

## Reflecting on Kenneth Waltz

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, MAY 14 2013

As professors, students and lovers of international relations, we walk in the shadows of giants. Our field lost one of its giants yesterday with the passing of Kenneth Waltz.

I did not know Waltz personally other than a brief encounter at the 2010 ISA convention in New Orleans, where we spent all of 10 minutes in a hallway debating methods. But, like many of the statements I have seen in the last 24 hours, I find his influence on the field, and on my own theoretical and ideological commitments, to be nothing short of pivotal.

Waltz's analyses of international politics will forever impact how we explain and understand the world around us. Waltzian realism became, for a time, the thesis of international politics, and his work evoked such harsh reactions that he is also responsible for motivating and inspiring the antitheses to his own conceptions of realism. Between his two major works, 1959's *Man, the State, and War* and 1979's *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz redefined how scholars of international relations were to theorize the events unfolding around us, and in the past. Rather than engaging in debates about Hobbes, Machiavelli, Kant or Locke and their influence on politics above the state level, Waltz compelled students of international politics to ground their work in methodologically rigorous social science traditions, most of which were totally unfamiliar to the field at the time. In a very short time, international relations theory went from the humanities to the social sciences, and students were forced to take crash courses in rational choice modeling, theory-testing and falsification, and systems theory. Waltz took us from Machiavelli to Morgenstern and von Neuman, and drew connections for us between Kuhn, Popper and Lakatos to how we comprehend world events. Naturally I should emphasize that Waltz was not necessarily the first to make these connections, but the prominence of his work certainly popularized these theoretical questions.

What is equally as fascinating about Waltz's contributions to the field through his own work are the reactions to it. Waltz was almost single-handedly responsible for the plethora of anti-realist interpretations of international (and global) politics. Liberalism (and its variants), Marxism, the Frankfurt School, feminism, postmodernism, post and neo colonialism, green theory, constructivism, the English School and the approaches in between all either took exception to, or sought to clarify, what neorealism was doing both ontologically and epistemologically. Issues such as the unit of analysis debate, the centrality and characteristics of the state, the condition of anarchy and its enduring nature and even the very question of whether there is an international system have all been strongly influenced by Waltz and his neorealist contemporaries. Even fellow realists began to build on Waltz's work, which is why realism has greater insights into offensive v. defensive posturing, balancing v. bandwagoning, and security v. power maximization.

This is not at all to say that Waltz's work was without weakness or controversy. Reducing international politics to unit-like interaction in an anarchic system is fascinating but its applicability to a wide array of global events is questionable. Waltz was often accused to himself trying to oversimplify the world and his exclusion of other variables in explaining international events begs the question of utility in a world far more complex than what the prisoner's dilemma can tell us. Yes, this is where Waltz's brilliance is best seen, in my opinion – Waltz never purported to explain and understand everything going on in the world, nor did his work insult other approaches. His argument, which remains essential to realist theory, is that the structure of the international system can explain how and why states will act in a given situation as they calculate their strategic options. Criticizing realism for not taking gender, discourse or the environment into account is irrelevant because such factors are not a part of neorealism's hardcore

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assumptions and thus do not degenerate the research program.

I will say the one area of Waltz's work that I have trouble with is history. Waltz himself was less guilty of questionable historical interpretations than his contemporaries, but neorealism is guilty in many instances of trying to make history fit the theory as opposed to the proper scientific method of events leading to a theoretical conclusion. The "square peg in a round hole" problem of neorealist historical application is something students and scholars continue to struggle with today.

Waltz's legacy is really that he has forced us all to think about the world in a way that some value, some hesitate to accept, and others hate, but that is distinctly different than what was said before he intervened. I could not think of a more valuable contribution for a scholar to make.

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*Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: [Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality](#)*

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**Robert W. Murray** is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.