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# Kenneth Waltz's approach to reading classic political theory and why it matters

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## Abstract

How did Kenneth Waltz read canonical theoretical texts? Waltz understood himself first as a political theorist and remained committed to interpreting political thought throughout his career. This paper briefly delineates Waltz's method for reading political theory. I identify four elements of Waltz's approach: it was purposive, explanatory, textualist, and anti-esoteric. First, he thought texts could best be linked to one another and compared purposively, by aligning the questions they asked. Second, he understood the primary purpose of theoretical texts to be explanatory: normativity was a secondary concern. Third, he was a relatively strict textualist, taking little interest in historical context. Fourth, he took no account of esoteric writing. I then track his intellectual influences, through his graduate training and early academic career. I show this set of methodological tenets was, taken together, largely his own invention. I argue Waltz's reading method shaped his own theoretical work, providing concepts and informing his structural and parsimonious style of theory. I track these effects in his later theory-building project in *Theory of International Politics*. By extension, I suggest, his approach influenced much of postwar International Relations theory, both in terms of its specific conceptual toolkit and its approach to theory as such.

How did Kenneth Waltz read political texts – and how did his readings shape his own International Relations (IR) theory? Waltz was likely the most influential anglophone IR theorist of the postwar period and, more than his contemporaries, was a reader of canonical political thought. His graduate training was in political theory as much as or more than in IR. His first book, *Man, the State and War*,[1] was a survey of political thought on a core problem of world politics – armed conflict – and he spent much of his early career teaching political theory at Swarthmore and Brandeis. However, we have little systematic sense of how he went about

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[1]Waltz 1959.

reading, interpreting, and comparing theory. His method matters, I argue, because his readings informed how he constructed theories of his own. In so doing, they informed the school he founded, neorealism, and with it much of how IR has drawn on the history of political thought.

This essay reconstructs Waltz's method for reading historical political theory. Drawing on his early writing and on archival sources, I document Waltz's idiosyncratic approach, assess its sources, and explain how it shaped his thought.[2] I argue he adopted four basic tenets for interpreting texts, although he did not systematically articulated them. First, he thought texts could be linked to one another across historical contexts by focusing on the questions they asked. Where thinkers addressed the same problems, he thought their answers could be productively compared. Second, he was a textualist. Contra later contextualisms, he largely ignored the circumstances in which texts were written, instead viewing works across historical periods as addressing recurring questions about political life. Third, his focus was on explanation. He took normative debates to be secondary or downstream matters and saw the primary purpose of theory as explanatory. Fourth, contra Leo Strauss and others, he implicitly dismissed esoteric writing. He did not aim to tease hidden meanings out of texts.

To explain how Waltz arrived at this method, I take a broadly contextualist approach, evaluating influences on Waltz's biography as a graduate student and young academic. I identify three scholars who were involved in his graduate training in political theory at Columbia: William T. R. Fox, his doctoral advisor, Franz Neumann, a Frankfurt School researcher who was at Columbia during and after WWII, and Justus Buchler, a philosopher with whom Waltz studied epistemology. Their influence on him appears to have been real but limited. Differing from Cambridge School and Straussian methods, Waltz's approach aligned instead with an older style of cross-historical survey in the history of political thought. I thus point to once-standard survey texts on which he based his teaching. All that said, Waltz's approach to reading and interpreting past political theorists appears to have been largely his own happenstance invention.

I argue Waltz's method informed the IR theory he went on to develop. I show *Theory of International Politics* (*TIP*) parallels and relies on the readings in *Man, the State and War* (*MSW*), in three respects. First, Waltz's later structuralism famously relied on core ideas from his earlier work. Second, both rely on similar forms of parsimony in treating their objects of study, whether texts or international systems. Third, both are methodologically ahistorical, being committed to transhistorical comparison. The 'texture of international politics' that he diagnosed in *TIP*, in which 'patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly', was formally analogous to his transhistorical conception of intellectual history.[3] To illustrate more specifically, I show these features at work in ideas spanning both books: his reading of Rousseau's stag hunt in *MSW* and his return to the same material in *TIP*.

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[2]Waltz's conception of theory as such is well documented. I am concerned with his method of reading and interpreting canonical texts. Waltz's approach to explanatory theory was broadly sociological. See Goddard and Nexon 2005; Wæver 2009; Jackson 2016, 123–25; LaRoche and Pratt 2018. See also his own comments in Waltz 1986; Waltz 1997a; Waltz 2004, 98–99.

[3]Waltz 1979, 66.

My argument thus has consequences for how we understand both Waltz's body of work and IR as he influenced it. Waltz's ideas deeply shaped the trajectory of IR theory, through both the school he founded, neorealism, and the broader discourses of images or levels of analysis and of international anarchy.[4] I illustrate by imagining a counterfactual Waltz who foregrounded historical or contextual variation in theory. I suggest a different method of reading might have yielded grist for building different, perhaps more historically situated and heterogeneous theories of international politics.

Waltz's approach to reading canonical political texts was idiosyncratic, and most historians of political thought today would reject some or all of his premises. I aim not to reconstruct a defensible method so much as to document how Waltz read and how his readings shaped his thought. Doing so serves to distinguish two tasks Waltz did not explicitly differentiate: the history of international thought and the writing of IR theory itself. I argue his approach, whatever its limitations, was useful – if not for historians, then for social scientists engaged in theory building.

Below, I proceed in three stages. First, I define and delineate the four precepts I find in Waltz's approach to reading and interpretation. Second, I biographically reconstruct his early development as an interpreter of political theory, documenting influences on his approach to reading. Third, I consider implications for how we assess *TIP*, Waltz, and postwar IR theory more broadly as they approach world politics.

## Waltz's method of interpretation

Waltz placed considerable emphasis on classical or canonical political theory. At the end of a 2011 interview, James Fearon asked him if scholars of politics generally should focus on political philosophy. He answered

> I believe that very strongly. One of the advantages that we have in political science is a great historical body of literature in the western world, largely from Plato onward. But all kinds of different emphases and all kinds of different schools are represented. And you think of Plato and St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas and Machiavelli, I mean, anything that could be of importance politically is represented and written about and discussed and debated at the highest intellectual levels. It's a wonderful literature. And it's a shame that there are people in the field who have not had the benefit of thorough exposure to that literature, not to the exclusion of other things, by any means, but there's enough time to read the really great literature in our field and to do other things as well.[5]

Waltz's doctoral education had focused on political theory, and turned to international politics only later and somewhat incidentally.[6] While his main later

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[4]Waltz's conception of images was the organizing principle of his early work. Waltz 1954, 1959. The term 'image', as against more rigid levels of analysis, was coined by his wife, Helen Waltz, who also did the research for chapter 3 of *Man, the State and War*. See Waltz 2001, ix; 2009, 499. On the 'discourse of anarchy' in IR, see Schmidt 1998; Donnelly 2015.

[5]Walt in Waltz and Fearon 2012, 12. On how 'great thinkers' are received by the field generally, see chapters in Jahn 2006; Vergerio 2019.

[6]In his own words, 'I thought a minor in international relations would be probably the easiest minor I could have and would interfere to the least possible extent with what I was really interested in, which was

interlocutors drew on game-theoretic rationality or sociological theory, he drew at length on texts he regarded as classics.[7] And while *TIP*, his third and most cited book, drew chiefly on structural explanations and philosophy of social science, he remained focused on canonical texts, publishing on Kant[8] and naming five works by Kant, Thucydides, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Smith among the 10 texts that had most influenced him.[9] For Waltz, a historical canon of political thought – in his case, a deeply Eurocentric one – constituted an essential foundation for serious thinking about politics.

However, his approach to these texts is remarkably opaque: he published scant methodological guidance for doing so and associated himself with no particular school in the history of political thought. Drawing on a scattering of remarks across his works, and on the substance of his approach in *MSW*, I identify four elements to Waltz's method. His approach was purposive, textualist, explanatory, and anti-esoteric.

First, Waltz's cross-historical comparisons are structured by problems or questions. Here, he drew on an imperative he claimed to find in Collingwood, to interpret political philosophers by 'seek[ing] out the questions they were attempting to answer'.[10] He focused on a core problem, war, to which he imputed trans-historical properties.[11] This methodological wager provided an anchor point, to which comparisons of quite varied texts could be tethered, against differences of meaning, and audience. His account of the first image compares freely across Milton, Malthus, Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Spinoza, and St Augustine, in the first several pages alone.[12] His third image draws on Thucydides, John Adams, Cobden, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hobbes, and others.[13] So long as the authors address broadly the same question, he implied, differences in their mode and context of inquiry are no barrier to useful comparison.[14]

While it is now nonstandard in the history of political thought, this approach remains more common than we might think. Ronald Beiner compares theorists across centuries, in their answers to the problem of 'civil religion'.[15] Alison McQueen compares realist authors from the Renaissance to the 20th century on

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political philosophy. So that's how I happened to do international relations at all'. Waltz in Waltz and Fearon 2012, 3.

[7]Keohane 1984; Wendt 1999.

[8]Waltz 1997b.This late essay appeared only in French translation. In Waltz's papers, see the English original, Waltz 1996; as well as a draft, Waltz 1995. He had previously published a part of his dissertation on Kant. Waltz 1962.

[9]Waltz 2004.

[10]Waltz 1959, 12.

[11]Precisely *how* Waltz aimed to do so is less clear. The phenomenon he concerned himself with, war, is a persistent enough feature of human history that he did not likely see conceptual ambiguity or drift as a problem.

[12]Waltz 1959, 16–21.

[13]Ibid., 159–66.

[14]Fox noted this purposiveness in a Forward to the book: 'He is concerned not only with what certain towering figures in the history of Western political thought have really meant, but even more with what difference it makes that they thought and wrote as they did. His concern is not an antiquarian one'. ibid., xiii–xiv.

[15]Beiner 2011.

the challenge of apocalyptic politics (thought she frames her study as contextualist).[16] Corey Robin finds unifying themes in conservative political thought across the whole of the modern period.[17] Like *MSW*, these studies are problem or question focused: they identify a theme, question, or applied problem and compare texts on how they engage with it. Waltz, too, aimed 'to pose a central question and identify the answers that can be given to it'.[18]

Third, Waltz distinguished facts or explanations from values or prescriptions, and concerned himself chiefly with the former.[19] The methods section of his dissertation is largely given over to distinguishing between what he called 'analysis' and 'prescription'.[20] Only with causal relationships established could we proceed to consider what was possible – and from there what was to be done. Put differently, Waltz was a realist, in the moral or political sense, even in the domain of his textual methodology.[21] If texts provided reliable causal explanations – he has in mind to evaluate them against one another, relative to the historical record – then, and only then, can we ask what courses of action those explanations would permit or endorse.[22] The purpose of theory then is to make the world cohere analytically.[23] This understanding precludes normative (moral) analysis as an autonomous area of study.[24] For Waltz, *all* analysis was first concerned with the world as it is. 'A prescription based on faulty analysis would be unlikely to produce the desired consequences' Waltz remarks.[25] He appears to take as given that the good in question – peace, however narrowly defined – was desirable.[26]

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[16]McQueen 2018.

[17]Robin 2017. Waltz's approach also has limited parallels in John Rawls' approach, which compares across periods, but does emphasize context, and which compares canonical texts to Rawls' own thought. Rawls 2007; Nițu 2013.

[18]Waltz 1959, 12.

[19]Fact-value distinctions are a well-plumbed philosophical rabbit hole. I aim not to defend Waltz's distinction, so much as to show how it bears on his readings. Waltz's distinction differs from Hume's standard version in being prudentially rather than deductively arrived at. Hume 1960, 469. Hume argues from first principles that no set of facts alone can by reason alone give rise to a value. Waltz aims for prescriptions that can reasonably be expected to work. For context, see a review of metaethics in Sayre-McCord 2014. Waltz arrived at his explanations-first approach early. His MA thesis opened with statements to this effect. Waltz 1950, 1–2. He nonetheless implied an underlying ethical commitment, as we will see below, to avoiding war.

[20]Waltz 1954, 18–19.

[21]'Prescription is logically impossible apart from [theoretical] analysis'. Ibid., 20.

[22]See a critical discussion of Waltz's fact-value distinction in Levine 2012, 136–43. On Waltz's hedging about verification, see LaRoche and Pratt 2018, 160–62. On comparing theory to other theory, not data, Waltz later drew on Lakatos 1970. Waltz 1997a.

[23]As he would later contend, 'if we knew what reality is, theory would serve no purpose'. Waltz 1997a, 913.

[24]This may explain his odd later claim that '[t]here is very little theory in political philosophy'. Waltz in Halliday and Rosenberg 1998, 372. The often-normative texts in canonical Western political thought offer relatively little theory-as-explanation. This was perhaps his meaning when he allowed that political philosophy is nonetheless 'great literature' Waltz in ibid.

[25]Waltz 1954, 21.

[26]This was the crux of complaints from critical IR scholars, and may explain Waltz's expressed confusion regarding essays by Robert Cox and Richard Ashley. Cox 1986; Ashley 1986. 'Reading his [Ashley's] essay is like entering a maze. I never know quite where I am or how to get out'. 'Ashley and Cox', he protested, 'would transcend the world as it is; meanwhile we have to live in it'. In the end, it 'reveals to me no

Second, Waltz was a relatively straightforward textualist. He believed the relevant meanings of canonical works could be derived from texts themselves, independent of sociopolitical context or dialog with other texts. His textualism is most easily seen in the analytical form of *MSW*, which compares freely across periods and genres, without reference to context. His textualism thus underwrites the problem-focused, cross-historical comparisons described above. This contrasts Waltz with the contextualist methods of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School – which *MSW*, in any case, predates.[27] Skinner and his colleagues explain the content of a work or corpus by situating it in intellectual-historical context, emphasizing dialog across texts, under a given period's political circumstances, through which texts' meanings are made clear.[28] Nothing could be further from Waltz's approach. He shared with Skinner *et al.*, a belief that political theory was inseparable from practical concerns, but did not link it to practice in any situated way. Waltz took scant interest in texts as objects of inquiry unto themselves. He focused instead on the explanations they provided or that could be derived from them. Canonical texts, he implied, are viable theoretical resources for the present.

Strict textualism is now an unusual position in the history of political thought.[29] Nonetheless, a broad textualism was once the default approach to interpreting political theory. It was standard to survey works Waltz sometimes relied on and was among the existing approaches that Skinner was concerned to refute.[30] Moreover, many canonical political theorists themselves read and compared relatively freely across periods and contexts. Machiavelli understood himself to be reading and writing in dialog with his Roman antecedents.[31] More recently, as Beiner notes, Hannah Arendt 'accorded greater intellectual urgency to putting her political philosophy in dialog with the great thinkers of the canon than in putting it in dialog with leading contemporaries'.[32] Waltz's approach was, in its way, similar.[33]

Fourth and finally, Waltz concerned himself more or less exclusively with surface meanings. He took no interest in esoteric or Aesopian writing, presuming relevant ideas and arguments are found in the literal or explicit content of texts. In political theory, esoteric reading and writing have been linked chiefly with Leo

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clue about how to write an improved theory of the latter [problem-solving] sort. I am sorry that it does not'. Waltz 1986, 338, 337, 341. All this reflected Waltz's well-known high handedness, but perhaps also a bit of real bafflement. He admits he has 'no quarrel with Cox's concern with counter and latent structures, with historical inquiry, and with speculation about possible futures', but could not see how one would proceed productively in these ways. Ibid., 338. Once theory had to begin with the scope of the possible, these alternate routes were obscured.

[27]Skinner's key early articulation of method appeared a decade after *MSW*. Skinner 1969. Contextualists might note that Waltz implies a transhistorical context, rather than none at all. However, he appears not to have done so in any self-conscious way. My thanks to Knox Peden for pressing me on this.

[28]Such work is now widespread, perhaps dominant in the history of political thought. See methodological points in Skinner Ibid.; 2002, vol. 1; Pocock 2009, and a brief review in McQueen 2018, 15–18.

[29]For defenses of anachronistic reading, see Leslie 1970; Beiner 2013; Green 2015; Frazer 2019.

[30]Skinner 1969. Skinner's targets were many and varied – see also Macpherson 1962.

[31]Schmidt advocates reading Machiavelli himself in the same way. Schmidt, Jr. 2018.

[32]Beiner 2013, 29–30.

[33]There is no indication Waltz was influenced by or particularly aware of later approaches outside the English speaking world, such as genealogy or conceptual history. Foucault 1984; Koselleck 2002.

Strauss and his followers.[34] For Strauss, many if not most historical political theorists held views that made them subject to potential persecution. They therefore coded their meanings 'between the lines', leaving a trail for later philosophers to uncover.[35] The covert dialog between the resulting canon of works forms the basic material for esotericist inquiry.[36] Admittedly, a concern with surface as against covert meaning is less a methodological decision for Waltz (and others) than a default position. Still, it distinguishes him from an important position in the history of political thought. As with Waltz's textualism, the implication is that we can derive meaning straightforwardly from canonical texts.[37]

Waltz did not state all of these propositions explicitly and seems not to have been committed to them in any absolute way. While he aimed to compare texts as regards particular questions or problems, he often defined those problems loosely and adaptively. Thus, *MSW* often slips from comparing the causes of war to comparing the origins of violence as such.[38] In comparing across contexts, he commonly acknowledged differences of origin.[39] He did not reject prescriptive or moral analysis; he merely thought it flowed from practicality.[40] He took his goal – avoiding war – as given.[41] While I have found no indication of him attributing to authors hidden or surreptitious meaning and intents, neither is there a blanket indication that he would not do so.

Waltz's approach also entailed the assumption of a canon – one that was taken as given, relatively fixed, and deeply Eurocentric.[42] This assumption of 'a great historical body of literature in the western world', in which 'anything that could be of importance politically is represented and written about and discussed and debated at the highest intellectual levels' shaped both his writing and his teaching.[43] While hardly surprising, it formed a general basis for much of his thought. Contextualists,

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[34]Straussian ideas gained currency in the USA from the publication of Strauss 1950. On esotericism, see Strauss 1941. For a sustained defense of esoteric writing as a historical phenomenon, see Melzer 2014. Waltz had read Strauss, at least passingly, apparently took no methodological interest in him – see his reading notes for *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Waltz n.d(e).

[35]Strauss 1941, 490.

[36]Strauss, like Waltz, took as given a canon of core texts and believed they provided crucial answers to timeless questions. However, Strauss saw political philosophy as a source of values – of guidance for human flourishing, positioned against positivist social science. Strauss 1957, 346–47. Waltz rejected positivism for non-normative reasons. Jackson 2016, 123–25; LaRoche and Pratt 2018. Strauss also embraced an idiosyncratic cannon, comprising ancient, medieval and early modern 'Western' texts, along with Jewish and Islamic sources.

[37]Strauss recognized multiple rhetorical strategies on authors' parts; esoteric writing was prominent among them. Strauss 1941. He sometimes emphasized surface or straightforward meanings, as points of entry to more abstruse meanings. My thanks to Christopher LaRoche for pushing me on this. For a Straussian reading of Waltz, see Pangle and Ahrensdorf 1999.

[38]Though he does so mainly in addressing psychological explanations he rejects. Waltz 1959, chap. 2.

[39]See e.g. ibid., 21–22.

[40]Waltz 1954, 18–25.

[41]Though see arguments in his writings against the Vietnam War. Waltz 1967a, 1967b.

[42]He was thus comparing, but was not doing comparative political theory, which concerns the global history of political thought. Euben 1997; Dallmayr 2004; Williams and Warren 2014.

[43]Waltz in Waltz and Fearon 2012, 12.

in contrast, take canons to be constructed things.[44] He shared a roughly defined canon with Strauss and his descendants, as well as a belief in enduring problems or questions. Waltz may also have, in assembling a fairly standard set of Eurocentric texts for the task of answering a core IR question, helped to define a canon of classical texts on which the newer enterprise of IR theory could be built.[45] IR theory was just beginning to catalyzing as a self-consciously distinct enterprise in the early 1950s, as Waltz wrote his dissertation.[46] His choice of texts presumably also shaped his work, informing the kind state (Hobbesian) he put at its center as well as his gendered and Eurocentric blind spots.[47]

Waltz's approach may strike current intellectual historians as less than sophisticated. However, none of his imperatives are opposed to close, critical, analytically sustained reading. He could and did read texts closely, as indicated by his grappling with Kant's *Perpetual Peace* over decades.[48] Nor was his approach necessarily distortive.[49] His assessment of Machiavelli is instructive. He notes that a prescription commonly found in the *Prince* – 'The end justifies the means' – is commonly read without enough qualification and or reference to his other works.[50] In place of contextualization, he invoked 'the depth of Machiavelli's understanding of the necessities of politics'.[51] He understood Machiavelli to be invoking core features of politics as such, grounding comparison to Thucydides, Rousseau, and Kant.[52] His approach also left room for considerable debate over meanings. His reading of Kant against democratic peace accounts is exemplary.[53] These debates would

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[44]Skinner and his colleagues are not alone in seeing canons as (sometimes problematically) constructed, in and through social context. Canon disputation was part and parcel of the 'culture wars' of the 1980s and 1990s – debates in which Straussians played leading conservative roles, e.g. Bloom 1987.

[45]IR's canon may now include Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Marx, but not Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Burke, Hegel, and Nietzsche, because Waltz took little interest in them. That said, other sources Waltz cites, such as Montesquieu, John Adams, the Federalist Papers, and Cobden, are also little read in IR today. Also, some of this sorting process may precede Waltz. Systematically evaluating the canon-making process is too large a task to undertake here – my thanks nonetheless to a reviewer for flagging it.

[46]Guilhot 2017, 28, 62.

[47]The broader critique of Eurocentrism in IR is now well established, e.g. Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Kuru 2016. On Waltz specifically, see e.g. Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 344–45. Waltz's canon rendered gendered and racialized experiences invisible. They amount to, in Sjoberg's phrase, 'what Waltz couldn't see' – on the basis of which she provides a feminist reconstruction. Sjoberg 2012. Waltz's gendered title has been subject to much incisive critical prodding. Sylvester 1994, 82; Tickner 1992, 27. On Waltz's distinctively Hobbesian state, see Polansky 2016.

[48]On Kant, see Waltz 1954, 290–96; 1959, 167–68; 1962; 1997b. *MSW* did risk sacrificing depth for breadth. Fox noted, advising Waltz his dissertation prospectus had been approved, that 'With a subject as comprehensive as the title of your dissertation seems to indicate, your greatest problem will be to convince a skeptical reader that you are not being superficial. I am not, myself, greatly worried on this score but mention it only because I think you should be prepared to deal with the criticism that you have sacrificed depth for breadth'. Fox 1952.

[49]In this sense, Waltz's approach is consistent with readings of historical texts in analytical philosophy, concerned to simplify and salvage, rather than explicate in depth, as an end in itself.

[50]Waltz 1959, 212–13.

[51]Ibid., 214.

[52]Ibid., 211, 215–16.

[53]For example, Doyle 1983.

not have been possible were interpretations of classic texts not open to disagreement.

## Waltz's background as a reader

Where did this approach come from? The general political context of Waltz's major works was, of course, the Cold War, by which they were deeply marked. Thus, *MSW* aimed to provide new, structural–theoretical groundwork for American realism, a largely postwar invention. *TIP* served to fill out that realism with reference to Waltz's peers in 1960s and 1970s American IR, bolstered by his reading of philosophy of science in those decades.[54] However, his approach to texts used in his doctoral research must have arisen in the early 1950s, circa his graduate training. I show his method, while shaped in some specific respects by others, was, taken together, distinctively and idiosyncratically his own. Three figures from Waltz's graduate school years at Columbia may have somewhat informed his thinking about theory. Waltz began at Columbia in economics, changing disciplines a year in, to study political theory.[55] The project emerged while preparing for an oral qualifying exam in his second field, IR, on power in world politics.[56] His examiner, and later dissertation advisor, was William T. R. Fox. He also retained notes from classes with two other Columbia professors: Franz Neumann and Justus Buchler.

Fox, best known for coining the term 'superpower',[57] was a scholar of US foreign policy who, along with other American IR scholars, had helped to establish IR as distinct theoretical space, through a series of conferences in the 1950s.[58] He was a central influence on Waltz's career and, as a realist, likely shaped Waltz's insistence on explanation before prescription.[59] Neumann was Frankfurt School critical theorist, who had landed at Columbia during the former institution's wartime expatriation on Morningside Heights. During the war, he worked as an intelligence analyst for the OSS.[60] Waltz held onto notes from one of his Columbia classes, on German

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[54]Waltz contemporary interlocutors in *TIP* include Richard Rosecrance, Stanley Hoffmann, Morton Kaplan, J. David Singer, and more senior figures like Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron. Waltz 1979, chaps. 3–4. Against more classical formulations of realism, he arrayed a grab bag of philosophy of science, drawn from the likes of Thomas Nagel, Ludwig Botzman, and others. Ibid., chap. 1. See a reconstruction of Waltz's role in post-war realism and its conversion to social science in Guilhot 2017.

[55]Halliday and Rosenberg 1998, 371; Waltz and Fearon 2012, 4.

[56]Waltz 2001, vii–viii.

[57]Fox 1944.

[58]Fox was among those who interposed theoretical inquiry against a purely behaviorist science of IR, through a Rockefeller-funded conference in 1954, the year Waltz defended his dissertation. Guilhot 2017, 52–63. He attended the conference and kept minutes. Guilhot 2013, 29 n 13. Waltz later reflected on Fox and his role in the postwar inception of IR theory, noting a further set of conferences at Columbia in 1957. Waltz 1989. On a similar 1953 working group, set up by the Council on Foreign Relations, see e.g. Rosenboim 2019.

[59]Waltz 1954, 18–25. Their letters, from Waltz's PhD through 1959, are extensive. Waltz and Fox 1959.

[60]See discussion in Jeffries 2016, 252–55. Neumann, a Weimar-era Social Democrat, also appears to have passed information to a Soviet intelligence agent, while working for the OSS (Office of Strategic Services – the wartime precursor of the CIA). Laudani 2013, 7; Jeffries 2016, 255. He seems to have seen these actions as consistent with one another, under the larger rubric of opposing fascism. After the war,

political thought.[61] Neumann may have informed his interest in Kant.[62] However, his works reflect little of the dialectical Frankfurt approach. Buchler was something else again. A native New Yorker, he was a philosophical descendent of the American pragmatists and advanced a metaphysics based on 'natural complexes'.[63] His thought appears now to be rarely read.[64] Waltz took Buchler's course on epistemology, for which he took and retained copious notes.[65] Buchler's pragmatism may have shaped Waltz's later anti-positivism and thus his conception of theory. However, there is scant suggestion these three shaped him beyond these limited points.

Elsewhere, the secondary texts Waltz later assigned to his own students may reflect his interpretive preferences. In the 1960s, he assigned or recommended three survey texts in the history of political thought, by George Sabine, and to a lesser extent Charles McIlwain and Sheldon Wolin. His selections, though they post-dated *MSW*, likely reflected his more general predilections. Wolin was a historian of political thought who developed an approach often compared to Thomas Kuhn's view of the history of science.[66] McIlwain offered a workmanlike survey, from the Greeks to the Middle Ages.[67] Sabine's *History of Political Theory* marked the apex of a genre of doorstopper history – works that surveyed a unified 'tradition' of political thought.[68] In the 1960s, it was Waltz's chief secondary text for political theory undergraduate courses.[69] Sabine claimed two basic principles animated it. First, he saw theory as a part of political practice, not an abstraction apart from it. Second, he (like Waltz) endorsed a Humean fact-value distinction.[70] Sabine, McIlwain, and to a lesser extent Wolin exemplified an older style of general survey that elided context and took their canon as given a canon. Waltz's own approach was similar.[71]

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[61]he worked as an analyst for Robert H. Jackson, the lead US prosecutor at Nuremburg, where he wrote reports on 22 members of the Nazi leadership, including Herman Göring. Ibid., 256.

[61]See Waltz' handwritten notes, including a seminar paper he wrote on Hegel's critique of Kant. Waltz n.d(b).

[62]Waltz had already read Kant at length as an undergraduate. Waltz 2004, 64.

[63]Buchler 1966.

[64]See a biographical note in Wallace 2005. Buchler went on to political activism, serving on the ACLU's academic freedom committee. Narvaez 1991.

[65]Waltz n.d(a). Waltz's class notes range over Buchler's core themes, covering Pierce, Whitehead, Dewey, Carnap (and the critique of logical positivism), Collingwood, Cassirer, James, Mead, Royce, and others.

[66]Wolin 1960. On Wolin's ideas and impact, see Connolly 2001; Kuhn 1962.

[67]McIlwain aimed to 'never lose sight of the *growth* of thought while engaged with the detail of its contemporary expression… [and] keep the history of political ideas in closest touch with the actual political development and the institutional growth, but without becoming a mere political or institutional history'. McIlwain 1932, v. In practice this meant a textbook slog through great books, set loosely in historical context.

[68]Farr 2008, 236. First published in 1937, the book went through several revisions. As Farr shows, the genre declined in the face of turns to method, by Strauss, Skinner, and others. Waltz's thinking predated this turn. Ibid., 237–39.

[69]See his syllabi from the period. Waltz 1970.

[70]See Sabine's brief methodological comments. Sabine 1937, Preface.

[71]None of the three are cited in *MSW*, which references scant secondary literature. Wolin post-dates it. Sabine and Wolin are among those Skinner criticized in establishing his later approach. Skinner 1969, 5, 14, 18, 25.

Waltz published almost nothing on how to read texts – his 1959 book includes little on the matter. However, his 1954 dissertation details its methodology over several pages.[72] There, he makes clear he reads for explanations: 'Theoretical research is concerned with causal relations as they have been in the past and are in the present[.]'.[73] As in his later work on methods of theory building, Waltz insists on theory as a supplier of (abstract and unobservable) causation: 'The fact of correlation means nothing, or at least should not be taken to mean anything, apart from the analysis that accompanies it'.[74] He excised most of this discussion from his 1959 book. He inserted in its place a brief reference to theory as question – or problem – driven: 'R. G. Collingwood once suggested that the best way to understand the writings of philosophers is to seek out the questions they were attempting to answer'.[75] This appears central to Waltz's approach to texts, forming the core research design principle of *MSW*: texts may be most usefully compared cross-historically when they address the same question – without particular regard to the contexts in which they wrote.

Waltz's way of reading had limits. For example, while the idea from Collingwood captures Waltz's preference for a problem-centric approach to texts, he also appears to considerably skew its meaning. Collingwood's point was not to establish a basis for cross-historical comparison, but precisely to undermine it. For example, he contrasted accounts of the Greek *polis* in Plato and the early modern absolutist state in Hobbes as differing because they were focused on different historically situated political institutions.[76] The one could not be substituted for the other. It was not just the answers that differed, but the questions that could be asked.[77] We should thus be leery of assuming Waltz reliably read with sustained care. For example, his reading notes for Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* state that 'skimming 1 chapter leads to conclusion that this is pompous nonsense, with some useful data thrown in. Basically she is Hobson – Luxemburg + a little Schumpeter'.[78] This is, at best, an uncharitable reading. Arendt's influence on postwar political thought is expansive. Still, some of her thought clearly lingered. Years later, his

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[72]Waltz 1954, 18–25.

[73]Ibid., 18. Here, Waltz is paraphrasing advice quoted from Gunnar Myrdal's study of American racial politics. Myrdal 1944. This is, so far as I am aware, the only work on race discussed anywhere in Waltz's corpus. This silence may speak volumes. See discussion of Waltz and race in Sabaratnam 2020.

[74]Waltz 1954, 20. Compare Waltz 1986; Waltz 1997a.

[75]Waltz 1959, 12. Waltz provides no citation for the passage. His bibliography includes Collingwood's last book, written in response to WWII Collingwood, like Waltz, was concerned with a practical problem in the world: war. Collingwood, oddly, began the work by endorsing fairly radical interpretive freedom on the part of his audience: 'A reader may take the title of this book in whichever way he pleases'. Collingwood 1999, lix. I found no indication in Waltz's papers that he had read the work. However, he had read and kept notes on Collingwood's memoirs. Waltz n.d(d). In a parallel passage Waltz flagged, Collingwood observed 'That what one learnt depended… on what questions one was asking'. Collingwood 1939, 24–25. The passage refers to Collingwood's student experience with archeology and by analogy philosophy as well.

[76]Collingwood 1939, 61–62.

[77]Collingwood was an influence on Skinner 1969, 50. My thanks to Ian Hall for flagging Waltz's misreading.

[78]Waltz 1974; Arendt 1951. Waltz's notes are handwritten in abbreviations – I have standardized his spelling.

lecture notes on constructivist IR linked an idea he attributed to the George W. Bush Administration – 'we make reality' – to Arendt's conception of a totalitarian state that 'made reality' as well.[79] The idea stayed with him, however glancingly and dismissively he treated it in the first instance.

## Implications

What follows from this assessment? I argue Waltz's method for reading political thought substantially shaped his thought more generally, thus also influencing the field as he shaped it. I argue his approach to reading prefigured, directly or by analogy, key features of his conception of theory-building in *TIP*.[80] Both books are structuralist, parsimonious, and ahistorical.

First and most basically, the account in *TIP* is structural, on specific terms developed in *MSW*. Waltz insists, against what he terms reductionism, that structural theories better explain net outcomes in a political system.[81] Waltz's 1979 structuralism is famously derived directly from his 1959 third image, derived in turn from his comparison of historical political thought. He finds it '[i]mplicit in Thucydides and Alexander Hamilton, [and] made explicit by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau'.[82] He thus conceptualized international politics in *TIP* through categories derived from comparison across theoretical texts in *MSW*.[83]

Second, both books adopt similar kinds of parsimony, such that *MSW* prefigured the approach to theory in *TIP*. Waltz engages in what Gunitsky terms 'cartographic parsimony', through which 'theories, like maps, necessarily distort and simplify in order to be useful'.[84] To evaluate and compare texts in *MSW*, Waltz strips their ideas to core particulars. In *TIP*, he aims to capture only a limited band of political phenomena – states and state systems – to theorize and compare clearly and systematically. He establishes cross-historical structural comparability by simplifying away specific political institutions, cultural circumstances, and military technologies.[85] 'Waltz adopts an instrumentalist conception of theory-creation, arguing that the goal of theory is not to reflect reality but to abstract from it…. [T]

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[79]Waltz 2007. The former quote paraphrases an unnamed senior Bush Administration official: 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'. Quoted in Suskind 2004. On Arendt in/and IR, see Owens 2007, 2009.

[80]His first book, he later wrote, 'did not present a theory of international politics. It did, however, lay the foundation for one. It developed concepts and identified problems that continue to be major concerns for students and policy makers'. Waltz 2001, ix.

[81]Waltz 1979, 38–40. Waltz's use of 'reductionism' is idiosyncratic. In philosophy, 'reductionism' means explaining phenomena in one area with reference to another, stripping the former of autonomy as an area of inquiry – or example of a reduction of the mind to the brain (against mind–body dualism), or biology to chemistry, or chemistry to physics. See discussion in van Riel and Van Gulick 2019. It need not mean reducing structures to agents. One could as easily reduce agents to structures. See similarly Jackson and Nexon 2020, at 28:30.

[82]Waltz 1959, 7.

[83]Strauss 1941; Skinner 1969.

[84]Gunitsky 2019, 711.

[85]The exceptional technology, he later indicated, was nuclear weapons. Waltz 1981.

he process of theory construction cannot be led by pure empiricism'.[86] An alternative – perhaps *the* alternative – to deriving theory from fact is deriving it from other theory. The raw material for theory making was thus past ideas. The parsimony of *MSW*'s comparative method was both a precondition for and analogous to the parsimonious theory in *TIP*.

Third and consistent with this parsimony, *TIP* is ahistorical: it assumes a fixed conception of international structure, varying over time only in a few particulars.[87] These limited differences facilitate transhistorical comparison and contrast. This approach to the history of world politics is prefigured by his attitude to intellectual history in *MSW*, which also enables comparison by eliding historical context. Both deploy cross-historical analysis, oriented by specific problems or questions. *MSW* treats theoretical texts as *TIP* would later treat states and international systems: as isomorphic units, comparable across time and space. In both, the purpose is to confront the problem of war.

While these parallels do not capture the whole of Waltz's approach, they do indicate his positions on reading theory and building theory were closely aligned. And while the causal link is not direct, there is reason to think one led to the other. The purposive, structural, ahistorical, and parsimonious conception of theory in *MSW* recurs fairly directly in *TIP*. Both are predicated on the possibility of transhistorical comparison. The earlier work then appears to have laid the groundwork for the style of theorization undertaken in *TIP*.

We see his approach at work in his well-known reading of a passage in Rousseau: the 'stag hunt' in the *Discourse on Inequality*.[88] Waltz reads Rousseau as addressing a complex of transhistorical problems: violence, survival, and political order. He imputes to Rousseau an explanatory or analytical (as against normative) argument, to do with the conditions of possibility for political order-making. Waltz attributes this view without particular regard to Rousseau's historical context, and without recourse to any implied or esoteric meaning. He then goes looking for the idea, stripped to bare essentials, across a wide swathe of canonical political thought. Whatever we think of this reading, its effect was distinctively Waltzian – the reading appears to have been genuinely new. It also gave rise to reams of later theoretical research: it apparently originated the entire 'stag hunt' discourse in game theory.[89] His specific reading thus had considerable downstream impact.

Waltz's reading of the stag hunt is commonly treated as an artifact of *MSW*. However, it resurfaces in *TIP*, during a rejoinder to Stanley Hoffmann.[90] Hoffmann had argued Waltz misread Rousseau, locating the stag hunt in the larger,

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[86]Gunitsky 2019, 711. *TIP* thus rejected neopositivist induction. Goddard and Nexon 2005; LaRoche and Pratt 2018.

[87]MacKay and LaRoche 2017, 218–19.

[88]Waltz 1959, 167–68; Rousseau 1997, 163.

[89]See an early usage citing him in Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1970, 106. The passage did not previously, from what I can tell, hold any specific interest for political theorists. As Williams shows, Waltz mistakes the parable as applying for all time, whereas Rousseau located it in an early historical 'stage' in human development. Williams 2005, 65–66. Waltz reproduced, perhaps unthinkingly, a colonial conception of the state of nature, from Rousseau, Hobbes, and other social contract theorists. See discussion in Moloney 2011; Crawford 2017.

[90]Hoffmann 1963.

more complex argument Rousseau made. Waltz responded not with contrary textual evidence, but by questioning Hoffmann's approach in general: 'One can … find evidence to support almost any interpretation in an author who writes profoundly and at length about complicated matters'.[91] If texts underdetermine our readings, how should we interpret complex canonical works? Waltz had tacitly answered the question two decades before. We can derive a coherent and defensible reading by knowing the author's purpose and reading with it in mind. That purpose will be explanatory before it is normative. With it in hand, we can usefully compare a given text with others, contrasting and evaluating them, appealing directly to their surface meanings. Waltz's recourse to Rousseau in *TIP* also reminds us that he had first found the self-help logic of the third image in this passage. The stag hunt provides the ideas underwriting Waltz's structural conception of anarchy.[92] His reading of a classical political text, informed by his method, shaped a core idea in his thought.

Did Waltz actually arrive at this approach before his core ideas about world politics? This is the chicken and egg question: perhaps he arrived at an understanding of IR first and developed his method of reading later, in justifying it. There are reasons to think the reading and method informed the theory, more than the other way around. First, this was the order in which they occurred in time. His reading of political theory, and method for arriving at it, appeared before his international theory. Waltz started his graduate training in politics as a political theorist – his interest in IR came later.[93] He developed readings of canonical texts, in his first book, from comparison and analysis of which he distilled analytical categories – which he applied in his third, to produce a systematic theory. Because Waltz spent much of his intellectual life with both, it seems doubtful either wholly takes precedent over the other. However, to the extent a general approach shaped his career course, it involved first comparing and distilling ideas and then later building explanations from them.

How directly did his reading method shape his ideas? A counterfactual Waltz, a necessarily speculative one, who thought differently about how to read and assess theory might have produced a different contribution to IR. A Waltz less moored to transhistorical comparison might have produced a book that, while perhaps as systematic and theoretically intensive as *TIP*, was also more sensitive to historical variation. A Waltz more focused on differences of ideas across historical periods might have recognized a role for those ideas in producing historical differences in world politics. That Waltz might have been better equipped to deal with, for example, the structural transformations John Ruggie identified in his response to *TIP*. Waltz's book, Ruggie charged, 'provides no means by which to account for, or even to describe, the most important contextual change in international politics in this *millennium*: the shift from the medieval to the modern international

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[91]Waltz 1979, 48.

[92]Waltz's conception of anarchy was itself transformative – the word was used more frequently and quite differently after he wrote than before. Donnelly 2015, 394–00.

[93]That he stuck with IR, not political theory, owed to the vagaries of the academic job market: 'You know, I did not set out to be an international politics person. I started out to be a political philosopher; but there were not any jobs available, and they [sic] were in the field of international politics, so that is how I ended up in international politics'. Waltz 2011.

system'.[94] Waltz, of course, was aware of both the Middle Ages and the limits of his theory.[95] But to adjust this theory to fit would have undermined a principle of transhistorical comparison that was central not just to both his 1959 and 1979 books. This counterfactual Waltz – again, necessarily speculative – with different priors about theory, might have produced a quite different later work.

The extent of this hypothetical divergence allows us to see more clearly the shape of Waltz's contribution to the discipline and the specific effect of his method on it. Recovering a systematic view of world politics from his survey of canonical theory required that he render those historically disparate texts comparable. He could only generate new ideas by taking texts as raw materials, rather than as historical phenomena that called for historicized understanding. When Waltz said that he 'started out to be a political philosopher' he implied more than he knew.[96] He has set out to be a political *philosopher*, not a historian of political thought. He was concerned with things in the world to which political thought referred, more than with the historical sources of those thoughts. *MSW* treated texts as resources, not objects of inquiry. Doing so required him to take their meanings as given. Waltz faced the problem described by Nietzsche: 'only something which has no history can be defined'.[97] Waltz needed definitions or systematic meanings – coherent, portable, *comparable* ones – with which to make explanations. Concern with meanings did not require him to historicize, so much as foreclose doing so. This was the price of admission to building new international theory out of past ones.[98]

Waltz was thus concerned with international political thought, but was not a historian of it. Contextualists might argue he thereby consigned himself to misread his sources. But his goal in reading them was not strictly to unpack their situated complexity – to 'get them right' as a task unto itself.[99] Instead, he had begun by addressing himself to a practical problem: to explain the causes of war. Wars were, he wrote, disasters in which 'there is no victory but only varying degrees of defeat'.[100] His aim was not a strictly historical one; it was to confront a pressing problem, ongoing in his lifetime and impinging on his life experience.[101] His method differed from history of political thought because his purpose did.[102]

## Conclusion

I have argued that Waltz's method for reading, interpreting, and comparing texts was purposive, textualist, explanatory, and anti-esoteric. While Waltz likely drew some of this from an assortment of influences during his graduate education and

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[94]Ruggie 1983, 273.

[95]Waltz had been reading the history of the European middle ages since at least his master's degree and retained extensive notes. Waltz n.d(c).

[96]Waltz 2011.

[97]Nietzsche 2006, 53.

[98]On Waltz's refusal of historicism, see also Devetak, who sees resonances with Rawls. Devetak 2014.

[99]See similarly Pocock on the difference between doing theory and writing its history. Pocock 1980.

[100]Waltz 1959, 1.

[101]On Waltz's military service, see Halliday and Rosenberg 1998, 372; Waltz and Fearon 2012, 2–3.

[102]The distinction is not, admittedly, absolute. Recent debates in international law between academic lawyers and historians also concern context and what we can still learn from texts. See e.g. Orford 2013; Koskenniemi 2014; Fitzmaurice 2018; Benton 2019. My thanks to a reviewer for raising this.

early academic career, the combination was idiosyncratically his own. It aimed not at historical accounts of political thought so much as the production and evaluation of new theoretical explanations.

I close by noting his approach's downstream influence on the discipline. While they did not all share his substantive claims, Waltz's approach to reading was often mirrored by his contemporaries, including his critics. While Keohane's theory of international cooperation does not grow out of a survey as large as that in *MSW*, it does reference freely across the theoretical canon, citing Marx, Smith, Hobbes, Gramsci, Locke, Lenin, Hobson, and others.[103] Broadly the same seems true of Wendt.[104] English School theorists appear to assume Hobbes, Locke, Grotius, Kant, and perhaps others can in principle be applied transhistorically.[105] *MSW* itself remains an influential work.[106] IR theorists themselves also appear to read one another purposively and comparatively. The most expansive exceptions are critical IR scholars who reconstruct ideas, past and present, *in situ*.[107] Perhaps not coincidentally, these are also scholars more inclined to historicize the state and other institutions of domination or rule.

More basically, my argument allows us to re-evaluate the form of Waltz's influence on IR. The canons of political thought to which we refer inform our thinking, in terms of both what they include and how we interpret them. Waltz left behind analytical categories shaped not just by the theories he read, but by the assumptions on which those readings were based. We should read his own work accordingly.

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[103]Keohane 1984.

[104]Wendt 1999.

[105]For example, Bull 1977.

[106]At the time of writing, Google Scholar showed more than 2200 citations of *MSW* since 2015 alone (searched 11 Sept 2020).

[107]For example, Cox 1992; Grovogui 1996. Though even then, see Ling's fictional critical dialog between theorists across historical contexts. Ling 2013, 74–85.

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