

## Neorealism and Its Critics ed. Robert Koehane

### Chapter 6: “Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis” by John Gerard Ruggie

In his *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz presents a systemic theory of international relations. According to Waltz, the structure of the international system, which is determined by (1) the organizing principle of the system (anarchy) and (2) the distribution of power within the system (the number of great powers), determines the outcomes of world politics. Accordingly, systemic continuity will result in similarity of outcomes over time, and a change in outcomes requires a shift in either the organizing principle of the system or the distribution of power.

Ruggie takes issue with Waltz’s model on two main points: Waltz’s fails to recognize a both dimension and determinant of change in world politics.

Ruggie argues that a dimension of change is missing from Waltz’s model because he drops out the second analytical component of political structure, the differentiation of units (i.e. the structure of the state), when theorizing about the international system. Waltz interprets “differentiation” as differences among units rather than as the separation of units. Ruggie claims that if one focuses on the principles that separate units from one another, the second component of structure does not drop out and becomes a crucial source of structural variation. Ruggie uses the shift from the medieval to the modern international system to illustrate his point. Ruggie argues that without taking the second image into account, with its shift from feudalism to the modern principle of sovereignty to organize states, one cannot account for “the most important contextual change in international politics in this *millennium*” [Ruggie’s italics] (p. 141).

Ruggie then enumerates four specific consequences for Waltz’s model if the second component is regarded as a dimension of transformation in the international system.

- (1) Waltz’s deduces from anarchy certain constraints on state action. Ruggie believes these constraints arise from the principles that separate the units.
- (2) Inclusion of the second component allows Waltz to argue more compellingly against those who claim that the erosion of sovereignty means the systemic argument can no longer explain outcomes. Waltz simply dismisses such inclusion of unit-level issues in systemic theory. Ruggie argues that the concept of sovereignty still matters because it “shape[s], condition[s], and constrain[s] social behavior” (p. 147). Just as private property rights still matter at the domestic level even though the state interferes with property rights on a regular basis, sovereignty still matters in the international system because it affects when and how intervention occurs.
- (3) Inclusion allows one to expand the scope of realist analysis without violating the theory’s basic premises. The structure of the second level (e.g. the hegemonic form of state/society relations) is an attribute of the international system and thus can be considered a system-level explanatory factor.
- (4) Inclusion helps us build a more comprehensive view of world politics.

Ruggie also argues that Waltz is neglecting a determinant of change. In the tradition of Durkheim (Waltz self-consciously took a Durkheimian approach), change occurs not just as a result of a shift in the number of units (Waltz counting great powers) but due to a shift in the pattern of their interaction (termed “dynamic density”). Waltz banishes interaction to process, shaped by structure but not influencing structure. Ruggie believes Waltz takes this approach for three reasons. First, Waltz is missing the second level

dimension of change. Since most of the pressure from dynamic density occurs within a society, Waltz, whose model lacks this level of structure, rejects societal transactions as having nothing to do with structure. However, the shift in dynamic density during the end of the feudal system and the resulting change in property rights that ushered in the notion of sovereignty clearly did affect structure. The modern international system is a result of this determinant of change. Second, Waltz shifts his theory from a generative one to a descriptive one. This eliminates one method of determining how dynamic density could affect the system level. Third, in reacting against what Waltz has termed reductionist tendencies (taking all causes to the unit level), Waltz goes to opposite extreme and considers unit-level processes to be all effect with no ability to affect the structure of the system in which they operate. Ruggie argues that, in any system, structural change is only caused by unit-level processes.