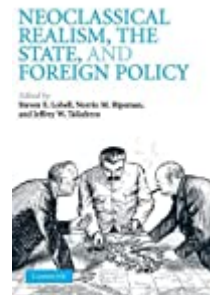




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## The High Cost of Theory in Neoclassical Realism

Why is it necessary for the primary analysts of international power—realists—to write a book in 2009 explaining how states make foreign policy? One would think that realists, with their proud pedigree, had provided answers somewhere along the road. Realists did, as a matter of fact. Classical realists wrote prolifically on foreign policy in the half century 1900-1950. Their motive was quite clear: because liberalism had penetrated the state during the course of the nineteenth century, beginning really with the French Revolution of 1789 and continuing with the imposition of constitutions and parliaments throughout Europe, someone had to remind liberals that politics had its own inner logic, related to power of course, and that politics could not be reduced to simple questions of economics or morality. Foreign policy was about power and indeed should be about power, according to classical realism.

Neoclassical realism (NCR), including this book, represents an attempt to regain the initiative, to once again understand foreign policy via power analysis, now that realism has been through a fifty-to-sixty-year detour

through the social science of structural realism. The latter, which comes in both an offensive and defensive version, is predicated on the argument that classical realism was too complex, that there was no real theory of power politics involved, and that too much of the intellectual effort relied on scholars' intuition and sense of history as opposed to the canons of scientific inquiry. NCR largely buys into this criticism, yet it wants to turn away from structure to focus on foreign policy. Beginning in the mid-1990s, some realists therefore began to theorize how foreign policy (the dependent variable) was shaped by international power (the independent variable) but considerably pushed and pulled by domestic politics (the intervening variable). This became NCR. The focus was on foreign policy, and all three levels of analysis were present (the international, the state, and the individual), and so it was neoclassical. Like structural realism, though, NCR attributes ultimate causal power to the international level and seeks to build real theories. This may sound slightly schizophrenic and so cleaning up the house of NCR becomes one of three primary goals of this book. The three

goals are: (a) to refine and systematize NCR, (b) to set NCR apart from both classical realism and structural realism, and (c) to develop the concept of the state (p. 5).

The book as a whole but notably the introduction does a good job of realizing ambition (b). We learn that NCR sets itself apart from structural realism by defining foreign policy, not recurring patterns of behavior, as its dependent variable. We also learn that NCR shares the classical goal of focusing on the state and its relationship to society (or, how liberal society manages to penetrate the state, which was where the classicals began), but NCR aspires to “greater methodological sophistication” than these classical predecessors (p. 19). This is nicely laid out in the book and in table 1.1 (p. 20) in particular. There is therefore no doubt that this book is a must read for realists who wish to work on foreign policy. It is the first book to take stock of NCR after slightly more than a decade’s worth of intellectual labor, and it will now define a new point of departure. It is clear, concise, at times thought-provoking, and a valuable guide to further research.

The individual contributions focus on ambitions (a) and (c), by and large, and they do so by responding to questions asked by the editors. There are three sets of questions, with one concerning threat assessment (i.e., who gets to define a state’s threats?), another strategic adjustment (i.e., who gets to define the response to threats?), and the final concerning resource extraction (i.e., how do states get resources to actually respond?). The chapters (eight in all, excluding the editors’ introduction [chapter 1] and conclusion) progressively address these questions and while there is some overlap, inevitably, it is clear that chapters 2 and 3 deal with threat assessment, chapters 4-6 with strategic adjustment, and chapters 7-9 with resource extraction.

Chapters 2 and 3 by Steven E. Lobell and Mark R. Brawley, respectively, take on the issue of why foreign policies vary even if we know the threat. Lobell defines a so-called complex threat identification model that informs us why states, even with a fixed threat, sometimes veer off course and get their balancing acts wrong. This can happen, according to the model, because policymakers can disagree on components of enemy power, which is more complex than aggregate levels of power, and then disagree on appropriate responses. Brawley takes this type of dynamic into the international arena: during the interwar years everyone knew that German power was a potential threat, yet they offered contrasting and sometimes contradicting national responses to it. The reason,

Brawley argues, has to do with the nature of the threat: though known, it was not imminent. A permissive environment thus enabled diverse national responses to the same threat. Brawley effectively combines questions one and two above (threat and strategic adaptation).

Chapter 4 by Jennifer Sterling-Folker likewise straddles questions one and two, and she roots her discussion in “bio-political” foundations because “tribalism is a fact of human existence” (p. 110). Tribalism explains why states come to see each other as threats and why strategic adjustment as opposed to continued confrontation can be difficult. Sterling-Folker observes this phenomenon in the case of Chinese-Taiwanese relations. She finds fault with liberalism because it overlooks that tribalism may trump interdependence. Interestingly, she is eager to seek dialogue with constructivists who have theorized identity politics, although these constructivists would no doubt disagree on the inclusion of identity politics in a realist framework. The chapter thus illustrates the way in which NCR is able to fill the middle part of the theoretical equation—that part falling between the independent variable (international power) and the dependent variable (foreign policy decisions)—with analytical stuff that many would say is foreign to realism. These critics would be right when it comes to structural realism but not necessarily in the case of NCR.

Two chapters in the debate on strategic adaptation, chapters 5 and 6, are less strong. Chapter 5 by Colin Dueck confronts pure theories of *Innenpolitik* to argue that domestic politics shape not the “whether” but the “when” and “how” of foreign interventions; chapter 6 by Norrin M. Ripsman proposes that the domestic players yielding vetoes of various sorts over executive decision makers will be able to influence decision making. Neither chapter presents propositions that advance the debate much beyond what was achieved in the introductory chapter. Their case illustrations are short and selected to verify broad ideas, not subject specific NCR claims to strong tests.

Chapters 7 and 8 by Jeffrey Taliaferro and Randall Schweller, respectively, enter into the dynamics of resource extraction. Chapter 7 (Taliaferro) argues that not all states are able to emulate (i.e., copy winners) or innovate: only states that are powerful vis-à-vis society can hope to do so, and of those states it is really only the most vulnerable that will feel compelled to actually do so. Taliaferro’s chapter is sophisticated and interesting and ready to inspire new research in this domain. Chapter 8 by Randall Schweller argues that land powers

in Eurasia have not fought more wars of hegemony not because it was impossible (it was possible) but because it is difficult to define the ideological construction that will inspire people at home and thus mobilize grand resources for grand conquests. Fascism had what it takes in expansion terms, Schweller notes, which is not the case for either realism or liberalism. Schweller's chapter is thought-provoking and it will be interesting to see what Schweller and others will do with the implied argument that we must now integrate state ideology in our approaches.

This point brings us to chapter 9 by Benjamin O. Fordham. The editors categorize the chapter in the resource extraction department but this is not the most interesting part of the story. Fordham argues, in brief, that U.S. foreign policy changed in the course of the Cold War because international factors caused some U.S. policymakers to reverse positions. What Fordham is saying more fundamentally is that you cannot define the external threat without knowing your subject (the decision makers of the state you study). This is not an additive business: external threats do not define a framework within which decision makers act more or less wisely. This business is interactive: threats and decision makers interact. In Fordham's words, we need to know the motive and interests of a state "before anything can be said about the implications of international events and conditions" (p. 255). This stance by Fordham causes the editors to define Fordham as a non-realist. In table 10.1 in the conclusion (p. 283) all realists—all the contributors save Fordham—are located in the left-hand column because their theories contain "Clear information on threats"; Fordham, hinging threat definitions on domestic conditions, is put into the right-hand column, "Unclear information on threats," where liberalists, constructivists and other non-realists presumably also figure.

It is at this point that the book takes a turn that ultimately detracts from its three goals, and the key problem is related to (b)—setting NCR apart from classical and structural realism. All chapters refine the theory and all of them address the state as a concept (ambitions [a] and [c], respectively), but it happens in a context in which NCR has been so defined, so distinguished from classical and structural realism that the achievements in directions (a) and (c) become limited. Put differently, there is a limit to what can be achieved in terms of theory refinement and state conceptualization as long as NCR is skewed the way it is here. The book de facto seeks to associate NCR with structural realism's emphasis on international power because international power is the key

which make threats so easy to identify. If one can easily deduce threats from power, then one enables theory-building, and this is what the book wants. The three thematic questions of the book (who gets to define the threat, respond to it, mobilize resources against it) follow from this alignment with structural realism. First one deduces threats from power, then one examines the making of foreign policy within this context. This is what Fordham calls additive analysis: as an analyst one knows the threat (via one's assumptions), which is then reality, and one subsequently studies how well decision makers respond to reality. Footnote 84 of the introduction (p. 31) is revealing: here we learn that the editors do not wish to examine "variation in the interests of states." It is this move that sets up the book: first an agenda related to threats as power; then contributions examining threat management; then finally a conclusion regarding theories with "Clear information on threats."

The book thus discards the most valuable bridge to the classical literature—namely its insights into state motives and changes herein. Thucydides invoked fear, honor, and interest; Machiavelli talked of men, fox and lions, Hans Morgenthau followed Max Weber and spoke of power, self-interest, and prestige; and Henry Kissinger and Raymond Aron dealt in various types of status quo and revisionism. Classical realists considered these the real building blocs of understanding because if we understand state motives, then we understand what is at stake internationally. Of course, with motives varying independently of external power, there is no possibility of creating a theory like in the field of mathematics, but such is the nature of international politics, noted Aron once. Rationalist theory can in fact be dangerous, as Morgenthau noted, because it can reach a degree of rationalist certitude that creates the belief that politics can be rationally controlled and steered. But rationalism is not the end of the story because human nature involves other dimensions—biology and spirituality, as Morgenthau labeled them—and if we wish to understand power politics, then we must understand what really motivates concrete actors instead of making general assumptions about average actors.[1]

Rational theory is the reason why this book discards motives and their variation. Taliaferro, one of the editors, is quite clear in his analytical chapter: "in order to create a foreign policy theory, one must begin with a set of assumptions about the broad preferences of those charged with making grand strategic decisions on behalf of states" (p. 224). Quite so, which is why the classics gave up on theory. NCR, it seems, has given up on part of reality to

promote theory. Table 10.1 is the clearest evidence.

One might ask whether this is a fair criticism. After all, it is legitimate to have theoretical ambitions, and the editors do acknowledge (in footnote 84) that motives are part of the NCR agenda (it's just that they don't pursue it). My point is that this is really a matter of defining the heart and soul of NCR. If we downplay motives, we lean more heavily on structural realism and favor theory-building. This is so because we have a firm grasp of the independent and dependent variables. If we include motives, we engage classical theory and favor understanding over explaining. We mess up theory, of course, because motives become detached from power yet must be accessed to evaluate power. Randall Schweller's 1998 book, *Deadly Imbalances*, mentioned in footnote 84, considers both power and motives but interestingly does *not* theorize motives (i.e., why do some states become revisionist; why do they remain revisionist?).

If we follow the lead of the book under review here, we head in a direction where neoclassical realism gradually morphs into neostuctural realism for the simple reason that the edifice in time will build on key structuralist assumptions and discard that which the classicals considered essential: motives. I believe the latter direction, the inclusion of motives, is more fruitful if only because the conceptual inventory of this version of NCR is more complete and enables better understandings of foreign policy. This change of emphasis will not violate NCR foundations because as the editors acknowledge, motives form part of the NCR agenda. NCR will have to develop differently, though. It can no longer maintain the neat distinction between international power as the independent variable and domestic stuff (including motives) as intervening variables. It will have to look at the interaction between these factors, and it will become tied to single and comparative case studies of limited reach (i.e., just a few cases) because it will lack a theory of motives.

Positivist theory will be the loser in all this. This loss may not be significant, and this is where the book contains its final clue. Virtually all NCR works, including the chapters in this book, state a general theoretical ambition, which also marks the conclusions that tend to seek further studies to corroborate general propositions, but the bulk of the analyses concerns in-depth case studies. If general theory is the overarching ambition, then NCR should soon arrive at some type of validated general theory (of course, the theory will apply to certain kinds of states put in certain positions, not to all states across the board). This is not about to happen, judging from the NCR literature. I suspect the reason is that NCR scholars typically find their one or few cases so interesting that they wish to understand them in depth. In addition, NCR scholars, we know, appreciate conceptual development and refinement. They are therefore classical realists by heart: concepts and cases are the ingredients in the historical sociology employed by classical realists. It is in the nature of honest disagreements that structural realists have turned their back to this approach and tradition. This is not the case for NCR scholars who, judging by this book at least but also the wider literature, harbor theoretical ambitions on the one hand while practicing classical realist scholarship on the other. There is thus ambiguity in the house of neoclassical realism. Neoclassical scholars should be acutely aware of this because their choices will greatly impact on the unfolding NCR tradition and its balancing act between classical and structural realist scholarship. This book declares its ambition to pull NCR in the latter direction of positivist theory absent a theory of changing motives and interests. The book enlightens and intrigues, and most fundamentally is a timely reminder that much is at stake in the realist debate on foreign policy analysis.

#### Note

[1]. Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

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