

# Kenneth Waltz, Metatheorist?: Mind-World Monism in 'Theory of International Politics'

Written by Brittnee Carter

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BRITTNEE CARTER, JUL 29 2013

On May 12, 2013, the field of International Relations lost one its greatest minds. I am, of course, referring to Kenneth Waltz. As the founding father of neorealism, Waltz contributed many works, but his most crucial is arguably *Theory of International Politics* (TIP). TIP is considered by many to be a classic text that affords scholars the opportunity to test hypotheses of international political outcomes. However, metatheoretical implications of Waltz's work have been largely overlooked by scholars and students of the field. That said, this essay proposes that TIP has more to offer than instruction in hypothesis testing, as it can also be seen as a guide with valuable lessons for the creation of theory.

Waltz began his career as an economist, but after several years in graduate school he realized his true passion was English literature and political philosophy. After switching to a new program, in 1959 Waltz wrote *Man, the State, and War* (MSW) from his doctoral dissertation with the intent of providing, or sorting out, language to facilitate conversation about the assumptions of cause in international political outcomes.[1] Waltz was concerned by the miscommunication and lack of understanding between scholars and felt that the root of this problem lay in issues with the formation of theory itself.[2]

It was this concern that led Waltz to enroll at the London School of Economics in order to study philosophy of science. After experiencing mild disappointment in this program, Waltz devoted the next period of his life to self-education in metatheory. These metatheoretical concerns permeate every facet of TIP. Its first chapter is meant to convey Waltz's understanding of theory, highlighting several important characteristics of the theory building process. First, theories must be constructed, not observed. Second, the world which is depicted by the theory and the world from which these inferences are drawn are one in the same and cannot be separated.[3] Lastly, the purpose of theory is not to test hypotheses, but rather to simplify reality and facilitate discussion.[4]

That theories must be created is possibly the most important principle in the creation process according to Waltz. Arriving at a theory by aggregating facts and observations is what Waltz terms the "inductivist illusion." This illusion lies in the "belief that the truth is won and explanation achieved through more and more data and the examination of more and more cases."<sup>[5]</sup> No matter the amount of data gathered and relationships explained, they do not signify the existence of a singular truth. If theory is created in this manner, then theory itself is reduced to nothing more but a testament to its own supposed certainty. "We can never say with assurance that a state of affairs arrived at inductively corresponds to something objectively real."<sup>[6]</sup> Theories are not meant to be created inductively, but rather a mentally formed picture that attempts to explain a particular phenomenon or the relationship between phenomena.[7]

The second point made about theory building, that the theoretical world and the world about which it theorizes are of the same reality, is presented in a much vaguer fashion. Waltz argues theories represent a "bounded realm of domain or activity," but that this realm is merely a simplification of the reality that it represents.[8] Theory is not a representation of an external reality; theory helps to organize parts of reality and connections among them. Waltz writes scholars who believe in a "reality out there" (one that exists separate from our minds) rest on the conviction that knowledge is certainty, but that certainty can never be attained, therefore the assumption of a theoretical world

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separate from the world it depicts does not hold water.[9] This rendition of Waltz's theory complements Patrick Thaddeus Jackson's argument that Waltz is a mind-world monist. Monists argue that reality cannot be, and is not, separate from our minds. Jackson's argument, albeit controversial, astutely identifies the monist elements of TIP: that theory and reality are one in the same and that theory is merely a means to order or arrange the parts that make up reality.[10]

If no distinction between theory and reality exists, what is to be the fate of hypothesis testing? It seems throughout TIP, Waltz presents clear instructions on how to test neorealist theory. Part two of chapter one begins by stating the necessary requirements for hypothesis testing and chapter six appears to provide directions on how the balance of power theory can be tested. Many scholars, including Randall Schweller[11] and William Wohlforth,[12] have been drawn in by the allure of empiricism and the possibilities for validation that neorealism offers. However, in examining TIP from a different perspective, many such as Ole Wæver[13] and Nicholas Onuf,[14] have extracted metatheoretical implications that indicate Waltz's preoccupation with theory building as well as several caveats for those attempting to test theory. According to Jackson's analysis of Waltz, "it makes little sense to formulate and test hypotheses because the idea of an externally existing world against which to test them is nonsensical." [15] Those who believe the pieces can be added up to create a model with independent and dependent variables have no more than their own faith; pieces and parts of reality are infinite and there is no way to know them all or how they will fit together.[16] Waltz believes good theory to be too parsimonious to be tested, often leading to experiments laced with variables that are "confused, vague, and fluctuating." [17] To those in search of a generalizable truth, Waltz cautions, "rigorous testing of vague theory is an exercise in the use of methods rather than a useful effort to test theory... Trying to check them [hypotheses] experimentally is to place more weight on the theory than it can bear." [18]

Even theories that are "logical, coherent, and plausible" [19] are subject to limitations with hypothesis testing. The predictions that come as a result of testing International Relations theory are indeterminate because the conditions under which they are tested are not fixed, they are varying and uncertain. This is especially true of TIP since the primary unit of analysis is the ever transforming international system. Theory may raise expectations, but is incredibly difficult to test in fields like international politics.[20]

While I cannot and do not claim to know what Waltz's *true* intentions were when he wrote TIP, I submit this essay as an alternative lens through which to view neorealism, a lens that offers a metatheoretical perspective to the field of International Relations on the work of the great Kenneth Waltz. This representation will likely give rise to doubt in the minds of many of the field's scholars and students because it stands in vivid contrast to traditional representations of Waltz as an empiricist and Popperian. That said, positivist representations of Waltz are not without merit. In fact, it is through the testing of neorealism that the field has been able to identify the theory's strengths and weaknesses, and Waltz admits in TIP that hypothesis testing can be useful in this respect. However, his concern for what theory is and how it should be created can offer prudence and caution to those looking to create and test theory. And ultimately, the argument for Waltz as a metatheorist who was greatly influenced by his studies in philosophy of science is strengthened by what is written in TIP: theory is a simplification of reality constructed within our minds, and it is useful for ordering experience and facilitating discourse.

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[1]University of California Berkeley, "Kenneth Waltz Interview: Conversations with History," 2003:<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people3/Waltz/waltz-con1.html>.

[2] Kenneth Waltz, "The Virtue of Adversity," *International Relations* 23 (September 2009): 501-502.

[3]Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 7.

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[4] Waltz, *Theory*, 4.

[5] Waltz, *Theory*, 4. Inductivist Illusion is originally termed by Levi-Strauss.

[6] Waltz, *Theory*, 5.

[7] Waltz, *Theory*, 6-8. This is taken from several statements made by Waltz in an interview with Ole Waever. The interview appears in: Ole Waever, "Waltz's Theory of Theory," *International Relations* 23 (June 2009): 209.

[8] Waltz, *Theory*, 8.

[9] Waltz, *Theory*, 4-5.

[10] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 8-9, 38.

[11] Randall Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventative War; Are Democracies Pacific?" *World Politics* 44 (January 1994): 72-107.

[12] William Wohlforth, "The Russian-Soviet Empire: A Test of Neorealism," *Review of International Studies* 27 (December 2001): 213-235.

[13] Waever, "Waltz's Theory of Theory."

[14] Nicholas Onuf, "Structure? What Structure?" *International Relations* 23 (June 2009): 183-199.

[15] Jackson, 38.

[16] Waltz, *Theory*, 4.

[17] Waltz, *Theory* 15.

[18] Waltz, *Theory*, 16.

[19] Waltz, *Theory*, 16.

[20] Waltz, *Theory*, 124-125.

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