Waltzian neorealism advances neither the analytical power of the realist school nor its utility for practitioners. Discuss.

What is known as ‘Waltzian neorealism’ was expounded by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics*, first published in 1979. During the late 1960s and in the 1970s, the post-WWII pre-eminence of the realist school came under increasing attack from the liberal tradition which focussed on international cooperation and interdependence. Waltz’s ideas spurred a revival in realist thinking and Waltzian neorealism became “a dominant school of thought in International Relations theory”. Nevertheless, it provoked fierce and prolonged controversy.

This essay will begin with an outline of Waltzian neorealism, identifying how it departs from preceding realist theory. It will then examine critiques of Waltz’s theory and its utility for practitioners; then arguments in its defence. It will suggest that while Waltzian neorealism can be seen to have altered the focus of realist thought, the realist school which emerges from the resulting controversy may prove to be more robust as a result.

Realist thought is associated with a long genealogy, encompassing eminent theorists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and more recently, Hans Morgenthau. While there are variations in their individual approaches, certain key themes emerge: a fundamentally pessimistic, tragic, view of human nature as self-interested, competitive, conflictual and belligerent; the importance of sovereign states and individual state security and survival; the absence of an overarching authority, hence the necessity of ‘self-help’; the establishment of states creates security within them but insecurity between them (the ‘security dilemma’); in an anarchical international system there is no prospect of permanent peace between states, which are continually vying for power. For these ‘classical’ and ‘neoclassical’ realist thinkers, normative values – for example, separate moralities for the public and private spheres (Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes); domestic peace or “felicity” (Hobbes); civic responsibility and the importance of statecraft (Machiavelli) – play an important role.

Waltzian neorealism differs from preceding realist thought in particular in this last respect. Influenced by behaviouralists of the 1950s and 1960s, Waltz favoured an objective, scientific approach, disregarding normative values as subjective and therefore unscientific. Waltz takes this objectivity a step further, viewing states, whatever their size, as all alike (‘like units’) in that they all perform similar tasks such as levying taxes, legislating, conducting foreign policy, etc. The structure of the international system is determined by the units’ relative capabilities in performing these tasks (i.e. relative to one another). The structure consists of ‘images’ - or ‘levels’ - : individuals are ‘first-image’, states are ‘second-image’ and the international structure, ‘third-image’). Furthermore, states are concerned with relative (rather than absolute) gains, so there is continual tension between them, the ultimate expression of which is war; bipolarity is more likely to maintain the balance of power than multipolarity.

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These conditions are perpetual as long as international anarchy persists; they do not change over time.\(^4\)

As indicated above, Waltzian neorealism has been subject to strong critique. Among the general critiques are arguments that Waltz’s emphasis on structure is passé (outdated), having been pre-empted by similar work in the social sciences, itself superseded by post-structuralism and post-modernism\(^5\); also, the separation of agency from structure,\(^6\) and the domestic from the international (the inside/outside issue), are unworkable.\(^7\) The emphasis on relative gains and the related idea that power is zero-sum is also criticized as too absolute (“monolithic”), and too abstract, not taking into account a “multidimensional concept of power”; and differences in the understanding of the meaning of victory in war.\(^8\) In addition, Waltz’s understanding of anarchy as universal and immutable is questioned; the meaning of anarchy may be mediated by variations in states’ conceptions of their security.\(^9\)

Rosenberg takes up the baton in his critique.\(^10\) Because of Waltzian neorealism’s adherence to universal, unchanging laws, it is ahistorical and cannot predict outcomes\(^11\) (notably the end of the Cold War). In focussing on the military aspect of power as the main determinant of international relations, it precludes consideration of other forms of change, such as revolution, imperial expansion, contraction and rivalry, and the development of transnational economics. Its lack of specification makes it a theory which is difficult to falsify and also produces a flattening effect, “suppressing the differences” [between, for example] “Charles V, Napoleon, Wilhelm II and Hitler”.\(^12\)

Rosenberg argues that Waltzian neorealism fails in its aspiration to a theory of international politics because, in preserving “the insulation of the international from the domestic”, it is too narrow, excluding factors which might override the concerns of power politics. As a theory endorsing the balance of power, it can be seen as a form of ideology, which endorses the continuation of Great Power politics and realpolitik, and is therefore also a conservative ideology.\(^13\)

Waltzian neorealism is the subject of further critique by Lebow\(^14\), with particular reference to its practical relevance to issues of international power politics post-1945. Lebow contends

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\(^4\) Jackson, R., Sorensen, G. (editors). *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*. pp. 73-77


\(^11\) Ibid p.295

\(^12\) Ibid pp.290-91

\(^13\) Ibid pp.296-97

\(^14\) Lebow, R. 1994. The long peace, the end of the Cold War, and the failure of Realism. *International Organization* 48 [2]:249-77
that the bipolarity of the post-war international system on which Waltzian neorealism rests did not in fact exist until at least the mid-1950s.15 Waltz’s eventual affirmation of the significance of the nuclear deterrent apparently acknowledges that a unit-level variable had an effect at system level.16 With these points, Lebow argues that Waltz’s interpretation of bipolarity falls short of the specificity needed.

Lebow offers examples of instances where the actions of a major power contradict the realist/neorealist paradigm of the preservation of sovereign territory. The 1987 arms control treaty on Soviet and US nuclear weapons, under which the USSR agreed to remove more of these weapons than the US and which was therefore advantageous to the West; the USSR’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988-9; and its withdrawal of forces from the countries of eastern Europe, which encouraged calls for their independence, contributing to the destabilization and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.17 Insight into Gorbachev’s foreign policy must therefore draw on factors outside the realist/neorealist paradigm, such as “domestic politics, belief systems and learning.”18

Neorealist principles are also tested in Jackson and Sorensen’s discussion of the question of NATO expansion into eastern Europe after the Cold War. Jackson and Sorensen argue that, with its strict emphasis on structural, scientific analysis, Waltzian neorealism lacks utility for politicians and military officials weighing up the relative value of competing arguments, such as: NATO expansion eastwards would deter Russia from attempting to recover lost territory, and promote stability and security among eastern European states; or, expansion would antagonize Russia and promote instability along a dividing line between those countries which had joined NATO and those who had not; and the additional commitment accompanying expansion would stoke latent US isolationism. In contrast to earlier realist thought, Waltzian neorealism precludes consideration of such normative questions, so can be seen as inadequate for practitioners in this respect.19

Several of the above charges are refuted by Waltz himself.20 He disputes the claim that systems theory is static and conservative. On the contrary, he argues that the system is dynamic; its dynamic changes when there are changes in its structure, for example when there are changes in the relative distribution of unit capabilities.21

Regarding the separation of agency (unit-level) from structure (system level), Waltz asserts that the charge is misconstrued. Taking the example of the introduction of nuclear weapons (a unit-level change), he acknowledges that these had an effect at system level (for example, increasing the standing of poorer, weaker states); however the fundamental characteristics of the system (self-help, inter-state competition) remain the same.22 Regarding the separation of

15 Ibid pp.255-57
16 Ibid p.254
17 Ibid pp.261-63
18 Ibid p.268
19 Jackson R, Sorensen G, editors. Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches. pp.81-84
21 Ibid p.342
22 Ibid pp.327-28
the domestic from the international, Waltz contends that while domestic politics, ideology and culture are important, they are intellectual categories separate from theory: “What theories do mainly is omit things. They make bold simplifications…theories are about something, not about everything.”

Waltzian neorealism’s apparent failure to account for, for example, the end of the Cold War, or Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev, is understandable from its position as pure theory. The abstract nature of Waltz’s structure also makes it “transposable” and therefore relevant and useful over the longer term and in a variety of circumstances.

Waltz also claims that his theory broke new ground in identifying clearly the “effects on units of changes in structure”, which he argues had only previously been attempted in a general way, whether by “liberals, Marxists, realists or behaviouralists”. In this sense, Waltz’s theory of the international structure was innovative and in addition, as pointed out by Buzan, was even attractive to those whose sympathies lay within the liberal school of thought: “…many of the advocates of interdependence and transnationalism…work emerging from those perspectives during the 1980s…bore more than traces of theoretical and methodological reassessment deriving from Waltz’s critique”; for example, Gilpin and Keohane. Some see this as problematic: Rosenberg comments that “Realism…continues to have a disorganizing effect on its critics” by reinforcing the dominance of the “ideology of nationalism” and he points out that the sovereign state has become a global phenomenon.

In contrast, Buzan, Jones and Little, adopt a more positive approach. They see the essential structure of Waltz’s theory as a valuable framework on which to build a wider-ranging theory of the international system, based on the perceived common ground mentioned above, to include “First…a much more comprehensive definition of structure” (which does not focus exclusively on power politics); “Second…a multisectoral approach” at the systems level, acknowledging the importance of economic, societal and environmental interaction; “Third…a more linguistic approach to analogy” instead of Waltz’s use of analogy based on microeconomics. This proposed metamorphosis of Waltzian neorealism is known as Structural Realism.

However, in this approach and in the ‘neo-neo’ debate of the 1990s between neoliberals and neorealists (which also focused on efforts to find common ground), there is a risk of neorealism, and realism overall, losing its identity as a distinct intellectual position/paradigm;

25 Ibid p.336
29 Rosenberg J. What’s the matter with realism? p.298
30 Ibid p.302
31 Buzan B, Jones C, Little R. The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism. pp.11-12
to paraphrase Waltz, of becoming a theory about everything, not about something. This is apparent to Legrow and Moravcsik, who refer to “the degeneration of contemporary realist theory”32 to encompass variations in state preferences, ideology and norms, and advocate a return to a more clearly defined distillation of international relations theory, into four paradigmatic categories: “realist, liberal, epistemic and institutional”, as a foundation for “multicausal synthesis”33 in the empirical analysis of international affairs; the relative weight of each paradigm varying according to particular circumstances: the liberal paradigm being more applicable to the non-military resolution of disputes between advanced democracies, and the realist paradigm being more relevant regarding situations involving issues of relative gains and strategic interaction. In Legrow and Moravcsik’s more closely defined definition of the realist paradigm, which consists of states as unitary political actors in perpetual competition for resources, the most important component, in their view, is the (distinctly Waltzian) focus on international structure and “the primacy [and relative distribution] of material capabilities.”34

Conclusion

During the 1960s and 1970s, realism was perhaps in danger of being seen as redundant, with international relations increasingly influenced by transnational concerns and institutions, and interdependence. Theory of International Politics brought a new theoretical dimension to the realist school and, its publication coinciding with the onset of the period called the Second Cold War, it appeared highly relevant. Its emphasis on an anarchical, competitive international structure and the balance of power between states, served to illustrate, with renewed intellectual vigour, that realist principles were still of relevance for practitioners; and they may well continue to constitute a valid approach in the context of the modern global plurality of sovereign states (particularly following the disaggregation of the British and French empires and the collapse of the Soviet Union). As Buzan writes: “…there is still a very long way to go before power politics is expunged from human affairs.”35

At the same time, some recent conceptions of realist theory have stretched it almost “beyond all recognition or utility.”36 However, provided that the importance of clearly defined paradigms in international relations theory is acknowledged, greater conceptual clarity regarding the character and scope of realist thought, with Waltzian neorealist principles as a determining influence, may result in the enhanced utility of realism for empirical analysis of events in world politics.

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33 Ibid pp.46-47
34 Ibid pp.16-18
35 Buzan B. The timeless wisdom of realism? p.62
36 Legrow JW, Moravcsik A. Is Anybody Still a Realist? p.53
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