

Guest Essay

## NEOREALISM: CONFUSIONS AND CRITICISMS

Kenneth Waltz

Confusion begins with misunderstanding how theories are made and failure to comprehend what they can and cannot do. I define a theory as a mental picture of a domain – a picture showing how the domain is organized and how its parts are connected. Theory isolates a realm in order to deal with it intellectually. A mental picture, for example of a national economy or of an international-political system, is a simplified representation. To display important causes and effects, the picture has to omit most everything that goes on in an economy or in an international-political system. A theory is an instrument intended to be useful in explaining what happens in a defined realm of activity. To criticize a theory for its omissions is odd because theories are mostly omission. One is sometimes told that something should be added to a theory in order to bring it closer to reality. Yet the development of science, whether in physics or economics, has progressed by taking long steps away from direct experience of the world and depicting it in highly abstract terms. Simplification often comes through assumptions incorporated in a theory. That mass concentrates at a point is an example of a simplifying assumption made in Newtonian physics. That people are economic maximizers is a similar example in microeconomics and that states act to ensure their survival is an example of structural theory.

The structure of international politics is sparsely defined by anarchy, which is the ordering principle of the realm, and by the distribution of capabilities across states. Should we not add something to the definition? Some have complained that normative considerations are omitted. Should they be added? To ask the questions is like asking whether we should add to a theory that explains gravity a warning that it is unwise to fall from high buildings. Others have complained that such obviously important matters as economic relations, technological change, and demographic patterns are omitted. Many critics of structural theory seem to believe that if a variable is omitted from a theory, adding it will make the theory stronger. A theory, however, is not a collection of variables. To add to a theory something that one believes has been unduly omitted requires showing how it can take its place as one element of a coherent and effective theory. If that were easy to do we would

be blessed with a wealth of strong and comprehensive theories.

The matters omitted are not neglected when a theory is used. Theories are sparse in formulation and beautifully simple. Reality is complex and often ugly. Predictions are not made, nor explanations contrived, by looking at a theory and inferring something about particular behaviors and outcomes from it. How could that be done when the empirical matter that must be considered in making predictions or fashioning explanations can not be included in a theory? A theory is an instrument used to explain “the real world” and perhaps to make some predictions about it. In using the instrument, all sorts of information, along with a lot of good judgment, is needed. Theories don’t predict, people do.

Another criticism claims that new realism is simply old realism made rigorous. The validity of that judgment depends on what one thinks old realists were saying. Traditional realists are behavioralists; they believe that international outcomes are determined by the decision of states, the behaving units. Causations goes in one direction, from the internal composition of states to the outcomes their behaviors supposedly produce. This has been the usual way of thinking. Socialists as well as liberals are examples of this. Mao Zedong like Woodrow Wilson believed that good states would live at peace with one another, and bad states would make war. The communist and the liberal democrat agreed on how to explain international events. They disagreed merely on how to define good and bad. New realism turns old realism upside down. The old realism is behavioral: good states produce good outcomes; bad states, bad ones. The new realism is structural: outcomes depend not only, and often not mainly, on the qualities of states, but also on variation of the structure within which their actions occur.

Perhaps the most common criticism of structural theory is that it fails to include consideration of the effects of the policies and behaviors of states on international politics. True, states are omitted from structural theory. It is, after all, a theory about international politics and not a theory about foreign policy. A neorealist theory of international politics explains how external forces shape states’ behavior, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the explanation of foreign policy. An international political theory can explain states’ behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens. When they do not, a theory of international politics needs help. The help is found outside the theory. Yet it is said that although neorealists admit that unit-level causes are important, they refuse to include them in their accounts. The peculiarity of this criticism is matched by the frequency with which it is made. Obviously nobody, realist or otherwise, believes that foreign policy and international politics can be understood without consid-

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ering what goes on inside states. The critics have confused theories and accounts. Accounts, stories about what happens and speculations about why, are not theories. Much is included in an account, little is included in a theory.

States matter, and the structure of international politics matters. Which matters more varies with changes in the structure of international politics. Anyone who had failed to notice this could hardly fail to see it as the world moved from bipolarity to unipolarity. In a bipolar world, two states check and balance each other. In a unipolar world, checks on the behavior of the one great power drop drastically. Unipolarity weakens structural constraints, enlarges the field of action of the remaining great power, and heightens the importance of its internal qualities. An international system in balance is like a political system of checks and balances. The impulses of a state to behave in arbitrary and high-handed fashion are constrained by the presence of states of comparable capability. An international system in which another state or combination of states is unable to balance the might of the most powerful is like a political system without checks and balances. With depressing predictability when rulers establish their dominance, the result is arbitrary and destructive governance that works for the benefit of the governors rather than the governed. Ideally, a benevolent despot is able to fashion the wise policies that the compromises of democracy impede. Similarly, imperial countries, superior to those they rule, may claim to aim at uplifting the natives but seldom produce that result. Disparity of power spawns despotic rule at home and abroad.

Different structures permit and cause the units of a system to change their behavior and produce different outcomes. Changes at the unit level may also have far reaching effects. The difficulty of distinguishing between unit- and system-level causes is a problem of neorealist theory. It follows from the theory that bipolar systems are more peaceful than multipolar systems. Yet one many wonder how much of the peace that marked the Cold War was produced by the structure of international politics and how much by the weaponry some states wielded. Was peace the product of nuclear weapons or was peace the byproduct of the system's structure? Until the system's structure changed, one could hardly say more than both structure and weaponry shared the credit. Just what caused what was hard to say. In the absence of nuclear weapons the United States and the Soviet Union would still have shied away from fighting each other because of the great damage that states of continental size armed with modern conventional weapons can wreak on each other. Yet through history wars have been fought among countries wielding great destructive power. War between the United States and the Soviet Union would have been hard to start, harder than World War I and II. Bipolarity reduces uncertainties about who will oppose whom, but the uncer-

tainties of outcomes in contests between conventionally armed states remained and would in time have lead one side or the other to believe that superior weaponry or a cleverer strategy would bring victory at supportable cost. Bipolarity offers a promise of peace; nuclear weapons reinforce the promise and make it a near guarantee.

Among states armed with nuclear weapons peace prevails whatever the structure of the system may be. The shifts from multi- to bi- to unipolarity during the past century well illustrate how strongly differences in polarity affect the behavior of states and alter international outcomes. The introduction of nuclear weapons shows that, like structural changes, unit-level changes may also have system-wide effects. The system was marked by moderate behavior, with moderation the product of the fear that balance instills. Through the long years of the Cold War the might of each superpower balanced the might of the other and moderated the behavior of both of them. Now the only superpower left in the field is free to act on its whims and follow its fancies.

The disappearance of one great power left the effects of nuclear weapon intact, but the disappearance of balance unleashed the impulses of the remaining great power. Superiority fosters the desire to use it. The dictatorial aspiration, whether of ruler or country, is to perpetuate supremacy and to transcend the processes of history. Polarities tells us much about national behaviors and international-political outcomes without revealing the part of the story that resides in the heart of nations.

#### *Theory for Today and Tomorrow*

Structural theory has two main competitors: liberal institutionalism and constructivism. Robert O. Keohane is the major proponent of the former; Alexander Wendt of the latter. Liberal institutionalism is not a distinct theory. Keohane and Nye have stressed that institutionalism has structural realism as its theoretical core, which they have tried to broaden. And constructivism is not a theory at all. If a so-called theory does not explain, it is not a theory. To say what constructivism explains is difficult. What it offers instead is a seemingly hopeful view of the world. The self-regarding concerns of people and states can be replaced with other-regarding impulses. Instead of acting mainly to serve their own interests, people and states may begin to act for the sake of others. A nice thought; neither people nor states, however, have consistently behaved in other-regarding fashion. Unless a state can reply with certainty on other states to come to its aid in adversity, it has to take care of itself as best it can. Constructivism enjoys some popularity mainly in countries like the United States, which has few good reasons to worry much about its security, and Western Europe, which has enjoyed American protection,

and among individuals who dwell in such safe havens as universities.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union greatly changed the world. How did the change come about? It did not happen in ways imagined by liberals or constructivists. The undoing of Russia's communist system was contrived not by a bunch of aspiring democrats but by old Soviet apparatchiks, the likes of Andropov, Gorbachev, and Ryzhkov. Nor did the increasing economic interdependence of states have anything to do with the Soviet Union's unraveling. The Soviet Union traded little outside its bloc and neither supplied nor received significant amounts of capital. The collapse of the Soviet Union was caused not by the triumph of liberal forces operating internationally but by the failure of the Soviet Communist System. The Cold War ended exactly as realists had predicted. The Cold War rooted in the bipolar system and would end only when that system collapsed.

After the Cold War, does realism still reign? As the title of an essay by Robert Gilpin has it, "Nobody Loves a Realist." Yet time and again, from antiquity to the present, realism has emerged from the competition of explanations as the most useful comprehensive one for explaining outcomes produced by units existing in a condition of anarchy. As long as that condition endures, realist theory remains the most useful instrument for explaining international political events. One may, however, wonder which version of realism—offensive or defensive—is the more useful one. Offensive realism asserts that more is always better. States want more power, and they always need more power, in order to be secure. Realist theory, properly viewed, is neither offensive nor defensive. States have to take care of themselves by whatever combination of internal effort and external alignment. Whether the best way to provide for one's security is by adopting offensive or defensive strategies varies as situations change. A state having too much power may scare other states into uniting against it and thus become less secure. A state having too little power may tempt other states to take advantage of it. Realism is best left without an adjective to adorn it.

Realism is age old. Putting realism into the form of theory is recent. Over the ages, the development of realism has been a world enterprise with major influences emanating from Greece (Thucydides), Italy (Machiavelli), England (Hobbes and alter E.H. Carr), Germany (Meinecke and Morgenthau) and America. We may now hope for contributions from other parts of the world.

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