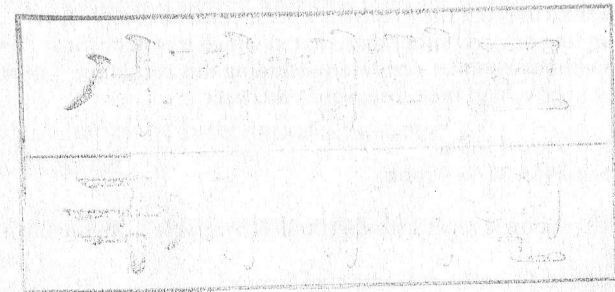


INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THEORY TODAY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY TODAY

Edited by
Ken Booth *and* Steve Smith



Polity Press

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First published in 1995 by Polity Press
in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd

Reprinted 1995, 1996

Editorial office:

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

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ISBN 0 7456 1165 6
ISBN 0 7456 1166 4 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 12 pt Garamond Stempel
by CentraCet Ltd, Cambridge
Printed in Great Britain by Hartnolls Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Neo-realism in Theory and Practice

Andrew Linklater

The argument that neo-realism is flawed in theory and stultifying in practice has been explored at length in critical circles in recent years. The advocates of critical perspectives have argued that global political structures are mutable, and the future need not be like the past. Two claims which are robustly defended by Kenneth Waltz have been challenged as a result. The first is that the international system, which has been remarkably similar across whole millennia, will endure indefinitely. The second is that the anarchic system will thwart projects of reform as in the past. The neo-realist riposte has been that advancing the moral case for a different world order will not prevent the recurrence of old patterns of inter-state rivalry and war.

With the demise of the Cold War era, the differences between neo-realist and critical theories of international politics should acquire even greater importance. The neo-realist argument advanced by John Mearsheimer (1990) develops Waltz's (1964) point that the advent of nuclear bipolarity was the main reason for the high level of international stability since the Second World War. In Mearsheimer's view, the passing of bipolarity creates new dangers and instabilities. Critical accounts of long-term trends in international relations remain underdeveloped, but one of the more detailed approaches, which is found in the writings of Robert Cox, refers to the rising fortunes of multilateralism and middle-powermanship in the emerging post-Westphalian world order (Cox, 1989). Although competing visions of future possibilities divide critical theory and neo-realism, there has been very little debate between their proponents about the likely shape of the

post-Cold War world or about the significance of their differences for the future of international theory.

This chapter links debates about whether long-term processes of change have gathered momentum following the demise of bipolarity to the ongoing controversies between neo-realism and critical theory, specifically between the former's emphasis on the cyclical quality of international history and the latter's emphasis on the prospects for development and change. The chapter is in four parts. Part 1 considers Waltz's argument that neo-realism is not only different from realism but an advance upon it. Parts 2 and 3 compare neo-realist arguments about the stability of the bipolar world with some recent analyses of the changing nature of state structures and emerging patterns of closer co-operation. The argument of these sections is that neo-realism underestimates the extent to which state structures are changing in the industrialized parts of the world. Part 4 highlights three respects in which neo-realism is being superseded by critical theories of international relations which, it is argued, contain a superior account of the relationship between the units and the international system, a deeper grasp of the significance of the cultural dimensions of world politics and a clearer recognition that the main challenge of the post-bipolar world is to create new forms of political community.

REALISM AND NEO-REALISM: PRIMARY DIFFERENCES

Waltz has long been critical of the idea that war will be eradicated by tapping the best in human nature or by creating legitimate domestic political systems. In *Man, the State and War* (1959), he argued that the international system had dashed liberal and socialist hopes that the rise of legitimate regimes would bring an end to war. In *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Waltz restates the argument that non-conformist regimes have been socialized into the dominant ways of the anarchical system when criticizing the reductionist belief that the system can be explained by understanding the sovereign parts.

What reductionism cannot explain, in Waltz's view, is why states behave in very similar ways despite their diverse political systems and contrasting ideologies. The problem is solved, according to neo-realism, by assuming that systemic constraints are interposed between states and their foreign policy behaviour. Neo-

realism endeavours to demonstrate that these systemic forces are responsible for the remarkable similarities of foreign policy behaviour.

Reductionism underpins classical liberal and socialist writings about international relations, but realists often commit the same error, according to Waltz. Classical realism understood the constraints inherent in anarchy but failed to develop a serious account of its structure. Realists often focused on national foreign policies in the belief that they held the key to the dominant forces in world politics. Exemplifying this position, Raymond Aron maintained that the realm of international politics was impossible to theorize because it was shaped by diverse economic, political and ideological forces (Waltz, 1990, p. 25). The realist error was to suppose that no clear distinction between the system of states and the nature of the sovereign units could be drawn. As we shall see, the relationship between the units and the system remains a deeply contested theme in Waltz's thought.

Waltz acknowledges that economics, politics and culture are intertwined, but adds that a theory of international relations can be developed by abstracting the international system from other domains. Failing to disentangle the international system in this way, realists such as Aron were confined to developing crude generalizations about foreign policy (Waltz, 1990, p. 33). Neo-realism begins with the premise that a theory of international relations and a theory of foreign policy are not the same.

Waltz maintains that neo-realism advances beyond realism just as the physiocrats progressed beyond earlier analyses of different national levels of economic prosperity and uneven rates of growth. What gave the physiocrats the advantage over earlier economic thinkers was the boldness of their decision to abstract the economy from society and politics when, in reality, no firm boundaries separated these realms. Recognizing the need for abstraction, the physiocrats proceeded to develop a superior understanding of the primary determinants of economic growth. The neo-realist abstraction of the international system from the wider socio-political domain equally distorts reality, but it has similar utility. It ensures that the propelling forces in international politics are properly identified while future probabilities are more clearly ascertained (1990, pp. 22–31).

To achieve its aim of explaining the uniform behaviour of different nation-states and the constancy of international political life across whole centuries, neo-realism omits many of the factors

which were important in realism (Waltz, 1979, p. 66). It resists the temptation, to which realists invariably succumbed, of being waylaid by the contingent, the transitory and the unforeseen (pp. 5 and 8). Neo-realism assumes that the 'regularities and repetitions' in international politics are clues to the operation of deep structural constraints. Its greatest advance beyond realism, it is argued, is the decision to conceptualize international politics 'as a system with a precisely defined structure' (Waltz, 1990, pp. 29–30).

Several analysts observe that the continuities between realism and neo-realism are more striking than the ruptures and breaks (Gilpin, 1984; Little, 1985). They are right to stress differences of emphasis. Neo-realism highlights the uniformities of foreign policy and the long-term reproduction of the anarchical system, but realism also emphasized these themes, and it is unhelpful to make too much of the differences between Waltz and Morgenthau. However, differences exist. Waltz's neo-realism seeks to emulate developments in the philosophy of science and structuralist modes of social-scientific explanation which are absent from classical realism. This quest for methodological rigour is central to the principal neo-realist endeavour, which is to delineate the main structural features of the system of states.

For Waltz, the structure of the international system is distinguished from the structure of domestic political systems according to three criteria: the ordering principle of the system, the character of the units and the distribution of their capabilities. In domestic political systems the organizing principle is hierarchy; in the international system the operative principle is anarchy. In hierarchic domestic systems, relations of command and obedience exist, and individuals are free to specialize within a complex social division of labour; in anarchic systems, where there are no relations of super- and subordination, the basic units tend towards functional similarity. Individuals within hierarchic orders are functionally alike and endowed with unequal capabilities whereas states in the anarchic realm have an unequal ability to perform exactly the same functions (Waltz, 1979, p. 104).

The ordering principle of international relations has remained unchanged over several centuries, and states have relied on the principle of self-help when faced with the security dilemma which is inherent in anarchy (Waltz, 1979, pp. 187–8). States such as the former Soviet Union, which believed that the structure of international relations was malleable, failed to break the mould. Economic interdependence exists, but it is low compared with the level

of economic and social integration found within states. In the context of anarchy, each state tries to avoid dependence on others, and each is afraid of receiving a lesser share of the economic gains of interdependence (pp. 105–6; Grieco, 1988). The organizing principle of international relations has forced states to become like units (Waltz, 1979, p. 93).

Neo-realism stresses continuities but it does not deny the existence of change. Change *within* the international system has occurred because there have been alterations in the configuration of military power, but no change of its organizing principle has occurred, nor has it ever seemed probable or imminent (Waltz, 1979, p. 100). Anarchy may give way to hierarchy at some future date but, Waltz argues, no logic of economic and political change powerful enough to transform the condition and consequences of anarchy currently exists. Alterations in the balance of power will continue to occur, but no rearrangement of the configuration of military forces will alter the basic structure of international relations or radically modify the behaviour of its sovereign parts. For neo-realism, however, the current reconfiguration of the global balance of power is no minor matter.

BIPOLARITY, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND INTERNATIONAL STABILITY

Waltz wrote that in the nuclear age it became necessary to reject the conventional wisdom that bipolarity is less stable than multipolarity: the bipolar world was a world of unusual stability (1988, p. 620). Because the barriers to acquiring superpower status had never been so insurmountable, and the continued survival of the Soviet Union seemed assured, Waltz argued that the bipolar system was not only stable but likely to persist (1979, pp. 95 and 183).

The bipolar world turned out to be more precarious than most analysts had realized. But, as previously noted, Waltz does not think that a breakdown of the balance of power transforms the international system. The prediction is 'not that a balance, once achieved, will be maintained, but that a balance, once disrupted, will be restored' in some other way (1979, p. 128). Following the demise of the Soviet Union, neo-realists such as John Mearsheimer have argued that the end of bipolarity is a reason for concern rather than celebration.

Four reasons have been offered by neo-realists in support of the claim that the bipolar world was more stable than the multipolar world which it replaced. First, the bipolar world was free of war between the great powers because the main threat to their security and survival stood out in bold relief. Caution in foreign policy and a keen sense of the dangers of over-reaction underpinned the long peace. By contrast, dangers were much less specific, responsibilities were confused and definitions of vital interests were unclear in the multipolar age (Waltz, 1964, pp. 881–90). The attendant danger was that states would miscalculate the power of their rivals or underestimate the exact strength of their resolve, so unleashing a sequence of events which culminated in major war (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 14). Ambiguities prevail in multipolar systems because shared understandings of national rights and obligations are notoriously difficult to achieve (p. 17).

Second, the dangers of miscalculation are compounded in multipolar systems by the existence of military alliances comprising approximately equal powers. In the multipolar context, the defection of any one state immediately jeopardizes the security of the rest. In the modern bipolar world, the unequal military capabilities of partners meant the superpowers were largely unaffected by acts of defection. The superpowers could concentrate on preserving the central strategic balance untroubled by 'free floaters' (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 14).

Third, because crisis might have embroiled the superpowers in war, the long peace could not have rested on bipolarity alone. Had both superpowers been armed with conventional weapons, they might have been tempted to attack their principal adversary whenever military success looked probable. Nuclear weapons were a crucial source of stability in the bipolar world because neither superpower could suppose that victory was possible or derive any comfort from thinking that the consequences of military defeat would be bearable (Waltz, 1988, pp. 624–7; Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 19–20).

Waltz has argued that the controlled spread of nuclear weapons to other societies could have equally stabilizing effects, in which case nuclear proliferation is to be welcomed rather than feared (1981, p. 30). Mearsheimer has argued that the 'limited, managed proliferation' of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world, and the admission of Germany into the ranks of the nuclear powers, could preserve stability in Europe, although the future will be more dangerous than the past (1990, p. 8). But problems

arise for neo-realism at this stage. If an orderly transition to stable nuclear multipolarity occurs, the number of powers must be less significant than the nature of their destructive military power and their willingness to collaborate. And if the ability to act in concert is an important variable, Stanley Hoffmann is right to deny that the anarchic character of the international system is more important than the nature of sovereign states in determining the level of war or peace (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 12; Hoffmann, 1990, p. 192). This is a crucial issue to return to later.

Fourth, mutuality of dependence, which is a feature of multipolar systems, compels each state to observe others with suspicion (Waltz, 1979, p. 209). If interdependence is high, there are many occasions in which states can come into conflict (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 45). Unusual levels of economic self-sufficiency in the years since the Second World War reduced the prospects for war between the superpowers (Waltz, 1979, pp. 138 and 144).

Neo-realism will remain central to analyses of long-term trends in international relations if Mearsheimer (1990, p. 56) is correct that the stability of the last forty-five years is unlikely to be repeated in the next few decades. However, the relationship between the units and the system remains unclear. It has been argued that realism is less useful for understanding international politics between the core industrial powers than for explaining relations between peripheral states where military competition remains paramount (Goldgeier and McFaul, 1992). If this is correct, states in the industrial core are capable of overriding the systemic logic which neo-realism regards as an unavoidable consequence of anarchy. Richard Rosecrance (1986) has argued that instability may result unless a new concert of great powers emerges quickly, but a strong domestic commitment to liberal-democratic and free-market thinking on their part could smooth the path ahead. Even Waltz nods in the direction of liberalism. Unbalanced US power is a matter for concern in the post-Cold War era, but there is some truth in the liberal claim that peace usually exists between liberal-democratic societies, and the spread of liberal democracy should be welcomed for external and internal reasons as a result (Waltz, 1991, p. 670).

Waltz argues that the relative importance of the units and the system changes over time. The 'international system is more likely to dominate' the units in a bipolar world whereas, with multipolarity, states possess greater flexibility regarding military alignments (1964, p. 901). Yet there is no meaningful discussion of how

states can display flexibility or virtuosity in other respects – by institutionalizing norms which pacify relations between the great powers for example. The whole tenor of neo-realism discourages the analysis of unit-driven change. It stresses how non-conformist powers such as the Soviet Union were forced to comply with the dominant patterns of international behaviour, and suggests that civilian powers and reformist states will succumb to a similar fate or face irrelevance in the future (Waltz, 1979, pp. 128 and 152). In Waltz's view, Morgenthau's claim that superpower detente would be more secure if it rested on a common moral framework committed the reductionist fallacy of assuming that the main contours of international relations are moulded by the domestic characteristics of states. Morgenthau's attendant error was to believe it was important to 'do something to change the internal dispositions of the internationally important ones' (Waltz, 1979, p. 62). Waltz's own remarks about the positive, if qualified, achievements of liberal democracies point towards a different and less bizarre conclusion which raises further difficulties for neo-realism. If nothing prevents liberal democracies from behaving peacefully in their relations with one another, the neo-realist distinction between the unit and the system, and its denial that fundamental international reform is possible, are immediately suspect. International stability may come to depend less on the number of great powers, or on the nature of their destructive capabilities, than on the principles of international relations they espouse and the moral constraints which they recognize.

THE DECLINING RELEVANCE OF NEO-REALISM?

The belief that the spread of liberal democracy could help refashion the international system (Doyle, 1986) is a minor theme in Waltz's writings but a major point for some of his critics. Francis Fukuyama (1991) refers to deep currents of global change in which relations between the liberal-democratic, industrial powers have come to rest on consensus rather than force. Fukuyama argues that Michael Doyle's thesis that liberal-democratic societies form a unique zone of peace was bolstered by the zeal for democratization which transformed the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. John Mueller (1989) maintains that modern warfare has become increasingly repulsive in the industrialized world, just as the duel fell into disrepute in nineteenth-century Europe. Ray (1989) has

observed that just as moral development led to the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, contemporary moral progress proclaims the obsolescence of force. Are these writers correct that cultural change within nation-states has already checked the neo-realist logic of anarchy? Are they right that 'anarchy is what states make it' (Wendt, 1992)?

Although the neo-Kantian thesis remains controversial, there is a significant consensus that the spread of liberal democracy is an encouraging development which supplements other patterns of change in the industrialized world. Unquestionably, the major powers are less inclined than their predecessors to rely on force to resolve their political differences. The nuclear revolution not only helped to maintain the peace but ended the reliance on 'mass armies' which has been a crucial linchpin of modern nationalism (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 21). In industrialized societies more pacific cultures are the result. Although the struggle for territory continues in world politics, none of the great powers is gripped by past assumptions that the conquest of territory is necessary for economic growth (Gilpin, 1981, p. 138; Rosecrance, 1986). What Rosecrance calls the rise of the trading state represents a watershed in the evolution of international society in this regard. Not only have the great powers replaced military conflict with peaceful economic competition but, *contra* neo-realism, they may be more willing as a result to perform specialized roles within an international division of economic and political responsibilities (Rosecrance, 1986, pp. 24 and 101). Developing a similar theme, Robert Cox (1989, pp. 827–8) has argued that the prospects for multilateralism and middlepowermanship have improved with the decline of US hegemony: the same is true of the world after bipolarity.

A related argument concerns the impact of international interdependence upon the sovereign state and its willingness to cooperate with others and comply with the rules established within international organizations. Robert Keohane (1989) accepts the neo-realist postulate that states are rational egoists but employs game-theoretical resources to explain how states can widen their conception of self-interest through their involvement in international institutions. There are parallels between this approach and English rationalism in that both think the concept of anarchy is of limited explanatory value (Keohane, 1990). The international system is anarchic but it is normatively regulated too. From the vantage point of these perspectives, neo-realism has underesti-

mated the role of normative constraints upon states in the past and the potential for further development in the future.

Greater opportunities for moving towards multilateral forms of global governance exist in the post-bipolar world, but it is clear that the transfer of power and authority from states to global institutions is not the only challenge to lie ahead. The nation-state is under pressure on two fronts – because globalization has seriously reduced its scope for independent action and because subnational groups demand greater representation and autonomy. As Aron (1968) noted many years ago, nationalism and globalization travel in tandem: inequalities of progress fragment the human race. The rapid demise of bipolarity is the most dramatic shift in world politics in forty years but the collapse of state socialist societies must be understood in conjunction with these dual patterns of change – the subnational revolt and the process of globalization – which are eroding the foundations of the Westphalian system.

The above-mentioned perspectives differ from neo-realism in four fundamental respects. First, neo-realism argues that strategic factors are still the primary determinants of the shape of great power relations. Strategic relations are susceptible to change, and pacification may prove to be temporary. The opposing perspectives deny that the redistribution of power is the only significant change in world politics; each claims that the pacification of great power relations is a dominant logic in contemporary world politics (Richardson, 1992, 1993). Second, neo-realism and its critics disagree about the relative importance of cultural forces in world politics. Waltz argues that a systemic theory of recurrent patterns should ignore beliefs and traditions (1979, pp. 81–2). The critics point to a revolution in statecraft which systemic explanation neither registers nor explains – this is the transformation of values in world politics (Morse, 1976). Third, the critics argue that neo-realism is an inadequate guide to the dominant forces in world politics precisely because it analyses the states-system in isolation from the sovereign units and the complex processes of economic and cultural change to which states are now subject. Not only is the international system far more dependent on the character of the units than Waltz suggests, but states have the ability to initiate radical change in world politics. Fourth, neo-realism argues that its concern with the question of power and security should remain paramount since idealist visions will fail to leave any impression on the system of states. The critics argue that neo-realism is too

quick to endorse prevailing realities, and its legitimation of the status quo should come to an end. The approaches outlined above often share a normative commitment to understanding the alternative paths of historical development which are immanent within contemporary global structures.

THE SUPERSESSION OF NEO-REALISM

Three criticisms of neo-realism remain for discussion as we turn to the issue of what the debates above imply for future directions in international theory. First, neo-realism lacks an adequate account of the relationship between the units and the system, and underestimates the capacity of states to promote international political change. Second, by lifting the system of states out of the cultural practices in which it is embedded, neo-realism fails to grasp the immense significance of contemporary moral and cultural change. Third, neo-realism has set its normative sights too low and devalues the contribution which critical approaches are making to the study of international relations.

Competing perspectives on unit and system

Waltz argues that realists failed to take account of the effects of structure. Neo-realism differs from realism by explaining how structural constraints force states to become functionally alike, but neo-realism does not deny that some of the 'causes of international outcomes are located at the level of individual units' (Waltz, 1990, pp. 34–36). Three reasons are proffered for taking unit-level phenomena seriously.

First, the analysis of unit-level characteristics is essential to explain 'why different units behave differently despite their similar placement in a system' (Waltz, 1979, p. 72). Second, states are not powerless to influence the system; the causal flow runs two ways, from the structural level to the units and from the units back again to the system (Waltz, 1990, p. 34). Third, unit-level analysis is necessary because 'the proportionate causal weight of unit-level and of systems-level factors' varies over time (Waltz, 1979, p. 49). (The neo-realist observation that the units had more influence in a multipolar system than in the bipolar world exemplifies the basic point.) Extending this theme, Waltz argues that a theory which

explains the relative importance of unit and system in different epochs is unattainable at present, although one might be developed in future. Current limitations are no reason for abandoning the quest for theory, however. The most sophisticated approach available should therefore consider the international system in isolation from the units, set out its unique structure and explain how its constraining influence produces similar behaviour among states.

Waltz argues that systemic theory can ignore the domestic nature of the units because while they are able to influence the system they are powerless to change it. This portrayal of the relationship between the units and the system is precisely what is at stake in the debates between neo-realism and its critics, although some of the latter deny that Waltz has a coherent and unchanging position on the way they are related. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990) argue that Waltz softens his systems-determinism in his major riposte to his critics. In his response, Waltz argues that 'the shaping and shoving of structures may be successfully resisted', adding that structural constraints can occasionally be overcome by using the requisite amount of 'skill and determination'. In particular, 'virtuosos transcend the limits of their instruments and break the constraints of systems which constrain lesser performers' (1986, pp. 343-4).

To what extent does this grant more influence to the units than Waltz allowed in *Theory of International Politics*? In part, the answer depends on the meaning of virtuosity. Waltz's definition is not immediately clear, but his comment that unit-level processes should be analysed when there is 'a deviation from the expected' may offer a clue (1979, p. 71). The neo-realist could choose to define virtuosity as the imaginative exercise of security and foreign policy to achieve national goals which strategic conditions seemingly place out of reach. If this is Waltz's intended meaning, his position is unchanged since the publication of *Theory of International Politics*.

However, Waltz's argument that unit-level phenomena do not generate significant systemic change forecloses the discussion at a crucial point. As already noted, Waltz (1979, p. 62) criticized Morgenthau's conception of the prerequisites of detente for converting domestic political developments 'into matters of direct international concern'. A systemic account of international relations has no interest in 'whether states are revolutionary or legitimate, authoritarian or democratic, ideological or pragmatic'

(p. 99). Yet the decision to place unit-level phenomena on one side clashes with other remarks about keeping 'open the theoretically interesting and practically important question' of how the influence of unit-level and systems-level factors varies historically (pp. 48-9). Clearly, Waltz's more recent comments on the positive international effects of the spread of liberal democracy should upgrade the importance of unit-level analysis. But so should his earlier observation that the international 'standards of performance' are currently higher than they were when social Darwinism encouraged the belief that military prowess provided unambiguous evidence of national virtue (1979, p. 137). Understanding changes in the standard of performance inevitably leads to the social and cultural forces operating inside and across nation-states.

Waltz's argument that he is concerned with developing a theory of international politics as opposed to a theory of foreign policy should therefore be treated with suspicion. He maintains that systemic theory explains the impact of structural constraints upon state behaviour, but it does not explain the whole of foreign policy. However, Waltz simultaneously argues that the units can transcend structural constraints and castigates Morgenthau for taking unit-level phenomena too seriously and for attaching too much importance to foreign policy. Waltz cannot have it both ways. Either the system determines the principal moves which states make, in which case foreign policy analysis is a residual enterprise, or states can profoundly influence the system, in which case reductionist and systemic theories deserve equal standing.

Different policy implications are inherent in these contrasting points of view, and the import of the gulf between them is immense especially in the post-Cold War age when traditional assumptions about what is possible and impossible in international relations have come under question. Neo-realists such as Mearsheimer argue that the age-old struggle to create international stability will continue under the more exacting conditions of an emerging multipolar world. The critics, such as Rosecrance, Fukuyama, Mueller and Cox, argue that neo-realism fails to appreciate the importance of 'far-reaching changes . . . in national goals and values' (Jervis, 1988, pp. 343-4). Neo-realism misjudges the initiative that trading states and middle powers can take to raise the standard of performance in international relations, although Waltz observes that the spread of liberal democracy may prove helpful in this regard. It is important to go much further by arguing that raising the standard of performance under contemporary

conditions requires efforts to rework political community to give subnational and transnational identities greater importance. Promoting this pattern of change requires virtuosity with regard to political ideas and culture rather than virtuosity with regard to strategic circumstances. This deeper form of virtuosity requires efforts to make national political communities less exclusionary.

Structure, culture and change

The way in which neo-realism conceptualizes the relationship between the units and the system obscures one form of political change which is different from an alteration in the balance of power or a change in the organizing principle of the whole system. The missing dimension is cultural change, which John Ruggie (1983) stressed in the first major critical essay on neo-realism. Neo-realism failed, in Ruggie's view, to consider the shift from medieval international society to the modern system of states. This was a transition between different types of international anarchy in which membership of a wider Christian society was replaced by the divisive principles of sovereignty and territoriality. What changed were the legal and moral rights and duties which constituted independent political actors and regulated their interaction. Ruggie describes this development within international anarchy as the metamorphosis of the principles of separability.

Contemporary critiques of neo-realism which argue that Waltz does not consider how the state is constituted, but simply takes its egotism for granted, take this point further. Richard Ashley and Alexander Wendt argue that neo-realism fails to note that the meaning and importance of sovereignty are socially constructed and change over time (Ashley, 1984, pp. 240–1; Wendt, 1992). The main point is that state egotism is acquired rather than given in anarchy itself; new conceptions of the state and political community are possible; anarchy might endure but, given the capacity of states to co-operate, it need not exist as a realm of structural constraint (Linklater, 1990b, pp. 28–32).

Earlier references to the fact that states no longer regard territorial conquest as central to economic development shed further light on this notion of the constitution and reconstitution of states. In early modern Europe, it is often argued, violence was endemic partly because the absolutist state assumed that economic growth required conquest and war. False expectations of the

economic benefits of territorial expansion compounded the tensions which led to the First World War (van Evera, 1985). The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of the trading state which eschews the use of force for strategies of global commerce and investment. The absolutist state and the trading state both belong to an anarchic system but their code of conduct is clearly not the same and the nature of anarchy is different because of it. Neo-realism fails to consider the changing nature of state structures and therefore cannot account for the possibility of an anarchical system which is not only peaceful but responsive to subnational identities and cosmopolitan moral sentiments. It rules out the possibility that the modern system of states might be the first system to change peacefully rather than revolve around the axis of the balance of power until it is finally destroyed by empire.

Surprisingly little exists in the way of a sociology of state structures which explains how states construct their legal or moral rights and duties and how these cultural inventions change over time. The sociological project envisaged here runs counter to neo-realism and has been delayed by structuralism and ahistoricism. The problem can be traced back to Waltz's important and enduring work, *Man, The State and War*, which distinguished three images of war, which locate its cause in human nature, type of domestic regime and international anarchy respectively. At no point did the analysis focus on the ways in which states construct the legal and moral rights and duties which separate them from, and relate them to, the outside world (Linklater, 1990a, 1992). Neo-realism neglects a possible fourth image which focuses on the construction of community and its potential and desirable reformation to respond to the interests of the systematically excluded (Linklater, 1990a).

Community and critique

Since the 1980s the critique of neo-realism has been centred on epistemological issues. Richard Ashley (1981) employed Jurgen Habermas's trichotomy of knowledge-constitutive interests to defend a critical-theoretical alternative to the technical realism of Waltz with its orientation towards manipulation and control, and the practical realism of Morgenthau with its orientation towards diplomatic understanding and consensus. Subsequently, he described neo-realism as 'an apology for the status quo' (1984,

p. 257). Assuming that prevailing realities are 'natural', Ashley argued, neo-realism focuses on ways of 'expanding the reach of control' and 'parades the possibility of a rational power that need never acknowledge power's limits' (p. 228). In the same period Cox (1981) distinguished between neo-realism, or problem-solving theory, with its interest in the management of great power relations, and critical theory with its very different orientation towards understanding and promoting global change. According to Cox, neo-realism took the existing system for granted and asked how it could be made to function more smoothly, while critical theory asked how the system had developed and whether it might be changing. Whereas neo-realism helped to legitimate an order which the powerful found congenial, critical theory looked for immanent possibilities that it might be transformed to satisfy the interests of the marginal and excluded.

Three different points need to be made about these criticisms. First, the claim that neo-realism is simply about expanding the reach of control is either imprecise or false. Waltz recognizes that a state can act against its own interests by amassing so much military power that others have little choice but to respond aggressively towards it. Second, neo-realism takes issue with foreign policy which substitutes the pursuit of vague ideological goals for the sober assessment of vital security interests and attainable national goals. When it performs this role, neo-realism counterbalances excessively ideological or xenophobic foreign policies which obstruct the development of co-operation and community.

Third, however, neo-realism fails to make any significant positive contribution to strengthening international community between states and peoples. In Ashley's (1981) terms, neo-realism is constituted by a technical interest in manipulation and control as opposed to the practical interest in promoting diplomatic agreement and understanding, exemplified by the writings of classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau. In short, neo-realism cannot envisage a form of statecraft which transcends the calculus of power and control. No importance is attached to the practical efforts of states to create new global norms or to theoretical attempts to articulate new conceptions of political community and foreign policy. The emphasis is placed on the doomed utopianism of reformist projects. Significantly, then, neo-realists such as Mearsheimer alert the exponents of the Whig interpretation of history to dangers lying ahead, argue that in the end the balance

of power is all that is possible and provide, however unwittingly, legitimacy for the status quo (Cox, 1981, p. 132). Recent developments in theory and practice suggest different modes of analysis. The neo-realist belief that the theory of international relations should explain recurrence and repetition is rejected by critical theorists who argue for the analysis (and defence) of immanent trends which run counter to the dominant logic of the system. This critique is reinforced by recent discussions of changing state structures in the industrialized world and the long-term pacification of great power relations. These developments in theory and practice suggest that neo-realism has to do more than issue warnings about the dangers which may eventuate now that the bipolar age is over.

The most important post-realist positions in the current debates share the assumption that one of the central purposes of studying international relations is to promote the well-being of the marginal and the excluded. In their different ways, Frankfurt school critical theory, postmodernism and feminism take issue with the classical principle of state sovereignty and make the case for new forms of political community. All three perspectives deny that while domestic politics may be governed by discourse and dialogue, international politics are condemned to revolve around power and force. All three are far more inclined than neo-realism to identify and give direction to promising trends in world politics.

Critical-theoretical approaches deny that the interests of insiders naturally take precedence over the interests of outsiders; they reject the supposition that in the event of a conflict between duties to fellow citizens and duties to humanity, the former inevitably come first. The emphasis is on extending political community to include outsiders, on universalizing norms, on realizing a cosmopolitan ethic (Linklater, 1990b). This cosmopolitan rejoinder to neo-realism is challenged by postmodern writers, who are equally keen to criticize the principle of state sovereignty and the rituals of power politics, but who fear that cosmopolitan perspectives are insensitive to cultural difference (Walker, 1988, 1993). Similar themes have emerged in feminist thought. Many feminists argue that neo-realism provides a gendered interpretation of world politics because it fails to understand how the political world might be changed by harnessing aptitudes for conflict reduction which are often more pronounced in the lives of women. But some feminists are suspicious of cosmopolitan ethics which disregard the personal traits of individuals in order to arrive at moral

principles which are true for all. Their argument is that cosmopolitan thinking frequently downplays the ethic of care and responsibility for specific persons which has governed the traditional role of women within the family (O'Neill, 1989, p. 443; Grant and Newland, 1991).

Despite their differences, all of these perspectives argue for new forms of political community which are less exclusionary towards outsiders and more sensitive to their interests and needs. Critical theory argues for new political structures which take greater account of the interests of outsiders; postmodernism stresses the interests of those who are different, including minorities and indigenous groups; feminists argue that the exclusion of women from the public domain has meant that important ethical skills and orientations have been confined to the private sphere. Despite their differences these perspectives are complementary. A cosmopolitan ethic which denies value to diversity is unattractive, as the postmodernists observe, but so are claims for special cultural rights which constrain subordinate groups and willingly sacrifice the interests of outsiders (O'Neill, 1989). The real challenge is to strike the right balance between universality and difference in new forms of political community which transcend both moral parochialism in their dealings with outside groups and the exclusionary treatment of minorities within. What has been described elsewhere as the problem of community in international relations (Linklater, 1990c) is the longer-term problem posed by the post-bipolar age yet barely noticed by neo-realism.

CONCLUSION

Finally, what contribution has neo-realism made to the theory of international relations and, in the light of recent theoretical and political developments, what influence does it seem likely to exercise over future disciplinary debates? The first point is that neo-realism has helped to introduce greater sophistication to a field which has been shy of theory and insulated from the controversies which are central to other social sciences. In particular, there can be no doubt that neo-realism surpasses realism in rigour and sophistication. Neo-realism developed a magisterial account of the persistence of the international system, the remarkable similarities of state behaviour and the virtues of bipolarity. But it pays a heavy penalty for its abstractions and omissions. The

contention that the international system should be analysed in isolation from the nature of the constituent states is not an advance beyond realism. In contrast with realism, neo-realism overstates the importance of structure. More importantly, it fails to recognize that the propensity for conflict is not the inevitable consequence of anarchy, but partly a product of the way in which states have been constituted historically. Although neo-realism recognizes that states can influence the nature of the international system, it underestimates their capacity to transform it. More importantly still, neo-realism does not consider the possibility that nation-states could (and should) be transcended by new forms of political community which are responsive to traditionally excluded identities and loyalties.

Various recent theoretical developments within the field may derive encouragement from the collapse of the bipolar world, for here is evidence that the future need not be like the past. The differences between neo-realist pessimism and progressivist interpretations of long-term patterns of change will no doubt persist, but there is a need to ensure that they are more systematically debated. What the more recent theoretical developments bring to this debate is a series of propositions which challenge neo-realism at its foundations. These propositions urge a more careful analysis of the powers of initiative which reside within the units, a greater emphasis upon the cultural dimensions of world politics and a normative engagement which seeks to recover the idealist project in international relations. Although it may be unwise to argue that neo-realism was no more than the bipolar age comprehended in thought, it did reflect that world and it did provide legitimacy for it. During the last decade, the task facing those who are committed to analysing and defending international political change has been to challenge the hegemony of neo-realism. The theoretical challenge has succeeded; the next stage is to understand more about the prospects for restructuring political community at the end of the cold war age.

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12

International Politics and Political Theory

Jean Bethke Elshtain

My task in this chapter is to make a case for what students of international politics might learn from the study of political theory, including those classical writings constitutive of this rich tradition of discourse. To say I can only scratch the surface is to understate. I begin with a brief account of how it came to be that the two enterprises became severed, one from the other, and the damage this split has done to the political acumen and explanatory possibilities of each. Second, I display but a few of the ways international theory today should draw upon and help to extend and deepen our appreciation of political theory texts. I go on to argue that the primary political passion of our time is, and will be, nationalism and that both international relations scholars and political theorists must 'go back to school' and learn (or re-learn) history, geography, cultural studies, most especially the power of religious and national belief and identity, if they are to have anything interesting or intelligible to say about the politics of the next century. Drawing upon Raymond Aron, I conclude by suggesting what has gone wrong with international relations theory and how things might be put right, at least from the perspective of the sort of political theory I endorse.

IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning (of the political sort, that is) the Greeks created the *polis* and the *world-beyond-the-polis*, a world composed of foreigners or aliens (*barbaroi*, or barbarians), or other Greeks poised in potential contest with one's own political body. This