

**John Ruggie, “Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neo-Realist Synthesis”**

in Keohane, ed. *Neo-Realism and its Critics*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1986)

**This chapter deals with a discussion of the extent to which Waltz’ theory explains systemic continuity in international politics.**

Let’s begin then with a brief recap on Waltz’ theory would not hurt.

*International politics*, says Waltz, can best be described in systemic terms.

4 key concepts are involved here. A **system** is this new totality formed by the union of parts [units], a totality enjoying a “specific reality which has its own characteristics” (not Waltz, Durkheim). The **structure** depicts the organization of a system, or the laws of association by which **units** are combined, to form the systemic totality. **Processes** are simply the patterned relations among units that go on within a system.

Waltz’ concept of political structure consists of three analytical components:

- (1) the principle according to which the system is ordered or organized;
- (2) the differentiation of units and the specification of their functions; and
- (3) the degree of concentration or diffusion of capabilities within the system.

Given this, *Waltz’ central concern is to demonstrate the impact of variations in international structure on international outcomes, and to explain similarities of outcomes over time by structural continuity*. Note that, to be productive, the systems level has to express systemic properties and to explain how these act as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it.

In the case of international politics:

- (1) the principle according to which the system is ordered is the absence of central rule. Hence the international structure of *anarchy*, that is, the horizontal organization of authority relations. And self-help units (states) is the fundamental basis of international association.
- (2) the differentiation of units is extremely limited, since Waltz asserts that units (states) are compelled to try to be functionally alike. Therefore, since there is no functional differentiation of states (apart from that imposed by relative capabilities), the second component of political structure is not needed at the international level.
- (3) capabilities are either economic or military.

A key point to keep in mind is that Waltz thinks of these three (or two) components of the political structure as successive causal depth levels. The “ordering principle” shapes its fundamental social quality. Differentiation, where it exists, mediates (through broad and enduring social institutions) the social effects of the deep structure, but within a context that has already been circumscribed by the deep structure. Lastly, the impact of the distribution of capabilities on outcomes is to magnify or modify the opportunities and constraints generated by the two other structural levels. But since functional

differentiation does not exist, in conclusion, *international structures vary only through a change of organizing principles, or, failing that, through variations in the capabilities of units.*

Ruggie's point, basically, is to reach beyond the confines of conventional realist analysis, without violating its basic premises. An important limit of Waltz' theory, according to Ruggie, comes from an inappropriate definition of the second level of structure: differentiation between the units, and particularly from the idea that this level should be dropped as a factor of change of the international structures. To put it shortly, bringing back in one dimension of change (namely, the one related to the second level of structure) would correct some of the limits of Waltz' theory – for instance by giving greater determinate content to the general constraints of anarchy deduced by Waltz.

He illustrates his point by showing that Waltz' 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.

What does this second structural level deal with? I couldn't find a clear definition, but Ruggie provides some illustrations, like the form (hegemonic or not) of state/society relations and the nature of property rights, all components of “generative structure” which shape, condition and constrain social behavior.

More generally, Ruggie blames Waltz for not taking into account factors which are shaped by structure but affect structure also in turn. He misses for instance the “dynamic density” of societies, namely, the quantity, velocity and diversity of transactions that go on within society, and which, according to Durkheim, modifies profoundly the fundamental conditions of collective existence (or of international structure in the context studied by Waltz).

One reason for why Waltz cannot integrate into his theory is that, by reacting to the “reductionist tendencies” in international relations which make the system all product and not productive, Waltz goes to far in the opposite direction, for in his conception unit-level processes become all product and are not at all productive. Ruggie argues on the contrary that, in any social system, structural change itself ultimately has no source other than unit-level processes. This means that Waltz exogenizes the ultimate source of systemic change. Therefore, continuity, in his model, is a product of premise even before it is hypothesized as an outcome! But, this defect can be compensated by reformulating the realist model, that is, by redefining the “second level of structure” (unit differentiation) and including it among the potential factors of change.