

Waltz, Kenneth N. (1986) 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*', in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics*.

In this chapter Waltz responds to criticisms made of his work by other contributors (Ruggie, Keohane and Ashley), assuming an understanding of their arguments. Before rebutting these criticisms, he outlines his aims in *Theory of International Politics*:

1. A more rigorous theory of international politics than earlier realists achieved.
2. To show how to distinguish between unit-level & structural elements and to make the connection between them.
3. Demonstration of the inadequacy of 'inside-out' approach to international politics.
4. To show how system change leads to variation in state behaviour and outcomes.
5. To suggest how theory can be tested and give practical examples.

International structure

Waltz's understanding of international structure is of: 'an external joining of states-as-actors who have precisely the boundaries, ends, and self-understandings that theorists accord them on the basis of unexamined common sense'. Further, he sees structure as constantly interacting with its parts, rather than being independent of them. Neither structure nor units are sole determinants. He sees this view as contrasting to Ashley's alternative model of international structure.

Structures and units, mechanical and organic societies

Waltz argues that systemic theory must distinguish between structural and unit levels. His theory distinguishes actors based on:

- (i) Ordering principle of the system
- (ii) Specification of the functions of formally differentiated units
- (iii) Distribution of capabilities across units in the system.

In answering Ruggie's criticisms, Waltz discusses the debate about 'differentiation', specifically the distinction between 'difference' and 'separateness'. In doing so, he invokes Durkheim (1893).

Mechanical societies comprise similar, but loosely linked, units. They duplicate efforts and do not become involved with, or dependent on, one another. Because they are alike they gain less from co-operation. In contrast, **organic societies** consist of units, whose complementary skills contribute to the welfare of the whole and lead to a highly integrated society. The division of labour thus increases efficiency, makes for social solidarity and brings unlikes closer together.

Waltz then distinguishes between Ruggie's and Durkheim's interpretation of transformations of society. Durkheim argues that transformations of societies from a mechanical (anarchic) to an organic (hierarchical) state tend to bear a relation to the society's **dynamic density** (i.e. where through economic and social relations individuals come into close contact, acting and reacting on each other). Whereas Durkheim argues that, by becoming more dissimilar, the units become more closely united within the organic whole, Ruggie seems to view the process as leading to a change in the principles that cause the separation of units from one another. Considering the implications of these ideas, Waltz argues that, while Ruggie's historical example of changed property relations is significant, it represents not a transformation of international system structure, but of unit-level change. Similarly, he considers dynamic density a unit-level, not a structural, process. While it may of course affect interaction among units - in turn altering structure or systemic outcomes - it is not structural change *per se*. Thus, Waltz argues that Ruggie's approach would see the criteria of inclusion become 'infinitely expandable'. Instead, he believes that the notion of 'structure' should contain little, should focus on durable components and should be transposable across realms, rather than providing detail about the unit-level.

In summary, Waltz notes: the functioning and behaviour of units within a system is affected by both the constraints of the system and the units' internal organisation. Systemic effects cannot easily be assessed by considering only the characteristics of the interacting parts, as they inevitably behave differently by virtue of being parts of the system (p.342). Thus, in explaining outcomes and behaviour

system dynamics thought must consider both the unit-level and structural causes – where structure delimits ‘the range of expectations’ and units act within these parameters. A key question, and what Waltz considers a limitation of systems theory, is thus: to what extent should particular effects be ascribed to either unit-level or level of structure?