

## Summing Up

In his influential book *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz claimed that “[t]o be a success,” a theory of international politics “has to show how international politics can be conceived of as a domain distinct from the economic, social, and other international domains that one may conceive of” (1979, 79). His answer was that international politics consisted of interactions among units in a condition of anarchy and the interacting units were states. Thus a theory of international politics, he claimed, must be a theory about the working of a particular kind of social system, the system constituted by the collection of individual states of which it is composed. Theories of domestic politics, he claimed, were theories about the working of a different kind of social system, whose main common property was what he called “hierarchy.”<sup>1</sup> While many criticisms have been made of Waltz’s claims about the properties of international systems since his book was published, even many of his critics have accepted his definition of the subject of study.

One of the main theses of this book has been that this definition of the subject is misguided and has left us poorly equipped to understand the world in which we now live. If we are to understand international politics, I have argued, its study must be part of the more general study of the relation between political order and organized violence, as it was in the intellectual tradition from which modern-day Realism was derived. This is a puzzling and complex subject, in part because political order in complex societies *is* organized violence, and therefore one may wonder which is worse, the cure or the disease (Bates, Greif, and Singh 2002). This is the central question debated by early modern European political theorists as the European state system developed, and out of this debate emerged modern social science. The possibility of both interstate warfare and domestic repression was inherent in the development of that system, and, as we have seen, neither can be understood in isolation from the other.

Thus we cannot know what sort of political order is possible without understanding organized violence. But to do that we must understand

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1. See Waltz 1979, chap. 5.

both violence and how people organize themselves to engage in it. Considered separately, each is an extremely complex phenomenon, and together they constitute a very difficult subject of study.

Violence is complicated in part because it can be used by some people to influence the behavior of others and therefore can be part of a bargaining process. Bargaining alone is hard to understand, and in spite of an enormous amount of intellectual effort that has been expended on it by economists and game theorists, there is still no generally satisfactory theoretical treatment of it. But violent bargaining is even more complex, because to understand it one must take into account several features of the bargaining situation that tend to be ignored by economists. First, variations in what is called the disagreement outcome in the bargaining literature will influence bargainers' relative bargaining power, and the disagreement outcome can not only be manipulated by the bargainers but also change as a result of exogenous factors. Second, one must consider how any agreements that are reached can be made self-enforcing. Third, bargaining among more than two bargainers is very complex and little understood. And finally, the extent to which people are organized will influence how much bargaining power they have.

Understanding how human beings organize themselves is a complex subject in its own right, because it requires an understanding of how they overcome both what is commonly called the collective action problem and the problem of coordinating their actions. Organizing for violence is especially complex, because it introduces the possibility of violent conflict between or among organizations seeking to profit from the threat of violence, as well as among the members of such organizations over how to divide the spoils.

Given the complexity of these phenomena, it is not surprising that people would try to ignore some components of them in order to analyze the effects of others, and for many purposes this is the only sensible way to proceed. Treating states as though they were individual actors bargaining with each other is an example of such a simplification, and much can be said about international politics in those terms.

If we want to evaluate the competing claims that have been made about the prospects for a peaceful global order, however, or about what the institutional basis for such an order might be, then such simplifications inhibit our understanding of the problem, since the modern state is at once the main example that we have of how violence can be organized to serve the common good and the basic institutional building block out of which a global order might be constructed. And one of the questions to be answered is whether peace requires some institution at the global level that resembles the modern state or whether properly constructed states alone would be a sufficient institutional foundation for it.

A state is constituted by the contracts that define the organization of a government and its relation to the people it governs and to other governments, and the collection of all such contracts defines the institutional structure of the global order. Force can be used to renegotiate any of them—an attempted coup d'état, for example, can lead to a popular revolt, which can lead in turn to a war with another government. And the barriers to the peaceful negotiation of agreements that define the relations among governments are not fundamentally different from the problems that inhibit the peaceful negotiation of agreements defining the organization of a government or its relation to the people it governs.

The terms of any agreement that might be accepted in lieu of violence will be influenced by the amount of force each party can inflict on the other. But this will be influenced in turn by the nature and extent of their organization. Thus the rise and fall of states is the product of the formation and dissolution of groups and forcible bargaining among them. The complexity of this process is magnified further by the fact that the terms of any agreements that might be reached may influence the subsequent relative bargaining power of the parties to the agreement. An agreement defining the boundaries between two states, for example, may influence their subsequent relative military capabilities. And an agreement defining the relation between a government and its subjects will usually require the disarmament of one or more of the parties to a conflict, which might be hard to reverse if the terms of the agreement are later violated.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the main problem in resolving violent conflicts is to define the terms of such contracts in a way that will reflect the current relative bargaining power of the antagonists without altering it. One barrier to agreement may be inconsistent estimates of what the parties' relative bargaining power actually is. Another may be the inability to craft an agreement that everyone is sufficiently confident will not place them at a disadvantage in the future. There is no guarantee that agreements that avoid both these problems and are also preferred to the continuation of a conflict by the parties to it always exist. And even if they do, they will be vulnerable to exogenous changes in incentives, expectations, or the technology of violence that can lead to subsequent renegotiation. The collapse of the Soviet Union is an example of how unpredictable such developments can be.

The complexity of these relationships makes it very easy to make mis-

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2. This suggests a parallel between the problem of explaining the boundaries between states and the international system and the problem of explaining the boundaries between firms and markets: one of the themes of the recent literature on that subject is the fact that many contracts are necessarily incomplete and are subject to renegotiation. See, for example, Hart 1995. This parallel is briefly explored in Glete 2002, 55–58, and in Powell 1999, 216–22. However, contracts that define firms in the protection business are renegotiated in the shadow of organized violence.

takes in reasoning about factors that one happens to focus on and to overlook other factors that are also important. I have given examples of both in the preceding pages. A recitation of the mistakes I know that I have made, if I could remember them all, might be even longer, but they would be less interesting and important than the ones discussed here. And I do not doubt that critical readers will be able to find mistakes that I have unknowingly made in the preceding pages. Mistakes are inevitable. What is important is that they be spotted and corrected. And that requires that we be willing to check the validity of arguments and that arguments be constructed in such a way as to make that as easy to do as possible. We must be willing to use whatever tools are necessary to accomplish those goals.

Of course, given the difficulty of constructing interesting valid arguments about this subject, it is possible to be overly impressed by one. And therefore it is important to remember that the fact that an argument is valid only means that the conclusion must be true if the premises are true; and even if some facts that are known to be true can be derived from an explanation, there might nonetheless be another explanation that better explains all the known facts. That is why the progress of knowledge requires the development of competing theories, which are subjected to empirical tests. However, as Waltz wrote in his famous book:

Many testers of theories seem to believe that the major difficulties lie in the devising of tests. Instead, one must insist that the first big difficulty lies in finding or stating theories with enough precision and plausibility to make testing worthwhile. Few theories of international politics define terms and specify the connection of variables with the clarity and logic that would make testing the theories worthwhile. Before a claim can be made to have tested something, one must have something to test. (1979, 14)

Unfortunately, the reader of Waltz's book is left with the impression that it is far easier to satisfy that requirement than it actually is.