

Uncovering the Dark Metaphysical Science of Neorealism

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My purpose here is to argue that Waltz's theory of international politics cannot grant the structure of international anarchy the sort of ontological independence from states his systemic approach requires. In particular, my intention is to argue that Waltz's conception of structure stems from positivist structural analysis, and this approach does not allow him to seriously argue for a systemic turn away from reductionist theories of international politics. I will determine that by 'finding' structuring principles from positivist structural analysis, Waltz's attempt to grant structure the sort of generative characteristics constitutive of a realist conception need to be taken with caution – we cannot forget that the structure he identifies stems from a positivist approach to structural analysis that establishes underlying law-like principles from observations of regularities in inter-state action. To pursue this agenda, I have decided to divide this paper into three sections under the following headings: 'structuralism', 'positivism', 'realism'. Under the first one, 'structuralism', my intention will be to situate the reader with regard to the proclaimed neorealist anti-reductionism. I will note that Waltz's neorealism is said by its proponents to symbolise both an advancement towards the adoption of scientific standards of theory that classical realists obfuscate in their knowledge claims, and a detachment away from the behavioural reductionism that dominated the discipline in the 1960s. After highlighting how Waltz's neorealism is said to correspond to basic elements of structuralist thought, I will turn to the second heading, positivism, to argue that the proclaimed systemic turn neorealists advocate only works at the level of appearances. In particular, I will be arguing that the so-called privileging of the 'whole over the parts' which forms the basic element in Waltz's systemic approach is misleading, since Waltz in effect adopts positivist structural analysis that starts with the parts to identify the whole. This will lead me on to the third heading, 'realism', where I will be arguing that if structure is identified from regularities in the interaction of the parts, Waltz's theory depends less on his identified structure of international anarchy than on metaphysical assumptions with regard to how states think of themselves and the world. Or in other words, the reason why states act the way they do depends less on the establishment of causal relationships with the identified structure of international anarchy, than on the ways Waltz 'sees' states defining their interests. This will lead to the conclusion that the neorealist attempt to adopt features of a realist and generative conception of structure is a façade, and that closer inspection into the Waltz's neorealist edifice will show a positivist conception of structure that is as reductionist as the sort of theories of international politics he criticises.

“structuralism”

Heralding the inadequacy of reductionist theories of international politics that explain foreign policy behaviour exclusively in terms of causes at the national level, neorealists have opened the realist paradigm of international relations to an explanatory dimension of state action anchored on systems theory. The

backdrop of this development in the realist paradigm of international relations is understood primarily in the context of the rejection of both the hermeneutic reductionism adopted by classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau or Henry Kissinger, and the positivist reductionism highlighted in the tendency of American social scientists in the 1960's to adopt a behavioural focus in the explanation of state action. If we take the first of these, neorealists, largely following the theoretical coordinates suggested by Kenneth Waltz, see the 'reductionism' of classical realism in its focus to accord perennial centrality to the subjective perceptions held by actors (statesmen, diplomats) in constituting and reproducing the system.¹ Furthermore, classical realists, given the importance they attribute to the situation-bound interpretations of statesmen, can only with difficulty provide properly founded knowledge claims having in mind modern scientific standards of theory. For the neorealist, the focus on the hermeneutic interpretations of actors renders classical realism's knowledge claims "too fuzzy, too slippery, too resistant to consistent operational formulation, and, in application too dependent upon the artful sensitivity of the historically minded and context-sensitive scholar."² Besides its critique of the classical realist reductionist understanding of the international system, neorealism, therefore, is seen by its proponents as "a progressive scientific redemption of classical realism under new challenging circumstances and as advantaged by a clearer grasp of objective science's demands and potentialities."³ But it is in defining a critical alternative to the behavioural preponderance in the 1960's that neorealists truly emphasise their anti-reductionist orientation in their approach to international politics. For if the neorealist attack on the reductionist approach of classical realism can in some way be de-emphasised in the midst of an attempt to bring the realist paradigm towards scientific standards of theory, in relation to behaviourism the implications of the neorealist rejection of reductionist approaches start acquiring more palatable implications given debates around positivist and realist philosophies of science. When faced with the behavioural orientation to explain states behaviour in positivistic terms using statistical techniques to generate scientific understanding, neorealists argue for the need to escape the limits of logical atomism, and expand the explanatory dimension of state action to include unobservable phenomena. In particular, neorealists attack the assumption that it is better to explain the system level properties given the interaction of states (calling theories that do this 'reductionist'), and adopt holistic arguments that explain the action of states with reference to causal relationships between the state and unobservable structures that constitute the international system.

This anti-reductionist neorealist posture has at its roots, therefore, the acceptance of what is presented as a much-needed structuralist turn in the realist paradigm of international relations. If we consider some examples of main features in structuralist thought, it is possible to apprehend the distinctiveness of the neorealist approach *vis-à-vis* the reductionist atomism of both classical realism and behaviourism. "Consistent with its totalising inclinations, structuralism presupposes not only the priority of structure over practice but also the absolute predominance of the whole over its parts."⁴

¹ Waltz, 1979, pp. 62-64;
² Ashley, 1984, p. 231;
³ *Ibid.*, p. 230;
⁴ Ashley, 1984, p. 235;

Structuralists, therefore, “argue that phenomena should not be broken down into their individual elements and studied atomistically. Rather, each system must be studied as an organised set of interrelated elements.”⁵ The ontological primacy accorded to the whole over its parts points towards Saussure’s distinction between *langue et parole*, since it indicates that ‘behind’ the directly observable lies a structure of regularities that determine knowable reality. In the case of Saussure’s linguistics, behind every speech act that is performed we find the grammatical structure of the language (at a given moment of time, since linguistic structures alter in the course of history, and make it erroneous to analyse a language as whole – synchrony over diachrony) which, although not apprehended directly by the speaker, structure and inform the meaning of what is said.⁶ Practice for a ‘structuralist’, therefore, needs to be interpreted from a social, totalising, or systemic point of view. This indicates a key anti-humanist characteristic in structuralist thought since it highlights how structuralists (in varying degrees) de-centre “the privileged philosophical and political status of the subject within humanism and rationalism” by providing a dialectical account of the development of the subject that sees the site for rational and theoretical assessment taking place ‘behind’ historically located subjects.⁷ Neorealism shares in this ‘de-centring’ impetus of the structuralist movement – it privileges systemic theories that give ontological status to unobservable structures and locates “the proper object of theory not in the ‘parts’, and not in external relations among them, but in independently existing ‘wholes’, which, as ordering and orientating properties of a system, constitute parts and generate relations among them.”⁸ Above all else, this clearly totalising stance aimed at uncovering the objective structures that determine the significance of practice indicates the neorealist objective to de-centre the primacy accorded by classical realists and behaviourists to the state (subject), and assume an anti-reductionist approach premised on structural analysis that “can in principle escape the limits of logical atomism.”⁹

“positivism”

For Waltz, the objective structures acting “as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units”¹⁰ are conceptualised having in mind three structuring principles framing the organisation of the international system: “the principle according to which the system is ordered or organised; the differentiation of the units and the specification of their functions; and, the degree of concentration and diffusion of capabilities within the system.”¹¹ From these three structuring principles it is possible, according to Waltz, to initially understand that the most important structural feature is international anarchy, or absence of central rule, with this premise also used to explain how, in face of decentralised legitimate authority within the system, states become the system’s constitutive units as “existing repositories of the ultimate arbiter of force.”¹² In effect, this anarchical structure leads Waltz to the logical

⁵ Keat & Urry, 1982, p.124;

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ West, 1996, pp. 154-156;

⁸ Ashley, 1984, p. 236 – Ashley’s emphasis;

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Waltz, 1979, p. 72.

¹¹ Ruggie, 1983, pp. 263-264 – Ruggie (pp. 263-271) provides an concise summary and overview of Waltz’s (1979) argument as presented in his *Theory of International Politics*;

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 134;

claim that the international system is governed by self-help, or the constant striving for survival following an implicit analogy with the Hobbesian state of nature. In a system governed by self-help, the units are compelled to be functionally alike, since all states are confronted with the same structural constraint of international anarchy. This understanding of the undifferentiated functions held amongst units of the system (Waltz's second principle) does not mean, however, that states are alike in their respective capabilities to satisfy their 'structurally' attributed functions, since the measure of the capabilities of any particular state could allow it to influence its strategic position within the system. Of particular importance here is Waltz's assertion that states will inevitably be functionally alike given the structural constraint of international anarchy. Put differently, what this means is that the states' self-identities are peripheral, unimportant, given the structural constraint of a system governed by self-help – one state might be totalitarian, another liberal, one might have problems corresponding to the dominant ontological assumption in international relations of a 'state as unitary actor' ('failed' states), another might not, but for neorealists following Waltz's dominant theoretical route-map these distinctions are irrelevant. For Waltz, in effect, the second structuring principle that concerns the differentiation of units is not needed at the international level, since no functional differentiation is accorded to states apart from their distinct relative capabilities when faced with the 'deeper' level structure of international anarchy.¹³ Indeed, for Waltz, systemic structures need "to be thought of as successive causal depth levels" where "ordering principles constitute the 'deep structure' of a system, shaping its fundamental social quality. They are not visible directly, only through their hypothesised effects. Differentiation, where it exists as a structural property, mediates the social effects of the deep structure, but within a context that has already been circumscribed by the deep structure. It is expressed through broad enduring institutions, and therefore is more directly accessible to the observer. The distribution of capabilities comes closest to the surface level of visible phenomena, but its impact on outcomes is simply to magnify or modify the opportunities and constraints generated by the other two structural levels."¹⁴

The problem with Waltz's theory lies in his rejection of any causal relationship between the deep structure of international anarchy and the second structural principle that explains (or should do) the basis for the individuation of units within the system. By saying that states are functionally undifferentiated given a system constituted by self-help, Waltz is assuming the state, and rejecting any causal explanation that unites the structure of international anarchy with the emergence of the modern state-system. Implicitly, it seems that for Waltz the modern state-system does not need explanation – it is a fact one can discern from direct observation. Indeed, as Ruggie argues, this position resembles Durkheim's positivist structuralism, since at the basis of his approach lies the idea that the conceptualisation of the whole needs to depart from an analysis of the parts, rather than the whole being used for causal explanations of how the parts came into being. For Durkheim, therefore, "whenever certain elements combine and thereby produce, by fact of their

¹³ Waltz, 1979, pp. 93-97.

¹⁴ Ruggie, 1983, p. 265 – Ruggie's emphasis;

combination new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements, but in the totality formed by their union. The structure depicts the organisation of the system, or the laws of association by which the units are combined to form the systemic totality.”¹⁵ If we apply Durkheim’s structuralism to Waltz’s neorealism, we would read Durkheim’s words as follows: whenever elements combine to produce an observable reality such as the emergence of the state and modern-state system, it is plain that we cannot be reductionists and continue looking only at the parts which make up this system; instead, we should give the system and its structures an ontological status of their own, bypass the basis on which the individuation of the units could be explained, and erect systemic constraints that make any attempt to explain what happens ‘inside’ the units superfluous. What comes out of this adoption of Durkheimian structuralism, I believe, is an indication that Waltz’s anti-reductionism is in fact a façade, and that his attempt to deliver a generative conception of structure should be taken with caution. It is only at the level of appearances that Waltz’s structuralism appears to favour the whole over its parts, since on closer inspection we find a statist approach which, although granting unobservable structures ontological status, always starts from the units that constitute the system, and more importantly, rejects any notion that the whole could be used to explain the constitution of the parts – states, and what they form together, the international state-system.

The state, in Waltz’s neorealist edifice, “is *ontologically prior* to the international system. The system’s structure is produced by defining states as individual unities and *then* by noting properties that emerge when several such unities are brought into mutual reference. For the neorealist, it is impossible to describe international structures without first fashioning a concept of the state-as-actor.”¹⁶ The state, for neorealists, has to remain forever untheorised – if Waltz was to develop a social theory of the state he would need to open this black-boxed totality he assumes as a matter of observation, and attempt to provide causal explanations of how system structures generate state agents themselves.¹⁷ By assuming states and the modern state-system in the identification of systemic structures, Waltz has to abstain from providing a social theory of his ‘basic unit of analysis’ since doing so would imply regarding systemic structures not only as constraints on state-action, but also as constitutive elements in generating them. As Wendt aptly puts it, “system structures cannot generate agents if they (structures) are reduced to the properties of agents in the first place.”¹⁸ To put this more explicitly, if we assume the state and the international system as Waltz does, then we could argue that the structure of international anarchy is the reason why states are functionally alike. This is because, in the absence of any central authority, states will not be coerced to abstain from power politics and the search for relative advantage, and even if one state decided to do so, all others would need to follow suit. In the hypothetical situation of full agreement between states, Waltz seems to believe that only one free rider is needed for the cooperative arrangement to collapse. Hence, given the fact that one state cannot change the system, and the assumption that free riding is to be expected in a system without central coercive authority, Waltz

¹⁵ Durkheim, quoted by Ruggie, 1983, p. 263;
¹⁶ Ashley, 1984, p. 249; Ashley’s emphasis;
¹⁷ Wendt, 1987, p. 342-345;
¹⁸ Ibid, p. 342;

identifies his deep structure called international anarchy. But if Waltz were to try to explain how both the state and the modern-state system came into being, he wouldn't be able to: if the structure he identifies stems from an *a priori* ontological assumption that states simply exist as a matter of observation, how could he then use that same structure to provide a social theory of the state? This indicates, I believe, that Waltz's attack on reductionist approaches to international relations theory only works at the level of appearances, since if we decide to delve more carefully into the proclaimed neorealist systemic turn, we find that before being structuralist, neorealism is unashamedly statist. As Ashley puts it, for neorealists "the structure of interpenetrating politics, far from being an autonomous and absolute whole that expresses itself in the constitution of acting units, is an emergent property by the joining of units having a prior existence."¹⁹

Neorealism, therefore, privileges the whole over its parts only by paradoxically maintaining an *a priori* commitment to privilege the parts over the whole. What this bizarre variant of structuralism indicates, I believe, is the inability of neorealists to convince the reader that their conception of structure is in effect generative – or to put it differently, that we should take seriously their attempt to draw on a realist conception of structure.²⁰ If we consider that the main canyon dividing positivist and realist conceptions of science lies in the question of whether to ascribe ontological status to unobservable generative structures, and adjacent to this, the nature of causal claims and scientific explanation (the realist attack on the Humean model of causation), it is possible to, in basic terms, state that while positivists only accord status to what can be said to exist through sensory perception, realists argue that it is scientific (not metaphysical) to establish causal relationships between what is observed and underlying unobservable generative structures. If we recall Waltz's neorealist theory of international politics, we can state that, on surface-level, his approach accords ontological status to unobservable structures, and draws on a realist conception of structure. But as we have also seen, Waltz establishes his structure not by giving priority of the whole over the parts, but inversely, by privileging the parts over the whole. This means, it seems, that for Waltz the structure of international anarchy is arrived at by observing the totality of empirically given social relationships within the 'international system'. This indicates, I believe, a positivist conception of structure since, as highlighted by Keat and Urry, "for a positivist to talk about the social structure is to talk about the laws and regularities found to obtain between observable phenomena."²¹ Waltz, although according ontological status to unobservable systemic structures, does so by ascertaining observable phenomena derived from the action of units he gives an *a priori* ontological existence (states). For a positivist, as with Waltz, "there is the implication of regular, systematic and orderly relations between elements that comprise the structure." Thus the structure of international anarchy he identifies "consists of given patterned and relatively enduring relationships"

¹⁹ Ashley, 1984, p.240.

²⁰ Given the amount of 'realisms' floating around in the text, I feel I should at this point clarify my usage of terms: as you have been reading, when I refer to realist theory in international relations, I have systematically termed it, 'realist paradigm of international relations'. Neorealism, on the other hand, refers to a strand (now dominant) within the realist paradigm of international relations. When I refer to 'realism' by itself, or 'realist turn', stands in contrast to positivistic, or conventionalist (instrumentalist) philosophies – see Keat and Urry, 1982, part I;

²¹ Keat & Urry, 1982, p.121;

between states. “These form a structure or system; and some of its properties cannot be understood without considering the total set of relationships or the totality.”²² “Structural analysis”, therefore, “refers to the detailed description of the observed pattern of social relationships, particularly dyadic, and of the social institutions which are discovered.”²³ For Waltz, this means describing observable relationships between states, and then coming to the conclusion that a systemic structure called international anarchy has to be at work in constraining states from behaving in ways suggesting anything other than self-help – this in turn suggests why Waltz believes states are functionally alike.

“realism”

The question here is whether it is legitimate to start with a positivistic conception of structure, and then once this structure has been identified, attributing to it the sort of features we find in a realist conception? In answering this question, let me first argue that neorealists never really manage to endorse the generative features to structure associated with a realist conception of science. Although neorealists, after identifying the structure of international anarchy using positivist structural analysis, do regard structure as a “system of relationships which underlie and account for the sets of observable social relationships and patterns of social consciousness,” for the neorealist to fully accord to a realist conception the structure of international anarchy ‘he’ would need to combine answers to why-questions with how and what-questions.²⁴ Hence, in order to be able to answer *why* states are functionally alike (which Waltz does – international anarchy), Waltz would also have to answer *how* some change or event brought about this state of affairs, and more importantly, *what* are the natures or essences of the entities involved. What this indicates, therefore, is that to explain why states are functionally alike, Waltz would have to provide an explanation of how the structure of international anarchy contributed to this situation coming about, and what actually constitutes states. In short, Waltz would have to renounce the sort of ontological reductionism we may identify in his narrow focus of only using structure to ask why-questions, and provide more substantive explanations of how the structure of international anarchy generates states and the international state-system – a social theory of the state. What this means, therefore, is that if Waltz were to fully adopt a realist conception of structure, he would have to de-centre what we already know is his primitive unit of analysis – the state. In sum, it seems that to answer the above question we have to first state that for neorealists, adopting a realist conception of structure after pursuing structural analysis along positivist lines does not mean that they will gain from the remarkable intersubjective penetration into reality that a realist conception of structure ‘truly’ permits – as noted by Ashley, for the neorealist there is “no prior intersubjectivity unity [which] joins parts and whole.”²⁵ Instead, if we take Waltz’s theoretical coordinates to heart we will be left with a structure that can only answer why-questions, and more crucially, only manages to establish the structure in the

²² *Ibid.*, p. 120;

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 122;

²⁴ As Keat and Urry put it (1982:p31), “the realist view of explanation can be conveniently summarised in the claim that answers to why-questions (that is, to requests for causal explanations) require answers to how- and what-questions.”

²⁵ Ashley, 1984, p.255;

first place by embracing the positivist method. So, to re-state, is this 'at the end-of-the-line' partial and limited acceptance of what a realist conception of structure has to offer legitimate?

Yes. There is certainly nothing inherently wrong in pursuing theory this way. But my point is that this floating around positivist and realist conceptions of structure neorealists allows me to question the closed and circular nature of Waltz's theory. In particular, I think it is possible to develop the point that this 'parts and whole, whole and parts' debate raises the question of which one we should stick to. Should we start with the parts and identify structural principles resulting from empirical observations of relationships between states, or should we argue that states and their actions could be better explained by truly penetrating reality and supplying causal relationships that, with why followed by how and what-questions, establish a rich intersubjective unity between the whole and the parts? The truth is that neorealists really do not adopt a realist conception of structure. They appear to do so when attempting to establish the independent nature of the structure they have identified using positivist structural analysis. But the independence of the structure of international anarchy only has any meaning if we give into the dark metaphysics that commands all branches of the realist paradigm of international relations. As already argued, Waltz's theory adopts a positivist conception of structure because it starts with empirical observations of relationships between states, and from there, establishes the structuring principle of international anarchy. The catch here is that Waltz then tries to capture the realist insight of making the structure somehow external to and independent from the state. This in turn is justified by resorting back to the parts over the whole stance and, from observation, capturing how states – due to the 'problems' of free riding and absence of a centralised coercive authority – do not have any option (and here the argument falls back to the whole over the parts) but to be constrained by the structure of international anarchy. With this Waltz closes his inescapable and vicious circle, and grants continuity to the story of power politics that has dominated from its inception the sad discipline of international relations. My question here is: how can it be said that states have no option but be condemned to the inevitability of the structural constraint of international anarchy, if as we have seen, this structure is arrived at by positivist structural analysis stemming from observations of *state action*? Surely, wouldn't this imply that the structure of international anarchy is dependent on empirical observations of inter-state relations? When Waltz argues that states have no option but to conform to a system governed by self-help, it might be useful to remind him that, at least theoretically, he is only able to even talk about the structure of international anarchy due to his 'perceptive' and 'original' observations of state action. This leads me to the conclusion that the proclaimed independence of the structure of international anarchy depends, for Waltz, on empirical observations of how states act, and that if, by any chance, states were to change the way they act in relation to each other (say, prefer to work for the collective good of humanity), Waltz couldn't have any theoretical legitimacy in invoking a structure he has identified through observations made in the context of a positivist conception of structural analysis – he cannot claim that his structure

will inevitably constrain states because, in essence, his perspective follows from positivist structural analysis that departs from observations of the units.

Waltz, therefore, “establishes the independence of the structured whole from the idealised point of view of the lone, isolated state-as-actor, which cannot alone alter the whole and cannot rely on others to aid it in bringing about change in the whole’s deepest structure. We are encouraged to glimpse and authenticate the independence of this structure, in other words, from the standpoint of a frozen abstraction: the point of view of the single state-as-actor, or the points of view of any number of number of state-as-actor, one at a time.”²⁶ But, as we have seen, Waltz *needs* states to maintain this ‘frozen abstraction’ in order to guarantee what proves to be a fictitious independence of structure. Waltz, I believe, never really manages to follow the predominant structuralist impetus of ‘de-centring’ the subject, since the structure of international anarchy is never to be located ‘behind’ historically located subjects – it is at all times the result of positivist structural analysis that starts from the sort reductionist approach to international relations that Waltz misleadingly criticises. Implicit in Waltz’s conception of structure, therefore, lies the dark metaphysical assumptions of classical realism – namely, that life is about the survival of the fittest, and everything is about finding relative rather than absolute gains. Since structure depends at all times on observations made of state action, it is ‘hidden’ metaphysical assumptions about human nature (which unfortunately can quite easily be brought to life through empirical observation) rather than a deep unobservable structure that allows Waltz to argue that states will be ‘condemned’ to conform to the logics of self-help. What this indicates, I believe, is that Waltz’s drive to adopt facets of a realist conception of structure is misleading – his conception of structure is positivist, and if, at any given moment it appears to have the sort of ‘whole over the parts’ nature of realist conceptions, this holism is at all times dependent on states conforming to what has been for the last thousands of years the dominant story humanity has sadly decided to make its own: we are all competitive, self-interested beings that will not be able to find the common ground needed for lasting cooperation. So long as this story lives, neorealism will continue to con people into believing that the proclaimed independence of structure exists irrespective of what states think of themselves and the world.

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