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Waltz on the State of Things Today

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July 19, 2011

[Justin Logan](#) ^[2]

The excellent *Theory Talks* website has an [interview with Kenneth Waltz](#) ^[3] that may be of interest to *Skeptics* readers. For those who follow Waltz's writing closely, there may not be much new there, but here are a few highlights to encourage you to have a look:

Waltz on the “central challenge or principal debate in international relations” today:

For me, the central question is how to contain and moderate the use of military force by the United States...

On theory:

There isn't much theorizing going on in international politics. And the word “theory” is so loosely used that people begin to think that anything that is not directly empirical or factual must be theory, and that is certainly a misconception. To develop a theory is difficult, and all the more difficult if one defines theory as it should be defined. For example, as Einstein said, there is no inductive route that leads to theory. That is, simply knowing more and more, having more facts at one's command, does not lead one to the ability to develop theories...

On what he would have done differently in *Theory of International Politics*:

I certainly would add something about unipolarity. I wrote about multipolar systems and bipolar systems, that is, structural changes that produce changes in behavior. I identified these two different kinds of structure. And it did not occur to me that we would move from bipolarity to unipolarity, which of course we did with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In any kind of balancing system, the major players have to continue to exist as major players for the system to remain unchanged. You cannot have a bipolar balance without two parties being the participants in that balance...

On the advantages of structural theories over behavioral theories:

[O]ne gets away from the kind of causal thinking that Durkheim satirized when he

gave such examples as the question: why did the Greeks produce all of that immensely impressive philosophy? And the answer typically given is that the Greeks were a very philosophic people. Or why did the Germans produce all of that magnificent music? Well, the answer given is that the Germans were a very musical people! In other words, the cause is found in the acting or behaving units. That is entirely behavioral! Structural thinking breaks away from that. It is a very difficult jump to make for a lot of people; very difficult. As Henry Kissinger said, “moderate and legitimate states produce moderate and legitimate systems of international politics.” That is exactly the kind of thinking Emile Durkheim was satirizing...

On America as a unipolar power:

It responds to the situation all giant countries have responded to. And it responds in the very same way: it abuses its power, singling out poor, weak countries—that’s what we specialize in—and beating them up! That is what we do! Six wars in the twenty years since the 1980s; they were all cases in which we singled out small and weak countries like Granada or Panama, and we proceeded to beat them up. It is sad, but this is a typical behavior of powers that are dominant, or used to be dominant in their regions and now are globally dominant...

That is what you would expect dominant powers to do. One does not like it; I do not like it; and I am sure the countries that experience the bullying do not like it; but it is expected behavior. That is the way countries behave when they have dominant power—globally or within their region.

Whole interview [here](#) [3].

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