for a deeper understanding of the nature and implications of partial explanations. It also suggests that Waltz's theory cannot necessarily be improved by incorporating additional variables. If the only way in which explanatory theory can address the mutually affecting relationship between structure and units is by separating factors at different levels and artificially isolating independent variables, then the addition of further variables at a different level cannot help. Waltz's sharp

differentiation between theory and application suggests that he acknowledges the importance of the variables he excludes, but cannot find a way to reconcile both structural and unit-level factors within a unified nomothetic theory. The problems that Waltz encounters also cast doubt on efforts to operationalize a structurationist ontology as a basis for explanatory theories. The notion that agents and structures are mutually constitutive does nothing to overcome the underlying tension between explanatory theory and complex systems. Although various scholars, most prominently constructivists, have sought to problematize rationalist assumptions, doing so does not lead directly to better explanatory theories.[14] It directs attention toward factors excluded from Waltz's substantive theory, but it does not address the underlying explanatory problems with which Waltz grapples.

System and structure in explanatory theories

In *Theory*, the concept of structure does not initially appear as an independent variable. Rather, it emerges as part of Waltz's contention that international relations should be conceptualized as a system. Structure becomes an independent variable only when Waltz determines that a holistic approach will be required if systems are to be addressed theoretically. Systems, Waltz argues, consist of a structure and interacting units. The structure of a system is an emergent property and its relation to the interacting units is constitutive: their participation in the structure is what makes them units of the system. The very notion of structure is therefore bound up with the notion of a complex system and, consequently, with the relation between agents and structures and with questions about holistic and individualistic explanation. Any approach that draws upon the concepts of structure or system must address such questions: it is not possible to ask how (state) behaviour is affected by structure (context, environment, etc.) without (at least implicitly) engaging with questions about the basic relationship between agents and structures and with questions about how that relationship is best explained. Waltz fails to engage with relevant (but highly problematic) questions about the correspondence between, on the one hand, constitutive relations among the elements of complex systems and, on the other hand, causal explanations of behaviour and outcomes in those systems. Consequently, the notion that

[14] See, for example, Katzenstein, 'Introduction', p.1.

international relations forms a complex system coexists uncomfortably in Waltz's explanatory strategy with the notion that structure can be isolated as an independent variable.

Giddens maintains that it does not make sense to conceive of structures and agents independently: they '*presuppose one another*'.[15] Buzan, Jones and Little, adopting the structurationist ontology, insist that, because unit and structural levels 'are in some ways mutually constitutive, Structural Realism is able to serve as a theory of the international system as a whole'.[16] Although Waltz does not explicitly engage with such questions, he does insist that structure and units are mutually affecting and that neorealism adds structural effects to classical realism's unit-level explanations.[17] This leads Keohane to argue that

> Structural Realism's focus on systemic constraints does not contradict Classical Realism's concern with action and choice. On the contrary, Classical Realism's emphasis on *praxis* helps us to understand the origins of Structural Realism's search for systematic understanding, and – far from negating the importance of this search – makes it seem all the more important.[18]

In other words, just as structure derives from and is perpetually reconstituted by action, so action and choice takes place in and draws upon a structural context. This conception of structure and units as mutually dependent reflects Waltz's insistence that his three images of international politics are intertwined:

> In a manner of speaking, all three images are a part of nature. So fundamental are man, the state, and the state system in any attempt to understand international relations that seldom does an analyst, however wedded to one image, entirely overlook the other two.[19]

Waltz treats structure as a constitutive notion: it is what makes the units into a system. Problems emerge only when structure (a constitutive notion) becomes the subject of explanatory theory (a causal approach). The uneasy tension at the heart of Waltz's explanatory strategy derives not from structure per se, but from Waltz's attempt to isolate structure as an independent variable in a nomothetic theory.

Buzan, Jones and Little, like Waltz, argue that the system concept 'refers to a group of parts or units whose interactions are significant enough to justify seeing them in some sense as a coherent set'.[20]

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[15] Giddens, *Central problems*, p.53.
[16] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.50.
[17] See Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.34.
[18] Keohane, 'Theory of world politics', p.169.
[19] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.160.

However, they insist that, without interaction, the term system 'has no meaning'.[21] Because structure is (re)constituted through (inter)action, structural constraints are nothing more than the cumulative effects of how others respond to particular types of action. As Jervis indicates, the accumulation may be complex: 'What each actor does affects not only how others react but also the number and type of others with which it has to deal, which in turn affects both the actor's behaviour and the results during later periods'.[22] Nevertheless, in this logic, the notion that structure causes behaviour is a metaphor for how states respond to the consequences of their own and others' (inter)actions. Thus Tellis argues that, because Waltz's system emerges from unit interaction, its distinctness from the units 'is merely epistemological': the system is 'ontologically caused and maintained' by the continuing interaction of the units.[23]

> Once generated, of course, the system proceeds to constrain the behaviours of the units in various ways. Thus, it acquires, in some metaphorical sense, a life of its own, that is, a life apart from and independent of any given unit, but not a life independent of all the units taken together. The systemic approach to international politics is, therefore, a metaphor which describes the constraints imposed by the presence of other units on the behaviour of any one unit.[24]

Although structure is treated as an independent variable in Waltz's theory, Waltz acknowledges that the concept 'is based on the fact that units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting produce different outcomes'.[25] In other words, structure is not genuinely an independent variable, but expresses the constraints and possibilities generated by the presence of other actors.

Waltz insists that there is 'no logically sound and traceable process by which effects that derive from the system can be attributed to the units': 'Systemic effects cannot be reconstructed from the system's interacting parts since the parts behave differently because they are parts of a system'.[26] However, this is a claim about explanation, not about what structure is. Waltz also maintains that structure does not refer to any concrete institution, but to states' relevant environments: 'Each state arrives at policies and

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[20] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.29.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Jervis, *System effects*, p.51.
[23] Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.73.
[24] *Ibid.* p.74.
[25] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.29.
[26] Waltz, *Theory*, p.65; Waltz, 'Reflections', p.342.

decides upon actions according to its own internal processes, but its decisions are shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them'.[27] If structure is a metaphor for how others respond, then it is less a cause than a framework of action. Waltz hints at this when he cites approvingly a comparison of structure's role to that of grammar vis-à-vis language.[28] It is also reflected in Waltz's otherwise curious insistence on states' freedom of choice. Despite defining structure as an independent variable that causes balancing behaviour, Waltz maintains that whether balancing takes place 'depends on the decisions of governments'.[29] Although this may be represented as acknowledgement that structure is only one cause among many, it also suggests that structure is not really a cause at all. Waltz argues that 'structures shape and shove; they encourage states to do some things and to refrain from doing others. Because states coexist in a self-help system, they are free to do any fool thing they care to'.[30] Yet if structure is a cause, even if it is not the only cause, then states cannot be free to act as they choose. In fact, of course, structure is not a cause (in the usual sense), but a framework for action, generating and excluding certain possibilities. This is reflected in Waltz's vague claim that '[w]hen external conditions press firmly enough, they shape the behaviour of states'.[31]

Waltz's theoretical difficulties all stem from his inability satisfactorily to represent a constitutive notion of structure in causal terms. Waltz fails to isolate structure as a genuinely independent variable. He defines structure so that (and makes assumptions about state interests such that) it is unchanging. Nevertheless, as he conceptualizes it, structure emerges from unit interaction. Waltz is right that structure affects how units interact: this is built into the very notion of a system as a set of interacting units which generate emergent properties. However, this does not mean that structure can successfully be isolated as an independent variable. The main obstacle to Waltz's attempts to apply his theory to substantive problems in international relation is his inability to specify what weight should be given to structure in integrated explanatory accounts. Yet if structure is not really a cause, and if the relation

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[27] Waltz, 'Conflict in world politics', p.457.
[28] See Waltz, *Theory*, p.80. This notion is explicitly drawn upon by Giddens and Dessler, the latter describing structure as a material, rather than an efficient cause. See Dessler, 'What's at stake?' p.453.
[29] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.37.
[30] Waltz, 'Evaluating theories', p.915. Although Waltz goes on to invoke the logic of selection, this will not do. Selection derives from behaviour and therefore needs to be explained.
[31] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.34.

between structure and units is constitutive rather than causal, then it does not even make sense to try to weigh structural and unit-level causes. The problem is not with the notion of structure itself, but with the attempt to treat structure in causal terms. Further, the same problems encountered by Waltz will apply to any explanatory approach that attempts to combine concepts of system or structure with a nomothetic approach to explanation. Nye argues that the 'most interesting explanations usually involve the interaction between the constraints of the international system, the nature of the domestic societies, and the policies of the major states'.[32] This may be so, but we may wonder if such explanations genuinely derive from any nomothetic theory. If they do, that theory will (at least implicitly) draw on a constitutive notion of structure lying behind the postulated systemic constraints. If not, our interest will turn to the derivation of such explanations and to whether there are alternatives to the nomothetic model from which causal explanations may be derived.

Substantive explanations of international relations

The basic (though often implicit) model of explanatory theory in International Relations is one in which substantive explanations are deductively derived from nomothetic theories. However, despite Waltz's standing as a doyen of explanatory theory, his substantive explanations are not deductively derived. This is not only because structure is not genuinely an independent variable: nor is it merely because, as contemporary realists have suggested, his theory is indeterminate. Rather, Waltz does not present his substantive explanations as if they constitute deductive accounts. The volume and variety of actors and interaction in contemporary international relations makes the conclusion that states balance too simplistic to be much of a guide.[33] Waltz therefore asserts that 'structural concepts, although they lack detailed content, help to explain some big, important, and enduring patterns'.[34] However, the point goes further than the fact that Waltz's theory only generates partial explanations: Waltz often characterizes theory as if it illuminates world affairs in a manner having little to do with

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[32] Nye, 'Nuclear learning', p.372.
[33] Schroeder doubts whether balancing has, historically, been a prominent form of behaviour. See Schroeder, 'Historical reality vs. neorealist theory'.
[34] Waltz, *Theory*, p.70.

deductive logic. Waltz argues that theories 'cannot remove the uncertainty of politics, but only help us to comprehend it'.[35]

> Theory cannot be fashioned from the answers to such factual questions as: What follows upon, or is associated with, what. Instead, answers have to be sought to such theoretical questions as these: How does this thing work? How does it all hang together?[36]

The image of theoretical inquiry that this invokes is not deduction from a nomothetic model, but Ruggie's insistence that the ideational factors ignored by rationalists are an essential part of what makes the world hang together, or Wendt's insistence that theory does not only provide answers to why-questions, but also provides answers to questions such as 'how are things in the world put together so that they have the properties that they do?'[37]

Waltz is far from consistent in suggesting that theory explains in a broader sense than is suggested by the nomothetic model: some of his predictions about the future of NATO, for example, are based on the premise that balancing behaviour follows deductively from his theoretical framework. However, Buzan, Jones and Little imply that Waltz's theory does (somehow) tell us something important about international relations even if its deductive logic is ultimately unsuccessful: they argue that the notion of anarchy, considered alone, provides insight of considerable value 'into what conditions behaviour in the international system'.[38] Similarly, when change is not the issue, the distribution of capabilities 'is a fruitful source of insights into how structural continuities condition the behaviour of units'.[39] Waltz himself suggests that the purpose of theory is to organize the world in a helpful way:

> If we look at the world and see discrete events, we are overwhelmed by the chaos: each event without cause and all events without meaning. But if we look at the aggregate of events with a proper organizing principle in our minds, we may see in the chaos, order; in the welter of events, a plan of nature.[40]

Further, the arguments applied by Waltz in the later chapters of *Theory* are not deductively derived from his definition of structure and accompanying assumptions. Rather, the theoretical framework

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[35] Waltz, 'Realist thought and neorealist theory', p.37.
[36] *Ibid.* p.23.
[37] Wendt, 'On constitution and causation', p.103. See also Ruggie, 'What makes the world hang together?'
[38] Buzan, Jones & Little, *The logic of anarchy*, p.51.
[39] *Ibid.* p.53.
[40] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Kant, liberalism, and war', *The American Political Science Review*, 56.2, June 1962, p.335.

provides a (distinctly realist) set of ideas with which to marshal a complex reality. Waltz frequently represents his explanatory approach as if its task is to tell a story that draws attention to particular features of international relations ignored in other stories. He proceeds as if his task is to show that these factors are (somehow) important, without having to fit them together in an integrated account.

Waltz criticizes Hinsley as follows: 'The promised effort to delineate theory and illuminate practice by carefully identifying important factors and rigorously examining their relations of cause and interdependence gives way to a combination of common sense and history'.[41] He criticizes Hoffmann for slipping from developing a theory to saying merely:

> Remember that any of many factors may affect the relations of states. A knowledge of history and of public affairs will then presumably enable men of intelligence to figure out just what factors may have the most serious effects at a given moment in time.[42]

Yet Waltz himself often draws on history to develop theoretical claims. He maintains that the 'play of mind over historical matter will suggest patterns, parallels with more recent events ... hypotheses to be considered'.[43] He insists that the expectation that new balances will form 'is firmly grounded in both history and theory'.[44] He observes that we can predict 'by deducing expectations from the structure of the international political system and by inferring expectations from past events and patterns'.[45] Waltz also emphasizes the importance of history for theory application. He argues that an understanding of power balancing explains why mobilization led to war in 1914, but that, in order to explain why any country mobilized in the first place, 'one must look to the vulnerabilities and strengths, the ambitions and fears, of all the states involved'.[46] He adds that the possible effects of these factors 'cannot be estimated without constant attention to the external pressures to which all states of Europe were subject'.[47] Similarly, he argues that, in order to understand why France and Russia waited until 1894

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[41] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Contention and management in international relations', *World Politics*, 17.4, July 1965, p.725.
[42] Waltz, *Theory*, p.49.
[43] Waltz, 'Political philosophy', p.52.
[44] Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', p.30.
[45] Waltz, 'The spread of nuclear weapons', p.1.
[46] Waltz, *Man, the state and war*, p.218.
[47] *Ibid.*

to respond to the 1879 Austro-German Dual Alliance, we must 'examine diplomacy and policy in the 15-year interval'.[48]

In practice, Waltz does not use his theory to deduce outcomes from initial conditions. Rather, he draws upon it as a guide to which factors are likely to be important. In other words, his theory merely emphasizes that structure is a significant factor (especially when balancing is common). Tellis objects strongly to this method: he argues that, because Waltz's theory provides only partial explanations,

> Waltz cannot – and does not – explain what the characteristic behaviour of any unit will be in the face of some generated structural constraint. Instead, all he can do – and does – is to rest content with asserting – on the basis of some inductively garnered evidence from history – that "balances of power recurrently form, and that states tend to emulate the successful policies of others".[49]

Tellis adds that these assertions 'cannot be shown to derive by logical necessity' but are 'selected from amidst the vast empirical record of modern European politics because they appear to cohere best with his conceptual framework'.[50] Although Tellis defends a deductive, determinate, and individualistic mode of explanation, the question posed by Waltz's approach is how we explain if this is not possible. The central problem with Waltz's theory is the lack of an account of how it is to be operationalized and evaluated as a heuristic guide. The risk is that Waltz is subject to the same criticism as Easton and Kaplan: what is presented as a theory is no more than an amalgam of historical generalizations. If so, then Waltz's substantive claims, like Rosecrance's, 'have no more force than does his original reading of history'.[51] Because Waltz never satisfactorily resolves the problem of how to apply a partial theory, he slips into theoretical commentary: his substantive explanations neither follow directly from his theory nor integrate a variety of factors. This places the value of Waltz's substantive explanations in considerable doubt, but also raises the question of how explanation should proceed, if not in accordance with the nomothetic model.

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[48] Waltz, *Theory*, p.125.
[49] Tellis, 'Reconstructing political realism', p.80.
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] Weltman, 'Systems theory', p.316.

Ruggie argues that the nomothetic model remains the underlying model of explanatory theory, despite the fact that no individual theory of international relations comes close to fulfilling its requirements. There is widespread agreement that rationalist approaches are not genuinely nomothetic. Keohane argues that '[n]eoliberal institutionalism is not a single logically connected deductive theory, any more than is liberalism or neorealism: each is a school of thought that provides a perspective on world politics'.[52] Gilpin argues that 'realism, like liberalism and Marxism, is essentially a philosophical position; it is not a scientific theory that is subject to the test of falsifiability'.[53] Jervis argues that neither realism nor neoliberal institutionalism 'can be sharply defined. Indeed, they are better labelled schools of thought or approaches than theories'.[54] Bueno de Mesquita argues that the objective of theory construction 'is to present systematically derived, law-like statements ... and to explore the relationship between history and those statements', but that this objective is rarely, if ever, fulfilled.[55] Keohane adds that general theories may be unfeasible in International Relations:

> It makes sense to seek to develop cumulative verifiable knowledge, but we must understand that we can aspire only to formulate conditional, context-specific generalizations rather than to discover universal laws, and that our understanding of world politics will always be incomplete.[56]

Adopting a similarly sceptical view about the promise of explanatory theory, Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner term the main theoretical approaches in International Relations '[*g*]*eneral theoretical orientations*' and argue that they 'provide heuristics – they suggest relevant variables and causal patterns that provide guidelines for developing specific research programs'.[57]

If explanatory approaches are not genuinely nomothetic (and if the nomothetic form is unattainable), then the lack of a plausible alternative model for explanatory approaches in International Relations becomes significant. King, Keohane and Verba argue that 'real explanation is always based on causal

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[52] Keohane, 'Neoliberal institutionalism', p.2. A perspective 'incorporates a set of distinctive questions and assumptions about the basic units and forces in world politics'.
[53] Gilpin, 'No one loves a political realist', p.6.
[54] Jervis, 'Realism, neoliberalism, and cooperation', p.43 (fn.3).
[55] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The war trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p.2.
[56] Keohane, 'International institutions', p.158.
[57] Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane and Stephen D. Krasner, '*International Organization* and the study of world politics', *International Organization*, 52.4, Autumn 1998, p.646. They cite realism, Marxism, liberalism, statism, pluralism, historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and constructivism.

inferences' and regard claims 'about "noncausal explanation" as confusing terminology'.[58] In effect, this is to affirm the nomothetic model; it certainly excludes the possibility of an approach based on the notion that constitutive relations can be explanatory. Wendt argues that constitutive theories 'account for the properties of things by reference to the structures in virtue of which they exist'.[59] The basic idea is that one can explain something by saying what it is. Describing what structure is by describing how it relates to the units in a complex system is viewed as an explanatory claim. This is one way in which International Relations theory may be able to examine notions such as structure, system and complexity free from the confines of the nomothetic model. It also reflects the form that social explanations often take: Lukes argues that 'to *identify* a piece of behaviour, a set of beliefs, etc. is sometimes to explain it', especially where this involves seeing it in a new way.[60] For example, describing the interaction between bank teller and customer as cashing a cheque is to explain the interaction, though the account is not causal. Yet King, Keohane and Verba are not alone in being sceptical of the idea of constitutive theory. Dessler and Owen argue that Wendt's account of constitutive explanations as explicating the structures that constitute objects of inquiry in the first place leaves the notion unclear. They suggest that 'it strains our ordinary notion of explanation' to call a description of what something is explanatory.[61] They propose that what Wendt terms constitutive explanation 'is more accurately termed constitutive *analysis*, or constitutive description'.[62]

Although Dessler and Owen associate constitutive explanation with constructivism, constructivists are deeply divided about what form explanations should take. Checkel argues that, strictly speaking, 'constitutive effects (A enables or makes possible B) are not captured by standard causal terminology (A causes B)'; nevertheless, 'empirical constructivists use the terms interchangeably'.[63] Adler argues that constructivism 'subscribes to a notion of social causality that takes *reasons as causes*'.[64] He adds

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[58] King, Keohane & Verba, *Designing social inquiry*, p.75 (fn.1).
[59] Wendt, 'On constitution and causation', p.105.
[60] Lukes, 'Methodological individualism reconsidered', p.126.
[61] Dessler & Owen, 'Constructivism and the problem of explanation', p.599.
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.328 (fn.9). See also Hasenclever, Mayer & Rittberger, 'Interests, power, knowledge', p.211.
[64] Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground', p.329.

that 'norms and rules structure and therefore *socially constitute* – "cause" – the things people do; that is, they provide actors with direction and goals for action'.[65] Although constructivists argue that agents and structures are mutually constitutive, they tend to see this as an ontological, not an explanatory, claim, leaving the notion of constitutive explanation hovering in the background.[66] Further, neither the notion of mutual constitution nor that of bracketing determines how substantive explanation should proceed. These notions do not, therefore, show how structural and agentic explanations can be combined. Checkel argues that the 'empirical application of mutual constitution' by the contributors to *The culture of national security* follows a logic of sequential causation.[67] This reflects a basic deficiency in constructivist theory: constructivists draw attention to the significance of both agents and structures but, like Waltz, have not been able to develop integrated explanations in which each has equal status. Whereas the notion of mutual constitution merely restates the agent-structure problem, constitutive explanation may provide a means of moving beyond the limitations inherent in applying the nomothetic model of explanation to complex systems. However, the notion is not yet sufficiently well developed to serve as a basis for investigating problems of organized complexity from an explanatory perspective.[68]

Progress in International Relations theory

Notions of system, structure and complexity pose deep challenges to International Relations theorists wedded to an explanatory approach. Waltz's unsatisfactory attempt to present structure as if isolated as an independent variable indicates the limits of the nomothetic model when applied to complex systems. The inability of scholars such as Giddens and Wendt to show how explanation could proceed

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[65] *Ibid.*

[66] Jabri and Chan argue that the theory of structuration moves International Relations theory away from explanation and toward a post-positivist discourse. See Vivienne Jabri and Stephen Chan, 'The ontologist always rings twice: two more stories about structure and agency in reply to Hollis and Smith', *Review of International Studies*, 22.1, Jan 1996, p.109.

[67] Checkel, 'The constructivist turn', p.335.

[68] Hollis and Smith, for example, describe what Wendt calls constitutive explanation as an interpretive approach. See Hollis & Smith, 'Two stories'; Steve Smith, 'Wendt's world', *Review of International Studies*, 26.1, Jan 2000, pp.156-7. See also Hidemi Suganami, 'On Wendt's philosophy: a critique', *Review of International Studies*, 28.1, June 2002, pp.23-37.

other than by examining agents and structures separately demonstrates that Waltz's methodology should not be seen as a curiosity, but as a considered attempt to address the problem of how we explain when structures and agents are mutually affecting. Waltz's tendency to slip into theoretical commentary (drawing on strained readings of history and resisting the notion that his theory can be tested) may indicate that he never accepted how limited his approach is, but it does not suggest that his explanatory strategy itself should be dismissed. The challenge posed to explanatory approaches in International Relations by complex systems is to abandon the explanatory form in favour of hermeneutic, historical, or post-positivist approaches, or to develop a way of examining complexity free of the shackles of the nomothetic model of explanation. The problem with the notion of mutual constitution is that it merely restates the agent-structure antinomy: it does not indicate how substantive explanation is to proceed. How to develop explanations that draw on both agents and structures is therefore a problem for realists and constructivists alike.[69] The puzzle, if agents and structures are characterized as mutually constitutive, is what drives the system. That is, if agents and structures are mutually constitutive, how can anything be explained in terms of either? How are the dynamics of the system established in the first place? Where does change originate in the system?

One possible direction of progress in International Relations theory is Wendt's recent rediscovery of teleology. Teleological explanation corresponds to the notion of final causation: 'the way in which the purpose or end of a system affects its development'.[70] In the Aristotelian system, it contrasts with efficient causation (the mechanical relationship between cause and effect traditionally deployed in explanatory theory), material causation ('the sense in which an entity or process is caused by having a particular composition', which lies at the heart of constitutive explanation), and formal causation ('the way in which the structure of an object or process gives it form', which is emphasized in structural-

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[69] Onuf argues that constructivists wish to explain both agency and structure. He observes, however, that 'if we try to do so, we come up against the staggering complexity of the social reality that we want to know about. It is impossible to do everything'. His solution is 'to start with rules and show how rules make agents and institutions what they are in relation to each other'. Nicholas Onuf, 'Constructivism: a user's manual', in Vendulka Kubálková, Nicholas Onuf and Paul Kowert (eds.), *International relations in a constructed world* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p.63.

[70] Alexander Wendt, 'Why a world state is inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9.4, Dec 2003, p.495.

functionalism).[71] Wendt's approach has much in common with the theory of open systems. It also draws on Kant's notion that explanation becomes possible if we discern a plan of nature behind the complexity of everyday life. Wendt's argument is that the international system is moving toward a discernible end: a world state. He argues that 'the struggle for recognition between states will have the same outcome as that between individuals: collective identity formation and eventually a state'.[72] The argument moves beyond the notion of mutual constitution because Wendt believes that the end-directed nature of the international system emerges from the interaction of agents and structures. He draws attention to two processes at work in the international system:

> a micro or bottom-up process of self-organization, and a macro or top-down process of structural constitution. The former involves efficient causation and the latter formal causation, neither of which is intrinsically teleological. Final causation emerges from their interaction.[73]

In other words, the end toward which the international system is moving arises out of the conjunction of the boundary conditions imposed by cultures of anarchy and the individual actions from which order spontaneously emerges.[74]

The notion of a teleological explanation moves beyond the sterile reproduction of the agent-structure antinomy inherent in the claim that agents and structures are mutually constitutive: it asks what drives the system. Wendt also emphasizes the inapplicability of causal explanations to constitutive relations: 'In a structured totality parts and whole are mutually constitutive, which means their interaction cannot be mechanical'.[75] He therefore moves the debate on beyond Waltz's failure to apply a nomothetic approach to a complex system. However, the relationship between Wendt's various arguments is unclear. Having begun by advocating a structurationist approach, Wendt discarded the notion of mutual constitution in favour of supervenience: 'a nonreductive relationship of dependency, in which properties at one level are fixed or constituted by those at another, but are not reducible to them'.[76] Yet

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[71] *Ibid.*
[72] *Ibid.* p.493. Wendt argues that the system is driven by states' desire for recognition rather than, as in neorealism, states' desire for security. See *ibid.* pp.510-11.
[73] *Ibid.* p.498.
[74] See *ibid.* pp.498-502.
[75] *Ibid.* p.500.
[76] Wendt, 'Identity and structural change', p.49. He argues: 'The structure of the states system is supervenient on the properties of states, and the properties of states – including state identities – are, to

supervenience does not feature in Wendt's work on teleology, raising doubts about the relation between mutual constitution, supervenience and teleology (and about the relation between the forms of explanation they suggest). The relationship between teleological and constitutive explanation also remains unclear. Wendt argues that constitutive explanation invokes material and formal causation:

> constitutive theorists have shown how phenomena normally seen as material, such as power, are in fact constituted by ideas ("material" causation). And these ideas exist and have effects because of the discursive forms (norms, institutions, ideologies) in which they are embedded (formal causation).[77]

He also suggests that efficient, material, formal, and final causation are all 'necessary to complete explanations, and will be at least implicit in any scientific theory'.[78] However, he indicates neither how they are to be combined, nor what form an explanation incorporating all four notions would take.

Although abstract, these issues illustrate the problems involved in adopting an explanatory approach to complex systems. Whilst the problems themselves are revealed by a thorough examination of Waltz's explanatory strategy, their intractability is revealed by Wendt's various attempts to develop a more complete systemic approach. This is not to deny the significance of Wendt's contribution to our understanding of international relations: the issue at stake is how explanatory theory enhances understanding. It may be that, as with Waltz, Wendt's theoretical endeavours have achieved more by directing our attention toward previously ignored phenomena and processes (in Waltz's case, structure; in Wendt's case, identity formation) than by situating them within an explanatory approach. If so, the substantive debates and empirical studies spawned by both scholars may be of more lasting significance than the theories themselves. If a theory enhances our understanding by pointing to phenomena of interest, rather than by showing that certain outcomes follow deductively from specified initial conditions, then what we mean by explanation or understanding becomes unclear. We may not be able to say precisely how our understanding improves when we examine phenomena we had previously ignored, being sure only that the process is not well represented by the nomothetic model of explanation. Some relativists may not consider this unduly problematic, but if Waltz is right that

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a significant but lesser extent, dependent on properties of the states system. It is this (partial) mutual constitution that enables us to analyze structural change in terms of identity-change'.

[77] Wendt, 'Why a world state is inevitable', p.495.

[78] *Ibid.*

we persistently engage in explanatory activity the aim of which is control, then it presents a huge challenge to International Relations theory (including post-positivist and hermeneutic approaches).

Instead of grappling with abstract problems about the form of explanation corresponding to various conceptions of causation, it is possible to make progress in International Relations theory by examining explanatory strategies. That is, we can improve both our substantive explanations and our understanding of what it means to explain by studying the nature and limits of the explanatory strategies adopted by theorist and non-theorist alike. We may set aside the problem of developing an over-arching reconstructed logic for International Relations and reconstruct the logics of particular scholars, asking which explanatory strategies are helpful and in what way. If this approach is to prove successful, two misbalances will have to be corrected. First, it is necessary to examine explanatory strategies themselves, rather than using (truncated readings of) other theorists' approaches as vehicles in opposition to which alternative approaches are developed. Cumulation and progress require that explanatory strategies are situated in relation to each other. However, the balance in International Relations is tilted too far toward opposition and away from detailed understanding. Cumulation and progress are not enhanced by contrasting new explanatory strategies with a reading of Waltz in which his definition of structure is (mis)construed as an attempt realistically to depict international relations. Disagreement about whether constructivism should be construed as an explanatory approach surely stems (at least in part) from the fact that constructivist approaches have been developed in opposition to a reading of Waltz that ignores his struggle to reconcile explanatory theory with the notion of a complex system.

Part of the problem is that cumulation and progress are diminished, not enhanced, when scholars attempt to stipulate the grounds on which theories, including their own, should be evaluated. This is particularly important where the nomothetic model has, in effect, been abandoned. We gain more by ignoring Waltz's comments about theory evaluation and asking what we can learn from examining his explanatory strategy *tout court*, than by inferring from his social-scientific aspirations that his theory should be evaluated as if it fulfilled the requirements of the nomothetic model. That Waltz's

substantive explanations are inaccurate when considered in isolation tells us little unless we also ask why that is so. Understanding is enhanced more by asking why an explanatory theorist would maintain that an apparently nomothetic structural theory tells us only a few big and important things, than from characterizing this move as a retreat and dismissing the theory as a failed example of a nomothetic approach. Keohane's infamous insistence that what he terms 'reflective' approaches need to develop 'a clear reflective research program that could be employed by students of world politics' also hinders progress.[79] Keohane insists that failure to comply will cause reflective approaches to 'remain on the margins of the field'.[80] Although his comments have not brought about the marginalization of which he warned, such attitudes can only contribute to the tendency for novel approaches (of whatever kind) to be developed in a manner that emphasizes both their distinctness from the approaches currently in vogue and their rejection of the evaluative standards and procedures favoured by the mainstream. The point is not that rationalist standards are superior, but that progress is unlikely unless it is possible to explore and to attempt to understand the strengths and weaknesses of differing approaches.

If there is no immediate prospect of developing a non-nomothetic explanatory approach that can deal satisfactorily with systems and complexity, then that aim should be set aside in favour of inquiry into what is involved in applying ideas heuristically. The balance of International Relations theory is tilted too far toward developing novel approaches and away from understanding theory application, especially given that theories do not, generally, offer complete or deductive explanations. The most striking weakness of Waltz's approach is not that his theory does not generate complete explanations, but that Waltz nowhere discusses how the partial explanations that he derives from his theory should be applied. His theoretical commentary is highly unsatisfactory: he frequently presents incomplete and non-deductive accounts shaped by an implicit realist world-view as if they constitute satisfactory historical or explanatory accounts. If theories provide only partial explanations, then we need to know how they may be drawn upon heuristically in integrated accounts of the phenomena under

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[79] Keohane, 'International institutions', p.173.
[80] *Ibid.*

investigation. Theorists should specify how explanatory accounts are influenced by particular sets of ideas as to what is important. Empirical researchers should specify how the various factors emphasized by different theories are integrated in substantive explanations. Both constructivists and historians draw upon ideas heuristically. Detailed accounts of how they employ these ideas in their substantive explanations would be hugely beneficial. Both the process by which ideas are drawn upon heuristically and the need to understand this process are currently obscured: in constructivism, by the debate over whether explanation should conform to nomothetic standards; in history, by the debate between political scientists and historians over the alleged methodological differences between the two disciplines.[81]

If we turn our attention to examining explanatory strategies, to explicating notions such as partial explanation, and to elucidating what is involved in the heuristic application of theoretical ideas, then abstract questions about what constitutes proper explanation may recede in importance. The inadequacy of the nomothetic model and the absence of a well specified alternative places explanatory theory in crisis only to the extent that we focus on the appropriate form of explanatory claims. In other words, concern about the adequacy of the nomothetic model is of far greater relevance to attempts to stipulate a general explanatory logic than to attempts to improve understanding of scholars' actual logics-in-use.[82] Taylor wonders whether there is a general solution to the problem of the relation between structure, culture and action.[83] Yet even if there is no general solution (if the agent-structure problem remains an antinomy), this does not place explanation in crisis: inquiry proceeds by looking for good explanations, not by stipulating their form. Developing helpful theoretical ideas must be the primary concern: worry about what they imply about agents and structures is secondary. Further, our understanding of the form of helpful theoretical ideas is likely to be better served by examining the substantive explanatory strategies employed by those engaged in empirical research and theory development than by beginning at too abstract a level. Waltz argues that a useful definition of

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[81] See, for example, Elman *et al*, 'Symposium'; Elman & Elman (eds.), *Bridges and boundaries*.
[82] See Kaplan, *The conduct of inquiry*.
[83] See Taylor, 'Structure, culture and action', p.116.

the term 'theory' should 'cover the explanatory activity we persistently engage in'.[84] He is right, but explanatory activity should not be narrowly construed as theory construction. We may learn more by examining and attempting to understand the explanatory activity that we and others engage in than by striking out anew.

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[84] Waltz, *Theory*, p.6.

Bibliography

The purpose of this bibliography is to provide a guide to the literature found useful in the writing of this thesis. It is limited to English-language sources. It includes many sources not cited in the body of the thesis but does not include every source cited therein. It is divided into three sections:

1. An unofficial and non-comprehensive list of Waltz's writings. It excludes works that replicate others without significant or relevant amendment.
2. A list of books, including edited collections, found useful in the writing of this thesis or considered to make significant contributions to subjects discussed herein.
3. A list of articles and chapters found useful in the writing of this thesis or considered to make significant contributions to subjects discussed herein.

Where an individual chapter in an edited collection is considered to be useful or important, it is listed in the third section. Where the entire collection is considered to be useful it is listed in the second section. In some instances, therefore, both individual chapters and the edited collections from which they are drawn are listed.

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