

NB Chaps 2-4 of Neo-Realism and its critics is in fact chaps 1, 4 and 5 of Waltz' Theory of International Politics.

In overview, Waltz sets out his view of how students of international affairs (and other fields) should approach theorising, then argues that a unit level explanation of international politics is inadequate, preferring a systems approach, and finally defines the salient characteristics of the structure of the international system, that is to say those characteristics which are separate from the characteristics of the unit-level actions and interactions of the system.

Chap 2 Laws and Theories

A "law" involves some statement if a then b, with some stated probability. A theory is sometimes seen as more complex than laws, but of the same nature, eg with more variables. For example, voting may be explained as a result of income, religion, parental views etc. However, Waltz suggests that theories shd be seen, not as mere collections of laws, but rather as statements that explain the laws. With laws the question posed is "are they true?", with theories, the question is "how great are their explanatory powers?".

Waltz suggests the following 7 step method for testing theory:

1. State the theory
2. Infer hypotheses
3. Subject hypotheses to experimental/ observational tests
4. In 2, 3 use definitions of terms found in the theory being tested
5. Eliminate or control perturbing variables
6. Devise a number of distinct and demanding tests
7. If a test is not passed, ask whether the theory flunks completely, needs repair or restatement or requires a narrowing of the scope of its explanatory claims.

Waltz's view is that the big difficulty is not the devising of tests, but stating theories with enough precision or plausibility to make such testing worthwhile.

Chap 3 Reductionist and systemic theories

Theories of IR are reductionist or systemic according to how they arrange their material. If they explain international outcomes through the action and interaction of parts (i.e. states, or units) they are reductionist. A systems theory of international politics, on the other hand, deals with the forces in play at the international, not the national level.

Waltz argues that the reductionist explanations are defeated by the similarity and repetition of international outcomes despite wide variation in the attributes and interactions of the agents that supposedly cause them.

In a systems theory, some part of the explanation of the behaviors and outcomes is found in the systems structures. What then is a structure?

A structure, in Waltz's sense, is a constraining condition which cannot be seen or examined, but tends to product a uniformity of outcomes despite a variety of inputs. Not a concrete agent. For example, in economics, the market is a structure. Structures mold and limit agents and point them towards common outcomes even where aims and efforts of agents vary.

Structures affect behaviour within the system indirectly the socialisation of actors and through competition between actors. These both encourage similarity of attribute and behaviour (similarly to market encouraging similarity among firms).

Chap 4 Political Structures

A system is composed of a structure and of interacting units. The structure is a system-wide component which makes it possible to think of the system as a whole. Structure should be defined free of the attributes and interactions of units. Defining structure means ignoring how units relates to one another in the sense of interaction, and concentrating on how they stand in relation to one another (that is, how they are arranged or positioned). NB not interactions between states - these are at the level of units. The arrangement of units is however the property of the system.

First question for structures: what is principle by which the parts are arranged? Domestic structures are arranged hierarchically. Second: What is the specification of functions of the formally differentiated parts (eg. congress supplies military, president commands.) . Third, how are capabilities distributed across units?

Waltz gives an extended example in relation to UK and US domestic politics, arguing that the difference in specification in functions of parts of domestic political system in the two countries produces different political outcomes. For example, there is less institutional constraint on UK PM's power (compared to President of the US), but selection of UK PMs through parliamentary service means means than infact chosen for ability to manage party in House of Commons, which results in a limited leadership role. US Presidents, not selected or constrained on this basis, are freer and more likely to offer leadership.

Structure in international politics.

1. Ordering principles.

In international politics, unlike domestic politics, the parts are formally equal. international politics is decentralised and anarchic. Waltz assumes that states wish to ensure survival.

2. Character of the units.

This second aspect of structure is not relevant to international politics, because states are not formally differentiated by the functions they perform. Two other questions: Why states only as units of system?

Answer:

States not the only actors, but the major ones. Why call states "like units"? Answer: By observation, very similar in ends if not capabilities (eg. laws, revenue raising, defence).

3. Distribution of capabilities.

The structure of international politics is affected by the distribution of capabilities - eg. how many great powers? Two questions: is capability not about units, and therefore does not fall within "structure" as defined? Answer: states are placed differently within the international system because of capability, and that capability is estimated by comparing capabilities of a number of units - so it is a system wide concept. Why not include alliances or groupings of states in structure? Do these not determine the placing of states? No structure refers to organisation of system not groupings that may occur now and again. For example, in a multipolar system if several states combine into only two alliances, it is still a multipolar world, not a bipolar world.