

Questioning Kenneth N. Waltz (1924-2013)

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Questioning Waltz

Adam Humphreys and Hidemi Suganami

Abstract: Two little-known academics examine the doctoral thesis of a young theorist, Kenneth Waltz. They conclude that his work is important, despite its ambiguities. Some years later, they catch up with Professor Waltz between classes and explore how his ideas have developed.

Terms for the Index: anarchy, causes of war, efficient cause, permissive cause, theory, third-image, US foreign policy, Vietnam war

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Professor Hani Magus and Dr Umesh Harpy are in the midst of a viva. The candidate is Kenneth Waltz. His work turns out to be one of the most successful doctoral theses in the history of IR but the examiners are giving him a hard time. Some years later, the two examiners visit Professor Waltz, now a leading IR theorist, for an interview.

Harpy So, Mr Waltz, your answers so far have clarified a number of ambiguities we found in your thesis. Still, one key question remains. On this, I should tell you, Professor Magus and I have differing interpretations; so you must tell us which of us has got it right. The question is this: what *are* you saying? [*Professor Magus looks alarmed by his colleague's bluntness.*] Is it (1) that there are three places where we can look for the causes of war – man, the state, and the international system – and that they are *equally important*; or (2) that, of the three places, the third one is *the most important*. My interpretation is that the thesis of your thesis, if I may put it that way, is the latter; you, Mr Waltz, are clearly a ‘third-image’ man, to use your own terminology. But Professor Magus thinks that you are arguing for (1), or at least that that is what you should be arguing for. Of course, it occurs to me now that you may be arguing something else; for example, that – and call this (3) – which of the three locations is the most important varies from one case to another. So what do you say, Mr Waltz? We really need to know.

Magus Please don't feel we are cornering you, Mr Waltz. We do not demand one hundred per cent clarity or consistency; even the best PhD theses I have examined over the years had many problems. We are really trying to find out where the balance lies in this very interesting work you have produced; is it, let's say, more about three different places where we may find important causes of war or is it more about the particular importance you find in the anarchical structure of the international system?

Waltz Thank you. Let me begin by going back to one of your earlier questions and stressing again that the choice is not between mono-causal analysis and multi-causal analysis. Explaining anything in terms of just one cause – well, that won't do and I am not advocating that at all. I am a multi-causal man. The question then is which of the many causes of war are the most important. Maybe there is some ambiguity in the thesis as I have presented it. But my thinking goes like this: (1) the three locations are all important but for different reasons, (2) we should appreciate the specific reason why each of the three locations is important, and (3) the reason why the third one, the anarchical structure of the international system, is an important cause of war is not often appreciated in current discussions about the causes of war and the conditions of peace.

Harpy Mr Waltz, do you always think in three steps? Sorry, that's meant to be a joke.

Magus Er... yes, I think you are touching on something very important in what you've just said, Mr Waltz. So, please expand.

Waltz Thank you. I assume that we all want to live in a more peaceful world. So, we discuss the conditions of peace but agree that we must first find the causes of war. That's sensible, in my view. But when we search for the causes of war, it is easy to be influenced by our preconceptions about what's wrong about the world, especially when such preconceptions suggest that the problems of the world can be remedied. I am aware of two very dominant preconceptions of this kind: Christian pacifism and liberal reformism.

Magus I see; that's very interesting. Please go on.

Waltz Well, if you are a Christian pacifist, you will say, 'There won't be any war if you all become like us: pacifists'. Or, if you are a liberal reformist, you will say, 'War will be fought less frequently if more countries of the world become more liberal – because war is after all an anathema to liberal values; it undermines them'. Under the influence of such doctrines, there is a general tendency, I reckon, to suppose that the main causes of war are to be found either in the way we individually are or in the way we are governed inside our states. I am not at all saying that these are stupid ideas. But we tend to forget one very crucial fact: no world peace can ever be permanent when all the states of the world live under anarchy, which is the state of war of all against all. Indeed, under such a system, there is a constant possibility of war – in other words, the system is inclined towards war, which may break out anywhere, at any time. My thinking therefore runs as follows: even though there are important causes of war to be found in 'man' and 'the state', we must pay more attention to 'the international system'; people come and go, states come and go, but as long as we live under international anarchy, we are stuck in the state of war; although one war might end, another will surely start.

Harpy That's impressively eloquent.

Magus Indeed, that clarifies a lot. And I did in fact notice an important discussion in the conclusion of your work. You don't always think in three steps but sometimes you invoke a dichotomy. I am thinking here of the distinction you draw between 'efficient' and 'permissive' causes of war. Am I right in thinking that this is very important in constructing your position?

Harpy Sorry, I may have missed that point. Maybe you'd like to explain that, Mr Waltz.

Waltz Professor Magus, I am very glad that the dichotomy attracted your attention. When I began my research and started reading a wide variety of theoretical works on international relations and war, I was struck by the fact that there is something common in these works: they all think of the world as comprising three layers – man, the states and the states-system. That's why I classified major theories of the causes of war into three kinds. But when, towards the end of my research, I began thinking for myself about the causes of war, I realised that there is an important distinction to draw between (1) what explains the outbreak of a particular war and (2) what makes perpetual peace an impossible dream and makes war a perpetual possibility. In other words, I thought that many theorists had missed an important distinction between what explains the *occurrence* of a *particular* war and what

explains the *recurrence* of war. I intend to pursue this theme further at a later stage. Anyway, what explains the *outbreak* of a particular war is, to put it simply, ‘acts of states’, which basically means things committed, or omitted, by individuals acting in the name of their states. These acts bring about a particular instance of war and they are therefore what I call ‘efficient causes’ of war. Being acts performed by individuals representing states, they are located at the levels of ‘man’ and ‘the state’. But what explains the *recurrence* of war is the fact that there is nothing to stop states from fighting one another. This is what I call the ‘permissive cause’ of war and it is found in the anarchical structure of the international system. The international anarchy is important because this is the one that *permits* war to happen anywhere, at any time; and this tends to be neglected by many people who reduce international phenomena to their particular instances. But I want to avoid that kind of reductionism and go for a structural explanation – bearing in mind, of course, that it’s the acts of states, and therefore of statesmen, that force us to fight particular wars.

Magus Well, as my colleague Dr Harpy said, you are impressively eloquent and, I must say, quite persuasive. There are a few issues, though, I feel you may need to clarify further to tighten your argument a bit. Let me just very tentatively indicate a few as they occur to me; they are not questions that you have to answer for now but you may want to think about them.

Harpy Please, Professor Magus: do go ahead.

Magus Well, you said you are thinking in terms of a dichotomy; but I am wondering if you may not be conflating two things in your argument. I mean, isn’t there a difference between what you are calling – er, what was it? – the impossibility of perpetual peace and – er – what you were calling the recurrence of war? It seems to me, though I haven’t yet thought this through, that there is a difference between something being *merely possible* and something *actually recurring*. And if you are saying that war is always a possibility because there is nothing to prevent it, why does this quality of there being ‘nothing to prevent war’, if I may put it that way, arise only in the international system and not, say, in human nature? I remain somewhat puzzled but, as I said, these are fairly complex issues ... ¹

[*There is a moment’s silence...*]

Harpy There you are, Mr Waltz; your work has certainly been very thought-provoking. Unless you wish to add anything to what you have already given us in your answers, or you have any thoughts on what Prof Magus is – er – wondering about, you may consider that we have completed our examination.

Waltz Thank you. I have nothing to add to what I have said in my response to your earlier questions.

Magus Very well, then; if you could leave the room for a while and wait in the lounge, one of us will come and collect you when we have reached a decision. Well done and see you in a while.

¹ So deeply puzzled was he by these and related issues that Magus spent many years, addressing them. This is explained in Hidemi Suganami, ‘Understanding *Man, the State and War*’, *International Relations* 23.3, 2009, pp.372-88.

[Waltz exits]

Harpy So, what would we say? A clear pass?

Magus I suppose. He certainly is eloquent. Alright; what if we said ‘a clear pass’ for now? But we advise him to consider some of the points I was raising at the end if he wants to publish his thesis as a book. We could write that into our report.

Harpy Great. Let’s call him in.

Late 1967. In Professor Waltz’s office.

Harpy Professor Waltz, you’ve become widely known for your arguments about the stability of the Cold War. I was struck by your confidence, so soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis, in describing the Cold War as stable. I am even more struck now by your claim that we’ll miss it when it’s over...²

Magus Indeed. I’m not sure I agree with that!

Harpy ... but I’d like to talk about the extent to which you are now engaged in debates about domestic politics and how it influences US foreign policy. Does this mark a change of direction for you? After all, despite what I recall to be your insistence on multi-causal analysis, your thesis, later published of course as *Man, the State, and War*, has very much given you a reputation as – er – how did we put it at the time ...

Magus As a ‘third-image’ man.

Harpy Right, as a third-image man or, as you might put it yourself, a structuralist.

Waltz Well let me start by emphasizing the importance of your own phrase: multi-causal analysis. Because I wouldn’t want anyone to think I’m a structural determinist: I’m not.³ In the history of international political thought, the third image has largely been neglected. Rousseau, of course, understood its importance, but because it’s a permissive, rather than an efficient cause, its importance is easily underestimated. And that applies in policy circles as much as it does in political philosophy: states that ignore the incentives created by the anarchic structure of the international system are liable to get themselves into trouble.

Harpy This seems to lie at the heart of what you’ve been saying recently. In *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* you defend democratic governance and even defend the US political system as being particularly well set up for responsible foreign policy, but in your recent article ‘The Politics of Peace’ you’re highly critical of US policy, most notably in Vietnam, and even suggest that a change of government might be required in order to extract the US. Could you explain your thinking?

² Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘The Politics of Peace’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 11.3, Sep 1967, p. 199.

³ Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *International Organization*, 36.3, Summer 1982, p. 680.

Waltz Yes indeed. The simple point we need to appreciate about the Vietnam war is that we can only understand what is at stake by thinking in third-image terms: we need to recognize that whatever outcome is reached it is not going to affect the global balance of power. What then, is the US interest in it? I believe that international politics sets traps for the powerful. When survival is no longer on the line it is easy to forget that the dangers remain constant: this is why we need to focus more on the third-image. Of course, I've argued that bipolarity is stable, but it is stable only if the superpowers recognize the incentives confronting them. President Johnson, like Wilson and Hoover before him, desire, though in different ways, to control the world. This can't be done and even if it could it would be dangerous. Can we always be sure that the leaders of strong states will be wise? And if they claim to act in defence of justice, how is justice to be objectively defined?

Magus I share some of your concerns here. If we live in a pluralist world, how indeed is justice to be objectively defined? But I'd like to understand the logic of what you're saying more fully. You argue that the anarchic structure of the international system, which is what third-image analysis is concerned with, creates incentives for states...

Waltz ... and those incentives are clearest for two states which far overshadow any other ...

Magus ... Absolutely. But my point is that despite your insistence about the incentives anarchy creates, states, even powerful states, can still act foolishly...

Waltz Exactly. That's the danger we face at the moment. That's why I'm concerned about the present direction of US policy.

Magus Well it's certainly a very suggestive framework for thinking about US policy: it is, how should I put it...

Harpy Heuristically powerful?

Magus Well it's certainly thought provoking. But my question is about the relationship between the first and third images. If anarchy is as powerful as you suggest, Professor Waltz, what is the likely consequence of a state, even a state as powerful as the US, acting foolishly?

Waltz Well, it is likely to be punished. It will suffer the consequences.

Harpy But who can punish a state as powerful as the US?

Magus Dr Harpy asks a good question. And I think the problem is quite a deep one. After all, even if the US is not so powerful as to prevent a balancing coalition from being formed, the formation of such a balancing coalition would surely require that other states respond rationally to the incentives created for them? But if the US can be foolish – and I am right, aren't I, to read you as suggesting that US policy in Vietnam *is* foolish? – surely other states can be foolish too? In other words, doesn't the operation of structural incentives depend on – one might say that it is reducible to – the choices of states and statesmen?

Waltz You're right to suggest that all three images are in a sense intertwined: as I've argued previously, they are lenses on a more complex reality. But I still think it's helpful to

treat the system level on its own merits and to ask what incentives it creates. One can certainly never cater for the actions of a Hitler or the reactions of a Chamberlain.⁴ But luckily we are not just relying on the right man (or even woman) being in the right place at the right time. Given the mutual antagonism between the superpowers, the US cannot risk getting it wrong and sensible people recognize that. It is not just an external pressure but enters into how we think and, I hope, will shape who we elect next year. One of the virtues of a bipolar world is that the incentives it creates are so clear. That, at least, is something to be thankful for.

Harpy That's very interesting. Your implicit acknowledgement that we always have to work with a partial picture is, I think, very important. But listening to you now highlights to me something I've wondered for a while: to what extent is your position at heart an ethical one?

Waltz What do you mean?

Harpy Well, it seems to me that part of your argument is that it is foolish for the US to become entangled in Vietnam because doing so goes against the structural incentives, and I think Prof Magus is right to ask where those structural incentives emerge from. But you also seem to suggest that some wars are more acceptable than others and, moreover, that that, too, reflects the anarchic structure of the international system. In other words, we all want to live in a more peaceful world, but you recognize that, anarchy being, as you would put it, a permissive cause of war, some wars are unavoidable: states have to defend themselves. But that also means that some wars are avoidable: they are wars of choice, perhaps pursued with good intentions, but avoidable nonetheless.

Waltz Absolutely. That is where anarchy creates a trap. In the absence of any higher authority, who is to say which wars of choice are justified and which are not? The danger of seeking to set the world to rights is that it does more harm than good. Where national interests are not at stake, what is to guide us?

Harpy Do you wish, then, to give us a theory of the national interest, or perhaps of US national interests?

Waltz No, or at least not yet. [*Waltz glances at his pocket-watch.*] Developing a theory is a significant undertaking. Before embarking on such an enterprise one would need to know, for a start, what a theory is and is not. That would require significant preparatory reading in the philosophy of science.

Magus I'm interested in the philosophy of science myself, though I've found it hard to get absolutely clear on how all the various positions are distinguished from one another. But let me ask: if what you're offering us isn't a theory of US national interests, what is it?

Waltz Well, at the moment I think of myself as being engaged more in analysing US foreign policy than theorising it, though I explored some of what would have to be the constituent parts of a theory of foreign policy in my recent book. But an analysis is not a theory: I'm putting theoretical ideas to work to explain the risks of our current course of action, not creating a theory.

⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Stability of a Bipolar World', *Daedalus*, 93.3, Summer 1963, p. 906.

Harpy That sounds like an important and most interesting distinction. Could you explain a little more what a theory can and cannot offer us?

[*Waltz looks at his watch again.*]

Waltz Well, I have some ideas, but I'm afraid I'll have to get back to you on that. I've very much enjoyed our discussion, but I'm late for a class...

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