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# Fantasy theory

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I applaud Linklater for dreaming the impossible dream: a triple transformation of political community, whereby social relations become more universalistic, less unequal, and more sensitive to cultural differences. The primary mechanism posited for this change is the expansion of dialogic communities, in which insiders and outsiders recognise one another as moral equals and the special ties and 'harmony of dispositions' inherent in bounded communities do not preclude membership within a universal communication community or the right of free movement in a global society. Linklater offers sophisticated and original analysis of a possible post-Westphalian international order centred on this 'thin conception of cosmopolitanism' that should provoke wide debate. Unfortunately, I am not persuaded in the least by his thesis, despite its being repeated like a mantra throughout the volume.

The problem is that Linklater argues by fiat rather than by the weight of hard evidence, which is in scant supply here. Again and again, radical propositions are supported by nothing more than references to some other critical theorist who shares Linklater's vision and/or tendency to rely on slippery, undefined and unmeasured concepts, primarily globalisation and fragmentation. This simply will not do. Whether Linklater, or Kant, or Marx, or Habermas, or other contemporary critical, feminist, postmodern theorists believe that something will happen, must happen, can happen, and should happen, does not make it so—or likely to be so—in the foreseeable future.

Moreover, as a work of critical political theory, it is neither very critical nor very political. To believe, for instance, that the goals of the triple transformation will be advanced by wider dialogic relations, one must naively assume not only that there is an underlying global harmony of interests from which a consensus can be forged on important political and social issues, but that such 'agreements will not be reached by ignoring or suppressing marginal and dissident voices' (p. 41). In this view as in others, Linklater simply skates over the central rationalist-realist explanations for international conflict and the struggle for power and security, e.g., states have an incentive to misrepresent private information about their capabilities and resolve, and they may be unable to commit credibly to uphold bargains that they would mutually prefer to war;[1] the nature of many international disputes are indivisible and therefore do not admit compromise; states exist under conditions of material and social scarcity with no sovereign arbiter to settle and enforce distributional disputes. As long as things commonly enjoyed cannot be commonly shared, indivi-

[1] James Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations For War', *International Organization*, 49: 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.



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duals and groups will seek to influence and control others and their environment; that is, they will struggle for social and material power. That is what politics is all about and what distinguishes it from other modes of human behaviour. Politics so defined is largely absent from Linklater's book.

Leaving aside the problem of indivisible scarce goods, a meaningful reduction in global material inequality would require significant sacrifices from those enjoying the good life. Surely, no one really believes that the 'haves' will voluntarily hand over their riches to the 'have-nots'. There is no historical precedent for such altruism on a global scale, and, no matter how much we all communicate with each other in the future, I cannot imagine that human nature will change so dramatically in my lifetime. Thus, unless one desperately wants to believe in this alternative future world, Linklater's book will appear as little more than an intellectual exercise in historical speculation and theoretical wishful thinking along familar liberal lines.

Nevertheless, Linklater's book will no doubt be hailed as one of the most important and powerful works of international theory in decades. After all, there is no shortage of liberals among academics, and Linklater tells them exactly what they want to hear: human relations can and will someday soon be governed by global dialogue and consent rather than by force and power. Here, Gilpin's remarks on liberal intolerance and its roots in liberal thought capture the thrust and appeal of Linklater's views:

> Liberals . . . believe in the overwhelming power of ideas; ideas in and of themselves are believed to move the world. (How else can one explain the fact that most professors are liberals!) Right thinking leads to right action and, of course, wrong thinking to wrong action. Therefore, the task of the liberal is to convert the benighted and to make the world over in the liberal's image. In the liberal's lexicon, therefore, benevolent 'truths' must be promulgated; malevolent 'untruths' such as those held by realists, must be expunged lest they cause mischief.[2]

More than a cause of mere mischief, realists appear in Linklater's eyes as members of an insidious, centuries-long conspiracy (à la Thomas Pynchon) called the totalizing project, 'the high point' of which 'was reached in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia' (p. 213). His discussion of neorealism gives the strange impression that Waltz set out to construct the ultimate theoretical critique of reformist approaches to world politics—the final culmination of the grand realist plot to enslave and divide the human race by means of the state's monopoly power. Indeed, neorealists go so far as to claim that 'international anarchy prevents human beings from leading a moral life' (p. 61). One could, perhaps, reach such a verdict from Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, but it would have to be a particularly tortured reading of it. True, neorealism is not a theory about the process of historical change or the possibility of creating an alternative world. It does not, however, gainsay these pursuits; it simply says nothing about them. Instead, neorealism seeks to understand and explain constant features of the current epoch of world politics, in which states are the primary actors on the world stage and principal aggregations of political power.

Specifically, Waltz shows how the interaction of states generates a structure that constrains them from taking certain actions and disposes them toward taking others. As a theory of international politics, neorealism resides at the systemic-structural

[2] Robert Gilpin, 'No One Loves a Political Realist', *Security Studies*, 5: 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 3-4.

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level of analysis or third image; theories that include unit-level causal variables are, in Waltz's view, not systemic but rather reductionist. Like any good (useful) theory, neorealism excludes virtually all of reality's complexity and does not claim to explain everything (otherwise it would not be a theory). Derived in part from economic theories of imperfect competition and oligopolistic markets, neorealism yields only imprecise predictions and precious few of them; from theories of competition among a small number of powerful actors able to manipulate their environment and each other, outcomes are necessarily indeterminate. What Waltz's theory tells us is 'a small number of big and important things' about international politics: how external forces shape, pull, and shove states' behaviour in certain directions and not others; why states similarly situated in the international system behave similarly despite internal differences; and why 'the style and substance of international politics has remained strikingly constant' through all of the changes in social, economic, political, and military relations and activities that have occurred since the birth of the modern state system in 1648.[3]

Neorealists believe that a truly systemic theory—one that does not confound the internal attributes of states with their external environment—is required for an adequate understanding of international politics. But they do not claim, as Linklater suggests, that internal forces have no effect on the behaviour of states. To the contrary, Waltz declares: 'Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous predictions. An international political theory can explain states' behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens.'[4] Because it is a theory of international politics and not one of foreign policy, neorealism says nothing about the causal effects of national- or unit-level processes and attributes. But this is not to say that all that is important for a system is its structure, and so we can safely ignore its constituent units. It is an admission that the construction of a grand theory of internal and external politics is unlikely anytime soon.

Linklater's thesis about the emergence of 'new forms of political community which sever the links between sovereignty, territoriality, citizenship, and nationalism' rests on his conviction that 'various trends create the expectation of [the sovereign state's] steady decline as the most effective and legitimate instrument of close political cooperation' (p. 34). (Can any liberal resist retelling the 'hollow state' myth?) Linklater admits that 'neo-realism recognises [sovereign states] are unlikely to last forever' (p. 15) but then lambasts the theory for obstructing challenges to the 'totalizing project, in which states seek to construct homogeneous national communities which are sharply distinguished from the world of outsiders and largely unconcerned about their interests' (p. 16). Curiously, Linklater himself concludes that he does 'not anticipate the demise of the state but envisage[s] its reconstruction . . . This is not to advance the unlikely proposition that conventional state structures either will or should disappear, but rather to suggest that states should assume a

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Response to My Critics,' in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 329.

[4] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy', *Security Studies*, 6: 1 (Autumn 1996), p. 57.

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number of responsibilities which have usually been avoided in the past' (p. 44). Is this a challenge to the neorealist view of the primacy of states in world politics?

Linklater rightly observes: 'All such approaches—critical-theoretical, postmodern, feminist and liberal—have defined their identity through a series of challenges to neo-realism' (p. 15). If he is also correct that 'the theoretical challenge to neo-realism has largely succeeded' (p. 23), why, one wonders, is Waltz's theory still being used as *the* springboard for every conceivable theoretical discussion of international relations, even those as far removed from the concerns of neorealism as Linklater's normative ideas about the transformation of citizenship and the modern political community? In other words, why have Waltz's ideas become the standard grammar of the discipline? The answer is simple: neorealism remains the most coherent, elegant, and powerful theoretical perspective that addresses the central issues of the field, *viz.*, war and peace, conflict and cooperation. Unparalleled in the clarity of its deductive logic, neorealism is the yardstick by which all other theories are measured and therefore *the* obvious target for those who believe they have built a better mousetrap. Since comprehensive and careful scrutiny of these so-called 'successful challenges' to neorealism is beyond the scope of this essay, a few brief observations about the constructivist research program will have to suffice for present purposes.

Referring to Alexander Wendt's constructivist challenge to neorealist theory, Linklater writes: 'Neo-realism regards the learned and alterable behaviour of the major powers as inherent features of an immutable anarchy. But as an influential formulation correctly maintains, anarchy is what states make of it: the propensity for inter-state violence is not inherent in anarchy itself but is a function of how states have responded to inernational anarchy by constituting themselves as exclusionary and egotistical units' (p. 18). Wendt's claim that power politics is not a necessary consequence of anarchy is far less persuasive than Linklater suggests, however. In theory, Wendt is correct. An anarchic realm composed solely of angels, all with the certain knowledge that every other member is also a true angel and cannot be otherwise, might indeed be governed by other-regarding rather than self-regarding behaviour. If we introduce to this world the possibility of predation (a devil in disguise, so to speak), or one or two powerful undisguised devils, or a history of predation, self-regarding behaviour associated with power politics quickly emerges and drives out other-regarding behaviour. Wendt himself admits that a few bad apples will spoil the whole barrel. In practice, therefore, it is highly improbable that anarchy will ever lead to other-regarding behaviour.

It is not my intention to denigrate Wendt's theoretical insights, most of which I find quite compelling and all of which strike me as provocative and intelligent. It is simply to recognize that the task of the normative theorist is to imagine possible, if not entirely plausible, other worlds. Practitioners of international politics, however, understand that foreign policy is too serious a business to entertain utopian ideas about dramatically reconstructed social relations; confronted by weighty foreign-policy decisions, they do not enjoy the luxury of retreating into a fantasy world of their own creation but instead must act under real-world constraints, knowing that bad judgment can lead to the subjugation or extinction of the state and its citizens.

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