3
Other Realisms and the Scientific Turn

Political realism provided an image of the international sphere that scholars of the postwar period, especially in the US, found compelling (Vasquez, 1998, p. 42). This period followed a second horrendous world war, an emergent bipolar international order, and the possibility of nuclear warfare capable of destroying humankind along with just about every other creature on the planet. The centre of Western power had also shifted from a devastated Europe to the US which, by the end of the Second World War, had assumed economic dominance as well as superpower status. It is in this context that IR as an 'American social science' was born, although it did so on the intellectual foundations laid earlier by E. H. Carr and carried forward in the US by Hans Morgenthau in particular (Hoffman, 1977). Foreign policy discussions in the US were now expressed largely in the realist language of power and interests, and, when policy-makers wished to appeal to some kind of ethic, it was now firmly aligned with the concept of 'national interest' (Keohane, 1986, p. 9).

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Although realism remained dominant, the particular form it took changed considerably. There was a decisive shift from the 'inside-out' approach of classical realists, who saw behaviour in the international sphere as determined at the individual (human nature) and domestic (state) levels. A new approach – neorealism – held that state behaviour is ultimately determined by the anarchical structure of the international sphere itself, which has little or nothing to do with human nature, individual actors, regime type (democratic, authoritarian, theocratic, etc.) or other domestic matters, which constitute separate levels of analysis. In the ungoverned realm of competitive interaction, neorealism holds that each state is driven to act according to a self-help principle, striving to ensure its own security and survival vis-à-vis other states. This, moreover, is an entirely rational way to behave under conditions of anarchy. The essential structure of this system can change only in the event of world government, possessing sovereign authority over the entire planet, somehow emerging. This remains highly unlikely.

While neorealists might agree on these basics, they do not speak with one voice on many other matters. One significant division within the neorealist camp concerns whether states pursue power only to the extent that ensures their own survival under conditions of anarchy, or

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whether states want to maximize their power relative to other states. The former position, known as 'defensive realism', is best represented by Kenneth Waltz. The most prominent exponent of the latter, 'offensive realism', is John Mearsheimer. The first two sections of this chapter therefore focus on these contrasting approaches. This is followed by a discussion of 'neoclassical realism', which attempts to broaden the scope of neorealism to include foreign policy issues relating to domestic politics. We then consider certain questions relating to methodology, focusing in particular on the extent to which positivism has impacted on the discipline of IR, especially in the US. Although positivism is not to be conflated with realism, and has been just as readily deployed in some neoliberal approaches, it is highly pertinent to the discussion of theories which purport to explain the realities of international politics from an objective, scientific standpoint. The final section looks at the more recent field of critical realism, which emerges largely from the philosophy of science and which has some interesting implications for concepts of reality in IR.

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Kenneth Waltz and the Foundations of Neorealism

Kenneth Waltz's earliest substantial work, *Man, the State and War*, first published in 1959, notes the propensity of previous thinkers concerned with war and peace, both secular and religious, to locate the essential causes of conflict in human nature. But for Waltz the problem is to be found elsewhere. States in the international system have no assurance that other states will behave peacefully and so may be tempted to undertake a 'preventive war', striking while in a position of relative strength rather than waiting until the balance of power shifts. This problem is related neither to the level of the individual nor to the internal structure of states, but solely to the anarchic structure of the international system (Waltz, 2001, pp. 6–7).

This leads Waltz to propose three 'images' of politics which equate more or less to three spheres of human existence: the individual, the domestic sphere of the state, and the international system (2001, p. 12). The notion that war occurs because humans are wicked (the classical realist view), as well as the optimistic view that humans can be changed for the better (shared by liberals and socialists), relates to the first image. The character of the state – authoritarian or democratic, socialist or capitalist – belongs to the second image.

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Individuals are, for all practical purposes, contained within the domestic sphere of the state. Further, the character of states makes no real difference to their behaviour internationally. It is therefore in the anarchic structure of the international system itself that the problem of war lies. With the distractions of the first two images removed, and a firm dividing line between the domestic and internal sphere established, the scholar of IR can focus squarely on the third image.

This approach was much more compatible with positivism, which had adapted and refined quantitative methods suitable for deployment in IR. But although Waltz was influenced by economics, he was not mes-merized by numbers, nor did he consider the notion of 'reality' entirely straightforward. His most influential work, *Theory of International Politics* (1979), begins by noting a popular, but mistaken, view of theory creation which holds that it can be built inductively by producing correlations. 'It is then easy to believe that a real causal connection has been identified and measured … and to forget that something has been said only about dots on a piece of paper and the regression line drawn between them' (1979, pp. 2–3). Numbers can provide useful descriptions of what goes on in some part of the world, he says, but they do not explain anything.

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Despite its deficiencies, Waltz notes that students of politics nonetheless display a strong commitment to the inductive method, hoping that connections and patterns will emerge and thereby establish a 'reality that is out there' (1979, p. 3). 'Reality', he says, is congruent neither with a theory nor with a model depicting a simplified version of it (ibid., pp. 7–8). This begs the question: if theory is not a reproduction of reality then what is it? Waltz suggests that a theory is a mentally formed picture of a particular domain of activity, of its organization and the connections between its parts, and that that domain must be isolated from others to deal with it intellectually (ibid., pp. 8–9).

With respect to the subject matter of IR, Waltz says that traditionalists such as Morgenthau had been prone to analysing the field in terms of inside-outside patterns of behaviour – that is, by looking at how domestic politics affects international politics and vice versa. But, given the marked variability of states through both space and time, what accounts for the continuities observed over millennia? To illustrate, Waltz argues for the ongoing relevance of Hobbesian insights even in a period of nuclear-armed superpower rivalry. Thus 'the texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly.' And it is the enduring condition of anarchy that accounts

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for the essential sameness of international politics throughout history (1979, p. 66).

Waltz also elaborates the concepts of balance of power and self-help in an anarchic system, noting first that, because some states may at some stage use force, all states must be prepared to do so or remain at the mercy of more militant neighbours, for, among states, as among individuals in the absence of government, 'the state of nature is a state of war' (1979, p. 102). Elaborating on the difference between the use of force in the domestic and international spheres, Waltz notes Weber's point that, because states have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within their boundaries, governments will organize agents of the state to deal with violence as and when it occurs. An effective national system in which citizens have no need to organize their own defences is therefore not a self-help system. But the international system is (ibid., p. 4). In a self-help situation, states are concerned about survival, which in turn conditions their behaviour. They worry about their strength relative to other states rather than about any absolute advantage. This limits their cooperation with other states, especially if it means they may become dependent on them. Small, poorly resourced states will be unable to resist dependence. But stronger ones will avoid this, even if it means devoting considerable resources to military expenditure (ibid., p. 107).

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Anarchy may seem to be alleviated by the growth of international institutions and the fragments of government they provide, along with some sentiments of community and certain orderly and coordinated procedures across a range of international activities, but this notion, says Waltz, confuses process with structure. In the absence of a world state, the essential structural conditions imposed by anarchy remain. Even when peace breaks out over an extended period, warfare will inevitably return at some stage. In short, war will continue to occur with law-like regularity. The critique of international institutions, and the liberal hopes invested in them, is illustrated by Waltz's analysis of NATO in the post-Cold War period and its implications for Russian foreign policy choices, the subject of case study 3.1.

What structural realists seek to emphasize is that, while the domestic sphere remains one of authority and law, competition and force are the

Case Study 3.1 Kenneth Waltz's Critique of NATO and the Implications for Russia

NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – was established in April 1949 as a collective security organization in which an attack on one member by an external

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party was to be regarded as an attack on all, thereby requiring a collective response in defence of the state under attack. NATO was very much a creature of the Cold War given that the main threat to the US and Western Europe was perceived to be the Soviet Union, which initiated the Warsaw Pact (more formally the Warsaw Treaty Organization or WTO) in 1955. This was partly as a response to the integration of West Germany into NATO when it became its fifteenth member in May of that year, although it also aimed to consolidate Soviet control over Eastern and Central Europe. NATO has transformed its mission since 1989 and now projects an image of an organization dedicated to the pursuit of peace through cooperation both among its members and with others, including Russia. It currently has twenty-eight member countries, having expanded to take in most of the former Eastern bloc.

Kenneth Waltz, writing in 2000, argued that the fact that NATO had outlived its original purpose by taking on a new one does not support the case of liberals, who interpret this as evidence for the strength and vitality of international institutions. It actually supports the assumptions of structural realism. NATO, he says, remains both a

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treaty made by states and, while a deeply entrenched bureaucratic organization does indeed sustain and animate it, a creature of state interests. More than that, it is a means by which the US can maintain a grip on the foreign and military policies of European states.

The survival and expansion of NATO tell us much about American power and influence and little about institutions as multilateral entities. The ability of the United States to extend the life of a moribund institution illustrates nicely how international institutions are created and maintained by stronger states to serve their perceived or misperceived interests (Waltz, 2000, p. 20).

Waltz went on to suggest that NATO's continuation, and its expansion eastwards in the post-Cold War world, was actually dangerous, for it could only lead to the alienation and isolation of Russia. Thus justification for expansion was weak, while justification for opposing it was strong.

> It draws new lines of division in Europe, alienates those left out, and can find no logical stopping place west of Russia. It weakens those Russians most inclined toward liberal democracy and a market economy. It strengthens Russians of the

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> opposite inclination… . Throughout modern history, Russia has been rebuffed by the West, isolated and at times surrounded… . With good reason, Russians fear that NATO will not only admit additional old members of the WTO but also former republics of the Soviet Union. (2000, p.22)

There is no doubt that Waltz would see the Ukraine–Russia conflict as emanating precisely from the expansion of both NATO and the EU into Russia's former sphere of influence. John Mearsheimer certainly takes this view, arguing that the US – through NATO – has played a key role in precipitating the conflict and that Putin's behaviour has been motivated by exactly the same geostrategic considerations that influence all great powers, including the US. 'The taproot of the current crisis is NATO expansion and Washington's commitment to move Ukraine out of Moscow's orbit and integrate it into the West' (Mearsheimer, 2014).

key dynamics of the international system. This may be analysed in terms of *realpolitik*, the essential elements of which are:

1. self-interest (on the part of states or rulers) provides the spring of action;

2. the necessities of policy emanate from the unregulated competition of states; and
3. calculations based on these necessities produce policies that best serve state interests.

Success – the ultimate test of policy – is defined as preserving and strengthening the state. 'Ever since Machiavelli, interest and necessity – and raison d'état, the phrase that comprehends them – have remained the key concepts of Realpolitik' (Waltz, 1979, p. 117).

This brings Waltz to balance of power theory and its key assumptions about states: they are unitary actors which, at minimum, seek their own preservation; at maximum, they aim for universal domination (1979, p. 118). The means employed involve internal efforts (such as increasing economic capabilities and military strength) and external strategies (such as maintaining and strengthening one's alliances and weakening those of actual or potential enemies). The theory is built on the assumed motivations and actions of states; it identifies constraints imposed on state action by the system and it indicates the expected outcome in terms of the formation of balances of power.

Waltz further indicates the source of this model: 'Balance-of-power theory is microtheory precisely in the economist's sense. The system, like a market in economics, is made by the actions and interactions of its units, and the

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theory is based on assumptions about their behaviour' (1979, p. 118). Furthermore, a self-help system means that those who fail to help themselves expose themselves to dangers. 'Fear of such unwanted consequences stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power' (ibid). One commentator has pointed out that Waltz is careful to state that the primary goal of states is to achieve or maximize security rather than maximize power itself, and so power is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This further suggests that states seek power only relative to other states, which again does not indicate power maximization to some kind of absolute measure but, rather, corresponds to a balancing strategy (Guzzini, 1998, pp. 135–6).

More generally, the principal features of Waltz's structural realism have been summarized succinctly as explaining (and not merely describing) the international system by reference to the dominant structure imposed by anarchy, defined by the interplay between component units (in terms of states seeking survival), and characterized by the particular distributions of power reflecting the capabilities of the units. It is causality within this system that counts rather than factors such as differing political cultures that may shape foreign policy practice and other forms of interactions between the units. This 'systemic' approach is therefore parsimonious, not seeking to explain

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Positivism and 'Scientific' IR

The shift from classical realism to neorealism occurred at much the same time as a more general methodological trend in political studies, the latter reflecting a growing intellectual conviction in the US that all problems, including social and political ones, are capable of resolution through the application of a scientific method leading to practical application and genuine progress (Hoffman, 1977, p. 45). This resulted in a heavy emphasis on quantitative (statistical) analysis and, through this, the testing of hypotheses in accordance with the positivist approach discussed in chapter 1. As the new methodology aspired to compile objective, value-free data concerning human behaviour, the direct observation and measurement of which was the only reliable source of knowledge, it is commonly referred to as behaviouralism (Heywood, 2004 p. 9). Given that one of neorealism's claims to superiority over its classical predecessor was its parsimony, the narrowing of analytical scope to what can be directly observed and measured became a virtue rather than a vice. Further, the most appropriate tools were those already deployed in economic analysis. As Hoffman (1977, p. 46) argues: 'Like economics, political science deals with a universal yet specialized realm of human activity … on the creative and coercive role of a certain kind of power, and on its interplay with

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social conflict.' This draws it closer to 'that other science of scarcity, competition, and power' – economics.

Case Study 3.2 Realism, Neoconservatism and the Iraq War

The Iraq War commenced in March 2003 when forces led by the US invaded the country, alleging that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that its leader, Saddam Hussein, was planning to use them against certain Western countries and its allies. No weapons of mass destruction, or even materials capable of producing them, were ever found to justify a pre-emptive strike.

The Iraq War followed a similar attack on Afghanistan, which had indeed harboured the Islamic terrorist organization, al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, responsible for the attacks on the twin towers of World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 ('9/11'). Afghanistan's governing Taliban organization was not involved in the 9/11 attacks, and evidence suggests they may have preferred to cooperate with the US and NATO allies to turn bin Laden and other al-Qaeda operatives over rather than risk military action against them. The US under the George W. Bush

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administration, however, pushed for immediate action, and less than a month after 9/11 commenced military operations against Afghanistan.

The war on Afghanistan was dubbed the 'War on Terror', and when the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq it was brought under this rubric as well, even though Iraq had nothing to do with Afghanistan, the Taliban, al-Qaeda or the 9/11 attacks. But it was the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' that was essential to 'sell' the war on Iraq. This rhetoric was used to considerable effect both in the US and among some of its NATO allies, especially the UK, where Prime Minister Tony Blair was equally determined to depict Iraq as a terrorist state, armed with weapons of mass destruction, and therefore representing a clear and present danger to Western security interests.

Both Bush and Blair also appear to have believed that Iraq could be turned into a model democracy and an inspiration for the rest of the Arab world and the Middle East more generally. Indeed, Bush used some quite explicit arguments based on the liberal idea that the spread of democracy would enhance the prospects for a future of peace. More generally, their language was infused with a very strong moralism concerning the

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justification of war both in removing an evil dictator in the form of Saddam Hussein and in the prospects for bringing peace, security and prosperity to the region.

After a decade in Iraq, leading to half a million dead Iraqis and the loss of almost 5,000 US military personnel, along with smaller numbers of British and other allied forces comprising the 'coalition of the willing', the US finally withdrew in November 2011. Iraq remains in a state of widespread civil disorder as a result of a continuing insurgency against the new regime and the threat of all-out civil war, primarily between Sunni and Shia factions. Whereas al-Qaeda and its affiliates or offshoots were virtually non-existent in Iraq before 2001, the country faces an ongoing battle with Islamic extremists backing the mainly Sunni insurgency. There is no end in sight.

The ideology that drove the Bush administration is grounded in neither liberal nor realist premises but is, rather, 'neoconservative'. Neoconservatism has a history in American social and political thought as an amalgam of certain conservative ideas that makes selective use of elements of liberal thought and that has serious implications for international politics. In the hands of the Republican

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administration of George W. Bush, and in the context of the 'War on Terror' precipitated by the events of 9/11, it operated as something of an ad hoc doctrine driven by a heroic vision of America's role in the contemporary world. One former supporter of the doctrine, now turned critic, writes that neoconservatism emanates from a particular set of individuals 'who believe in American values and American power – a dangerous combination' (Cooper, 2011, p. xi). The emphasis on values chimes with liberalism and the focus on power appears to resonate with realism.

John Mearsheimer, among others, has associated neoconservatism with liberalism, describing it as 'Wilsonianism with teeth' and placing it very far from the main tenets of realism (quoted in Caverley, 2010, p. 594). But Jonathan Caverley (ibid., p. 613) argues that neoconservatism, although incorporating one element of liberalism associated with democratization, is better understood as a species of neoclassical realism. Neoconservatism pushes aggressively for the democratization of other countries, not on any principled moral grounds, but on the grounds that regime type matters for America's own security interests.

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Neoconservatism thus embodies the realist primacy of self-interest even as it appears to push a liberal agenda. The notion that regime type matters, however, is embedded in neoclassical realism, and indeed that is what makes it neoclassical rather than simply structural. Caverley goes on to argue that, although realists can justifiably claim that they opposed the Iraq War, their arguments were empirical and strategic rather than realist as such. Further, although neoclassical realists have not argued specifically for the spread of democracy to enhance America's security interests, the logic of the theory strongly supports it (Caverley, 2010, p. 613).

Rathbun (2008, p. 320) claims that neoclassical realism helps to illuminate some of the most important foreign policy events in recent times. He notes the vigorous campaign led by Mearsheimer against the US-led war on Iraq, a campaign grounded in the conviction that it would distract the US from more important strategic issues. The diagnosis of America's mistake is provided by neoclassical realism, for US government policy 'was dictated not objectively by considerations of power and material interests but by ideological myths promulgated by neoconservatives' (ibid.).

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The origins of the behavioural turn in political science in the US has been traced to the 1930s, when a conscious shift from normative to positive approaches featured in the work of several prominent scholars at the University of Chicago (Friedan and Lake, 2005, p. 137). The nascent discipline of IR, however, was initially less receptive to its promises.

Morgenthau himself was strongly opposed to this approach, noting that the tools of economic analysis on which it depended were simply inappropriate to international politics: 'In such a theoretical scheme, nations confront each other not as living historic entities with all their complexities, but as rational abstractions, after the model of "economic man", playing games of military and diplomatic chess according to a rational calculus that exists nowhere but in the theoretician's mind' (Morgenthau, 1970, p. 244).

Although Morgenthau and other classical realists may have found the positivist turn in politics and IR objectionable, and not just because of its close association with the 'dismal science' of economics, there are nonetheless elements of its methodology that resonate with certain basic tenets of political realism. As noted in chapter 1, the idea of an objective body of science requires that normative considerations be set aside, for objective science is defined in terms of the study of what is, not

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what ought to be. Here we may recall that the 'first great debate' in the discipline of IR between realism and idealism was directed, by realists, to the defence of a conception of objective reality against the deeply normative orientation of the idealists. The 'second great debate' centred on the methodological divide over whether the new positivist/behaviouralist approach, with its claims to objectivity and rigour, was superior, or inferior, to the traditional historical and philosophic approaches favoured by Morgenthau and others at that time. This became a 'battle of the literates versus the numerates', the latter claiming the mantle of science while excluding all those who believed that the study of politics cannot be reduced to numbers (Hoffman, 1977, p. 54).

The terms 'positivism' and 'science' became more or less interchangeable throughout the remainder of the twentieth century (Wight, 2002, p. 25), while genuine social science in the US has been similarly equated with positivism ever since (Smith, 2000, p. 398). In their assessment of IR as a social science, half a century on from positivism's rise to dominance in the US, Frieden and Lake (2005) argue that the discipline needs to become even more 'scientific' in its approach to ensure its theoretical rigour and policy relevance – 'rigour' being a term reserved for theory associated with positivist methodologies. IR,

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they say, 'is most useful *not* when its practitioners use their detailed empirical knowledge to offer opinions, however intelligent and well-informed, but when they can identify with some confidence the causal forces that drive foreign policy and international interactions' (ibid., p. 137; emphasis added).

It is important to note here that behaviouralism was to find favour not only with a new generation of realist scholars in the American academy but also with those of a new generation of liberal scholars. The latter were, after all, very much concerned with the idea of progress – a notion foundational to liberal theory – and not at all averse to employing methods providing a semblance of scientific objectivity to their own enterprise. Moreover, the more scientifically attuned approaches were more likely to attract research funding and all the prestige associated with large grants of money. Writing towards the end of the twentieth century, one commentator noted that both neorealism and neoliberalism had converged around a set of core assumptions in which moral considerations rarely rated a mention, and with both sides now assuming that 'states behave like egoistic value maximizers' (Baldwin, quoted in Smith, 2000, p. 381).

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