● Article ●

The Means of Reproduction: Neorealism as a Structural Utopia

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Abstract

This brief paper explores how Neorealism can be read as a form of idealism in its attempt to portray international politics as relatively predictable. In particular, Kenneth Waltz's work will be examined in order to show how his structural approach to analyzing international politics employs a selection bias that hides the complexities of what motivates the behavior of international political actors. The main goal of this paper is to explicate how a particular ideological approach to analyzing international politics results in the oversimplification of what takes place in that realm. It is not within the scope of this preliminary project to undertake a therapeutic approach in terms of offering a better way to conceptualize international political events. Finally, in light of recent failures by policy makers in the U.S. to map the changing nature of, for example, terrorism in international politics, it is prudent to remind ourselves of the complexities inherent in international exchanges defined in terms of security.

A theory is a picture, mentally formed, of a *bounded* realm or domain of activity. If 'truth' is the question, then we are in the realm of law, not theory.[1]

This brief paper will explore two main issues relating to neorealism. The first holds that neorealism is a diluted form of idealism. The second builds on this first notion by exploring how neorealism (Waltzian style) is a system which reproduces its own means of production through a selection bias. In other words, Waltz claims to take a structural approach to analyzing international politics because of its ability to provide a general picture of the systemic features of the international scene and why the units within that system behave as they do. There is a difference, however, between simplifying to construct a platform from which to look at complex realities of actors/units in a system, and simplifying as a way to avoid looking at these complexities because they could potentially threaten the coherency of the system of analysis. It is my contention that Waltz and, structural realists in general, engage in the latter form of simplification. Finally, I am neither interested in offering a "better" way to conceptualize the international scene, nor policy prescriptions which our nation's leaders can follow. Rather, the endeavor undertaken is a critique of ideology — an ideology that is often submerged in a Waltzian-style structural analysis.

A common Modern theoretical move is to separate theory from practice because of what the abstract can do to the workings of a particular system of thought.[2] In chapter one of his book entitled *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz goes through an elaborate description of why theory must be separated from practice in order to construct a model through which one can analyze how a structure defines the behavior of the units within that structure. Following 19th century positivist thought, the concept (theory) is rendered as abstract and nearly unimportant, while primary emphasis is placed on the testing of the concept in the reality of a system determined by structural boundaries. Because neorealism is a system of thought held together by the glue of the rational behavior of states within the system, perversions (irrational behavior) must be rendered to the abstract (concept) realm so that they do not jam the system of testing hypotheses in the practical realm.

In short, although "perversions" exist within the practical realm of state action that structural realists[3] hold onto so dearly, they must posit them as lying elsewhere because their system cannot account for them and they therefore threaten the very operation of the structural assemblage. Indeed, the realm of theory (the abstract concept) becomes the trash bin for the perverse where elements that fail to reaffirm the running of the system can be placed. The positivist move is one in which the analyst does not worry about inconsistencies because the system will take care of them.

In an international system characterized by anarchy, Mearsheimer provides a clear picture for us as to what the role of the state is in that system. The state provides a comfort zone so that security can be achieved on the inside while anarchy reigns on the outside. In other words, for structural realists the state is Linus' blanket that provides security and blocks from our vision the fact that there are "monsters underneath the bed" (perversions in state behavior). Structural realism allows analysts like Waltz and Mearsheimer to paint a picture of the world with an order that is predictable and where, for the most part, events are contained by and within a security mechanism called the balance of power. Of course, monsters are always sticking their heads out from underneath the bed, and it is then when the state must act to push them back into the trash bin and to retrieve the blanket of security.

Inherent in the analyses of neorealists like Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Wohlforth is a nostalgia for the simplistic and easily "structuralized" times of the Cold War period. Two questions that come to mind are; Why was the Cold War a time of simplicity ? And, for whom was it simplistic ? That is, did the period appear to be simplistic because of the actual structure of the international system ? Or, was it because the neorealist model hides inconsistencies and complexities with a systematic coherency ? It is my argument that the latter is true. The end of the Cold War made more visible what was always already the case — that we live in an unpredictable world where rational action is, at best, only part of the picture. In fact, what is deemed rational by one actor is often deemed irrational by (an) other. This is inherent in all ideological conflicts. First and foremost they involve demonizing the other through various forms of metonymy. That is, presenting certain valid or invalid characteristics of the other and projecting them as constituting the "whole" of the other and yourself as opposed to this evil other.

The game of mapping the behavior of states in the international system is one in which certainty is a hard to come by commodity. Mapping is always contextual — connections/relations can be made, but the process of mapping cannot lead one to a center point (security as the basis for action within the neorealist structure) from which all behavior can be seen as a deviation from that center point. To imply that this is possible as structural realists do, is to reduce an extremely complex array of actors (states, NGOs, etc.) in the international system into a simplistic and ready-made analytical exercise. Even Machiavelli advised the Prince that realism was not to be made into a system of thought — that it was to be used as a contextual tool that molds to a particular situation rather than molding a given situation to the tool. The notion of the simplicity of "... the similarity of forces and doctrines"[4] across nations that is pushed by structural realists, automatically excludes the possibility that different details may produce different results/motivations behind behavior thus rendering events contextual as the classical realists saw them. In short, structural realists have a degree of certainty that was not present in the early thoughts of classical realists such as Machiavelli and Hobbes.

As for specific examples pointing to how neorealists render perversities to the abstract, Mearsheimer and Layne provide us with two which center on the development of fascism. First, Mearsheimer makes it clear that "Germany's murderous conduct during World War II should be distinguished from the scope of the aggressiveness of German foreign policy."[5] In other words, this action by Germany exceeds the bounds of a neorealist explanation and is, in a short sentence, attributed to domestic factors that cannot be linked to the international distribution of power which ultimately led to World War II. This action was clearly irrational and therefore is dropped by Mearsheimer because it would jam the rational schematic of structural realism in relation to

state behavior. The possibility that Germany's hideous domestic activities could have been triggered by international actions such as the harsh sanctions they were delivered by the international community after World War I, is completely ignored. Layne also fails to incorporate fascistic irrational behavior into the neorealist schematic and simply drops it after a quick mention.[6]

The point to be made is that perversions/aberrations cannot mix with a systemic engine based on rational behavior. To the extent that structural realism cannot account for these aberrations, it also cannot account for or deny the significance of their causal relations of war and other crises. In other words, this is the blind spot of structural realism. Structural realists sidestep issues of desire connected to power and attach states' moves to become a great power to structural necessities. In essence, this move cleanses subjectivity with an idealist form of objectivity. And this move makes sense in relation to my thesis, for it is precisely out of notions of desire connected to power that aberrations/perversities can and do arise — the very issues that are beyond the bounds of a neorealist explanation. Therefore, because security in an anarchic international system is what drives individual units to act, U.S. involvement in many crises such as the Gulf War, Bosnia, Vietnam, etc., and certain aspects of that involvement in relation to desire and power, remain in the blind spot of neorealists. In addition, so do the actions of someone like Saddam Hussein. To admit that perhaps his actions were attached to power-desires and not to rational moves towards increasing security, would be to admit to the fact that contingency is a major player in the international arena. Hence, monsters will always manage to make their way out from underneath the bed — a claim neorealists do not want to make or miss behind the walls of their structural mode of analysis.

Implicit within neorealist analyses is a utopia not far from what idealists purported. That is, if all is attached to a need for security, then this is a manageable and potential outcome in the international arena. We have just not yet developed the institutions to bring this about or the vocabulary to speak adequately to meeting this utopia. In other words, neorealism substitutes idealist-style hope mechanisms for what simply remained as contingent and contextual for classical realists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.

Saying that the structure is the catalyst for action is to say that objectivity rules over subjectivity. I am not arguing that structures don't constrain actors, for they clearly do. What I am arguing, however, is that privileging structures (objectivity) over actors (subjectivity) is a move which, once again, cleanses such notions as a desire for power and the desire to dominate (an) other. Therefore, inherent in this cleansing is the possibility of reaching a utopian realm where contingency (perversity) is contained. Notions such as states becoming "secure and autonomous" found throughout neorealist literature, are idealist in nature. In the sentiments of E.H. Carr, they work to set universals which are presented as being the best possible scenario for all when, in fact, they mask the desire of a hegemon to maintain the status-quo, as much as is possible, for their own benefit.[7]

My critiques of structural realism are not meant to suggest that predictions or generalizations about the behavior of states in the international system cannot be made. They can be made and, in fact, classical realists have made valuable insights into state behavior since they began to speculate about the causes of war. But structural realists have gone a step beyond their predecessors by attempting to contain chance within a structure that creates an inside/outside binary and by selecting what its analysts label significant events to plug into the system while discarding aberrations in the outside (abstract) trash bin.

It is true that social scientists must focus in on a limited number of variables in order to make modes of analysis "doable," but it is the confident discarding of events that are beyond neorealist rational behavior explanations — events which could harm their theory — that are suspect. At least Machiavelli and Hobbes were willing to look underneath the bed unlike neorealists such as Mearsheimer. Of course, classical realists eventually contained the perverse (language and its various interpretations, for Hobbes), but they were conscious of this move and why they made it. Therefore, their dogmatism is clear and

visible. The issues that Hobbes and Machiavelli dealt with first were ones of contingency. I am not nostalgic for their return, I am simply using them to highlight how realism as an explanatory tool has become more and more static and therefore structurally limited in what it can attempt to explain.

Taking my critiques into consideration, an important question that emerges is: Does the inability of the neorealist model to account for irrational behavior render the mode of analysis useless ? My answer to this question is a simple, "no." The neorealist schematic provides insights into the fact that conflict and power struggles are inherent in all political relations[8] defined in terms of security. Neorealism provides one more significant piece to the puzzle of a deeper understanding of state behavior in the international system. It does not, however, provide a snapshot of the whole picture — which is something many would like it to do and even imply that it does do. At the very least, the fact that the structural realist system ignores behavior that states often engage in, or ignores possible motivations behind that behavior, weakens its foundation and points to the fact that we cannot be certain about its conclusions.

At most, we can use structural realism as a guide pointing in one direction of possible causes for war and other crises. But it cannot be used to provide a center point that incorporates all actions within one meaningful schematic in which all else is a deviation from the center point of that schematic. Structural realism creates a vacuum within which there is a clear connection between cause and effect that is undeniably linked to the international system of anarchy and the need by states for security. The schematic, for the most part, is immune to other — perhaps even primary — causes, domestic or not.

The implicit neorealist assumption that a utopia is reachable comes in at least two forms. The first is a consistent anarchical international system that makes possible predictions as to the behavior of states and the motivations behind that behavior. The second is the assumption made by Layne that it is possible for America to construct a position independent of subjective perceptions that is, "...just right — strong enough to defend American interests without provoking others."[9]

With the end of the Cold War, neorealists do hold that the structure of the international system has changed and therefore outcomes will also change. But neorealism is not dead because of the fact that its basis still remains true...that states are, for the most part, rational actors motivated by a need for security. This tenet found within neorealism is unchangeable as long as the trash bin for aberrations remains. Therefore, neorealist explanations leave much to be explained and what they do explain are reflections of a masked desire by analysts/scholars to contain contingency. This desire is masked by a deterministic structure that is privileged over the actions of individual units and their access to various levers of power and other motivations for their actions.

1 Kenneth Waltz, "Laws and Theories." In *Neorealism and its Critics*. Robert Keohane (ed.). (New York: Columbia University Press) 1986, 36. (Italics mine).

2 Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism." In *Neorealism and its Critics*, 256.

3 Throughout this paper I am using the terms "Neorealism" and "Structural Realism" synonymously.

4 Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, (Fall 1993) 45.

5 John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," *International Security*, (Summer 1990) 98.

6 Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, (Spring 1993) 146.

7 E.H Carr, *Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers) 1964, 68.

8 That is, all political relations beyond routine bureaucratic/trade, etc. relations.

9 Layne, 170.