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# How Realism Waltzed Off

Daniel Bessner and  
Nicolas Guilhot

## Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism

Neorealism is one of the most influential theories of international relations, and its first theorist, Kenneth Waltz, a giant of the discipline. This article examines why Waltz moved from a rather traditional form of classical realist political theory in the 1950s to neorealism in the 1970s. This issue is not an arcane matter of disciplinary history. Classical realism paid a great deal of attention to decisionmaking and statesmanship, leading classical realists to adopt the role of advisers or, more often, chastisers of policymakers. Neorealism, by contrast, dismissed the issue of foreign-policy making and decisionmaking. The realist tradition thus achieved true intellectual dominance in the U.S. academy precisely when it appeared to sever its ties to politics. How can this paradox be explained? What were the factors that led to the development of a “new” realism? Why did Waltz decide to exclude from the purview of realist theory the question of decisionmaking? Can the shift from classical realism to neorealism be explained solely as a product of theoretical development? These are the questions that animate our investigation.

Waltz himself said little regarding his theory's roots, save for vague observations about the ineffable—and decontextualized—origins of theories in general: “a brilliant intuition flashes, a creative idea emerges. One cannot say how the intuition comes and how the idea is born.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Waltz's ahistorical formulation, we argue that his *Theory of International Politics*, the text that defined neorealism, was an attempt to reconceive classical realism in a liberal form. Neorealism, in short, was profoundly ideological.<sup>2</sup> We assert

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1. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (1979; repr. Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland, 2010), p. 9.
  2. This claim contrasts with how most international relations scholarship presents itself. As Ido

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that classical realism reflected a nostalgic, anti-liberal political ideology at odds with Waltz's liberalism, one that longed for a return to elitist forms of rule, unaccountable to the *hoi polloi* of modern democracy. To reconcile his acceptance of classical realism's tenets with liberalism, Waltz incorporated cybernetics and system theory into *Theory of International Politics*, which allowed him to develop a theory of international relations that was no longer burdened with the problem of decisionmaking. In essence, Waltz removed the policymaker from international relations theory.

Most features defining the neorealist vision of international politics were otherwise present in classical realism, from the stress on balance of power politics to the notion of international anarchy. Neorealism, however, diverged from classical realism in that it placed stress on the international system as the *explanans* for international relations, whereas classical realism also focused on decisional and domestic political factors (the so-called first and second images). Waltz's adoption of a system-theoretical approach had two major advantages. First, it did not need to posit a rational decisionmaker, and thus it accommodated the classical realist notion that politics was not an activity primarily premised on rationalism. Second, and more crucially, by entirely removing the problem of decisionmaking from the purview of international relations theory, it did not have to pronounce upon the nature of domestic politics or embrace classical realism's critique of liberalism. Whereas classical realism was a theory of international relations that sought to make decisionmakers more effective, neorealism emerged as a theory of international relations without decisionmakers. By redescribing international politics in terms of systemic adaptation to an environment, and not as a setting in which statesmen make authoritative choices, Waltz provided a seemingly technical, non-ideological approach to foreign policy compatible with his commitment to liberal democratic norms.

Our argument highlights decisionmaking as a key focus of the realist tradition. The question of decisionmaking was crucial for classical realism, which developed partially as a critique of interwar-era Western parliamentarianism.

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Oren highlighted, "Although individual political scientists often acknowledge, in private or in published personal recollections, that their research agenda has been shaped by the flow of national and international events or by personal involvement in government and political work, the profession's methodological texts are virtually silent on these issues. These texts offer students useful advice on how to validate the empirical truth of theoretical propositions, but they rarely discuss where these propositions come from. Their conception of 'significance' is statistical, not cultural-historical. . . . By default, the image of political science that emerges from its discourse is one of an objective science that investigates politics yet remains outside politics, and whose questions and conceptual constructs are not embedded in any historical or national context." See Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 6.

The failure of the West to confront fascism was the formative experience for the generation of émigré scholars who developed classical realism, from Hans Morgenthau to John Herz. Throughout their writings in the 1940s and 1950s, they inveighed against the rationalistic illusions of legalism and advocated a return to what Morgenthau referred to as a “preliberal diplomacy” unencumbered by legal norms, public scrutiny, and democratic control. Waltz’s neorealism rejected this nostalgic, anti-liberal core of classical realism, which centered on the decisionmaker, while retaining a realist worldview.

The article proceeds as follows. We first give a brief presentation of Morgenthau’s 1946 *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* and his 1948 *Politics among Nations*, which provided the theoretical tenets that defined classical realism, in order to better locate Waltz in the realist tradition and compare and contrast neorealism with classical realism.<sup>3</sup> We then turn to Waltz’s first formulations of a theory of international politics in his *Man, the State, and War* to suggest that this early treatise was steeped in classical realism’s tenets, even as Waltz displayed some discomfort with classical realism’s emphasis on decisionmaking. We then explain why the kind of system theory that Waltz adopted in *Theory of International Politics* represented an ideological, as opposed to a theoretical, response to classical realism on the question of decisionmaking in a democratic context.

In sum, we suggest that Waltz’s neorealist theory is not highly original, neither in relation to classical realism nor in relation to the state of political science circa 1980. Rather, it is the fact that he succeeded in bringing realism in line both with major trends in U.S. political science and with liberal political culture that explains the tremendous intellectual appeal of his theory. Indeed, according to a 2015 *Foreign Policy* magazine poll, Waltz remains the fifth most-influential international relations theorist in the American academy.<sup>4</sup> In our view, this is because he was the first scholar to translate realism into a theoretical language fully compatible with American liberalism. Ultimately, neorealism reflected the successful Americanization of classical realism.

### *Classical Realism as a Decisionist Theory of Politics*

Classical realism is the source of all contemporary realist theories of international relations, and it provided the intellectual context within which Waltz

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3. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 51; and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

4. Daniel Maliniak et al., “The Best International Relations Schools in the World,” *Foreign Policy*, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/03/top-twenty-five-schools-international-relations/>.

was trained and spent his early career.<sup>5</sup> Morgenthau provided classical realism's basic tenets in his 1946 *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. A key purpose of the book was to explain liberal democracy's failure to confront fascism in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> It therefore consisted of an extended critique of nineteenth-century liberalism, which Morgenthau defined as the philosophical commitment to individual freedom, collective security, democracy, free trade, public opinion, international communication, and universal rights.<sup>7</sup> Through his analysis, Morgenthau desired to reveal to U.S. decisionmakers, whom he considered heirs of the liberal tradition, that their philosophy invariably led them to misunderstand "the rules of the game" of international affairs.<sup>8</sup> With liberalism's "veil of oblivion" lifted, Morgenthau hoped that *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* "would do for the theory and, in the long run, for the practice of politics all that a book can do."<sup>9</sup> From its beginnings, classical realism was focused on the decisionmaker.

Morgenthau asserted that liberals' naïve conviction that science could "solve . . . all political problems which confront man in the modern age,"<sup>10</sup> despite actual experience, "paralyzes both thought and action" in international affairs,<sup>11</sup> to which recent history testified: "The period between the two world wars, which saw its [rationalism's] triumph in theory and in practice, witnessed also its intellectual, moral, and political bankruptcy. . . . The fact alone that Western civilization could completely misunderstand the intellectual, moral, and political challenge of fascism and be brought to the brink of disaster by those very forces it had defeated on the battlefield but twenty years before should raise doubts in the soundness of its philosophy, morality, and statecraft."<sup>12</sup>

5. For an assessment of classical realism's impact in the 1950s, see Nicolas Guilhot, "Politics between and beyond Nations: Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*," in Henrik Bliddal, Casper Sylvest, and Peter Wilson, eds., *Classics of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 69–79.

6. As William E. Scheuerman noted, "The fundamental political inspiration for virtually everything [Morgenthau] wrote during the cold war was fear that the United States and its allies might succumb to blunders akin to those committed during the 1930s, when incompetent democratic foreign-policy makers helped to prepare the path for German aggression and the rise of fascism." See Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 178–179 (emphasis in the original).

7. The book began as a lecture titled "Liberalism and Foreign Policy," given at the New School for Social Research in the summer of 1940 for a series titled "Liberalism Today." See Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. v. What Morgenthau called "liberalism" is different from what we today term "liberal theories of international relations." See, for example, Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513–553.

8. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 51.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

10. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

Morgenthau identified liberalism with rationalism and lambasted Western decisionmakers for considering politics “as something alien to the true order of things, as a kind of outside disturbance like a disease or a natural catastrophe,”<sup>13</sup> “a kind of atavistic residue from a prerational period.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of recognizing Man for what he was—a being that forever sought power and dominance over others—liberals declared that “politics should be ‘reformed’ and ‘rationalized.’ Political maneuvering should be replaced by the scientific ‘plan,’ the political decision by the scientific ‘solution,’ the politician by the ‘expert,’ the statesman by the ‘brain-truster,’ the legislator by the ‘legal engineer.’”<sup>15</sup> But “politics,” Morgenthau averred, “is an art and a not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman.”<sup>16</sup>

Morgenthau further castigated liberals’ faith that law could always prevent war. According to Morgenthau, law was power’s mask. “International politics,” he declared, “has never outgrown the ‘preliberal’ stage. Even where legal relations hide relations of power, power is to be understood in terms of violence, actual and potential; and potential violence tends here always to turn into actual warfare.”<sup>17</sup> For Morgenthau, the liberal program naïvely ignored the limits of rationality and law, which led liberals to disregard the eternal, indeed tragic, realities of international politics. As the West’s interwar encounter with fascism demonstrated, liberalism’s misunderstanding of international affairs could have profound negative consequences.

Against optimistic liberals such as the American president Woodrow Wilson, Morgenthau endorsed a pessimistic philosophical anthropology. In his opinion, humans had an innate *animus dominandi* that politics reflected. Morgenthau averred that this “corruption . . . is a permanent element of human existence and therefore operates regardless of historic circumstances everywhere and at all times.”<sup>18</sup> Politics was necessarily “a struggle for power over men,” and international politics was inescapably power politics.<sup>19</sup> Morgenthau warned that any civilization that ignored this reality and held that rationality could not comprehend power politics “deprived itself of the intellectual faculty to master the radical evil of the lust for power,” then recently embodied by National Socialism, and prepared itself for potential destruc-

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13. Ibid., p. 22.

14. Ibid., p. 28.

15. Ibid., p. 29.

16. Ibid., p. 10.

17. Ibid., p. 50.

18. Ibid., p. 196.

19. Ibid., p. 195.

tion.<sup>20</sup> In Morgenthau's opinion, politics could not be reformed, at least in the near future; all one could do was act "according to the rules of the political art," which was an expression of "political wisdom."<sup>21</sup>

This last claim revealed that Morgenthau did believe that reason could contribute to the practice of international politics, even if its impact was invariably limited. Although one could not eliminate power politics, Morgenthau stressed that it was nevertheless possible to attenuate politics' potential destructiveness if one recognized how international relations functioned. He suggested that decisionmakers look to "the prerationalist Western tradition" and its statesmen for guidance.<sup>22</sup> Against modern liberal policymakers, Morgenthau valorized as ideal statesmen Francis I, king of France, for allying with Henry VIII, king of England, to challenge the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V; Cardinal Richelieu for putting aside his hatred of Protestantism if doing so harmed France's enemies, Austria and Spain; and Cardinal Mazarin for allying with Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, against King Charles I, though Mazarin wanted Charles's nephew to be king of France.<sup>23</sup> As his praise for these individuals implies, a deep nostalgia permeated Morgenthau's writings in the postwar period.<sup>24</sup>

Morgenthau's 1948 *Politics among Nations* was his attempt to provide U.S. policymakers with the rules of international relations to which *Scientific Man* referred. He began the book by explicitly stating its dual purpose. On the one hand, he intended it to be a study of "the forces which determine political relations among nations."<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, he hoped it would allow U.S. decisionmakers "to understand international politics, grasp the meaning of contemporary events, and foresee and influence the future."<sup>26</sup> Morgenthau wanted his book to aid decisionmakers "in making correct judgments in international affairs, in charting the future wisely, and in doing the right things in the right way and at the right time."<sup>27</sup> *Politics among Nations* thus had an explicit pedagogical purpose. As Morgenthau insisted, "No study of politics and certainly no study of international politics in the mid-twentieth century can be disinterested in the sense that it is able to divorce knowledge from action and

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20. Ibid., p. 199.

21. Ibid., p. 203.

22. Ibid., pp. 9–10.

23. Ibid., p. 60.

24. For Morgenthau's nostalgia and his skepticism of democratic politics, see Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau*, pp. 128, 78.

25. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 3.

26. Ibid., p. 5.

27. Ibid.



to pursue knowledge for its own sake.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that the world was “transformed into two inflexible, hostile blocs,” and the fact that “total war” could destroy mankind, made it critical for U.S. leaders to foster peace, which they could do only if they knew Morgenthau’s rules of international relations.<sup>29</sup> “The understanding of the forces which mold international politics and of the factors which determine its course,” Morgenthau emphasized, “has become for the United States more than an interesting intellectual occupation. It has become a vital necessity.”<sup>30</sup>

In *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau highlighted the centrality of the balance of power to world peace. The sole means to restrain what he termed “nationalistic universalism,” the claim that “one nation and one state [has] the right to impose its own valuations and standards of action upon all the other nations,” was to enable the balance of power to function effectively.<sup>31</sup> As he wrote in *Scientific Man*, only the balance of power “could impose actual limits upon the manifestations of [states’] collective desire for domination” inherent in international politics.<sup>32</sup>

Yet how could one guarantee that the balance would function effectively? Building on his earlier claim that *Politics among Nations* was a textbook for policymakers, Morgenthau avowed that a primary means to do so was to improve U.S. diplomacy. In other words, he located the solution to the problems of international relations at the level of the decisionmaker. Once U.S. statesmen grasped the rules of power politics that Morgenthau identified, he wanted them to abandon the liberal shibboleths of “free trade, arbitration, disarmament, collective security, . . . international government, and the world state,”<sup>33</sup> in favor of a politics of interest premised upon “persuasion, negotiation, and pressure, which are the traditional instruments of diplomacy.”<sup>34</sup> Over time, Morgenthau optimistically concluded, a wise diplomacy could perhaps “bring into existence . . . an international society and keep it in being.”<sup>35</sup> But, for the moment, power politics ruled.

A central element of Morgenthau’s proposal concerned the insulation of the diplomatic and policy elite from public opinion. Throughout *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* and *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau criticized public opinion

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28. Ibid., p. 7.

29. Ibid., p. 8.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 269.

32. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 197.

33. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 444.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.



for its naïveté, stupidity, and destructiveness. Thus, in *Scientific Man*, he lambasted “the attitude of a large sector of American public opinion during the second World War, which in 1941 was stated thus with classical simplicity: ‘The country wants to defend itself, aid Britain, and stay out of the war.’ . . . It was evidently impossible to comply with these three conditions at the same time.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in the second edition of *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau explicitly argued that any government must recognize “that it is the leader and not the slave of public opinion.”<sup>37</sup> He held this conviction for years. Thus, in his 1962 *The Restoration of American Politics*, Morgenthau asserted that the main issue faced by U.S. presidents was “the incompatibility between the rational requirements of sound foreign policy and the emotional preferences of a democratically controlled public opinion.”<sup>38</sup> With these claims, Morgenthau echoed and reinforced the opinions of other German classical realists, such as John Herz and Hans Speier, who likewise adopted a pessimistic vision of politics that emerged from their interwar experiences. This framework compelled Morgenthau and his fellow exiles to adopt a qualified and limited vision of democracy centered upon ensuring that allegedly volatile publics did not exert undue influence on U.S. foreign-policy making.<sup>39</sup>

In *Politics among Nations* and a number of later essays, Morgenthau repeatedly called for the establishment of a new diplomatic elite capable of learning the rules of international relations. For him, the “international disorder” of the twentieth century was the direct outcome of the decline of diplomacy: “The traditional methods of diplomacy have been under continuous attack since the First World War and have to a considerable extent been discarded in practice since the end of the Second World War.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas liberals had considered traditional diplomacy a leftover of the ancien régime, for Morgenthau, the restoration of U.S. politics required nothing short of the restoration of the diplomatic arts that had come under attack as politics became more demo-

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36. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 70.

37. Quote from Scheuermann, *Hans Morgenthau*, p. 178. For more on Morgenthau and elitism, see Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), p. 157; and Scheuermann, *Hans Morgenthau*, pp. 128, 178–179.

38. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3: *The Restoration of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 106. For a similar perspective to Morgenthau’s, see Hans Speier, “Historical Development of Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (January 1950), pp. 376–388. Christoph Frei and William Scheuermann have discussed Morgenthau’s skepticism of public opinion. See Frei, *Morgenthau*, p. 141; and Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau*, pp. 79, 173, 178–179.

39. Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

40. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, pp. 199, 98.

cratic. Morgenthau's calls for a return to eighteenth-century diplomacy were not the lonely grouings of an embittered conservative: he was echoed by other realists, including historians such as Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert, who also lamented the disappearance of a diplomatic tradition eroded by democracy.<sup>41</sup> The call for a return to an idealized version of eighteenth-century diplomacy, and thus to a tradition connected to absolutism, was at the heart of classical realism.

There is no need to belabor the realist attack on liberalism. What is important here is to highlight that postwar realism was primarily a conservative effort to rehabilitate diplomacy with reference to preliberal traditions. Morgenthau's longing for traditional diplomacy is extremely significant and indicates classical realism's ideological contents. Politically, classical realism defined itself against the liberal reformism of the interwar period. Theoretically, it represented a reaction to legalistic and popular representations of international politics common in the United States. Against legalism and public opinion it emphasized willpower, determination, and decisionmakers unconstrained by legal or popular strictures though buttressed by knowledge, who were capable of tackling the contingency and fluidity of concrete historical situations.<sup>42</sup>

Classical realism's rejection of legalism and public opinion presented three problems for Americans who, like Waltz, embraced realism's tragic understanding of politics. First, classical realism developed on the basis of a historical experience alien to American traditions of the rule of law.<sup>43</sup> Classical realists saw the collapse of the Weimar Republic in Germany and the rise of fascism in the 1930s as resulting from the failure of liberal democrats to make timely decisions unconstrained by existing normative frameworks. For a number of émigrés, the central question of politics was "who decides?" Weimar had demonstrated what happened when the answer was "no one," and the 1930s revealed what happened when the answer was "someone who does not

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41. Craig and Gilbert wrote as "the age in which diplomats held the fate of nations in their hands" had passed, and looked wistfully at a practice that was spawned by the absolute state and perished "assailed from the democratic, as well as from the totalitarian side" during the interwar period. See Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The Diplomats, 1919–1939* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 3, 7.

42. See Nicolas Guilhot, "Cyborg Pantocrator: International Relations Theory from Decisionism to Rational Choice," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Social Sciences*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 279–301.

43. On these origins, see in particular Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Felix Rösch, ed., *Émigré Scholars and the Genesis of International Relations. A European Discipline in America?* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

know how to play the game of international politics”—the enemies of Western civilization triumph. In the postwar period, when Soviet communism appeared to represent an existential threat as dangerous as Nazism, this question remained pressing.<sup>44</sup> From this position, émigré classical realists asserted that decisionmakers must be unconstrained by useless laws or ignorant publics incapable of understanding international relations.

Second, and as a result of this antipathy to legalism and public opinion, classical realism's politics were at odds with liberal American political traditions.<sup>45</sup> The émigré realists saw American political culture as a liability, and they believed that their experiences confronting Nazism and their witnessing the failures of 1930s liberal diplomacy provided them with evidence of liberalism's deficiencies that no one could challenge. They considered the moralistic nature of American ideology and what they viewed, perhaps incorrectly, as Americans' strict adherence to the rule of law and popular governance as obstacles to effectively tackling the Cold War's challenges.<sup>46</sup> In essence, realists believed that liberalism was bad for U.S. foreign policy—just as it had been bad for the Weimar Republic and international relations throughout the 1930s. Foreign policy decisions, classical realists avowed, must be left to men of experience and wisdom—themselves influenced by classical realism—unaccountable to the public. Classical realism saw in preliberal diplomacy—with its secrecy, its decisiveness, and its autonomy vis-à-vis parliamentary deliberations—a key to developing sound foreign affairs. This opinion placed realists at a stark remove from American liberals.

Third, exiles' rehabilitation of diplomacy and rejection of legalistic and popular approaches to international relations reflected an orientation we term “decisionist.” Decisionism is a core, and ignored, feature of classical realism that prevented its wider diffusion in the United States while providing a stepping-stone toward neorealism. As a doctrine, decisionism is commonly associated with Carl Schmitt, the authoritarian jurist who provided the most articulate formulations of decisionism and who eventually became a legal apologist for the Third Reich. Despite this scholarly consensus, however, decisionism

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44. The debates on “militant democracy” show that the question was as important in foreign policy as it was in internal, constitutional matters. See Giovanni Capoccia, “Militant Democracy: The Institutional Bases of Democratic Self-Preservation,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, Vol. 9 (2013), pp. 207–226.

45. Notably, they confirmed conservative opinions about foreign-policy making evident in the writings of figures such as George F. Kennan. See especially Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

46. Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Reason of State: The Survival of the Constitutional Order* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1957).

was actually a diffuse attitude about politics that one finds among other Weimar political thinkers across the political spectrum, including the socialist Hermann Heller and the liberals Max Weber and Karl Mannheim.<sup>47</sup> Decisionism emphasized the concrete and contingent nature of decision-making and the impossibility of containing the imperative of political decisionmaking within rational rules specified *ex ante*. Against legalism, it lambasted norms and legal rules that sought to regulate decisions as impediments to effective action in critical times. Against a diffuse public opinion, it located the capacity to decide in a specific instance of sovereignty. Essentially, decisionists saw politics, particularly in crisis periods such as the Cold War, as matters of authoritative decisions rather than restrictive and democratic norms and rules.

Even for realists who, in an effort to assimilate U.S. culture, sought to adapt their teaching to American liberal values, the decisionist element remained central. Herz, for instance, coined the notion of “liberal realism” to argue that realism, although not itself liberal, was a necessary complement to the pursuit and safeguard of liberal values. Importantly, he later acknowledged that his conceptual oxymoron was an attempt to salvage what was important in the doctrine of Carl Schmitt.<sup>48</sup> Their experiences in Weimar led the exiles to worry that too much liberalism would result in democracy’s destruction. Liberal values could be protected only if they were (momentarily or partially) curtailed.<sup>49</sup> Realists saw themselves as the guardians of an important strand of political thought inherited from absolutism, which had to be kept alive for democracy to survive, even if that meant the suspension or limitation of democracy in security matters.

The result was a vision of political decisionmaking reminiscent of Schmitt’s, and in particular of his view that the decision was a force creating order.<sup>50</sup> For

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47. For the importance of the concept of decision in their works, see, for instance, Hermann Heller, *Staatslehre* (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), pp. 286–302; Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936), pp. 100–101; and Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber: Collected Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

48. John H. Herz, “Looking at Carl Schmitt from the Vantage Point of the 1990s,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 307–314.

49. See Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*.

50. Writing about the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Schmitt contended that “the sovereign decision springs from the normative nothing and a concrete disorder” to generate order, peace and security. But while the decision is at the origin of civil order and then becomes invisible under conditions of legalized normality, in the sphere of international relations, no such society comes into being and the decision remains the alpha and the omega of politics. See Carl Schmitt, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, trans. Joseph W. Bendersky (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), in particular pp. 61–62.

classical realists, decisions had to be taken by seasoned statesmen informed by realist wisdom, sensitive to the *kairos* of political time, and capable of resolute action in the face of absolute uncertainty.<sup>51</sup> Morgenthau's discussions of statesmanship, for instance, were often replete with echoes of the Schmittian mystique of the decision: "The decision of the statesman has three distinctive qualities. It is a commitment to action. It is a commitment to a particular action that precludes all other courses of action. It is a decision taken in the face of the unknown and the unknowable. . . . The statesman . . . must be capable of staking the fate of the nation upon a hunch. He must face the impenetrable darkness of the future and still not flinch from walking into it, drawing the nation behind him. . . . He is the leading part in a tragedy, and he must act his part."<sup>52</sup>

The classical realist program, though, had several inherent problems. The longing for a return to diplomacy ran the risk of making classical realism politically irrelevant. Indeed, the defense of traditional diplomacy turned out to be pure nostalgia in an era of massive expansion of governmental bureaucracies and interstitial foreign policy research organizations such as the RAND Corporation, for which émigrés worked or consulted.<sup>53</sup> The realist program also suffered from a lack of specificity. Although classical realists called for a diplomatic corps composed of wise men aware of the tragic contingency of politics, they never described who these men were supposed to be. For all his lyricism, Morgenthau could not identify his idealized statesmen in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. He could only lament the complexity of anonymous political bureaucracies that undermined the capacity to decide, advocate a simplification of the processes of the executive branch, and chastise all U.S. presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to John Kennedy for what he regarded as their irresoluteness.<sup>54</sup> Classical realism was, in many ways, a reactive ideology, focused on the ills it identified and rejected. Nevertheless, and despite its problems, classical realism proved profoundly influential, and it was in dialogue with classical realism's political assumptions and prescriptions that Waltz developed his own neorealism.

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51. For how émigrés used this notion to develop pedagogies of simulation, see Daniel Bessner, "Weimar Social Science in Cold War America: The Case of the Political-Military Game," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Vol. 54, *Bulletin Supplement* 10 (2014), pp. 91–109.

52. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, pp. 102–103.

53. See Greenberg, *The Weimar Century*; and Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*.

54. See, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 1: *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 380–389; and Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, pp. 300–307.

### Waltz and Classical Realism

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Morgenthau's classical realism swept through the emergent discipline of international relations. One of the major scholars to respond to Morgenthau was Kenneth Waltz, a professor at Swarthmore College, who received a Ph.D. in political theory from Columbia University in 1954. Waltz was a student of William T.R. Fox and Franz Neumann—the latter, like Morgenthau, a German exile. Waltz also had a direct intellectual connection to Morgenthau. Kenneth Thompson, a student of Morgenthau's who carried out critical research for *Politics among Nations*, read *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz's dissertation *cum* first book, and provided Waltz with comments. Waltz was also the rapporteur and youngest member of the working group that, under the leadership of Fox, developed the first formulations of a realist "theory" of international relations at Columbia in 1956–57.<sup>55</sup> Unsurprisingly, classical realism influenced Waltz's first book.

In *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz famously identified three "images" of war's causes discussed by political philosophers: the first explained war with reference to human nature and behavior; the second did so through domestic political regimes of states; and the third referred to the international system, and specifically international anarchy, to understand war's occurrence.

Similar to Morgenthau, Waltz expressed pessimism about public opinion in *Man, the State, and War*. In its fourth chapter, he rejected the liberal assumption that the "control of policy by the people would mean peace."<sup>56</sup> Waltz declared that liberals insisted that, with public opinion as a guide, international "disputes [would be] settled rationally, peacefully, without political manipulation."<sup>57</sup> Despite such claims, Waltz averred in no uncertain terms that "faith in public opinion or, more generally, faith in the uniformly peaceful proclivities of democracies has proved utopian."<sup>58</sup> "Man's passion and irrationality," though not the sole causes of war, were for Waltz, as for Morgenthau, important sources of conflict that democratic procedures could not eliminate.<sup>59</sup> Waltz implied that the public was, as Morgenthau described it, irrational and imper-

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55. See Nicolas Guilhot, ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

56. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) p. 101.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 36.



fect. The “high order of excellence” of either “men or states” on which the liberal vision of the world rested would, in Waltz’s opinion, never be reached.<sup>60</sup>

Waltz also accepted Morgenthau’s critique that international law could not serve as an effective restraint on war or foreign policy. Just as Morgenthau insisted that “legal relations hide relations of power,” Waltz averred that “disputes between individuals are settled not because an elaborate court system has been established but because people can, when necessary, be forced to use it.”<sup>61</sup> International anarchy thus prevented international law from functioning: “How many times would the adverse decisions of courts be ignored if it rested upon the defendants to carry them out voluntarily, to march themselves to jail and place their heads meekly in the noose, or to pay voluntarily the very damages they had gone to court in order to avoid? An international court, without an organized force to back its decisions, is a radically different institution from the courts that exist within every country. The liberals want the benefits of an effective system of law; they are often unwilling to pay the price for it.”<sup>62</sup> Waltz, like Morgenthau, rejected legalism as a chimera. For Waltz, first-image analysts such as Morgenthau, as well as Saint Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Baruch Spinoza, had been “useful in descrying the limits of possible political accomplishment” that liberalism, with its faith in public opinion and law, refused to accept.<sup>63</sup>

*Man, the State, and War* reflected classical realism’s influence in other ways. First, Waltz criticized liberal policymakers for historically failing to understand international relations. As Morgenthau did, he fulminated against that bogeyman of liberal foreign policy, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, for his faulty belief that he could appease Adolf Hitler.<sup>64</sup> Second, Waltz’s most famous innovation in *Man, the State, and War*—his stress on the third image of the international system—emerged from classical realism. Indeed, Waltz praised Morgenthau because the latter “analyzed skillfully the implications of international anarchy and distinguished action possible internally from action possible externally.”<sup>65</sup> Besides Morgenthau, other classical realists, notably Herbert Butterfield, the head of the British Committee on International

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60. Ibid., p. 119.

61. Ibid., p. 117.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., p. 31.

64. Ibid., pp. 220–221. For Morgenthau’s critique of Chamberlain as representing “the decadence which corroded political thinking on international affairs” in the twentieth century, see Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 106, 115.

65. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, pp. 38–39. For Morgenthau on international anarchy, see Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 273–278.



Relations, and Herz, had emphasized the centrality of “structural” or “situational” explanations of war over human nature.<sup>66</sup> The idea that war and conflict could result from the nature of the international system therefore already had currency in classical realism by the time *Man, the State, and War* appeared in 1959.<sup>67</sup> Third, several additional elements of *Man, the State, and War* emerged from the classical realist genre, including Waltz’s critiques of international socialism, theories of imperialism, liberal internationalism, and world public opinion. Finally, the decisionmaker remained important throughout *Man, the State, and War*. In fact, the final section of Waltz’s seventh chapter, which explored the third image’s implications, offered “lessons” for international politics that echoed Morgenthau’s.<sup>68</sup> Teaching decisionmakers about the realities of international politics was the often overlooked upshot of *Man, the State, and War*, a fact that places it squarely within the classical realist tradition.

At the same time, however, Waltz’s relative lack of discussion of decisionmakers and decisionmaking when compared with such discussions by other classical realists indicated that, even at this early stage in his career, Waltz had problems with some of classical realism’s prescriptions. For instance, he did not discuss the public’s role in policymaking per se, only indicating that public opinion was imperfectible and would not fulfill liberals’ expectations. Moreover, Waltz’s discussion of decisionmakers in *Man, the State, and War* was more subdued and shorter than those of other classical realists. The American Waltz also never indulged in the nostalgic recipes so common to the European Morgenthau. Waltz was clearly reticent about framing his theory as being primarily for, or about, policy elites. This reticence was indicative of a problem that became central in later years and defined the ideological thrust of neo-realism: Waltz’s unwillingness to adopt classical realism’s elitist prescriptions for policymaking, in particular its vision of high politics as a sphere of activity

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66. Herbert Butterfield spoke of “an intractability that can exist in the human situation itself.” See Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 20. Furthermore, Herz had anticipated the notion of “security” as an alternative to “power” decades before Waltz, despite the latter’s claim that this was a distinctive feature of neorealism: “Whether man is ‘by nature’ peaceful and co-operative, or aggressive and domineering, is not the question. The condition that concerns us here is not an anthropological or biological, but a social one. . . . [Man’s] ‘security dilemma’ leads directly to social competition for the means of security.” See John H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 3–4.

67. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory,” in Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 67–82. A version of the security dilemma argument can be found as early as 1916 in Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, *The European Anarchy* (New York: Macmillan, 1917). For a discussion, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

68. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, p. 223.

necessarily insulated from the democratic process, despite his acceptance of classical realism's illiberal arguments. This, in turn, dictated the epistemological foundations on which Waltz erected his theory of international politics, specifically the adoption of cybernetics and system theory.

Waltz did not solve this problem by altering fundamentally neorealism's continuity with classical realism; instead, he changed its focus in one crucial respect: he removed the foreign-policy maker from consideration.<sup>69</sup>

### *Waltz's Problem: Liberalism and Realism*

Waltz's 1979 *Theory of International Politics* remains the foundational text for neorealism. The consensus view on neorealism's relationship to classical realism is that the former upgraded the latter to the level of "theory." To use Waltz's own terms, there was neorealist "theory" but only classical realist "thought."<sup>70</sup> This perspective conceals the central ideological difference between neorealism and classical realism. With neorealism, Waltz sought to reconcile classical realism with liberalism.<sup>71</sup> It was this desire to rescue liberalism, which revolved around questions of decision in foreign policy, that distinguished neorealism from classical realism. In short, neorealism represented the Americanization of classical realism.

Waltz was socialized into classical realism's intellectual framework, yet classical realism was fundamentally at odds with his own normative liberal commitments. These commitments were never stated explicitly by Waltz, who remained essentially a theorist. But as we show, they were at the center of his least-noticed book, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*.<sup>72</sup>

It is a common misconception that because he "blackboxes" states in *Theory*

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69. Waltz, of course, critiqued Morgenthau and other first-image analysts. Most pointedly, he asserted that their emphasis on human nature as a cause of war was theoretically unsatisfactory, because such a claim explained not only war, but "Sunday schools and brothers, philanthropic organizations and criminal gangs. Since everything is related to human nature, to explain anything one must consider more than human nature." Yet, no matter what Waltz's qualms were, they were not formulated as a repudiation of the pessimistic philosophical anthropology and critique of public opinion and legalism present in classical realism. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, p. 80.

70. Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory."

71. A somewhat parallel argument about realism has been proposed by Deborah Boucoyannis, "The International Wanderings of a Liberal Idea, or Why Liberals Can Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Balance of Power," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 703–727. Our argument is, however, quite different, and applies exclusively to neorealism, not to realism in general.

72. Moreover, throughout Waltz's extensive publishing record, there is no nostalgic call for traditional diplomacy and even less for unaccountability in foreign policy decisions, two declarations common in classical realism.

of *International Politics*, Waltz was uninterested in the nature of regimes, never looked into the process of foreign-policy making, and had no strong normative preferences.<sup>73</sup> Yet, there is strong evidence for Waltz's liberal views, beginning with his 1967 publication of *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, a comparative case study of foreign policy performance in the United Kingdom and the United States entirely dedicated to the relationship between democracy and foreign policy. The book is a comparison of the foreign policy performance of two democratic governments, based on a painstaking analysis of their internal structures. But despite the profusion of historical and institutional detail, which sometimes loses the reader, the purpose of the book remains clear: assessing the capacity of functional democracies to develop and implement a sound foreign policy without losing their democratic character in the process. Ultimately, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* argues that democracies are capable of making as effective foreign policies as totalitarian regimes.<sup>74</sup> In essence, Waltz rejected the notion of democratic weakness and totalitarian advantage present in classical realist thought from the interwar period onward.<sup>75</sup>

It is important to take notice of the dissonant note that *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* struck in the realist literature. The assumption that "the kind of foreign policy a nation pursues is determined by the kind of domestic institutions it possesses" was ridiculed by classical realism, and Morgenthau associated it with the rejection of diplomacy as a separate and independent sphere of action.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the notion that foreign policy performance could be determined by domestic institutions seems to contradict Waltz's later writings. Yet, in the short preface to *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, Waltz took a normative position that was antithetical to the realists' pronouncements regarding democracy's weakness: "I believed then [when he started writing the book], and still do, that the foreign-policy capabilities of democratic states are unduly disparaged."<sup>77</sup> Why would Waltz engage in an exercise that flew in the face of the realist tradition to which he belonged?

As Michael Williams suggests, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* makes

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73. Virtually any article on or introduction to Waltz points out that regimes hardly matter in a systemic approach that places the emphasis on the distribution of power within the international system. For one example, see Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 185–205.

74. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

75. Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*.

76. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, p. 199.

77. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. v.

sense only when one realizes that it is a sustained defense of liberal democratic values and liberal policymaking.<sup>78</sup> Williams convincingly demonstrates that neorealism sought to address domestic issues and emerged from decades-old discussions about the relationship between democracy and security. More specifically, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* is a proximate and explicit response to the anti-democratic arguments offered by Walter Lippmann in his 1955 *The Public Philosophy*, which themselves emerged from Lippmann's earlier works from the 1920s, *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*. Although Waltz's opening salvo was a critique of Lippmann's views that bipolarity was about to disappear, his more sustained arguments were an attack on Lippmann's "aristocratic distrust of mass electorates," a distrust that classical realists shared and, for those who came to the United States in the 1930s, developed in dialogue with Lippmann's earlier books.<sup>79</sup> From the 1920s onward, Lippmann questioned the ability of public opinion to guide decisionmakers; and in the 1950s, he asserted that uninformed public opinion was directly responsible for the poor governance of liberal democracies. In democratic regimes, Lippmann declared, the masses had acquired a "power which they are incapable of exercising," while governments had lost the power they needed, resulting in "an enfeeblement, verging on paralysis, of the capacity to govern."<sup>80</sup> Lippmann's critique of liberalism as the main cause behind the loss of the state's authority and capacity to act in a timely and effective way extended the prewar critiques of parliamentarianism and party politics that were characteristic of anti-liberal, conservative thought. The "devitalization of the governing power" was for Lippmann a direct consequence of the rise of party politics and interest groups.<sup>81</sup>

*The Public Philosophy* also shared and reinforced a number of classical realist concerns. Both anti-public ideologues such as Lippmann and classical realists such as Morgenthau lambasted the illusions of nineteenth-century liberalism, the deleterious consequences of democratization on governmental authority, the blinding effects of universalistic ideologies, the debilitating role of public opinion, and the irrationality of the public. Morgenthau, unsurprisingly, had only praise for Lippmann's book.<sup>82</sup> Lippmann was himself con-

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78. See, for example, Michael C. Williams, "Waltz, Realism, and Democracy," *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 328–340. This article owes a lot to Williams's original insight, and we are very much indebted to him.

79. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, pp. 5–6, 13; and Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*, chap. 3.

80. Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), pp. 14–15.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

82. "Representative government," he wrote in his review of *The Public Philosophy*, "tends to become paralyzed government." See Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, p. 64.

nected to the realist movement and participated in the first meeting convened to discuss the development of a realist theory of international relations.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, his primary references in *The Public Philosophy* concerned foreign policy.<sup>84</sup> In Waltz's *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, Lippmann served as an intellectual proxy for classical realism's political implications.<sup>85</sup> It is in dialogue with Lippmann that Waltz's discomfort with classical realism clearly emerges and, along with it, neorealism.

Yet, if *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* was a direct response to Lippmann's argument that the dire condition of his time was "connected with grave errors in war and peace that have been committed by democratic governments,"<sup>86</sup> it was also a circumstantial and provisional answer. Waltz limited himself to two case studies, and he was unable to articulate a vision of international relations that complemented his focus on the policymaking process. The next step consisted of developing a theoretical response of general value: this was the task of *Theory of International Politics*, which must be placed in the context of Waltz's prior dialogue with classical realism and its conservative implications.

It would be mistaken, however, to consider that Waltz simply rejected the anti-liberal critique of democratic publics. Waltz's move did not merely consist of restating democratic principles or offering a defense of public rationality, and indeed one would look in vain for a principled defense of democracy in the book. On the contrary, Waltz had no issues with the classical realist critique of democratic publics' irrationality. What he was unwilling to accept, however, were the anti-liberal, anti-democratic implications of this critique.<sup>87</sup> Waltz was therefore confronted with a profound dilemma: How was he to reconcile the classical realist worldview with his liberal principles? To do so, he needed to find a non-ideological version of decisionism, one that did not limit democracy

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83. Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory*. Lippmann's diagnosis of the incapacity of the democratic public to make foreign policy decisions made him an obvious ally of the early proponents of a realist theory of international relations: "Strategic and diplomatic decisions call for a kind of knowledge—not to speak of an experience and a seasoned judgment—which cannot be had by glancing at newspapers, listening to snatches of radio comment, watching politicians perform on television, hearing occasional lectures, and reading a few books." See Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, pp. 24–25.

84. Paul Roazen, introduction to Walter Lippmann, ed., *The Public Philosophy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1989), p. xvii.

85. Morgenthau, too, thought that though the formulation might be exaggerated, there was some truth to the statement that "a democratically conducted foreign policy is of necessity bad foreign policy." See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 326.

86. Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, pp. 12–13.

87. "Democratic governments of the Western type," Waltz concluded, "are well able to compete with authoritarian states." See Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 308.

by insulating the process of foreign-policy making from the public. The solution Waltz arrived at consisted of circumventing entirely the problem of decisionmaking by developing a theory that treated the aggregate outcome of decisions—that is, international politics as a whole—as a self-contained system whose logic of operation could be described without postulating any decision and without relying on a notion of rationality still tethered to decision theory. With *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz developed a model that, for the first time, was entirely detached from foreign policy (i.e., from the problem of decisionmaking and the identification of the authorized decisionmaker). With this ideological framework in mind, one can see why cybernetics and system theory provided a readily available and obvious foundation for neorealism.

### *Neorealism: A Cybernetic Theory of Decisionmaking*

To understand the ways in which neorealism directly responded to the problem of decisionmaking in classical realism, it is important to emphasize the extent to which decisionism was a core focus of international relations theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the subsequent evolution of international relations has completely obfuscated the connection between realism and decisionism, this connection was obvious at the time. In 1964 the political theorist Judith Shklar—herself a European exile—identified a direct relationship between decisionism and systemic theories of international politics. Shklar was a student of Frederick Watkins and Carl Friedrich, both of whom helped introduce the German discussion of prerogative powers to U.S. scholars. Writing about the main intellectual trends of the mid-1960s, she observed that “the most prevalent form of decisionism is . . . centered on the all-important realm of foreign policy,” with postwar realism as its primary vehicle.<sup>88</sup> But what makes Shklar’s essay illuminating is that she postulates a direct, if conflicted, lineage extending from the decisionist orientation of classical realism to the systemic approach that came to define Waltz’s neorealism. Shklar suggested that it was the diplomatic nostalgia of realism, the “decisionist” imaginary of a few actors holding the balance in their hands and choosing between distinct

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88. Judith N. Shklar, “Decisionism,” in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Nomos VII: Rational Decision* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1964), p. 11. In another essay published the same year, Shklar had pointed to the connection between the realists’ concept of power and Schmitt’s theorization of politics. See Judith N. Shklar, *Legalism: Law, Morals, and Political Trials* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 124–125. In many ways, the Waltzian shift from “power” to “security” as the defining concept of international relations theory was another attempt at ridding the discipline of some burdensome ideological ballast.



alternatives, that appealed to system theorists because it reduced the decision-making process to a few actors insulated from wider politics. The small-*n* scale inherent to classical realism's nostalgia for diplomacy actually paved the way for the modelization of policymakers' interactions using formal methods: "A theory of statesmen pursuing something as vague as the national interest has not proven acceptable to theorists of a more systematic turn of mind. Decisionism, however, has a vast appeal, precisely because the vision of a limited number of political actors engaged in making calculated choices among clearly conceived alternatives is an essential basis for any theory that wishes to reduce international complexities to systematic, diagrammatic form."<sup>89</sup> Shklar thus outlined a paradox: the systemic approach to international relations was not only reacting against, but was also premised on, the decisionist basis of classical realism. Although Shklar had in mind works such as Richard Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin's *Foreign Policy Decision Making* and other systemic treatments of international relations, we suggest that her insight applies equally well to Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>90</sup>

The relationship between neorealism and the question of decisionism becomes even more obvious when one looks at the methodological choices that distinguished *Theory of International Politics*. Scholars commonly assume that Waltz modeled neorealism after microeconomics.<sup>91</sup> He had majored in economics at Oberlin College before turning to political theory, and he often used economic analogies to explain his theory. Yet the emphasis on economics provides little guidance in understanding the epistemological foundations of neorealism. Waltz may well have looked occasionally to economics to establish a theory of politics, but, whether he knew so or not, he was observing a discipline whose epistemic status had been transformed by cybernetic approaches.<sup>92</sup> All his considerations about the nature and functions of a theory, about its relation to reality, and about its uses, point in another direction: toward the field of cybernetics and general system theory.<sup>93</sup>

89. Shklar, "Decisionism," p. 13.

90. Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

91. See, for instance, Boucoyannis, "The International Wanderings of a Liberal Idea," p. 711.

92. On this episode, see Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

93. Although it is not possible to give an overview of cybernetics within the scope of this article, for the sake of the discussion a cybernetic approach can be defined as one that rejects any intentionality, favors the vicarious selection of outcomes, relies on mechanistic processes to model purposive behavior, and ignores the boundary between the natural and the artificial. The reader can consult with benefit Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010); as well as Mathieu Triclot, *Le moment cybernétique. La consti-*



The intellectual sources of neorealism appear both in *Theory of International Politics* and in its embryonic version published in the 1975 *Handbook of Political Science*.<sup>94</sup> The major sources include Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General System Theory* (1968), Ross Ashby's *Design for a Brain* (1952) and his *Introduction to Cybernetics* (1956), Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* (1948), and David Easton's systemic functionalism in political science, each of which was foundational to the development of cybernetics and system theory in general.<sup>95</sup>

Situating *Theory of International Politics* in the context of the cybernetic movement enables one to understand Waltz's work in relation to both rationalist theories of decisionmaking and to the decisionist undertones of classical realism. It suggests that *Theory of International Politics* belonged to a growing body of political science scholarship that applied cybernetic insights (when not simply cybernetic terminology) to political problems. Earlier examples in the field of international relations include Morton Kaplan's *System and Process in International Relations* (1957), Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971), and John Steinbruner's *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (1974).<sup>96</sup> *Theory of International Politics* was in fact a late addition to this broader intellectual movement.

These works sought to make international relations more scientific while addressing immediate political issues, particularly policy formulation and decisionmaking. In the 1960s and 1970s, cybernetics and system theory appealed to political scientists because they offered an alternative to rationalistic theories of decisionmaking and seemed better adapted to the unprecedented growth of governmental bureaucracies and to the challenge organizational complexity presented for policy research. The most important problem international relations theorists confronted was that, in the new institutional era, political decisions were largely impersonal outcomes of exceedingly complex procedures that traditional models of decisionmaking, which implied a centralized decisionmaker, a set of transitive preferences, and a linear decision process, were unable to explain.

Perhaps the most appealing characteristic of cybernetics and system theory

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tution de la notion d'information [The cybernetic moment: The birth of the notion of information] (Seyssel, France: Champ Vallon, 2008). See also Hunter Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

94. Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory of International Relations," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 8: *International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 1–86.

95. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 40, n.

96. Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1957); Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); and John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974).

for Waltz was that they moved away from notions of decision and choice. Indeed, they were explicitly conceived as an alternative to “rational choice” models and operated from “a theoretical base fundamentally different from rational theory.”<sup>97</sup> They rejected formal decision theories, and game theory in particular, as better suited to an ideal world where alternatives were known and the capacity to compute them (i.e., rationality) widely available. In the real world, system theorists claimed, choices were made in a murkier fashion, and the number of actual possibilities was vastly superior to the limited computing capacities of human actors, who were obviously not rational. Organizational and bureaucratic processes were also part of the decisional machinery.<sup>98</sup> In their own way, system theorists echoed the critique of rational choice theories made by classical realists from the late 1940s onward, but in a new, formal, and non-ideological language.<sup>99</sup>

System theory, for its part, made it possible to explain the outcome of thoughtful, strategic decisions without assuming any underlying deliberative thought process, rationality, or intention. As Steinbruner declared, “Much of the work [in cybernetics] . . . has been directed precisely at the problem of explaining highly successful behavior (usually called adaptive) without assuming elaborate decision-making mechanisms.”<sup>100</sup> To do so, system theory and cybernetics shifted the emphasis from teleological, outcome-driven models to models that emphasized process and recipe-following, while being deprived of any form of entelechy. Servomechanics, feedback loops, and other physical analogies were deployed to explain efficient adaptive behavior without ascribing any rationality to political actors or, indeed, taking much account of actors.<sup>101</sup> Before the rise of system theory, to quote one of Waltz’s sources,

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97. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, p. 13. This is also very clear in Allison’s book, in which the second and third models for analyzing decisionmaking were conceived as fundamentally differing from rational choice theory. See Allison, *Essence of Decision*. For an analysis of *Essence of Decision*, see Nicolas Guilhot, “The Kuhnian of Reason: Realism, Rationalism, and Political Decision in IR Theory after Thomas Kuhn,” *Review of International Studies*, early access online edition (2015), DOI: 10.1017/S0260210515000054. That system theory was explicitly recognized as an alternative to rational choice is yet another reason why it is a misconception to think that Waltz subscribed or needed to subscribe to a “rationality assumption.”

98. Herbert A. Simon, “Political Research: The Decision-Making Framework,” in David Easton, ed., *Varieties of Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp. 15–24. See also Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1976).

99. See Daniel Bessner, “Organizing Complexity: The Hopeful Dreams and Harsh Realities of Interdisciplinary Cooperation at the RAND Corporation in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 2015), pp. 31–53.

100. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, p. 48.

101. Cybernetics focuses on “recipes” or “performances” rather than “ontologies”: it produces an outcome through a sequential process, but without a model of the world or of the environment. It is adaptive. The outcome is not conceptualized in advance—only produced through a series of op-

"notions of teleology and directiveness appeared to be outside the scope of science and to be the playground of mysterious, supernatural or anthropomorphic agencies."<sup>102</sup> Cybernetics made it possible to replace decisions with mechanistic processes. Goal-seeking behavior, as Ross Ashby had explained, was now understood on the basis of organizational patterns totally deprived of willful purpose or self-determination.<sup>103</sup> Self-steering could be represented as a process devoid of teleology and will. To put it differently, one could replicate, modelize, or simulate decisional processes without assuming the existence of a central and omnipotent decisionmaker.

The removal of the decisionmaker was a crucial aspect of *Theory of International Politics*. System theory enabled Waltz to describe international politics without recourse to a concept of decision. How decisions were made no longer mattered, because cybernetic models made it possible to describe their outcomes without implying purpose, intention, or rationality. As Shklar clearly saw, "system" and "decision" were mutually exclusive ways of talking about the same thing. In the system approach, whether the concept of decision was considered an old anthropomorphic notion tied to obscure forces, or an unrealistic assumption of rationality, it could be jettisoned in favor of anonymous adaptive processes. The new approach to international politics associated today with neorealism was, in fact, already present in a number of cybernetic works.<sup>104</sup>

*Theory of International Politics* thus rested on methodological choices that excluded any "rationality assumption" (i.e., the idea that humans were rational actors). Neorealist theory, Waltz wrote in the book, "requires no assumption of rationality or of constancy of will on the part of all the actors."<sup>105</sup> Foreign-

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erations, and only these operations are specified ex ante. We can only briefly allude to the features of system theory within the confines of this article, but for a solid analysis, see in particular Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*.

102. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 45.

103. W. Ross Ashby, *Design for a Brain*, 2nd (rev.) ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), p. 55.

104. The idea that second-image theories of politics had become obsolete was already present in von Bertalanffy: "Earlier periods of history may have consoled themselves by blaming atrocities and stupidities on bad kings, wicked dictators, ignorance, superstition, material want and related factors. Consequently, history was of the 'who-did-what' kind—'idiographic,' as it is technically known. Thus, the Thirty-Years War was a consequence of religious superstition and the rivalries of German princes; Napoleon overturned Europe because of his unbridled ambition; the Second World War could be blamed on the wickedness of Hitler and the warlike proclivity of the Germans." See von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, p. 8. The book was among those Waltz cited as inspirations for the approach that defined *Theory of International Politics*.

105. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118. There is obviously a huge discussion within international relations scholarship about the rationality assumption. For an overview of the discussion, see Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism, and Constructivism* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2013), p. 112; Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising*

policy making is “such a complicated business,” he later asserted, that “one cannot expect of political leaders the nicely calculated decisions that the word ‘rationality’ suggests.”<sup>106</sup> And in one of his last interviews, Waltz confessed that he had no idea what the expression “rational actor” meant.<sup>107</sup> Mearsheimer is therefore correct to suggest that Waltz’s putative rationality assumption is a perplexing case of collective self-delusion among international relations theorists, who have usually overlooked both the context in which Waltz was writing and the intellectual sources that informed *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>108</sup>

One reason for the persistence of this disciplinary canard is that international relations scholars have tended to assume that Waltz adopted classical microeconomic foundations for his theory, and in particular the notion of a rational actor. Not quite: Waltz made it clear that his theory of international politics was not modeled after the neoclassical economic model assuming rational actors acting in perfectly competitive markets (given that such a model would end up with harmonious equilibria requiring no policing, as some critics have noticed).<sup>109</sup> To the extent that he drew inspiration from economic theories, his reference was the theory of oligopolistic markets.<sup>110</sup>

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*the Field* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Randall L. Schweller, “New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz’s Balancing Proposition,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 927–930; and Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” in Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989), pp. 35–73.

106. Waltz, “Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Response to My Critics,” in Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 43.

107. It is worth quoting the passage at length, because it suggests the abyss that distinguishes a system approach from rational choice theory: “I do not even know what ‘rational actor’ means empirically. A rational actor assumption may enter into a theory but has no direct, empirical representation. One can define rationality only within narrow settings, as for example in game theory, where one can define what a rational actor is and work out some outcomes under assumed conditions. Of course economists presuppose that economic actors are rational. People of course in a very loose sense prefer to do less work and get higher rewards. That is a good way of putting it now, but there is no reason in economics to think that a bunch of actors are going to be rational. Some of them are going to do better than others; some are going to be a lot smarter; some are going to be a little bit luckier than others; some are going to be better at cheating than others. All those things affect outcomes, but rationality—in its empirical form—has really little to do with it. The notion of rationality is a big help in constructing a theory, but one has to go back and forth between the theory and what goes out in the real world. But in the real world, does anybody think ‘I’m rational, or you’re rational’? Let alone, that *states* could be rational? It has no empirical meaning.” See Kenneth N. Waltz, “Theory Talk #40—Kenneth Waltz,” *Theory Talks*, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2011/06/theory-talk-40.html> (emphasis in the original).

108. Mearsheimer provides a thorough reading of both Waltz and the literature on Waltz and rightly concludes that “a number of scholars . . . insist that Waltz employs a rational actor assumption. But these claims are not true.” See John J. Mearsheimer, “Reckless States and Realism,” *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June 2009), pp. 241–256, at p. 241.

109. Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 90–121.

110. Kenneth N. Waltz, “International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1

There was, however, a much more formidable obstacle that prevented Waltz from adopting the rational actor assumption, which did in fact come straight from microeconomics: Kenneth Arrow's impossibility theorem. As a trained economist, Waltz could not ignore that the rational actor assumption led to the impossibility of rational collective choice—unless that choice was undemocratic and coercive, as Arrow had shown.<sup>111</sup> Even for the new economists of rational choice, the fact that a decision was political made it *de facto* either irrational or authoritarian.<sup>112</sup> As collectives, states were either irresolute or irrational if they were democracies, or their foreign policy decisions had to be insulated from the democratic process in order to attain rationality. In other words, the rationality assumption would have brought Waltz back to where he did not want to be—namely, in the chorus of classical realists calling for the reinstatement of preliberal, pre-democratic foreign policy practices. His explicit reluctance to accept the notion that states could be rational points directly to the state of the discussion of rationality after Arrow and to the ideological implications of the rationality assumption.<sup>113</sup>

Therefore, the move away from rational choice and toward systems had deeper motivations than a mere desire to reduce politics to something akin to a natural phenomenon and international relations to a natural science. The adoption of system approaches by international relations theorists was directly tied to their ideological discomfort with classical realism. Similar to Waltz, system theorists retained a deep anxiety about the nature of decisionmaking in democracies. Steinbruner captured these fears when he wrote that “a society traditionally concerned with constraining government in the interests of avoiding tyranny must now concern itself with effectiveness. Even if it could be fully accomplished, it would no longer be acceptable merely to follow the established principles of democracy to trust that the outcomes of such a process will be the best attainable, or even acceptable. . . . Achieving effective performance without stumbling into some new form of tyranny is a major issue of coming decades.”<sup>114</sup>

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(Autumn 1996), pp. 54–57. See also Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 71–77. For a discussion of Waltz's oligopolistic model of politics, see, for instance, Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *The Republican Legacy in International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially p. 225; Andrew P. Dunne, *International Theory: To the Brink and Beyond* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996), p. 69; and Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 58.

111. Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951).

112. Bruno Leoni, “The Meaning of ‘Political’ in Political Decisions,” *Political Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 1957), pp. 225–239.

113. See the quotation in footnote 107.

114. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, pp. 6–7. The same concerns were popularized



In the political context of the mid-1970s, in which long-standing anxieties regarding democratic performance were reinforced by emerging doubts about the governance of complex societies, system theory and cybernetics promised policy efficiency without authoritarianism. Systemic theories of politics directly, if implicitly, built on the conservative critiques of democracy formulated by Morgenthau and Lippmann while avoiding classical realism's anti-democratic implications.<sup>115</sup> Cybernetics was a theory of decisionmaking adapted to complex societies for which the traditional mechanisms of liberal democracy were deemed obsolete and inefficient. Yet it also offered a reassuring prospect to U.S. liberals: there may have been no way for a rational public to generate good decisions, but neither was there a need for an authoritarian decisionmaker who approximated the prescriptions of rational choice. Both were chimeras. Political pluralism and social complexity could be maintained; executive power could be decentralized; and the calls for dictatorial crisis-management that had grown louder among political theorists since the end of World War II could be ignored.<sup>116</sup> System theory replaced anthropocentric decisionmaking with abstract, large-scale organizational processes that did not rely on individual capacities or rationality. The benchmark of rationality, to the extent that this notion retained any importance, was no longer a subjective attribute of the individual decisionmaker, but a property of the system denoting its capacity for adaptation and survival. For these reasons, system theorists could accept the classical realist position on public opinion while maintaining their commitment to liberal democratic norms.

System theory provided Waltz with an obvious solution to the political dilemma he had inherited from classical realism. On the one hand, it took for granted the inadequacy of traditional notions of liberal-democratic decision-making for the governance of complex societies. But, on the other hand, instead of calling for an authoritative decisionmaker, it equated policy effectiveness with systemic adaptive properties. The nature of the decisionmaking process no longer mattered. This provided Waltz with theoretical vindication, as it supported his claim in *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* that democra-

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the following year by the report of the Trilateral Commission on the governability of democracies. See Michel J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

115. Easton, for instance, introduced his notion of "system" against what he saw as a movement back to traditionalism in politics—a movement whose primary exponent he considered to be Michael Oakeshott. See David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953).

116. For an example of such a call, see Clinton L. Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in the Modern Democracies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1948). See also Friedrich, *Constitutional Reason of State*.

cies were just as capable of effective foreign policy decisionmaking as authoritarian regimes. As units of the same system, these two regime types were caught in an adaptive process of learning and deviation correction. Discrete decisions, per se, mattered little in a structure where the system itself was the ultimate shape of reality.<sup>117</sup>

In sum, system theory and cybernetics made it possible to leave behind the focus on sovereign decisionmaking evident in Morgenthau's and other classical realists' works. They presented Waltz with several advantages. First, they elided the thorny question of political personnel (i.e., Who made decisions?). Second, unlike rational choice models, system theory and cybernetics could deal with what Steinbruner called "structural uncertainties," the very uncertainties about the rules of the game that Morgenthau desired to teach decisionmakers. Third, system theory abandoned the need for rationality, whether that of a rational public or of a rational decisionmaker, and thus remained in line with realism's basic assumptions. Finally, system theory placed a premium on state conservation and stability in general. As such, it was also very much in fashion as an ideology of bipolar stability that helped explain the rise of détente.

### *Bipolarity and Democratic Balancing*

Waltz's views about bipolarity expressed in *Theory of International Politics* relate directly to the broader discussion about the capacity of democracies to carry out an effective foreign policy. They also represent another major difference between neorealism and classical realism. Morgenthau saw bipolarity as a source of instability in the postwar international system: "[The] two blocs face each other like two fighters in a short and narrow lane. They can advance and meet in what is likely to be combat, or they can retreat and allow the other side to advance in to what to them is precious ground. Those manifold and variegated maneuvers through which the masters of the balance of power tried either to stave off armed conflicts altogether or at least to make them brief and decisive yet limited in scope . . . the shiftings of alliances . . . the sidestep-

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117. Significantly, Waltz ultimately developed a quasi-cybernetic view of the internal workings of both democratic and authoritarian states, which according to him were confronted by the same challenges in terms of gaining and securing power, persuading or manipulating stakeholders and constituencies, and executing decisions. In the end, it was not just the international system but the political system itself that blurred strong distinctions between democracy and authoritarianism when it came to foreign policy performance: "The characteristics which, it is said, democratic governments cannot display are, despite the assertion, in part within their capacities and in part absent also in other forms of government." See Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 311.



ping and postponement of issues, the deflection of rivalries from the exposed frontyard to the colonial backyard—these are things of the past. With them have gone into oblivion the peculiar finesse and subtlety of mind, the calculating and versatile intelligence and bold yet circumspect decisions which were required from the players in that game.”<sup>118</sup> Waltz, in contrast, highlighted bipolarity as a stabilizing factor in international politics. This difference must be understood in light of diverging views about the relationship between democracy and foreign policy.

The theoretical arguments Waltz used to defend bipolarity are well known: in a multipolar system, the balance of power dear to both him and the classical realists is too uncertain. The making and undoing of alliances, the identification of threats, the expectations of leadership, and the flexibility of the balance introduce too many unknowns in policy calculations, which increase the risk of misperceptions and hence the outbreak of war.<sup>119</sup> Bipolar systems, Waltz asserts, are more stable for three reasons. First, they simplify balancing. Second, they make it easy to identify threats. Third, they create constant pressure in favor of balancing, whereas in multipolar systems such pressures are reduced.

Waltz’s preference for bipolarity is not simply a case of political quietism or conservative acquiescence to the state of geopolitics circa 1975. These views were already formed in the 1960s; and as we have argued, they played a part in his opposition to Lippmann’s nostalgic views about English-style balancing and traditional diplomacy.<sup>120</sup> It is part of the ongoing conversation about decisionmaking triggered by classical realism’s calls for the restoration of diplomacy. By rejecting the large-*n* balance of power associated with multipolarity, Waltz implicitly rejects traditional diplomacy. As he puts it, “With more than two states, the politics of power turn on diplomacy by which alliances are made.”<sup>121</sup> In contrast, in Waltz’s opinion traditional diplomacy had little role to play in bipolar systems. This particular understanding of the concept of balance in Waltz’s thought has not been noted by those who study his work. In a bipolar system diplomacy is atavistic, because “where two powers contend, imbalances can be righted only by their internal efforts.”<sup>122</sup> In other words, the balancing act takes place essentially in the domestic arena: economic policies,

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118. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 284.

119. “In the great-power politics of multipolar worlds,” wrote Waltz, “who is a danger to whom, and who can be expected to deal with threats and problems, are matters of uncertainty.” See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 170.

120. See, for instance, Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer 1964), pp. 881–909.

121. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 165.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

research and development, education, culture—everything becomes engulfed in the systemic logic of bipolar stability.<sup>123</sup> Waltz's analysis and endorsement of bipolarity was thus a major reason for him not to heed the calls for the restoration of traditional diplomacy coming from classical realists.

Neorealism dispensed with a theory of foreign policy because Waltz assumed that any policy decision in the domestic or international sphere was relevant to the overall systemic process. Focusing on a subset of decisions and transforming them into the reserved turf of a specialized cadre of unaccountable decisionmakers was ultimately meaningless. Morgenthau, in the end, was right to claim that relating foreign policy to domestic institutions was the symptom of "an intellectual attitude hostile to diplomacy."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, this was Waltz's attitude. Both his ideological convictions and contemporary analysis compelled him to argue that the illiberal prescriptions of classical realism were obsolete in the age of hegemonic bipolarity. In the systemic imaginary of neorealism and in the age of bipolarity, the ordinary operation of domestic institutions replaced diplomacy. And this, as Waltz had earlier suggested in *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, was not a problem, because democracies were as good at making decisions as authoritarian regimes. As more complex and articulated subsystems, to put it in the cybernetic terms of *Theory of International Politics*, democracies were perfectly capable of rapid adaptation to changing environments and thus of maintaining system stability.

## Conclusion

The historical and intellectual contexts in which Kenneth Waltz wrote *Theory of International Politics* are crucial for understanding neorealism's origins. The era of détente and the ensuing period of stability gave credibility to systemic theories that were entirely organized around the maintenance of equilibrium and the conservation of given states (in the physical sense): the arch model of the system in cybernetic theory was indeed Ross Ashby's "homeostat," a contraption that recovered a situation of equilibrium every time the prior equilibrium was disturbed. The widely accepted notion that industrial democracies were experiencing a crisis of governance because the traditional processes of will-formation were ill adapted to the complexity of policymaking in the modern

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123. A civil rights judiciary decision becomes just as important as an official delegation traveling abroad: "Vice President Nixon hailed the Supreme Court's desegregation decision as our greatest victory in the Cold War," Waltz wrote approvingly in 1964. See Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," p. 100.

124. Morgenthau, *Politics in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, p. 199.

world also helped lead to the rise of system theories that departed from simplistic representations of politics in terms of discrete “decisions.” At the same time, Waltz’s embrace of systems allowed him to bid farewell to the decisionist basis of classical realism, move realism beyond its previous concern with decisionmakers, and to de-ideologize the discussion of foreign policy by turning it into a matter of process, not substance. The result was neorealism: an approach to international relations that brought realism into the fold of American liberalism and removed from it the last remnants of elitist conservatism evident in the work of Hans Morgenthau and his colleagues.

Ironically, given the theoretical gymnastics that went into Waltz’s development of neorealism, the defense of democracy it offered was a decidedly weak one. If Waltz could assert that democracies were just as good at making policy as authoritarian regimes, it was not because democracy was as or more just and effective than authoritarian government, but because it was irrelevant. Whereas classical realists insisted on curtailing liberal democracy by insulating foreign policy decisions from the public and placing them in the hands of a small elite, neorealism saved democracy by making it inconsequential. Public opinion and legalism had no more place in neorealism than they had in classical realism. Neorealism provided a theory of international politics that did not require a theory of foreign-policy making or pronouncements on the organization of powers in society, because it rested on the assumption that ultimately the system would take care of itself.

Neorealism thus belonged to a longer conversation about the decisionmaking capacity of liberal democracies that stretched back to the interwar years and across the Atlantic. Waltz was reacting to the illiberal assumptions of classical realism and its elitist and conservative ideology of decisionmaking. Yet classical realism, importantly, provided him with a theoretical opening to create a purely formal theory. For all their hemming and hawing about the sovereign decisionmaker, Morgenthau and other classical realists never specified who, exactly, should make decisions. This lacuna enabled Waltz to take the next logical step and transform this absence of content into a pure formalism and a theory of international politics that circumvented the problem of decisionmaking.

Yet Waltz was unable to remove the “decisionist” problem completely. Even if decisions were made invisible, neorealism did not suppress the need for them. In fact, whenever he pronounced on decisionmaking, Waltz returned to traditional realist themes, such as the need for good judgment or a sense of history. Paradoxically, his formal theory of international politics remained an instrument of policy to be supplemented in real historical time by a sense

of the situation: "A theory is an instrument used in attempting to explain 'the real world' and perhaps to make some predictions about it. In using the instrument, all sorts of information, along with a lot of good judgment, is needed."<sup>125</sup> Judgment, of course, was what classical realists desired to improve in decisionmakers.

The theoretical replacement of decisions by system processes was ultimately a conscious obfuscation of the real decisionmaking process that attempted to protect liberal democracy while carving out a political space immune to it. This ultimately proved an impossible task. Who decides, perhaps the central question of international politics—as Waltz himself admitted—remained shrouded in mystery. Neorealism was Waltz's effort to rid realism of its ideological ballast by providing a scientistic spin on the question of executive decisionmaking that made realism's conservative assumptions nonthreatening to liberals. The replacement of decisional outcomes with formal system effects was meant to shape preemptively the range and content of political decisions while remaining silent about the identity of the decisionmaking group. Nonetheless, as Judith Shklar pointed out, the new systemic theories of international politics were also elitist theories, though they preferred sanitized references to "decisionmakers" instead of any mention of an "elite." To the extent that decisionmaking in international matters had become a cybernetic process of adaptation to a changing environment, it was better performed by those who understood the workings of the system and were perceptive of the constraints it created. The character of the system was all the decisionmaker needed to know before formulating policy preferences. In the end, one of the core realist tenets, the need to shield foreign policy decisionmaking from the public and entrust it to a small cadre of realist politicians and advisers, was preserved, but without the vocal critiques of democracy that were its correlate in classical realism.

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125. Waltz, "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy," p. 56. On the sense of history, see Waltz, "Theory Talk #40—Kenneth Waltz."