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8 October 2004

## PAPER 2: WALTZ

In his aptly titled *Theory of International Politics* (1978), Kenneth Waltz presents what he calls a systems theory of international politics—an explanation of how the structure of the international order affects the behavior of states. Waltz sharply distinguishes this account from what he calls unit-level theories, or descriptions of states' foreign policies. Although these two types of theories often blur together in the international relations literature, the distinction between the two is crucial not only to understanding Waltz's argument on its own terms, but also to criticizing the argument properly and to defending it.

For Waltz, the perpetual condition of anarchy makes the international order very different from hierarchic national orders. Because states cannot appeal to any higher authority to resolve their disputes, understanding international politics writ large means we have “to conceive of an order without an orderer and of organizational effects where formal organization is lacking” (89). Taking a page from microeconomic theory, Waltz compares international politics to a market:

The market arises out of the activities of separate units—persons and firms—whose aims and efforts are directed not toward creating order but rather toward fulfilling their own internally defined interests by whatever means they can muster. The individual unit acts for itself. From the coaction of like units emerges a structure that affects and constrains all of them. Once formed, a market becomes a force in itself, and a force that the constitutive units acting singly or in small numbers cannot control (90).

As this analogy helps clarify, the structure of the international system arises from the actions of individual units, which seek to survive and which have to help themselves in a world of anarchy (91). Their interaction creates a certain structure that then “conditions

their calculations, their behaviors, and their interactions” in such a way that successful patterns of state behavior are “selected,” or imitated, and others are punished—just as some firms make a profit in the market and some go bankrupt (91). For Waltz, as for Adam Smith, the question of intentionality—or lack thereof—is paramount. States do not intend to create the structure of international politics, just as firms do not intend to create a market (108, 120). Merely by seeking survival and pursuing their own interests, the structure emerges.

Certain patterns of behavior also emerge, not because states consciously follow rules of action but because the structure of the international system perpetually constrains and socializes states in certain ways. Waltz argues that over time a balance of power tends to recur among states, even if it is not the same states that are always powerful and even if the balance is achieved through different types of state actions (118).

Fundamentally, “states are alike in the tasks that they face, though not in their abilities to perform them. The differences are of capability, not of function” (96). For Waltz the main question in international politics is therefore how the distribution of capabilities among states varies— how the international system is more or less stable, more or less peaceful, depending on the number of great powers. Other questions about states—about regime type, about history, about internal problems—are not relevant (99). Waltz argues, in fact, that “in all of modern history the structure of international politics has changed but once,” when World War II brought the collapse of multipolarity and ushered in the bipolarity of the Cold War (163).<sup>1</sup> For this reason, a theory of international politics need

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<sup>1</sup> Presumably Waltz would count the end of the Cold War and the emergence of unipolar American power as a third change in the structure of international politics.

only “abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities” in order to make predictions about the nature of the international system (99).

In calling for a focus on states’ capabilities, however, Waltz takes pains to emphasize that he is still ultimately concerned with changes in the system-wide *distribution* of capabilities, rather than with specific changes in the capabilities of individual units (98). To return to the microeconomic analogy, he is still concerned with whether the market is a duopoly or oligopoly, not with whether a particular firm made good profits this year or with whether one firm displaced another as the market leader. This is a crucial distinction, for otherwise Waltz’s theory would fall into the trap of arbitrarily analyzing some unit-level features of the international system and ignoring others—and Waltz clearly wants to distinguish his theory from one focused on unit-level factors. Hinting at the arguments of some of his critics and at the approaches of other scholars, Waltz urges the reader not “to mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy” (121). “Any theory covers some matters and leaves others aside,” he writes. Balance-of-power theory “makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them. What it does explain are the constraints that confine all states,” which can generate broad predictions about how states will behave when confronted with similar situations (122). Waltz freely admits that balance-of-power theory “does not tell us why state X made a certain move last Tuesday.” But he claims that expecting it to do so “would be like expecting the theory of universal gravitation to explain the wayward path of a falling leaf” (121). It is simply not within the scope of the theory, and trying to account for it violates one of the very assumptions (the

lack of functional differentiation among states) that gives the theory its explanatory power.

All this not to say that Waltz is somehow against the study of foreign policy. To the contrary, he clearly recognizes the importance of unit-level analysis in refining predictions about particular cases. For instance, states react differently to the same structural constraints, just as different firms make different decisions about how to compete in the market. “To explain the differences in national responses,” Waltz concedes, “a theory would have to have to show how the different internal structures of states affect their external policies and actions” (122). This would be “a theory of foreign policy” examining the intentions and conscious goals of states, and “would lead to different expectations about the tendencies and styles of different countries’ policies”—rather than to general predictions about the constraints the system places on all actors, irrelevant of their motives (123). Moreover, “because the national and international levels are linked, theories of both types, if they are any good, tell us some things, *but not the same things*, about behavior and outcomes at both levels” (123, italics added). Waltz is concerned with elaborating a theory of how factors at the international level explain state behavior, and in particular with understanding whether “destabilizing events and conditions ...are likely to be managed better, and... absorbed more readily, in one system than in another (167). Such a focus is not the same thing as expounding structural determinism (174); it is merely an attempt at theoretical clarity in a field littered with sloppy and at times inconsistent assumptions.

Although it is impossible to review the voluminous secondary literature on Waltz in a paper of this length, an understanding of his theory of international politics—and

why it is not a theory of foreign policy—provides a foundation upon which any defense, criticism, or other engagement of his theory must rest.

Source: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill: Boston, MA, 1978).

WORD COUNT: 1200