

# Waever's assessment of neo-neo synthesis and its validity in the neo-neo debate

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FLAVIO PAIOLETTI, FEB 26 2011

Liberalism and Realism are considered as the main theories of International Relations. Although differences between the two paradigms made them incommensurable paradigms, nevertheless they shaped the doctrine and the behaviours of policy makers at least to the 1970's. What happened later, is that both doctrines reacted to the "behaviourist revolution" and tried to give their assumptions scientific validity, building 'neo' theories that reshaped the old paradigms. In doing so, as many scholars argue, they developed core issues that gave the possibility of defining a "synthesis" that would become the mainstream for the doctrine of International Relations. In particular, Ole Waever talked about a "neo-neo synthesis" taking place at the end of the third debate.

The aim of this paper is to discuss whether the two theories actually developed shared visions that allow arguing that they have in common basic assumptions and they are essentially trying to give answers to similar questions. In order to do so, I will first look quickly over the main claims of the two theories and what distinguished them from their traditional paradigms. Secondly I will analyze Waever's theory of neo-neo synthesis, explaining which reflections support his claim. At the end, identifying similarities and differences between Neorealism (or structural realism) and Neoliberalism (neoinstitutional liberalism), I will try to highlight the reasons that induced Waever claiming a neo-neo synthesis.

### Neorealism and Neoliberalism

In the changing scenario of 1970's in which states continued to be key players in decision-making and to maintain substantial autonomy, Keohane and Nye elaborated the theory of "complex interdependence". This represented a fundamental theoretical shift in the liberal tradition: recognizing the importance of states as primary actors and the anarchic character of the international system, they marked the beginning of the transformation of the liberalism theory towards neo-liberal institutionalism (Mazzei et al. 2010, p. 115). Since the 1970's coincided with a widespread disillusionment about the process of European integration, optimism on the future role of supranational institutions diminished, while the focus shifted on the transnational and transgovernative dynamics, considered in the light of the concept of interdependence. The new variety of Liberalism, labelled as Liberal Institutionalism or neo-liberal Institutionalism, was rooted in the functional integration theories who claimed that technical and economic integration would create a political dynamic which itself leads to further integration through the redefinition of state interests in supranational terms (Baylis and Smith 2005, p. 213). 'Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries' (Keohane and Nye 1977, p. 8): namely, relationship or relationships between two or more units in which one is sensitive to the decisions and actions of the other or others. The interdependence can be political, economic, social and can also be symmetrical or asymmetrical. According to the neoliberalism, interdependence had created new conditions and consequences at the international level. First of all, it led to the erosion of state sovereignty as states were increasingly involved in institutional networks that limited their autonomy in foreign policy. Second, the distinction between foreign and domestic policy was nuanced because of the increasing interpenetration of national economies. Finally, it took to the declining trend of military force and the possibility of disposing of it in the international arena.

Keohane and Nye's exposed their theory of "complex interdependence" in the book 'Power and Interdependence' in

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1977. First they clarified the concepts of sensitivity, which involves 'degrees of responsiveness within a policy framework – how quickly do changes in one country bring costly changes in another' (Keohane and Nye 1977, p.12), and vulnerability, as 'the relative availability and costliness of the alternatives that various actors face (Ibid. p. 14). As Baylis and Smith claim (Baylis and Smith 2005, p. 213), they then developed a vision of the world based on three key assumptions. First, the existence of multiple channels, namely the relationships, between states and states, and states and non-state actors. Together with inter-state relations must be considered transgovernative and transnational relations. Second, the absence of a hierarchy of issues since the military security agenda is not the only concern: as a consequence the distinction between high and low politics tends to be nuanced. Finally, with the decline of the importance of military power, is increasingly important given the economic interdependence and international institutions.

During the 1970's there was also the strong feeling that liberalism, despite its many facets, was becoming the dominant theoretical paradigm of international relations. It was the formulation of realism in structural terms by Kenneth Waltz, with its famous "Theory of International Relations" (1979) to reaffirm the centrality of the political dimension and restore prestige to the school. Waltz's theory was strongly influenced by the positivistic scientism and labelled as neo-realism, and focused on the structural-systemic within the realist doctrine (Mazzei 2010, p.117). As Guzzini claims (Guzzini 1998, p. 181 – 183), Waltz's role was fundamental in defending the independence of the discipline of International Relations, seeking to work on a more restrictive field than the continuous extension of the 'global network' of the research topics. His approach provided the discipline and its members with a long-disputed scientific legitimacy. By setting clear boundaries and imitating a respected method, that Donnelly labels microeconomic rational choice analysis (Donnelly 2000, p. 30), the discipline and its independence were identified and legitimized. The aim was to replace the realist thought with the neo-realist theory. In order to do so, Waltz shifted from Morgenthau and classical realism, who relied on human nature, to explain state's behaviour (anthropological pessimism). Instead, he concentrated on the character of the anarchic international system (structural pessimism) that causes self-help, conflict and war (Mazzei et al. 2010, p. 118). He thus constructed a "systemic" theory and accused previous scholars as Morgenthau, Kaplan, Hoffmann of reductionism: having explored causes placed at the individual or the national level, they highlighted limited aspects of international reality (Waltz 1979, p.18), making realism 'a theory of politics in general, rather than a theory of International Relations' (Donnelly 2000, p.48).

In 1959 ('Man, the State and War'), Waltz presented the three classic images that helped to understand the origins of the war: human nature, the type of political regime of a State and the characteristics of the international system. According to Waltz, the discipline had to get rid of the first image, which would have forced the philosophical discussion rather than to encourage empirical theory. Even theories that rested on the second image, the characteristics of the state, to understand the causes of war, were subjected to harsh criticism. Because different states tend to behave in similar ways when they are in similar conditions of power, there must be structural causes to the behaviour of states. (Guzzini 1998, p. 183). Waltz claimed that this structure was defined by three characteristics. First of all, what distinguished paradigmatically the international system from other systems and what gives this structure its causal force, was its anarchic character. The second characteristic is the differentiation of the functions of different units. In an anarchic system, the state must bear alone of all its functions and preserve its survival. The system is made up of short units, having the same functions, can be considered equal. Finally, the third characteristic for the analysis of the structure is defined by the distribution of capacity among different units. The systems are defined by the number of power poles between which compete in the international arena. (Booth and Smith 1995, p. 244). Brown claims that the structural situation of anarchy states must provide to their own security and worry about threats given by other states, paying attention to adjust their position related to that of other states. The result is a power of balance, 'the theory of the international structure' (Brown 2009, p.43).

### **Waever's "neo-neo synthesis"**

After having summed the evolutions and assumptions of the two theories, I will look now at Waever's claims. Waever

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started its analysis (Waever 1996, p. 149-185) looking at the "third debate". In his vision, it involved the three dominant school of International relations: Realism, Liberalism, or interdependence, pluralism and world society, and Marxism, even called radicalism, structuralism or globalism. The third debate was the last step of a process began in the late 1960's, and continued through the 1970's, with rising criticisms about the dominant realist paradigm, especially on his state-centric vision of the international system and its focus on (militarily) power. New conceptions of the international system were theorised considering a broader number and type of actors, the result of which was a pluralist and interdependent view. Waever claimed that none of the two paradigms was supposed to 'win', 'there was no way to prove one or the other right. Realists and pluralists (interdependence people) saw different realities [...] Realism and its pluralist challenger appeared to be such incommensurable paradigms' (Waever 1996, p. 150-151). The two theories were challenged by a third rising paradigm in the 1970's, Marxism, who claimed that the nature of the international system is function of economic relationships between states and other agents of the system. As Baylis and Smith assert, 'the familiar events of world politics – wars, treaties, international aid operations, etc. – all occur within structures which have enormous influence on those events. These are the structures of a global capitalism' (Baylis and Smith 2005, p. 227). The third debate, Waever assessed, is clearly distinguished from the previous two because for the first time there was an evident self-perception that the three paradigms were incommensurable and no one would have prevailed over the others and would have shaped the study of the International Relations. The differences between the three theories were based on ontological divergences, distinct conceptions of reality, its actors and methods of studies.

As Marxism was early marginalised by the other two paradigms, something else happened: Realism, through the work of his most significant thinker Waltz, responded both to the challenges of the behaviouralist revolution, trying to 'relaunch a more scientific vision of realism' (Waever 1996, p. 162), and to those posed by the interdependence theories of the liberal side. The first intention seemed to Waever the main change that Waltz brought to the realist side, the 'concept of science': 'in this sense the shift from realism to neo-realism can be seen as a delayed and displaced victory for the scientific side of the second debate' (Ibid. p. 162). Neorealism was not relying anymore on ethico-philosophical assumptions, drifting from the rhetoric of classical realism and its focus on the nature of human being. This opened the theory to other issues and had an impact on the relationships with other theories.

Waever went on arguing that liberal theory proceeded through similar patterns, narrowing its interests from a wide interpretation of the nature of international relations to the role that institutions have in defining state actions. Institutional liberalism, accepting the neorealist assumption of anarchy, challenged neorealism on its field trying to demonstrate that cooperation was possible in anarchical 'Waltzian' world. In order to do so, it sought more precise and limited correlation that could be reduced to testable analytical statements (Waever 1996, p. 163).

Waever concluded assessing that, beside the choice of developing their theories on the common assumption of anarchy as the scenario in which states and institutions behave, what really made possible a synthesis of the two paradigms in a dominant mainstream was that "both underwent a self-limiting redefinition towards an anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism, and they became increasingly compatible [...] they shared a 'rationalist' research programme, a conception of science' (Waever 1996, p. 163). In doing so, each theory needed to renounce to some of their traditional issues, probably the ones who made them 'incommensurable': for neorealist the 'classical' focus on statesmen and the reliance on human nature as explaining states behaviour, for neoliberals the centrality of ethic in state behaviour.

So, in Waever's analysis, what really enabled the two schools to come to a shared guide, is the Waltz's ambition to elevate the doctrine of International Relations, in his neorealist pattern, to a scientific discipline. In order to do so, Waltz devoted the first chapter of the book to the analysis of the definition of 'theory': as Waever argued, 'the book's grand success owed much to being widely accepted as setting a new standard for "theory" in the discipline' (Waever 2009, p. 204 – 205). Innovations recognized to Waltz regards the nature of 'theory': 'theory explains laws. This meaning does not accord with usage in much of traditional political theory. Which is concerned more with philosophic interpretation than with theoretical explanation' (Waltz 1979, p.7). Waltz claimed that theory would have acted as guidance through infinite materials (Ibid. p.5) allowing neorealism to focus 'on a small number of big and important things' (Waever 1996, p.162). More specifically, neorealism, abstracting reality, needed to rely on the characteristics of the international system: given anarchy as its ordering principle, dynamics generated by the structure could be

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studied and, hopefully, explained. By doing so, it was possible to go over the original ethical and philosophical divisions that separated the two main schools. Neoliberal institutionalist facing the reality of an international system in which states still played important roles, approached neorealist basic assumptions. First of all, they shared the base of neorealist theory: the importance of the structure and its anarchical characteristic. 'The processes that take place in system are affected by its structure and by the most characteristics of the most important units in the system', Keohane and Nye argued reviewing the principles of his theory (Keohane and Nye 1987, p. 745). This claim is important for two main reasons: first, as asserted before, neoliberalism identified the importance of the structure as the independent variable conditioning the behaviour of its units, the dependent variable. The second shift from the traditional liberal thinking was the recognition of the state as a unitary actor. Basing this assumption in the rational choice theory, neorealism assessed that states 'at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination' (Waltz 1979, p.118). Neoliberalism, as well, started to look at the state as a unitary, rational actor trying to maximize its interests.

Even if neoliberalism saw the state to seek an absolute gain deriving from cooperation as the goal of the state behaviour, yet the approach to realist theory is clear. Still the two theories diverged over possibility for states to cooperate in the anarchical system. Neoliberalists, that focused more on the economic impact of and states interests in the anarchical structure, stressed the autonomy of institutions and regimes, claiming that they would have led states to absolute gains. Neorealists responded that international institutions were the result of the action of the more powerful states, and could survive as far as they served their interests (Waltz 2000, p. 23). Even if the approaches to the concept of international institutions and their functions were clearly divergent, yet is worth noticing that both theories considered them as consequence of states actions, themselves functions of the anarchical structure of the international system. It means that even realist, that usually emphasised a state-centric view of International Relations, accepted the importance of international institutions. State shared the stage with actors of various kinds, albeit with minor roles, as well as being influenced by the structure of the international system and to some extent, by established and internationalised international regimes (Mazzei 2010, p. 114). This erosion of state sovereignty led to another focal point of "neo-neo rapprochement": the neo-realist not only re-evaluated, to some extent, issues concerning the low politic, but they also tended to frame the issue of national security in a wider dimension, first tying it to international or regional level and the other assuming the reduced fungibility of military power (Ibid. p. 114). This argument got the two theories some closer: as Keohane and Nye attempted to show how, in a situation of a broader and more interconnected international system, the use of military force could have been more effective than a reliance on economic power (Keohane and Nye 1977, p.16).

## Conclusion

The convergence of neo-realism and neo-liberalism is self-evident from the fact that scholars of the two great schools, in addition to sharing a set of fundamental assumptions, ended up having the same central theme of reflection: how to assess, in a situation of anarchy, the effects that international structure have on the behaviour of states (Mazzei et al. 2010, p. 114). Sutch and Elias claim that this convergence was possible as neoliberalism accepted the 'scientific project' of neorealism, its epistemology (Sutch and Elias 2007, p.11). I suppose that they also have the same opinion about ontology, as they see a reality to explain that has is based on the anarchical structure of the international system. This convergence is even clear from the words of the main theorists of the two schools. Indeed, Keohane asserted that 'rather than viewing realist theory as an alternative to liberal "interdependence theory", we regarded the two as necessary complements to one another' (Keohane 1987, p. 729). He then added: 'the result of our synthetic analysis in *Power and Interdependence* [...] has been to broaden neorealism and provide it with new concepts rather than to articulate a coherent alternative theoretical framework from the study of world politics' (Ibid. p. 733). Waltz, for its part, assessed that '(neoliberalism) never was an alternative to realism. Institutional theory, as Keohane has stressed, has as its core structural realism [...] The institutional approach starts with structural theory, applies it to the origins and operations of institutions, and unsurprisingly end with realist conclusions' (Waltz 2000, p. 25). Paraphrasing David Baldwin, neo-neo debate was no more a confrontation

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between two incommensurable schools, one studying the reality – the world as it is – and the other proposing a 'utopia' – the world as they would like it be. 'Thus is between two group of scholars with reasonable disagreements as to how to describe and interpret the real world' (Baldwin ed. 1993, p.10) .

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