International Relations

Waltz, Realism and Democracy
Michael C. Williams

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

David Davies Memorial Institute for International Studies

Additional services and information for *International Relations* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ire.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ire.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Oct 7, 2009

What is This?

Waltz, Realism and Democracy

Michael C. Williams

Abstract

Waltz is generally seen as one the most important advocates of a systemic theory of international politics that stresses the importance of international anarchy and marginalizes domestic politics. Locating Waltz's thinking against debates within realism in the 1950s, and drawing especially on his neglected *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, this article argues that Waltz's thinking actually contains powerful domestic political dimensions that centre on a defence of democratic foreign policymaking. Rather than marginalizing domestic politics, Waltz's theory – and his critique of classical realism – is in part actually a subtle intervention *in* domestic politics.

Keywords: *democracy, culture, Walter Lippmann, realism, Kenneth Waltz*

Intellectual historians are fond of stressing the need for context in understanding a particular text or thinker. By looking at context, they suggest, we can gain a clearer sense of the issues that a particular thinker was trying to confront, and the otherwise sometimes hidden debates in which they may have been engaged. In the case of Kenneth Waltz and international relations (IR) such a contextual dimension has not been totally absent. Though the lion's share of commentary, debate and criticism surrounding Waltz's theory has focused on questions of conceptual cogency and analytic rigour, these methodological debates have often explicitly located themselves within traditions of social theory and developments in the social sciences that provide important background for Waltz's thinking. Whether formulated in terms of the influence of 'positivist' understandings of science in the evolution of the field of IR, or 'rationalist' or structural-functionalist forms of social theory in the social sciences as a whole, Waltz's thinking has often been implicitly or explicitly contextualized as part of these developments, albeit within the parameters of the debates over method that have dominated discussions of his work as a whole.[1]

There are, of course, many good reasons for this focus, not least the powerful status of Waltz's methodological contributions to the study of world politics, and his own tendency to formulate and defend his claims in terms of his own methodological position; and there is equally little doubt that the most intelligent, incisive, and productive debates surrounding Waltz's thinking have taken place in these terms. In this paper, however, I would like to suggest the value of taking a rather different path. Instead of focusing primarily on *Theory of International Politics*, and locating Waltz against the background of controversies over the nature of social science, it may be revealing to shift the interpretive context to a much earlier time and an apparently very different set of concerns and debates. This context lies in debates within American

realism in the 1950s, their connections to broader political controversies of the time concerning the cultural malaise of modern society, and the connections of both of these debates to the pressing practical question of whether democracies in general, and the United States in particular, were capable of developing and carrying through effective foreign policies in the dangerous world of the Cold War. These were not debates over methodology in its narrower sense. They were highly charged political controversies over the fate of modern societies, the future of Western civilization, and the survival of liberal democracy in the United States and beyond.

Viewing Waltz's thinking in the context of the 1950s may strike some as foolish enough; viewing it through the lens of foreign policy-making and democracy will no doubt strike them as even more outlandish, and perhaps worse. Waltz, after all, is famous amongst both his supporters and critics for his rigorous refusal to address such issues, arguing that there is an important difference between a theory of international politics and a theory of foreign policy. Nonetheless, I would like to venture that by following this unfamiliar route it is possible to bring to light previously ignored aspects of Waltz's thinking, and to show connections in his work that put that thinking in quite a new light. In particular, I suggest it does three things. First, it helps clarify further Waltz's relationship to (and departure from) specific strands of 'classical' realism, including those of Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. Second, it brings to light a little recognized dimension of Waltz's career, one with potentially wider consequences for appreciating his thinking as a whole. For while Waltz is often criticized as having little concern with domestic politics, I will try to show that by taking account of the broad sweep of his body of work – including his often ignored 1967 book, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* – this charge cannot in any simple form be sustained. Not only does he provide in this book a widely researched study of the impact of domestic factors on foreign policy; much more importantly, on closer reading his analysis reveals an agenda motivated directly by the highly politicized question of the capacity of democratic states to act effectively in foreign policy, and a desire to confront the claims by realists and others that the US was in the midst of a crisis and that its democratic structures were a hindrance rather than a help in meeting the foreign policy challenges it faced.

Seeing this context suggests that there is a subtle and, I would argue, an ultimately important set of domestic political interventions embedded in Waltz's entire theoretical edifice. The three images set out in *Man, the State, and War*, the historical analysis in *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, and the systemic theory developed in *Theory of International Politics* are not just analytic devices. Nor are they politically neutral. On the contrary, they are shot through with political implications. In fact, I will argue, Waltz's international theorizing contains a direct if largely unrecognized connection and commitment to democratic decision-making. An unrecognized objective and effect of Waltz's theory of international relations is to *exclude* from consideration precisely the questions of political modernity that classical realists (and many others) insisted were crucial in understanding contemporary politics at both the domestic and international levels. In doing so, Waltz's made a key con-tribution to the still-developing field of international relations, providing a basis

for the field's development as an apparently neutral social science by setting it apart from the highly controversial and deeply politicized debates concerning liberalism, democracy, and the future of Western civilization.

Man, the state, and modernity: the pessimism of classical realism

In textbook treatments, post-war realism's concerns with 'Man' and 'the State' have often been reduced to rather crude visions of the intrinsic 'evil' of human nature or the insatiable power hunger of states. The reality, of course, bears little resemblance to this caricature. In fact, the classical realism of the 1950s and early 1960s exhibited a remarkably wide range of philosophic, sociological, and political concerns that were by no means restricted to questions of international relations. Indeed, at the heart of many of the most sophisticated forms of realism in this period was a concern with the 'crisis' of liberal modernity and its implications for politics both within and between states.

The precise contours of the debates that swirled around the fate of Cold War liberalism defy any brief exposition.[2] In broad outline, however, they revolved around the question of whether the social and ideological structures of modern society had eroded the capacity of those societies to produce citizens and societies with the individual and collective virtue and principled cohesion necessary to maintain democratic institutions at home and to defend them abroad. Liberal democracy, it was argued, had fallen prey to (or even transmogrified into) fascism in Weimar. It had barely survived the war. And it was now challenged by an adversary perhaps even more formidable. Were democratic societies capable of formulating foreign policies capable of responding effectively to these challenges abroad while maintaining liberty at home and avoiding global thermonuclear destruction? For many of those in the emerging school of post-war realism, this was the key question underlying foreign policy, and they tended to answer it with scepticism, pessimism and foreboding.

Underpinning these analyses lay a clear set of connections between man, the state, and the dilemmas of democratic foreign policy. At the risk of significantly oversimplifying their views, a thumbnail sketch of the positions of some of the era's most prominent realists serves to illustrate the point. For Hans Morgenthau, for example, the problem lay in the relationship between the ascendancy of 'scientific man' and decadent liberal individualism.[3] Reduced to either a denuded rationalism or a facile relativism and subjectivism, increasingly dominant conceptions of the liberal modern individual provided an inadequate foundation for individual identity and political community, and led towards an anomic democratic politics that at its extremes yielded either the weakness of Weimar or the nationalistic crusading that was its alter ego.[4] Similarly, in Reinhold Niebuhr's view, modern individuals had lost spiritual depth and political wisdom: unable to cope with a politics of evil, the Children of Light increasingly risked falling into a pacifist quiescence in the face of the Children of Darkness – or into the righteous crusading that was its equally disturbing foil.[5] To George Kennan, the erosion of the Protestant ethos and civic

virtue in the face of urbanization and capitalist modernization meant that societies in general – and the United States in particular – were bereft of direction and commitment, and left Kennan himself pensive, melancholy, and often with abiding intimations of decline and decay.[6]

For our purposes here, one of the most challenging and important voices in this chorus was the widely influential journalist Walter Lippmann.[7] For Lippmann, the challenges confronting liberal democracy were daunting. In one vein, he argued that modern mass media had rendered democracy ever more ephemeral. Since action was based upon mental 'representations', and the experience of politics and wider social reality was increasingly dominated by distanciated media and images, modern politics was increasingly a realm of mass manipulation in which the democratic ideal of a deliberative public was ever more divorced from reality. The irrational tendencies of this 'phantom public' in turn heightened even further the shortcomings of democratic foreign policy-making that had been the grist of critics since at least de Tocqueville.[8] In an argument that in many ways paralleled Morgenthau's diagnosis in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, Lippmann also worried that modern societies had lost the individual and collective virtues necessary for the successful functioning and defence of democracy. The executive, he argued, needed to regain its power of decision and decisive action against the increasingly self-interested pluralism of the legislative branch and the democratic electorate. At the same time, the American public needed to recover its ability to believe in objective natural laws that Lippmann saw as the foundation of the Republic. 'The people', he argued, 'have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising and the governments they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern.' Where mass opinion rules, 'enfeeblement, verging on paralysis, of the capacity to govern' and a 'morbid derangement' of government follows. 'This breakdown in the constitutional order', he direly concluded, 'is the cause of the precipitate and catastrophic decline of Western society. It may, if it cannot be arrested and reversed, bring about the fall of the West.'[9]

As much as the analyses of figures such as Lippmann, Neibuhr and Morgenthau differed in diagnosis, detail or direction, and particularly in their responses, these thinkers shared a deep ambivalence about modern subjectivity and modern politics – about the relationship between man and the state, and about the implications of that increasingly fraught relationship for foreign policy and relations between states. In their diverse ways, they were all particularly concerned about the implications of this situation for the ability of democracies to conduct effective foreign policies – worries that were heightened by the dangers posed by the Cold War and the development of nuclear weapons. Their responses to this situation varied, of course. Hans Morgenthau, for instance, attempted to combine calls for renewed presidential leadership with exhortations towards a revivified republicanism – a position that not infrequently intersected with Niebuhr's. Almost all of these realists, however, displayed a certain nostalgia for an era of aristocratic or elite control over foreign policy, and the more stable and limited balance of power politics with which they associated it.

In sum, post-war realists were not just pessimistic as a matter of personal idiosyncrasy or dire geopolitical circumstances. Their pessimism derived in no small part from their visions of the connections between the 'nature' of individual human beings and the modern state. And one of the main consequences of their views was a deep scepticism about the future of liberal democracy, and particularly about the aptitude of democracies in the area of foreign policy. These were not isolated concerns. Although the formulations of the crisis differed widely and importantly, they reflected widespread views amongst scholars and political commentators that liberal democracies were simply incapable of conducting foreign policy effectively, and that in such dangerous conditions democratic procedures might well have to be curtailed if these states were to survive.

Waltz was well aware of these arguments.[10] In fact, they form the revealing backdrop to one of his most intriguing, though least acknowledged, works, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*.[11] In this the longest of his three books, Waltz notes that while criticism of democracies' ability to conduct foreign policy effectively is an old theme of conservative thinkers, going back at least to de Tocqueville, it has recently taken on a more widespread appeal and urgency of tone. Here, his discussion turns directly to Lippmann's *The Public Philosophy*, and he takes up a key theme that is worth quoting at length. 'In his criticism of democratic foreign policy', Waltz argues that Lippmann

> joins hands with an enduring aristocratic distrust of mass electorates. One wonders however, whether he has correctly described the workings of democracy. And even if he were right, could anything be done about it? In a happier world, a world in which the democracies were not so sorely tried, Mr. Lippmann's critique of democracy would still have point and purpose. Others have shortened their philosophic reach to concentrate more closely upon problems of the moment. Engaged in mortal combat with a monster, one must become a monster himself. Thinking of the disadvantages of democracy as merely temporary has suddenly, in the space of two decades for America and perhaps twice as long a time for the democracies of Western Europe, ceased to give comfort, for the fear has grown that disadvantages even of short duration might be fatal. America's potential opponents … are garrison states, tightly organized and closely controlled. If this does give them a clear advantage, then democracies are encouraged to adopt similar methods. Competitors, by the force of their struggle, are made to become alike; the one less well equipped for the contest must imitate the other or fall by the wayside.[12]

As Waltz shows, this conclusion was drawn by a wide range of thinkers at the time. For 'while Lippmann's harsh indictment is rejected by most students of politics, many would assent to a milder charge'[13] – and amongst the many he lists such figures as Gabriel Almond, V. O. Key, W.W. Rostow and Henry Kissinger. Equally importantly, he notes, the theme had substantial appeal amongst policy elites. As Waltz phrases it:

Haunted by the memory of the democracies' failures in the 1930s and dismayed by America's inability to adjust force to political purpose in and immediately after World War II, critics of democratic institutions found ample sustenance for a far-reaching pessimism. Although somewhat allayed by the rapidity and breadth of response to Soviet challenges in the period that began in 1947 and reached into the 1950s, pessimism reappeared in the Eisenhower years. Lippmann's critique, Emmet Hughes's description of the nation's plight in the title of his book *America the Vincible*, the officially sponsored investigation by the Gaither Committee, and the unofficial but highly authoritative studies of the Rockefeller Brothers' Fund, all reflected the fear that the 1950's like the 1930's were years of the locusts.[14]

Seen against the background Waltz sketches in *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, however, the issues at stake are momentous. For, if true, they would mean that democratic control over foreign policy-making needed at the very least to be curtailed (and perhaps removed) as liberal democracies were forced by the 'systemic' logic of anarchy to become like their 'garrison state' competitors. Indeed, the idea that states will be forced 'to become alike' inevitably calls to mind the 'third image' conclusions of *Man, the State, and War*, and might seem to presage the analysis in *Theory of International Politics*, whereby states are seen as forced by systemic pressures to become 'like units'. In short, in both Lippmann's jeremiad against the decline of Western civilization, and in the wider political position that portrayed liberal democracies as operating at a potentially fatal disadvantage to their Cold War competitors, nothing less than the future of liberal democracy might well be at stake. A key and generally unexamined concern for Waltz is whether this widely shared (often realist) scepticism toward democracy is in fact true.

   Although Waltz was clearly aware of the depth of the concerns of those who favour curtailing democracy in order to safeguard the state, and although he was more aware than most of the pressures created by the international system, he disagrees fundamentally with the conclusions drawn by so many prominent figures on the relationship between democratic decision-making and foreign policy, and thus on the implications of this question for the future of liberal democracy as a whole.[15] To respond to the critics of liberal democracy, and to rebut the implicit (and sometimes explicit) conclusion that countries such as the United States must effectively cease being liberal democracies – or at the very least significantly curtail their democratic processes – if they are to survive the geopolitical struggle, Waltz needs to argue the case for democracy in general and for American democracy in particular, while at the same time retaining the realist acknowledgement of the systemic pressures provided by international anarchy.

   This concern with democracy is one of the hidden themes of Waltz's thinking about international politics, and when viewed in this light his three major works – and the relationship between them – take on quite a different significance. In the rest of this article, I would like to suggest how this might be so by looking briefly

at each. The obvious place to begin this exploration is by teasing out some the polit-
ical consequences of the abstract philosophical analysis that Waltz develops in *Man,
the State, and War*. As we have seen, to its contemporary realist critics the short-
comings of liberal democracy arising directly from the relationship between man
and the state made democratic control of foreign policy dangerous and its restriction
necessary. The crisis in foreign policy and international affairs arose from the nature
of human beings and the inadequacy of liberal democracy to deal effectively with its
implications. As I showed earlier, it is important to recognize that this claim was not
based upon the simplistic charge that human nature was in some straightforward sense
'evil'. It was a much more complex claim where, in Lippmann's words, the 'acids
of modernity' have gradually dissolved the belief in principles of the public interest
and the ability of the executive to carry it out, leaving in its place an increasingly
irrational and destructive populism. The relationship between modern subjectivity
(Man) and government (the State) had become increasingly 'deranged'.[16]

But these political conclusions depended on the validity of the analysis: they *would*
be concerns *if* foreign policy was driven predominantly by the relationship between
Man and the State that Lippmann and other prophets of decline suggested. One of
the consequences of Waltz's argument in *Man, the State, and War*, however, is that
it allows him to reject this connection and the conclusions that follow from it. Waltz
does not, of course, deny the importance of first- and second-image causes.[17] But what
he does deny is that they are the sole determinants of foreign policy. The contribution
of the third image – the causal role of international anarchy in the production of
state action – is that it provides an opening for an account of foreign policy-making
beyond individual and domestic levels of analysis. In short, the critique of first- and
second-image explanations of the nature of international politics that Waltz develops
allows him to oppose at the most fundamental theoretical level those who criticize
democratic foreign policy-making. Whether classical realists and others are correct
in their diagnoses of human nature and the condition of the polity is not an argument
that Waltz takes up. Instead, he seeks to render such questions less relevant for IR,
and to prevent their concerns and conclusions from dominating sensible discus-
sions of foreign policy. If the primary source of state action is found in international
anarchy, then this provides an explanation of why all states – including democratic
ones – conform to its demands. Since the sources of foreign policy are not wholly
'internally' determined, the actions of democratic states are not determined solely
by the dynamics pointed to (correctly or incorrectly) by critics such as Lippmann.
Third-image theory provides a *causal* account of why democratic states may be
more adept in foreign policy than their second-image critics allow. *Man, the State,
and War* is thus not simply a philosophic text or a conceptual preface to a more full-
blown structural theory: in this context it has direct political implications too – one
of which is to defend democratic decision-making by disarming some of its most
trenchant critics.

A second articulation of this theme emerges in *Foreign Policy and Democratic
Politics*, where Waltz develops an empirical and historical defence of democratic
foreign policy-making. Through an analysis of British and American foreign policy,

he seeks to demonstrate that liberal democracies have not in fact proven less effective actors in international politics than other types of governments. Given the common charge that Waltz ignores domestic politics, one of the intriguing aspects of his account is the quite subtle analysis of how domestic factors impact foreign policy. Contrasting British and American policies in the post-war era, for example, he argues that while both countries have adapted quite successfully to the new condition of bipolarity, the 'national styles' of each remain influential. In Britain's case, although its international position has eroded, 'a hard residuum of national habits and of deep-set attitudes toward international affairs remains'.[18] And it was, he remarks later, this mannered national style that contributed to Britain's relatively 'graceful' and largely 'benign' retreat from empire: 'British governmental arrangements and national temperament coincide and reinforce one another' and, he remarks, 'External manner parallels internal procedure.'[19]

More important, however, is Waltz's conclusion that in explicit contradiction to the claims of many realist sceptics the history of both countries demonstrates their effectiveness in foreign policy. Arguing explicitly against the charge by Lippmann, Kissinger, Rostow and others, that the politics of 'mass opinion' means that the public is fickle, vacillating or overly vehement,[20] Waltz argues that a closer examination of democratic foreign policy reveals that while leadership (particularly presidential) is necessary, responsible leadership will usually generate public support, whereas irresponsible leadership will not. Two quite happy conclusions follow from this. The first concerns the nature of the American public, who in general turn out to be remarkably good at judging good leadership and the broad dynamics of international politics, as well as being flexible learners. It would seem, Waltz concludes, 'that the mass of the American people have learned to live with danger, to tolerate ambiguity, to accept setbacks, and to understand that victory is sometimes impossible, or that it can be gained only at a price the wise should restrain from paying'.[21]

Even more strikingly, he goes on to directly contradict the dire claims of those who see democracies as dangerously weak in foreign affairs. Not only, he argues, is democracy a better system for conducting foreign policy than totalitarianism, but American presidential democracy is the best form of all:

> It was long believed that America's democratic institutions would prevent her from behaving effectively and responsibly in the world. The judgment should be reversed. American institutions facilitate rather than discourage the quick identification of problems, the pragmatic question for solutions, the ready confrontation of dangers, the willing expenditure of energies, and the open criticism of policies.[22]

Far from being a danger to themselves, as many realists believed, democracies are well equipped to produce effective foreign policy: 'Coherent policy, executed with a nice combination of caution and verve, is difficult to achieve in any political system', he concludes, 'but no more so for democratic states than for others.'[23]

The third image: democracy and *Theory of International Politics*

Thus far, I have argued that Waltz's critique of post-war realist scepticism towards democracy rests on two pillars: the critique of first- and second-image theorizing first developed in *Man, the State, and War*, and a positive historical assessment of the foreign policy performance of the two most powerful modern democracies. This leaves an obvious third question: what explains this performance? Since his appreciation of the impact of domestic factors on actual policy formation has denied Waltz access to a second-image explanation, the answer is of course obvious: the performance of democracies is the result of a combination of their own characteristics and the more fundamental determinations of the structure of the international system. Articulating this argument is a goal of *Theory of International Politics*: the system sifts out dysfunctional behaviours, and so long as states are willing to reflexively monitor their actions and avoid fatal errors, they will conform to its pressures. As Waltz puts it, 'competition spurs the actors to accommodate their ways to the socially most acceptable and successful practices. Socialization and competition are two aspects of a process by which the variety of actors are reduced.'[24] As Goddard and Nexon have astutely pointed out, Waltz's thinking here bears the marks of yet another context – his engagement with structural-functionalism.[25]

In the context of the argument I am pursuing here, what is interesting is not the question of whether Waltz has an adequate theory of socialization, but rather the way in which his structural theory once again forecloses classical realism's scepticism toward democracy. Structural theory provides an explanation of why democratic states are effective in foreign policy terms. Since state action is not determined solely by type, all state forms can in principle be effective if they successfully adapt to and adopt the self-help logic of the system. By treating states as units within a systemic theory, the question of democracy's inadequacies or the dilemmas of liberal modernity is not determinative. The combination of objective structural pressures and flexible, responsive democratic policy structures means that internal dynamics do not wholly determine state policy. Nor, crucially, is there any need to curtail (or radically restructure) liberal democracy in the face of international pressures.

Theory of International Politics thus has a productive as well as an analytic agenda.[26] Rational self-preservation, not the dark metaphysics of man or grandiose theories of the state, is what states ought to pursue – and in Waltz's view there is considerable evidence in both logic and history that they in fact do so. First- and second-image theories on their own (or in combination) are misguided and dangerous: they can lead to the construction of radical dilemmas and crises, and to equally radical solutions that are not only suspect in foreign policy terms, but that potentially endanger liberal democracy itself. If states will simply seek their own self-preservation, the system will ensure relative stability. The only difficulty is if they refuse to do so – if they place some value above survival, which is precisely what metaphysical theories of man and the state tempt them to do. In such a condition, the system will not work. *Theory of International Politics* is an explanation of why

democracies do not need to bow to classical realism's fears, and a guide to how they (and others) should conduct themselves in order to ensure that these fears do not become reality. Seen in this light, *Theory of International Politics* is in its effect, if not its intention, a third plank in Waltz's defence of democracy.[27]

Conclusion

Many views of Waltz's theory of international politics stress his strict division between the domestic and the international, and between positive and normative theory. The account I have suggested here cuts across these categories. As I have tried to show, Waltz's critique of much of post-war American realism is not only methodological: it has a clear political edge – one that in part reflects the tendency of many of these realists to be sceptical or even hostile towards democratic government and its ability to cope with foreign affairs, a hostility that Waltz feels is deeply misguided. In fact, the methodological arguments and the political moves are intertwined. Waltz's three major books – *Man, the State, and War*, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, and *Theory of International Politics* – can even be seen as a triptych, each contributing in a different way (critique, evidence, reconstruction) to a defence of democratic foreign policy-making. It would be foolish to claim that this is the only, or even the main, agenda in Waltz's thinking. Yet at the very least, the symmetry and power of the argument is food for thought about both the lineages and the political entailments of his arguments.

A second conclusion follows directly: despite continual claims to the contrary, Waltz does not ignore domestic politics.[28] At the very least, putting *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* alongside *Theory of International Politics* in assessments of his work (and in reading lists) would go a long way towards correcting numerous misinterpretations of his thinking. More subtly, as I have suggested above, Waltz's thinking about the place of domestic politics may go beyond the need to integrate unit-level foreign policy analysis and structural theory into any analysis of concrete situations. One of the clearest ways of seeing this, I have argued, is to locate Waltz's thinking against the background of 1950s classical realism, its concerns with culture, modernity, democracy and foreign policy, and its widespread, though by no means universal, claim that the pressures of international relations required a restriction of democratic processes when it came to international affairs. Waltz was deeply concerned that claims about the anarchic nature of international politics (which he shares with other realists) should not be transformed into the claim that democracy must be curtailed in the face of the exigencies of foreign policy. Critics have often pointed to Waltz's unwillingness to look at domestic politics as not only an analytic weakness, but also as a political one – a move that denies the possibility of positive agential change. This may well be the case. But it is perhaps also important to recognize the other side of the equation: by bracketing the questions of political life that so preoccupied many classical realists, Waltz's structural theory also represents

a subtle attempt to insulate democratic structures from some of their most powerful realist critics. Waltz's 'pessimism' about the ability to alter the structure of the international system is actually optimism about the prospects for democracy within that system and a defence of democratic policy-making. Whether or not one finds these arguments convincing, they deserve serious consideration.

More speculatively, exploring these political aspects of Waltz's international theory may also shed light on some of the reasons for its remarkable popularity. As noted earlier, this popularity is often traced to neorealism's affinities with rationalist method and the emergence of IR as a distinctive (American) social science. Waltz's influence here was clearly crucial, not only in the overtly methodological claims of *Theory of International Politics*, but also for the ways that *Man, the State, and War* seemed to free the emerging field of IR from the suzerainty of both history and political theory. However, the sources of its attraction go even deeper than this, for Waltz's theory provided a way of thinking about realist power politics that did not require the thoroughgoing critique of domestic liberal politics that classical realists had demanded. By providing a framework through which a relatively comfortable domestic liberalism could co-exist with an international realism, Waltz provided a form of realism acceptable to liberal political cultures in a way that classical realism never could.[29] The difficult dilemmas concerning the relationship between liberalism and democracy, the challenges of modernity, and profound changes in social structure that were the hallmarks of the realism of Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Lippmann could be met with agnosticism, or simply ignored – cordoned off as irrelevant to the field analytically. Waltz's neorealism thus seemed to provide a realism that did not demand challenging the (often comfortable) liberal-democratic political preferences of scholars and publics alike.[30]

Finally, this analysis helps to show that in contrast to the pessimism that is often seen as a hallmark of realism, Waltz is in many ways an optimist.[31] International anarchy and the pressures of foreign policy do not undermine the prospects for democracy. In fact, if we take seriously his claim that democracies are at least as apt (and perhaps even better) at discerning and responding to changes in the international system as other forms of state, and combine it with his argument that structural pressures socialize states into adopting the most effective competitive forms, it may not be wholly outlandish to suggest that Waltz's theory could even envision a progressive spread of democracies. This does not, of course, mean that Waltz believed in the overcoming of anarchy through a 'democratic peace' – that is surely a step too far. However, the logic of a spread of democratic structures is not inimical to his theoretical vision as a whole. And if this structural dynamic could be combined with cultural traits or traditions that, as in the case of Britain, allowed for a relatively stable and yet fluid balance of power and international order, then the pessimism of the Cold War realists would be almost entirely reversed. This may be taking the logic of Waltz's argument further than it will go, but it may also point to the ways in which re-engaging Waltz's thinking can yield surprising and intriguing lineages and possibilities. Waltz: realist, democrat, optimist?

Notes

1 A point noted by Chris Brown in his contribution to the conference on which this collection is based. Important contributions to this area of inquiry include Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

2 For a variety of treatments in IR, see Duncan Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Vibeke Schou Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). In an enormous wider literature, see also the challenging interpretation in Ira Katznelson, *Enlightenment and Desolation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

3 Recent treatments of Morgenthau include William E. Scheuerman, *Hans J. Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2009), and Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007).

4 See, particularly, Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946) and 'Nationalism', in *Politics in the Twentieth Century,* vol. 1: *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 181–95.

5 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Scribner, 1944). Significantly for the argument I will make later, it is often forgotten that the subtitle of this book was 'A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense'.

6 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–50*, and *Memoirs 1950–63* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). A revealing study of Kennan's view of European and American cultures in this context is John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 135–233.

7 The standard study of Lippmann is Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1999).

8 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1925; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1993), and *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1922]). A survey of the period that includes incisive analyses of Niebuhr and Lippmann, is John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 280–359.

9 Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), pp. 14–15. There are a number of interesting links between the arguments in this book and those of Leo Strauss, and a lineage connected to contemporary neoconservatism that is worthy of exploration. The place of communication in Lippmann's thinking is briefly but interestingly developed in Alan Chong, 'Lessons in International Communication: Carr, Angell, and Lippmann on Human Nature, Public Opinion, and Leadership', *Review of International Studies*, 33, 2007, pp. 615–35.

10 Waltz served as the *rapporteur* for a conference organized by Kenneth Thompson and supported by the Rockefeller Foundation that brought together figures including Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Kennan, and that sought to provide a counter to the emerging behavioural movement in American political science; see the very revealing study by Nicolas Guilhot, 'The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory', *International Political Sociology*, 2(4), 2008, pp. 281–304.

11 For an exception to this general disregard, see the insightful analysis in 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*, 5(4), 2007, p. 705, fn. 37.

12 Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (New York: Longmans, 1967), p. 13. Later in the book, Waltz confronts a similar question when examining the popular suspicion that the American public is incapable of fighting the limited wars that are now necessary, since thermonuclear weapons have rendered total war suicidal – a position that, he notes, is shared by figures as diverse as Douglas MacArthur, Herman Kahn and (significantly, given his later role in neoconservatism) Irving Kristol. Revealingly, one of his choices of adversary again renders the issue in philosophical–political terms: 'Paul Ramsey has recently written that "perhaps because of the Calvinism gone to seed in the atmosphere, and the lack of any doctrine of the Two Realms in which a human destiny is played out, the American people are ill prepared for the self-discipline necessary for the limitation of war"'. Waltz's response is somewhat cryptic, but it is also revealing. Ramsey's conclusion, he writes, 'may *once* have been true, though not necessarily

for the reasons he suggests'. *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 295, emphasis added. The quote is from Ramsey's *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 151.

13   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 268.

14   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 269.

15   Many realists, it should be noted, turned to the revitalization of democracy as an at least partial alternative – a perspective developed by Lippmann in *The Public Philosophy*, and perhaps most strikingly by Morgenthau in *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1960).

16   Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy*, pp. 47–49; there are clear echoes of this analysis in contemporary neoconservative views of American foreign policy.

17   See especially Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, pp. 224–38.

18   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 7.

19   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, pp. 306 and 307. One might also thus suggest that the claim of many critics (and supporters, for that matter) that Waltz totally excludes domestic factors can only be sustained by focusing solely upon *Theory of International Politics* and ignoring Waltz's own major study of the issue.

20   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 269.

21   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 297.

22   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, pp. 307–8.

23   Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, p. 311.

24   Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 77.

25   Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Paradigm Lost?: Reassessing *Theory of International Politics*, *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(1), 2005, pp. 9–61.

26   A point early and often stressed by Richard Ashley. See also the discussion in Keith Shimko, 'Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism', *Review of Politics*, 54(2), 1992, pp. 281–301.

27   My thanks to Nicholas Rengger and Colin Wight for a very useful conversation on this point.

28   A useful corrective is once again Goddard and Nexon, 'Paradigm Lost?'.

29   See also the discussion in Shimko, 'Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism'.

30   If this is the case, then re-opening the question of domestic politics, as urged by many 'neoclassical' realists may well mean taking on much wider political questions and realms of social analysis than has yet been the case within this trajectory.

31   A theme pointed to in a different vein by Randall Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, 5(3), 1996, pp. 90–121.