

Notes: **Robert O. Keohane, “Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics,” in Neorealism and Its Critics, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 1-26.**

-the value of theory; theory can be policy-relevant—the example Keohane gives is Waltz’s theory of balance of power and how it could have been useful to U.S. policymakers in the 1950s who remained stuck to the idea of a monolithic communist bloc instead of realizing the eventual split of China from the Soviet Union

-BUT that doesn’t mean that one should stick to theory blindly; instead, theory must be used with a critical eye towards the particular situation; the example here is the bad name given to appeasement since Munich, an assessment by no means universally valid

-even more importantly: theories shape our perceptions of the world; the choice is not theory or no theory but being aware of theory or remaining prey to the subconscious force of theory

-the basics of political realism (which date back to Thucydides):

-first, states are the key units of action

-second, states seek power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends

-third, states behave in ways that are rational

-after 1648, “political realism became the generally accepted conventional wisdom...” [8]

-after WWII, realism became the accepted theory for Anglo-American thinking on international affairs (how true that is for England is quite contestable, though—my comment, not Keohane’s).

- -“discussions of foreign policy have been carried on, since 1945, in the language of political realism—that is, the language of power and interests rather than of ideals or norms.” [9]

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Notes: **Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).**

Waltz's book is the defining statement of neorealist theory (up to now), so if these notes are a bit on the long side, that is true for a good reason: I doubt anybody would understand IR theory without understanding Waltz, since so much of the debate centers around topoi developed by him, and I equally doubt that anybody could pass generals without at least a fairly comprehensive understanding of Waltz.

## Ch. 1 Laws and Theories

-Phil. of Social Science

-a *law* "establishes relations between variables" [1]

-an "absolute law" has an invariant relationship between two variables

-other laws express probability: If *a*, then *b* with probability *x*

-*laws* must be established by observing things that happen repeatedly {not one-time observations}

-a *theory* is harder to define

-by one definition, a theory is comprised of "collections or sets of laws pertaining to a particular behavior or phenomenon." [2] {note: this is the inductivist approach}

-the problem: this only gives us statistical correlations, but not causal mechanisms; the inductive problem is not solved: "But we can never say with assurance that a state of affairs inductively arrived at corresponds to something objectively real. What we think of as reality is itself an elaborate conception constructed and reconstructed through the ages. Reality emerges from our selection and organization of materials that are available in infinite quantity. How can we decide which materials to select and how to arrange them? No inductive procedure can answer the question, for the very problem is to figure out the criteria by which induction can usefully proceed." [5]

-second definition of a theory: rather than a mere collection of laws, theories are statements that explain them. [5] theories show why the laws are valid.

-the assumptions theories employ "are neither true nor false." [6] They are needed in order to isolate part of reality in an intellectually coherent sense; otherwise, there would be no discrimination in the theory, and it might represent reality well, but at the expense of being a bulky theory.

-the test of a theory: "Theoretical notions find their justification in the success of the theories that employ them." [6] {their explanatory power}

-"A theory is a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a domain and of the connections among its parts. The infinite materials of any realm can be organized in endlessly different ways. A theory indicates that some factors are more important than others and specifies relations among them. In reality, everything is related to everything else, and one domain cannot be separated from others. Theory isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually. To isolate a realm is a precondition to developing a theory that will explain what goes on within it. If the precondition cannot be met, and that of course is a possibility, then the construction of theory for the matters at hand is impossible. The question, as ever with theories, is not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is useful. And usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predictive powers of the theory that may be fashioned." [8]

#### **Ch. 4 Reductionist and Systemic Theories**

-*reductionist* theories: explain intl. outcomes through variables located at national or subnational levels; the internal force produces external outcomes. {“inside-out” theories}

-the example Waltz examines in Ch. 2: imperialism {class}

-the basic problem: from attributes, one cannot predict outcomes: Waltz gives the following example: “He is a troublemaker.” “He makes trouble.” Obviously, the two may be connected, but they are nevertheless distinct statements. If outcomes depend on the situations that actors find themselves in, then it is wrong to blithely give the full causal mechanism to the attributes of an agent. [60-61]

-the problem is that “even if every state were stable, the world of states might not be. If each state, being stable, strove only for security and had no designs on its neighbors, all states would nevertheless remain insecure; for the means of security for one state are, in their very existence, the means by which other states are threatened. One cannot infer the condition of international politics from the internal composition of states, nor can one arrive at international politics by summing the foreign policies and the external behaviors of states.” [64]

-reductionist theories cannot explain the continuity of international politics:

The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked instead by dismaying persistence, a persistence that one must expect so long as none of the competing units is able to convert the anarchic international realm into a hierarchic one.

The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia, .... [66]

-*systemic* theories: a systems approach analyzes not only the “properties and interconnections of variables but also by the way in which they are organized.” [39, chapter 3]. There are two levels: the international structure and the interacting units; the causal mechanism operates through both of them [structure influences units; and units influence the structure] [40]

-*systemic* theories, in Waltz’s view, must be clear to not changes at the level of units with a change at the level of structure [for instance, an alliance change for a state influences the units, but it should not change the structure]

-a systemic theory is what Waltz wants to construct in order to explain continuity in international-political outcomes

-change is not well-dealt with in structural theories, but Waltz nevertheless states: “A structural change is a revolution, whether or not violently produced, and it is so because it gives rise to new expectations about the outcomes that will be produced by the acts and interactions of units whose placement in the system varies with changes in structure.” [70]

-A theory of international politics “can describe the range of likely outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change. It can tell us what pressures are exerted and what possibilities are posed by systems of different structure, but it cannot tell us just how, and how effectively, the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities.” {read: cannot explain foreign policy by units} [71]

-the analogue: market theory; it uses a hypothetical ‘firm’ but not a theory of the firm

-the use of the term “*structure*”

-Waltz distinguishes two important things about ‘structure’

-first, it may designate a device that works to produce a uniformity of outcomes despite the variety of inputs {think of something that maintains homeostasis, a crude analogy}; this is helpful, Waltz says, because it maintains the idea that structures “work to keep outcomes within narrow ranges.” [73]

-second, it is used to designate “constraining conditions.” [73] it is a “selector” but not an “agent” that can be seen at work. Structures work by “rewarding some behaviors and punishing others” [74]; they do not work directly, but rather they “limit and mold agents and agencies and point them in ways that tend toward a common quality of outcomes even though the efforts and aims and agencies vary.” [74]

-structures work indirectly in two ways:

-first, *socialization* of actors [actors are being influenced by the common structure; the behaviour of a part can’t be derived by adding up the behaviour of each person, but one must consider the interaction; “Nobody tells all of the teenagers in a given school or town to dress alike, but most of them do. They do so, indeed, despite the fact that many people—their parents—are telling them not to. In spontaneous and informal ways, societies establish norms of behavior. A group’s opinion controls its members.” [76]; through this, homogeneity is encouraged {at the very least, variety is diminished}

-second, *competition*; competition generates an order; behaviours are selected for their consequences, and successful behaviours get screened out of the system {market analogy used here—unsuccessful firms go out of business}; the most successful units of the system are the leaders, and others will emulate them. [76-77]

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## Ch. 5 Political Structures

- the best way to overcome the limitations of reductionist and “avowedly systemic” approaches is to have a “structural” approach to a theory that explains international politics
- the problem of systems theory: to contrive a definition of structure free of the attributes and interactions of the units
- structural theories “must leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units, their behavior, and their interactions.” [79]
- instead of focusing on how units interact, a structure must focus on how units are arranged or position

These are the three keys way to think about structure: [82]

- 1) ordering principle: this is the principle by which the units are arranged (their relationship)
- 2) functional specification: what the different units do {a division of labor, if you will}
- 3) distribution of capabilities across units

### 1. Ordering principles [88-93]

- in domestic society, the ordering principles are hierarchic, but international systems are decentralized and anarchic
- the use of microeconomic theory explains how ‘anarchy’ can still be used as an ‘organizational concept’
  - classic microeconomic theory is a ‘microtheory’: the theory is constructed from the activities of the separate units {individual firms act self-interestedly; from the ‘coaction of like units’ a structure [a market] emerges}
  - similar in international politics: “Structures emerge from the coexistence of states. No state intends to participate in the formation of a structure by which it and others will be constrained. International-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended. In both systems, structures are formed by the action of their units. Whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts. *Both systems are formed and maintained on a principle of self-help that applies to the units.*” [91]
  - the “self-help” principle behind anarchy is an assumption on Waltz’s part: “I assume that states seek to ensure their survival.” [91]; since survival is a prerequisite to any other of the varied ends of state, this is a fair assumption in a world where the security of states is not assured

### 2. Character of Units [93-97]

- in domestic society, units are functionally differentiated because they are in a hierarchic realm
- in international-political systems, units are not formally differentiated [93]
- so, this principle of structure *drops out*; under anarchy, states remain like units
- states are alike in the tasks they face: functionally, they all must do the same thing : “International politics consists of like units duplicating one another’s activities.” [97]

### 3. Distribution of Capabilities [97-100]

- units are distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks [97]
- what counts: great powers
- “Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units.” [98]
- again, the microeconomics analogy: “Market structure is defined by counting firms; international-political structure, by counting states. In counting, distinctions are made only according to capabilities.”
- thus, we can call a structure “unipolar,” “bipolar,” “multipolar,” etc.

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## Ch. 6 Anarchic Structures and Balances of Power

-“Among states, the state of nature is a state of war.” [102]

-since each state is not structurally barred from using force, war may break out any time

-even though many have died in internal conflicts, the difference between national and international politics lies in the Weberian issue of legitimacy: in domestic society, the state has some degree of legitimacy to the use of force, and has a {near} monopoly on its use; but internationally, this is not the case, there is nobody to help out

-structure of international politics limits cooperation

-first, states are worried about relative gains [105-107]

-second, states are concerned about dependency that might be created through cooperative endeavours [106-107]

“In a self-help system, considerations of security subordinate economic gains to political interest.” [107]

-one other feature of international structure: individual interests, prisoners’ dilemma, and the “tyranny of small decisions” {this is defined: “If the market does not present the large question for decision, then individuals are doomed to making decisions that are sensible within their narrow contexts even though they know all the while that in making such decisions they are bringing about a result that most of them do not want.” [108]

-“The Virtues of Anarchy”

-units in a condition of anarchy must rely on “self-help” [111]

-“National politics is the realm of authority, of administration, and of law. International politics is the realm of power, of struggle, and of accommodation. The international realm is preeminently a political one. The national realm is variously described as being hierarchic, vertical, centralized, heterogeneous, directed, and contrived; the international realm, as being anarchic, horizontal, decentralized, homogeneous, undirected, and mutually adaptive.” [113]

-in international politics, force is not only the *ultima ratio*, but the first and constant one [113]

-Balance of Power Theory

-begins with assumptions about states: states are unitary actors who seek their own preservation (at a minimum) or who drive for universal domination (at a maximum) [118]

-there are two ways for states to increase their capabilities [118]

-first, internal efforts (increase economic capability, increase military size, develop better military strategies)

-second, external efforts (alliances)

-a bipolar system only allows for internal balancing [118]

-the balance of power theory states that “balances of power tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination.” [119]

-“Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive.” [121]

-but, balance of power theory will not provide predictions about particular states and their foreign policy

-one result that Waltz gives for balance of power theory: balancing is a more preferred behaviour than bandwagoning

-this is true because “[t]he first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system” [126]