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Introduction by Stephen M. Walt

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### Introduction by Stephen M. Walt, Harvard Kennedy School

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Where do new theories come from? In his landmark *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz suggested that “the long process of painful trial and error will not lead to the construction of a theory unless at some point a brilliant intuition flashes, a creative idea emerges. One cannot say how the intuition comes and how the idea is born. One can say what they will be about.”<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot’s “How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz’s Neorealism” is a fascinating and provocative reconstruction of the “painful trial and error”<sup>2</sup> that (supposedly) led to Waltz’s neorealist theory. They maintain Waltz’s overarching purpose was to rescue realism from the elitist, anti-liberal instincts of its classical European proponents—most notably University of Chicago professor Hans J. Morgenthau—and thus to reconcile a broadly realist outlook on world politics with the core values of American liberalism.

In Bessner and Guilhot’s account, Waltz did this by removing domestic politics and decision-making from his theory, replacing them with concepts drawn from cybernetics, and focusing attention on the systemic level. War, alliances, and other international outcomes were explained by “the system,” rather than by the characteristics of governments or the decisions of individual leaders. To explain individual state behavior, Waltz argued—not always convincingly—that one needed a separate theory of foreign policy. According to Bessner and Guilhot, taking domestic politics and decision-making out of the equation allowed Waltz to “translate realism into a theoretical language fully compatible with American liberalism.”<sup>3</sup> In short, they portray the desire to reconcile liberalism and realism as central to Waltz’s entire intellectual project.

Are they correct? In this ISSF symposium, Campbell Craig, William Inboden, Robert Jervis, and Robert Vitalis offer competing assessments of the Bessner/Guilhot thesis, Waltz’s scholarly motivations, and the status of realist thought today. The diverse perspectives they present raise important issues for realists and non-realists alike.

Inboden’s review does not confront the Bessner/Guilhot thesis directly, though he describes it as “insightful and somewhat persuasive.” Instead, he suggests Bessner and Guilhot should have paid more attention to realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who was both an influential “classical” realist and a more enthusiastic defender of liberal democracy than Morgenthau. It is not clear how paying greater attention to Niebuhr would alter Bessner and Guilhot’s interpretation of Waltz, but Inboden’s claim that the classical realists were not reflexively illiberal is on the money and a potentially telling blow. After all, if some classical realists were also enthusiastic proponents of liberalism, there was little need for Waltz to try to reconcile them.

Where Inboden errs is in his discussion of realism’s relationship to contemporary U.S. foreign policy-making. In particular, he thinks today’s realists are “perplexed” by their lack of policy influence and recent U.S. foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Waltz, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, “How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz’s Neorealism,” *International Security* 40:2 (Fall 2015), 89.

policy actions are “virtually unintelligible to most adherents of Waltz’s neorealism.” This claim, as former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz might say, is “wildly off the mark.” Many contemporary realists are disturbed by the recurring failures of U.S. foreign policy—and at this point how could one not be?—but realist theory also provides a ready explanation for these recent follies. Specifically, the end of the Cold War left the United States as the most powerful state on the planet by a wide margin, with no other major power to check it. This condition allowed unit-level factors (e.g., ideological fixations, interest groups, etc.) to exert greater influence over its foreign policy decisions than was the case during the Cold War (or for that matter any time before 1989).

To put it bluntly, when a state is as powerful and secure as the United States is at present, it does not have to be very smart and it does not have to pay as much attention to the constraints that realists emphasize. Yet realism also warns that even powerful states will pay a significant price when they ignore power politics and succumb to hubris, which is precisely what has happened to the United States since the early 1990s. The result has been a series of foreign policy debacles—most notably in Iraq but not limited to that particular tragedy—just as many realists had foreseen.<sup>4</sup>

In his contribution, Vitalis summarizes the Bessner/Guilhot thesis and highlights Waltz’s aversion to the rational actor assumption.<sup>5</sup> He also makes the important point that Bessner and Guilhot offer no direct evidence of Waltz’s motivations for proceeding as they say he did. They believe Waltz was consciously seeking to reconcile a realist view of world politics with the liberal principles of American democracy, but their article contains no diary entries, private letters, transcripts, or other materials showing that Waltz was troubled by the supposed tension between realism and liberalism or that he regarded this issue as the central problem his theory had to solve.

Here Robert Jervis’s comment gets to the heart of the matter. Drawing on his long friendship with Waltz and extensive knowledge of his thinking, Jervis argues that Waltz’s real motives were quite different from the ones inferred by Bessner and Guilhot. In particular, he suggests that Waltz’s main goals were to explain why bipolarity was more stable than multipolarity, develop a theory that identified the unique impact that systemic effects have on states or other political actors, and thus to explain continuities of ‘self-help’ behavior across time and space. In addition, Waltz also sought to place the unsystematic hodge-podge of classical realist arguments on a firmer philosophical foundation, while avoiding the inductivist fallacies of behavioralism.

Jervis also argues that Bessner and Guilhot have misinterpreted *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*,<sup>6</sup> probably Waltz’s least-read work. This book was Waltz’s only detailed empirical study, and it directly

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, “What Would a Realist World Have Looked Like?” *Foreign Policy* (online), January 8, 2016; at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/08/what-would-a-realist-world-have-looked-like-iraq-syria-iran-obama-bush-clinton/>

<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of this issue, see John J. Mearsheimer, “Reckless States and Realism,” *International Relations* 23:2 (2009): 241-256.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

compares decision-making processes in two major power democracies (the United States and Great Britain). As Jervis points out, the central purpose of the book is not to defend liberalism by demonstrating that democracies could conduct foreign policy tolerably well, but rather to show how the structure of different democratic orders (one parliamentary and one presidential) produces different policy behavior. Thus, the book is less a defense of liberalism and more an elaboration on the importance of political structures, in this case operating inside countries rather than between them.

Jervis's account of Waltz's scholarly motivations is consistent with my own experience as one of Waltz's students in the late 1970s. Although we read draft chapters of *Theory of International Politics* in his graduate-level IR theory seminar, I cannot recall him ever mentioning the tension between realism and liberalism emphasized in the Bessner and Guilhot essay. To the extent 'liberalism' was discussed at all, it was his well-known skepticism about the liberal theories of economic interdependence that were then in vogue.

Moreover, had defending political liberalism been his primary objective, one might have expected *Theory of International Politics* to begin with that issue and for Waltz to discuss it in detail somewhere in the book. But he never does. Instead, the book's opening chapter ("Laws and Theories") begins with a spirited attack on inductivism and proceeds to a defense of the indispensability of theory and an account of what theories are, how they are made, and how they should be tested. His target is manifestly not the illiberal tendencies of classical realism, but rather scholars of all stripes whose theorizing falls short of proper philosophy of science standards.

Campbell Craig echoes this view, by asking why Waltz's structural realism supplanted the "classical" versions presented by Carr, Niebuhr, and Morgenthau. His answer, which I think is correct, is that "it constituted a genuine philosophical advancement." In Craig's view, Waltz's use of Emile Durkheim and Karl Popper's theories (along with some basic ideas from oligopoly theory) gave his work an explanatory power, parsimony, and rigor that "a Classical Realism wedded to hazy notions of human nature could not compete with."

One might add that structural realism does a better job of anticipating some big real-world events than Craig acknowledges. He believes it was "wounded (some would say mortally) by its failure to predict the peaceful end of the Cold War," but here Craig has forgotten Waltz's own writings on that subject. In *Theory of International Politics*, for example, Waltz describes the considerable handicaps the Soviet Union faced in its competition with the United States, and remarks that "the question to ask is not whether a third or fourth country will enter the circle of great powers in the foreseeable future but rather whether the Soviet Union can keep up."<sup>7</sup> The answer, as Waltz anticipated, was that it could not. Although structural theories such as neorealism are designed to explain continuities rather than change, in this case Waltz's theoretical perspective helped him understand what sort of change was possible. Given the number of people who believed the Soviet Union was rapidly overtaking the United States in the late 1970s, it was a remarkably bold and prescient insight.

This episode also highlights a key difference between Waltz and the classical realists with whom he is frequently compared. Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Henry Kissinger, and George F. Kennan were brooding

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<sup>7</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 179-180. On this point see also William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 19:3 (Winter 1994-1995): 91-129.

pessimists for whom the wolf was always at the door (or at least lurking in the neighborhood).<sup>8</sup> Each fretted about different things, to be sure, but none could ever be accused of being overly optimistic about the state of the world in general or U.S. security in particular.

Waltz, by contrast, was inherently optimistic, both as a theorist but also when he wrote about concrete foreign policy and national security issues. He believed bipolarity was stable. He understood that Vietnam's fate mattered little to the global balance of power.<sup>9</sup> He was convinced that the United States was much stronger than the Soviet Union and that U.S. officials routinely exaggerated foreign dangers. He thought a Soviet invasion of Persian Gulf was unlikely and easily deterred.<sup>10</sup> He did not favor the rapid proliferation of nuclear weapons, but he was more sanguine about their "slow spread" than most experts and believed they could be stabilizing in certain contexts (such as Iran).<sup>11</sup>

Among other things, this aspect of Waltz's *oeuvre* is why I am skeptical of the Bessner and Guilhot thesis, despite my admiration for the impressive scholarship and many insights they present. Because Waltz believed that the United States was remarkably secure, bipolarity was stable, and nuclear weapons reinforced these reassuring features of world affairs, he would not have thought the United States had to abandon its liberal creed in order to survive and prosper. In Waltz's mind, in short, the tensions between realpolitik and American liberalism were neither powerful nor profound, and there was little need for him (or anyone else) to construct a theory to reconcile them.

#### Participants:

**Daniel Bessner** is an Assistant Professor in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He spent the 2015-2016 academic year as an International Security and U.S. Foreign Policy Postdoctoral Fellow at Dartmouth College's John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding and the 2013-2014 academic year as a Foreign Policy, Security Studies, and Diplomatic History Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell University's Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies. His first book, provisionally entitled *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual*, is under contract with the United States in the World series at Cornell University Press.

**Nicolas Guilhot** is research professor at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and visiting scholar at NYU. His work sits at the intersection political theory, the history of political thought and international relations. His publications include *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of*

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in 1979 Morgenthau gloomily predicted "the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable to survive for long." Quoted in Francis Boyle, *World Politics and International Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 11:3 (September 1967): 199-211.

<sup>10</sup> See Kenneth N. Waltz, "A Strategy for the Rapid Deployment Force," *International Security* 5:4 (Spring 1981): 49-73.

<sup>11</sup> See Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1981), and "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* 91:4 (July/August 2012): 2-5.

*Global Order* (Columbia University Press, 2005), *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011), and a forthcoming book on political realism: *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Thought in the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

**Stephen M. Walt** is Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, co-editor of the *Cornell Studies in Security Affairs*, and a contributing editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine. He is the author of *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), *Revolution and War* (1996), *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (2005), and (with John J. Mearsheimer), *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007). He was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005 and received a Distinguished Senior Scholar Award from the International Studies Association in 2014.

**Campbell Craig** is Professor of International Relations at Cardiff University. He has held senior fellowships at Yale University, the Norwegian Nobel Institute, the European University Institute, and Bristol University. Currently, he is co-writing a book (with Jan Ruzicka) on U.S. unipolar preponderance and nuclear nonproliferation, to be published by Cornell University Press. Past work includes *America's Cold War: the Politics of Insecurity* (Harvard University Press, 2009; with Fred Logevall) and *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

**William Inboden** holds the William Powers, Jr. Chair as Executive Director of the Clements Center for National Security, and is also Associate Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, both at the University of Texas-Austin. He is the author of *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) as well as numerous articles and book chapters. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a contributing editor to *Foreign Policy* magazine, and his commentary has appeared in numerous outlets including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, NPR, Sky News, BBC, and CNN. His previous policy positions include service on the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff and as Senior Director for Strategic Planning on the National Security Council.

**Robert Jervis** is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Cornell University Press, 2010). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology, ISA's Security Studies Section, and APSA's Foreign Policy Section, and he has received honorary degrees from the University of Venice and Oberlin College. In 2006 he received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war.

**Robert Vitalis** teaches political science at the University of Pennsylvania. The London *Guardian* named his *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, 2006) a book of the year. His new book, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2015) moves away from the Middle East to explore the unwritten history of racism and imperialism in American disciplinary international relations and the recovery of its critical "Howard School" tradition.

**Review by Campbell Craig, Cardiff University**

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Over the past ten or fifteen years Classical Realism has made something of a comeback. This intellectual tradition emerged during and after the Second World War, largely but not only in the United States, but it was effectively eclipsed in the 1960s and 1970s by Structural Realism, a school basically invented by Kenneth Waltz. Yet Structural Realism has itself faltered lately, wounded (some say mortally) by its inability to predict - or even conceive of - the peaceful end of the Cold War, to account for the persistence of U.S. unipolar preponderance, and to have much to say about the array of sub-national or transnational threats to international security obtaining today.

Because the great Classical Realists – Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, E.H. Carr – rejected predictive and positivist social science, did not regard the balance of power as a mechanical law, and were able to imagine international political orders beyond the interstate system, their more modest and historically-informed judgements often seem wiser and more prescient than the laws and theories of their successors.<sup>1</sup> Thus the question arises: why did Structural Realism ever supplant Classical Realism in the first place? What, to put it more specifically, was it about Waltz's new Realism that made it more attractive than the work of his predecessors?

Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot provide an interesting answer to this long-debated question. They argue that Waltz's structural approach, by finding the origins of international conflict in the very nature of the anarchical system rather than blaming it on poor decisions made by actual political leaders, allowed him to finesse a problem that had bedevilled Classical Realists, especially Hans Morgenthau: the problem of democratic foreign policy-making. Morgenthau and other Realists (most notably, Kennan) worried that the democratic masses were incapable of supporting prudent foreign policies; nor, crucially, were they inclined to give leeway to charismatic leaders determined to ignore petty politics in pursuit of the larger national interest. Therefore, these thinkers tended to make anti-democratic, elitist arguments in their analysis of both particular foreign policies and of the larger U.S. approach to the rest of the world. This threatened to drive a wedge between Realism and American democracy.

Waltz's move, according to Bessner and Guilhot, was to circumvent this danger by taking international politics out of the hands of (democratic) decision-makers. If the structure of the international system was what really determined whether nations went to war or remained at peace, how much they spent on weaponry, or what kind of alliances they established, then there was no need for the kind of elitist leader the Classical Realists sought. Indeed, in some sense there was no need for leaders, or decisions, at all. Bessner and Guilhot characterise Waltz's approach here as "cybernetic," (106) by which they mean that under his vision of the international system foreign policy becomes depersonalised, with a supra-human structure making the most important decisions. Democracy thus could be left out of the debate entirely.

Waltz's conception of bipolarity, particularly in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*, fits Bessner and Guilhot's interpretation very well. Waltz argued that a bipolar order such as the Cold War was inherently more stable than multipolar orders, because there was far less need for alliance-building, adroit diplomacy, and careful assessments of the intentions of several nations, both friend and foe. There was far less need, in

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Richard Ned Lebow, 'Classical Realism,' in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds) *International Relations Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 52-70.

other words, for difficult human decision-making. All the US (and the USSR) had to do was to maintain rough parity in their capabilities (to balance internally, in IR parlance), a task that any good computer could manage. Bessner and Guilhot's characterisation of Waltz's theorising here is brilliant.

Yet in making their case the two authors make questionable historical claims about Classical Realism, do not engage with alternative arguments about the rise of Structural Realism, and omit discussion of Waltz's career after 1979. The rest of this review will discuss these points.

In their lengthy treatment of Morgenthau's Classical Realism, which indeed occupies roughly half of the article, Bessner and Guilhot portray it as an elitist, backward-looking worldview, contemptuous of modern democracy, and wedded to an "eighteenth century" (95) vision of high interstate politics. There is some truth to this claim (see, especially, Kennan<sup>2</sup>), but it ignores crucial contrary evidence. On one hand, other important Classical Realists do not fit this description whatsoever. Niebuhr, for example, argued at length that the whole point of Realism was to preserve democracy, which he believed was a permanent political good in a world of moral ambiguity and trade-offs.<sup>3</sup> His own political activism, both as a stalwart figure in the internationalist left of the Democratic Party, and as an advocate for social justice, especially for civil rights for black Americans, belies the picture of an anti-democratic Classical Realism that Guilhot and Bessner paint.

Perhaps even more important, their suggestion that Morgenthau was devoted to the idea of an immutable interstate order is incorrect. Over the past ten years or so, a large literature has arisen which demonstrates how Classical Realists were far more willing to imagine the transformation of such an order than was previously understood.<sup>4</sup> Morgenthau's writings leave no doubt about this. In the early 1960s, he responded to the possibility of omnicidal nuclear war by stating that "no such radical transformation of the structure of international relations has ever occurred in history." The threat of nuclear war, he declared, "suggests the abolition of international relations itself through the merger of all national sovereignties into one world state which would have a monopoly of the most destructive instruments of violence."<sup>5</sup> These are not the words of a backward-looking reactionary.

Morgenthau's earlier Cold-War writing, and in particular the book Bessner and Guilhot highlight – *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* – certainly provide ample evidence for their portrayal.<sup>6</sup> But intellectual history requires

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<sup>2</sup> On Kennan's elitism, see the second volume of his *Memoirs* (Pantheon Books, 1983), and *Around the Cragged Hill* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

<sup>4</sup> See William Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See Hans J. Morgenthau, "Death in the Nuclear Age," *Commentary* 32:3 (September 1961).

<sup>6</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946). A crucial discussion is Michael Williams, "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 58:4 (2004): 633-665.

tracing how, and why, ideas change over time. Bessner and Guilhot do this with Waltz, but not with Morgenthau.

The article's central point is that Waltz's Structural Realism finessed the Classical Realist democracy problem by ceding decision-making to the system, and that this move best explains why his theory took hold in high Cold-War America. As noted, I find this a fascinating and brilliant claim, and believe that it invites us to look at Waltz's work, especially *Theory of International Politics*, in a new light. I think it also says something about Structural Realism's difficulties in coping with a unipolar order.

The question remains, however, whether their explanation is better than extant ones. One of these takes Waltz at his word. His work supplanted Classical Realism because it constituted a genuine philosophical advancement: Waltz developed a compelling new social science that deployed important methodologies, particularly Emile Durkheim's distinction between solidary and mechanical societies, and Karl Popper's rejection of reductionism, with which a Classical Realism wedded to hazy notions of human nature could not theoretically compete. Certainly, this is what Waltz thought he was doing: he (and I) would have violently disagreed with the assertion by Guilhot and Bessner that his first book, *Man, the State and War*<sup>7</sup>, represented more of a continuation of Classical Realist thought than a break with it.<sup>8</sup> That book is a tour de force, one that identifies the fundamental weaknesses of Classical Realism (and other IR schools) and introduces a novel way of considering international relations with a concision and originality we can only admire. Waltz believed that he was forging a new social science, focused on this argument in his major articles before and after *Man, the State and War*, and said to many (including the present author) that the philosophical insight in that book was his most important intellectual achievement. Waltz, like many of us, was a serious scholar who believed that he had something new to say, recognised that he had an opportunity to surpass a faltering tradition, and pressed his case home. Why not take that at face value?

A second interpretation of the Waltzian move argues that the nuclear revolution presented to Classical Realists a choice between justifying nuclear war in the name of the *ultima ratio* or abandoning their conception of interstate anarchy and, indeed, U.S. Cold-War strategy. This was such an agonising problem that it staggered confident thinkers like Niebuhr and Morgenthau, exacerbating the philosophical and methodological inconsistencies in their work that Waltz so acutely identified. Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Kennan, and many others in the Classical tradition could find no way to get around the core dilemma of the nuclear revolution, which was that a war for state survival could be an act of national, and perhaps species, suicide.<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, Morgenthau thought that this problem so revolutionised international politics that it invalidated the state system and necessitated world government. By removing the responsibility for waging such a war from the hands of actual people, and so normative conceptions of foreign policy, Waltz was able to

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: a Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> See "Interview with Ken Waltz," conducted by Justin Rosenberg and Fred Halliday, *Review of International Studies* 24:3 (July 1998): 371-386, and Cornelia Beyer, *Thinking about World Peace: a Reappraisal of Kenneth Waltz's Man, the State and War* (Sussex University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this effect upon Realist intellectuals outside of American IR, see Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

dispense with all of this at one stroke, thereby absolving himself, and everyone else, of blame for a war that could exterminate the human race. According to Structural Realism, as long as the international system remains anarchical a nuclear war is going to happen, and there is nothing we can do about it. It is a fatalistic, but also liberating, move.

As we can see, there is an obvious similarity between the ‘cybernetic’ and the ‘nuclear’ explanations for the success of Structural Realism: both see it as a means of keeping the Realist tradition alive and well in the US by finessing problems that Classical Realism could not solve. Which is the more convincing?

This, of course, is for the reader to judge, but it is instructive to note what Waltz did after the publication of *Theory of International Politics* after 1979. His main work between then and his death in 2013, culminating in a piece in *Foreign Affairs*<sup>10</sup> calling for an Iranian nuclear bomb, has been to advocate the spread of nuclear weapons, precisely because he argues this is the best way to avoid a nuclear war. He has, echoing Morgenthau, called the nuclear revolution the most important event in modern international (‘and perhaps all’) history; he has written on this topic in various fora, including an epochal article in 1990 and a series of debates with Scott Sagan.<sup>11</sup> He has done all of this despite his long-standing theoretical claim that human action and thus normative argumentation does not, in the end, determine the core outcomes of international politics, of which major war is the most important, as the title of his first book indicates. In short, while he ceded decision-making to the system in his formal theorising, he tried to grab it back on the question of nuclear-war avoidance. Ken Waltz became preoccupied with the problem of nuclear war after 1979. Perhaps it was a kind of atonement for the rationale, and implications, of the Structural Realism he created.

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See especially Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990), and, with Scott Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: an Enduring Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

Review by William Inboden, University of Texas-Austin

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*The Tragedy of Academic Realism*

One can hardly spend five minutes in conversation with contemporary academic realists before hearing their perennial lamentations that policymakers seem to pay little or no heed to the theoretical insights and policy prescriptions of neorealism. Thus their perplexed complaints against, for example, NATO expansion, or the Iraq War of 2003, or the Libya intervention of 2011, or the military campaign against ISIS, or American support for Israel and Taiwan – all policy choices which are intelligible to policymakers (including policymakers who disagree with those decisions but can at least understand how and why they were made) and to some scholars, but virtually unintelligible to most adherents of international relations theorist Kenneth Waltz’s neorealism.

Though this disconnect between theory and practice is not a central concern of Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot’s strikingly original article, their insights into the intellectual origins of Waltz’s neo-realism, also help illuminate neorealism’s relative marginalization in the corridors of power occupied by decision-makers.<sup>1</sup> There are three separate but related reasons for this. First, as Bessner and Guilhot explore with subtlety and insight, Waltz’s neorealism privileges structural factors in the international system over the decisions of individual leaders. It is not surprising that eliminating the decision-maker in theory makes it hard to gain an audience with decision-makers in practice. Second, as Campbell Craig points out in his excellent review of the article, many world events of the past quarter century have not been congenial for structural realism’s predictive power, what with its failures to explain major developments such as the end of the Cold War, American unipolar hegemony, and terrorism’s asymmetric power. Third, Waltz’s theory, as brilliant and original as it is, functions more as a description than a prescription. It purports to describe the reality of international politics and how the international system functions, rather than prescribing for policymakers what they ought to do. This comes out vividly in the concluding chapter of Waltz’s classic *Theory of International Politics* on “The Management of International Affairs,” with its homage to the stability of bipolar systems and its pervasive passive voice. His concluding sentence is revealing: “The problem seen in the light of the theory is not to say how to manage the world, including its great powers, but to say how the possibility that great powers will constructively manage international affairs varies as systems change.”<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli’s letter to a young prince on how to conduct statecraft this is not.

In constructing their intellectual lineage of modern realism, Bessner and Guilhot begin with political theorist Hans Morgenthau and his focus on the decisionmaker. For all of the strengths and subtleties of Morgenthau’s theoretical insights, this also left him with a deep ambivalence towards – and in some cases even aversion to -- democracy. Grounded in the grim historical record of the 1930s and the democratic follies that he believed (not without good reason) permitted the world-threatening rise of Nazi aggression, Morgenthau’s realism, in their words “concerned the insulation of the diplomatic and policy elite from public

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<sup>1</sup> Here it is important to distinguish between academic realists who are largely intellectual disciples of Waltz, and policy realists such as Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Robert Gates, *et al.* Policy realists believe in factors such as individual decision-making, national credibility, and active maintenance of power balances, all of which are deemphasized by most academic realists.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010, reissued), 210.

opinion” (93). After further probing Morgenthau’s intellectually pioneering work in reviving classical realism and a sense of the tragic in international politics, Bessner and Guilhot lay a plausible foundation for their equally ambitious excavation of the roots of Waltz’s neorealism in his purported desire to preserve liberal democracy. In so doing, they highlight the irony that neorealism needed to eliminate the personal in order to be accepted by the many persons who comprise the body politic.

As a matter of intellectual history, I find Bessner and Guilhot’s account of Waltz’s elimination of the decision-maker in order to reconcile realism with liberalism to be insightful and somewhat persuasive (though in his review Robert Jervis makes the very plausible claim that Waltz’s primary concern was updating realism to account for bipolarity; here I will be curious to see how Bessner and Guilhot respond to Jervis’s critique). This review will instead explore another dimension: the possible historical ties between realism and democracy, which may also shed some light on the questions raised at the outset about realism’s relevance for policymakers, and add a new wrinkle of complexity to the theoretical transition from Morgenthau to Waltz.

Given that one of Bessner and Guilhot’s central concerns seems to be the vexed relationship between realism and democracy, it is somewhat surprising that they almost wholly neglect, other than a passing mention, one of realism’s main intellectual architects who was also one of democracy’s most ardent proponents: the social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. This omission is all the more puzzling given Niebuhr’s close friendship with and influence on Morgenthau. To be fair, Bessner and Guilhot have already undertaken an ambitious intellectual task in probing the discontinuities between Morgenthau and Waltz, so it would be somewhat unreasonable and unfair to demand that they provide a full-orbed history of realism. That is the stuff of books, not *International Security* articles.<sup>3</sup> However, one opportunity afforded by this ISSF review forum is to elaborate on and perhaps refine Bessner and Guilhot’s argument, and suggest further lines of inquiry for other scholars interested in the intellectual lineage of realism and its many flavors. Here I would suggest that Niebuhr does merit more attention.

From their first meeting in 1944 on the occasion of Niebuhr’s lecture at the University of Chicago, Niebuhr and Morgenthau formed a fast and enduring friendship that lasted for a quarter century. The two shared many intellectual affinities and over the course of their lives paid many reciprocal tributes as to how each influenced the other. Emblematic of these is their exchange of letters in the fall of 1970. As an ailing Niebuhr approached his final months of life, he wrote to Morgenthau that “I am forced to ask whether all my insights are not borrowed from Hans Morgenthau,” to which Morgenthau wrote back “I have asked myself the same question with reference to you, and I am sure I have by far the better of the argument.”<sup>4</sup> Even a cursory look at the main principles of Niebuhr’s and Morgenthau’s thought shows that these were not just gratuitous encomiums. Both shared a belief that power is the basic currency not just in international politics but in all human affairs; both believed in the inevitability of conflict and clashing interests; both shared a disdain for the naïve idealism to which democracies were so susceptible; both contemptuously regarded utopian apostles of historical progress as not just deluded but dangerous. Both experienced the 1930s as a decade of searing disappointments, in which the feckless illusions of the democracies allowed Nazi tyranny to

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<sup>3</sup> For just such a book, and a superb one at that, see John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Both letters quoted in Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 147. For further evidence of Niebuhr’s influence on Morgenthau, see Bew 221-222.

advance unchecked. And both were early critics of the American misadventure in Vietnam. In a lament that could just as easily have been written by Morgenthau, Niebuhr fulminated in 1940 that “the defects of democratic government in the field of foreign policy are aggravated by the liberal culture...this culture is deficient in the ‘tragic sense of life’...it is full of illusions about the character of human nature, particularly collective human behavior. It imagines that there is no conflict of interest which cannot be adjudicated. It does not understand what it means to meet a resolute foe who is intent upon either your annihilation or enslavement.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet their many intellectual affinities masked a fundamental difference, of which they both seemed aware, yet there is little record that they ever directly addressed in a detailed and substantive exchange. Ironically, it was the year of their first meeting in 1944 that Niebuhr published the book which perhaps distilled the most significant difference between his “Christian realism” and Morgenthau’s classical realism. Niebuhr’s book, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, contained a revealing (and customarily verbose) subtitle: *A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. Whereas Morgenthau saw democracy as a distraction and potentially even an impediment to his classical realism, Niebuhr believed democracy, for all of its pretensions and follies, to still be central to his realism. Thus his most famous and oft-quoted aphorism from the introduction to *The Children of Light*: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>6</sup> All pithy, well, and good, but how did this fit into Niebuhr’s realism and understanding of power politics?

To be clear, Niebuhr began with a fundamental analysis of international politics that mirrored that of Morgenthau – and with which Waltz would most likely agree. Wrote Niebuhr, “the international politics of the coming decades will be dominated by great powers who will be able to prevent recalcitrance among the smaller nations, but who will have difficulty in keeping peace between each other because they will not have any authority above their own powerful enough to bend or deflect their wills.” Yet unlike some of his fellow realists, Niebuhr did not see this as guaranteeing stability, predicting instead that “while a balance between the great powers may be the actual consequence of present policies, it is quite easy to foreshadow the doom of such a system. No participant in a balance is ever quite satisfied with its own position. Every center of power will seek to improve its position; and every such effort will be regarded by the others as an attempt to disturb the equilibrium.”<sup>7</sup>

If every nation’s inevitable will-to-power perpetually threatened the international equilibrium, then a balance of power would be necessary but not sufficient for the preservation of order. Some type of internal restraint is also needed to check each nation’s propensity for self-aggrandizement. Here Niebuhr returns to democracy – not, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, out of a naïve belief that all peoples and nations are equally good, but out of a realistic assessment that all peoples and nations are equally bad. So, Niebuhr wrote, while “the first task of a community is to subdue chaos and create order, ... the second task is equally important and much be implicated in the first. That task is to prevent the power, by which initial unity is achieved, from becoming

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<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 68.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, 171, 175.

tyrannical. Justice is introduced into a field of order if the organizing power is placed under both moral and constitutional checks.” Summing this up, Niebuhr invoked President Abraham Lincoln’s effort to preserve the Union as an exemplar: “order precedes justice in the strategy of government; but...only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace.”<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr took this approach because his realism was at its foundation not structural but anthropological, even theological. Rooted in his assessment of human nature, he believed that all human activity, individual and collective, even up to the level of the nation-state, was tainted by self-love and the will to power. Moreover, because he believed in the possibility of human virtue, a tyrannical state, with its instrumentalization of the human person and systemic assault on human dignity, was not the answer. Nor was a reliance on international balance of power adequate to preserve order, because

outer checks are insufficient if some inner moral checks upon human ambition are not effective. Consistently egoistic individuals would require a tyrannical government for the preservation of social order. Fortunately individuals are not consistently egoistic. Therefore democratic government, rather than Thomas Hobbes’ absolutism, has proved a possibility in national life. Nations are more consistently egoistic than individuals; yet even the collective behavior of men stands under some inner moral checks’ and the peace of the world requires that those checks be strengthened.

This insight also illuminates Niebuhr’s incipient anti-Communism, which was beginning to emerge at the time of his writing in 1944: “The tendency towards self-righteousness is accentuated in Russia by the absence of democratic institutions through which, in other nations, sensitive minorities may act as the conscience of the nation and subject its actions and pretensions to criticism.”<sup>9</sup>

To cite the late Kenneth Thompson, himself a protégé of both Morgenthau and Niebuhr who wrote perceptively about the many affinities the two shared, “on the matter of the public and foreign policy, Niebuhr’s realism went beyond elitist thinking. He could not bring himself to accept unreservedly that foreign policy should be exclusively the business of professionals, but neither did he subscribe to the view that the more democracy was the key to better diplomacy.”<sup>10</sup> Here, then, was the most significant point of departure between Niebuhr’s Christian realism and Morgenthau’s classical realism. Ironically, the Niebuhrian formulation ultimately found Morgenthau’s version too idealistic and optimistic. For it is no small leap of faith in human nature to entrust the decision-making of high statecraft to a few supposedly enlightened policy-makers insulated from the pressures of democracy, and thus relatively unaccountable and unchecked.

All of this might suggest an expansion of Bessner and Guilhot’s argument, so that an oversimplified intellectual lineage of modern realism would go as follows: from Niebuhr to Morgenthau, democracy is removed from realism, and then from Morgenthau to Waltz, the decision-maker is removed from realism,

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<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr, 178, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, 182-83.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, “Niebuhr and the Foreign Policy Realists,” in Daniel F. Rice, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 140.

with structures eclipsing human agency. Ironically, if Waltz intended to develop a realism that preserved liberalism, he might better have looked not away from Morgenthau but rather to Morgenthau's fellow-traveler, Niebuhr.

This may also help illumine the issue raised at the outset of why neorealism is so little found in the corridors of political power. Its foundational premises dictate that neither democratic public opinion nor elite policy choices are of first-order consequence, even though some of neorealism's historical progenitors accounted for both. Perhaps contemporary academic realism's return to policy relevance begins with a return to Niebuhr, and a rediscovery of democracy.

**Review by Robert Jervis, Columbia University**

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Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot are keen students of the intellectual history of the American discipline of international politics and here offer a fascinating, if flawed, argument that Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was an attempt to reconcile the European, strongly anti-democratic tradition of Realism with the American faith in liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of the article lays out the claim that the European émigrés who established American Realism, most centrally Hans Morgenthau, but also John Herz (Arnold Wolfers is not mentioned, which I think is unfortunate), shared with some American observers, especially Walter Lippmann, a belief that the U.S. foreign policy could succeed only if it returned “to what Morgenthau referred to as a ‘preliberal diplomacy’ unencumbered by legal norms, public scrutiny, and democratic control” (89). Foreign policy had to be elitist and deference to public opinion was destructive, especially in an era when rationalism had led to a failure to appreciate the prevalence of evil in the world: “In essence, [émigré] realists believed that liberalism was bad for U.S. foreign policy--just as it had been bad for the Weimar Republic and international relations throughout the 1930s” (96). These Realists also adopted the perspective of “decisionism”, derived from the views of the influential and controversial German political theorist Carl Schmitt, that “emphasized the concrete and contingent nature of decisionmaking and the impossibility of containing the imperative of political decisionmaking within rational rules specified *ex ante*...essentially, decisionists saw politics, particularly in crises periods such as the Cold War, as matters of authoritative decisions rather than restrictive and democratic norms and rules” (97).

Starting with *Man, the State and War*, Waltz endorsed many aspects of Realism but was too much of an American to accept the anti-democratic cast to the arguments. Being influenced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General System Theory*, Ross Ashby's *Design for a Brain*, and Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*, Waltz was able to rid Realism of its illiberal components by rooting his version in the dynamics of the system.<sup>2</sup> By bypassing the power of public opinion and liberal illusions that older Realists had seen as rendering democracies incapable of following sensible foreign policies, Waltz was able to have his cake and eat it too--he could be both a Realist and American liberal.

I think the analysis of the émigré Realists is largely correct, although a couple of extensions and amendments may be appropriate. The hostility to, if not fear of, public opinion came at a time when survey research became a standard tool of social science, and what was found raised deep concerns about not only American foreign policy, but about the nature of American democracy. Gabriel Almond's *The American People and Foreign Policy*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1950, argued that the public was ill-informed and opinions were highly unstable.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); W. Ross Ashby, *Design for a Brain* (London: Science Paperbacks, 1952; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. 1960); Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory* (New York: Braziller, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950)

William Caspary's careful rebuttal twenty years later<sup>4</sup> is almost surly correct, which makes it even more interesting that Almond's analysis was widely accepted. Early students of voting behavior, one of the most important areas in the growing discipline of Political Science, grappled with the findings of widespread ignorance and apathy and developed arguments about how this was compatible with, or even facilitated, democracy. Although exploring this topic would have been a digression for Bessner and Guilhot, it is well worth following up by other scholars.

I think the authors are correct that the émigrés' analysis was grounded in the traumatic experience of the 1930s. It is worth noting, however, that these arguments were questionable at best. The links between liberalism and what Morgenthau decried as the scientific approach to politics are not as strong as he believed, and later scholarship has shown that neither IR theorizing in the inter-war period nor international politics was itself dominated by a faith in careful calculation, norms, and international law.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while public opinion in the West certainly wanted to avoid another world war, this was true of the elites and diplomats as well. (But, for an important and neglected study that argues that those who were or had been professional diplomats were disproportionately likely to oppose appeasement, see Donald Lammers's *Explaining Munich; The Search for Motive in British Foreign Policy*.<sup>6</sup> Even leaving aside all the arguments about appeasement, to blame the poor policies on liberalism and democracy implies that countries with different political systems would have followed more intelligent policies, a claim that is called into question by the failures of Benito Mussolini's and Joseph Stalin's, let alone Adolf Hitler's, foreign policies.

Similarly, the view prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s that American political culture led to a legalistic and moralistic foreign policy (see, most obviously, George Kennan's *American Foreign Policy, 1900-1950*)<sup>7</sup> is now discredited. Letting others do most of the fighting and then stepping in to sweep up the chips at the end, as the U.S. did in the first half of the twentieth century, can easily be seen as the epitome of cynical traditional statecraft.

Of course it is not Bessner and Guilhot's purpose to analyze the émigrés' views. But from their perspective of examining the intellectual history of the field and probing why people came to the views that they did, these topics are surely relevant.

Turning to the moves that Waltz made, my perspective is informed (or distorted) by having known him well, having been in the office next to his for a year when he was working on *Theory of International Politics*, and having discussed several of these issues with him. I don't think Ken Waltz would recognize the portrait here,

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<sup>4</sup> William Caspary, "The 'Mood Theory': A Study of Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," *American Political Science Review* 64:2 (June 1970): 536-547. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1953848>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Jeremy Weiss, "E.H. Carr, Norman Angell, and Reassessing the Realist-Utopian Debate," *International History Review* 35:5 (October 2013): 1156-1184. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2013.817468>

<sup>6</sup> Donald Lammers, *Explaining Munich; The Search for Motive in British Foreign Policy* (Hoover Institution Studies 16, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1950-1950* (New York: American Library, 1951).

which of course does not mean that it is incorrect. I agree with Bessner and Guilhot that scholars often fail to note the political impulses behind their writings, and without being excessively psychoanalytic would go further to say they may not always be aware of them. Nevertheless, I think that Bessner and Guilhot at best overstate their argument and at worst are on the wrong track. They may be correct to argue that “in the political context of the mid-1970s, in which long-standing anxieties regarding democratic performance were reinforced by emerging doubts about the governments of complex societies, system theories and cybernetics promised policy efficiency without authoritarianism” (113), but as far as I could tell, Waltz did not share these anxieties and regarded as alarmists those commentators who saw the West as being on the brink of disaster. Instead his deep interest in systems theories from several disciplines was central to the ways he thought theorizing could and should proceed, especially in the focus on emergent properties and the ways in which the output of the system did not always correspond to what the actors desired or expected.

I will return to *Theory of International Politics* below, but first want to say that while I think Bessner and Guilhot are right to precede the analysis of it with a discussion of Waltz’s less well known *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*<sup>8</sup>, they misread it by saying that its purpose is to defend the thesis that democracies can “develop and implement a sound foreign policy without losing their democratic character in the process” (103). Although this is indeed the claim of the preface, the bulk of the book, which Bessner and Guilhot point out contains a “profusion of historical and institutional detail, which sometimes loses the reader” (103), is a detailed comparison of the foreign-policy performance of the U.S. and the UK. This is what the book is really about and why all the detail and institutional history is necessary. If Waltz were to argue that democracies make effective foreign policies, he would not have compared two democracies and would have looked at the outputs and ignored the processes. The book is significant, however, in a way that is consistent with Bessner and Guilhot’s approach, if not their argument, on the need to examine the political and intellectual context. Published in 1967, it was written against the background of conventional wisdom claiming that for a variety of reasons, including the essentially decentralized and democratic aspects of the American polity, the U.S. was much less adept at making foreign policy than was Great Britain. Waltz was a great contrarian (his last major article, after all, argued that there were significant advantages to having Iran develop a nuclear weapons)<sup>9</sup>. He never saw a piece of conventional wisdom that he liked, and the prevailing view of the contrast between the U.S. and the UK was too tempting a target to ignore.

Contrarianism was also at work in *Theory of International Politics*, and for all their concern about context, Bessner and Guilhot miss it here as well. One of the major themes of the IR literature of the period was that bipolar systems were less stable than multipolar ones. This, in addition to developing the general systemic approach Waltz started in *Man, the State and War*, was his main objective. The book was also driven by Waltz’s sense of what theory could and could not be and his drive to clarify concepts. It was the latter that was perhaps his major contribution and that underpinned his claim for the stability of a bipolar world. Before he wrote his book, everyone defined bipolarity as a world consisting of two hostile camps, a definition that fit the pre-1914 world as well as the Cold War. Waltz argued that this was foolish because the centers of decision-making resided in the national capitals, not the alliances. The world before World War I was then multipolar, not bipolar, and the very instability that previous scholars had cited as evidence for bipolarity’s instability in

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (July/August 2012): 2-5.

fact showed the opposite. This, I think, was his central contribution, and it had nothing to do with why democracies can adopt effective policies. Indeed, he was at pains to claim that his argument referred to the system level and could not explain the foreign policies of individual states, although I join others in being skeptical about whether such a distinction can be maintained, especially in bipolar systems where what each actor does has an enormous impact.

Indeed, his first article in the project not only focused on the stability of a bipolar world, but explained this in a way that was opposite from the reasoning he deployed in *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>10</sup> In the article he argued that bipolarity was stable because each superpower knew that only the other could menace it, that a conflict between them would spread to the entire world, and that any attempt to expand anywhere would be met by the other's opposition. As a conjecture this made some sense, but by the time he came to write his book he supported the same conclusion very differently, arguing not that a bipolar world lacked peripheries, but that the peripheries were not worth fighting for because each of the superpowers could protect itself through what he called internal balancing--i.e., using its own resources to develop the forces it needed to protect itself. This argument, unlike his initial one, lent itself to a parsimonious theory because it allowed him to contrast a bipolar world in which allies were unimportant with the cases of both World War I and World War II, the former being caused by the leading states being dragged into war by the need to support their weaker allies, and the latter being caused by the propensity for the status quo states to pass the buck in the expectation that their allies would have to catch it. It is true that this analysis implicitly rejects the claim that democratic states cannot engage in effective eternal balancing, but I do not think this was the point of the exercise (cf. Bessner and Guilhot, 114-16).

This does not mean that Bessner and Guilhot are incorrect to argue that Waltz was influenced by the pressing issues of his time. While his contrarianism and his drive for a theory were crucial, so too was the war in Vietnam. His strong opposition to it articulated in "The Politics of Peace"<sup>11</sup> was incompatible with the earlier-articulated explanation for the stability of bipolarity, which implied that challenges like this should not rise or, if they did, would call for a strong American response. His opposition to the war could not only be squared with, but justified by, his theory by adopting the later version of his argument, which explained that under bipolarity the peripheries simply do not matter. (This raised the question of why the U.S. fought in Vietnam when doing so was foolish, however, and Waltz's answer that the prime danger under bipolarity is that superpowers will over-react is less than completely satisfactory.)

So while I think that Bessner and Guilhot are correct that context and the contemporary debates inform even the most abstract theorizing, but we also must be aware that the context and debates that preoccupy later scholars may not be the ones that were central to the theorists at the time.

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93:3 (Summer 1964): 881-909.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 11:3 (September 1967): 199-211.

Review by Robert Vitalis, University of Pennsylvania

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Nicolas Guilhot has produced some of the most innovative work to date on the ideas that mattered to post-1945 academic international relations. He approaches the subject not as an insider or practitioner, but as an intellectual historian with deep knowledge of European social and political thought, which he deploys to great advantage when it comes to studying the émigrés who shaped the U.S. discipline at a key moment. In this article he teams up with the equally formidable Daniel Bessner, author of a forthcoming book on the German-born defense intellectual Hans Speier, who founded the RAND Corporation's social science division. The two authors tackle a central problem in the evolution of the work of the American scholar Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013) who occupies a position second only to émigré Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980) in most accounts of the founding and evolution of the discipline's modern 'realist' school of thought.

Waltz's reputation rests on two books that are included on virtually every graduate field seminar reading list to this day. The first is *Man, the State, and War*, a revision of his 1954 Columbia PhD, which appeared a decade after Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*.<sup>1</sup> That book demonstrates a fealty to Morgenthau's critique of nineteenth-century liberalism (and its skepticism toward behavioral political science). It looks to past political theorists for support of its beliefs about the dim prospects of ending the scourge of war, due more to the fact of international anarchy (the 'third image') than to human nature (the first image) or the social and political composition of states (the second image). The book he published two decades later, *Theory of International Politics*, is viewed today as a decisive break with the émigrés in terms of approach.<sup>2</sup> So practitioners now see Morgenthau, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and others as exemplars of 'classical realism,' and Waltz as the father of 'neorealism,' which Bessner and Guilhot describe variously as "contending theories" (87), ideologies (98), and genres (101). As graduate students learn, Waltz took realist thought and upgraded it to the level of theory (102). No, Bessner and Guilhot claim, the real significance of the book is the role it played in "Americanizing" realism (89).

The authors follow Michael C. Williams, another reader with a social theorist's sensibility and, importantly, a contextualizer of the realist canon, in upending the practitioners' conventional account (not to mention Waltz's own) of why *Theory of International Politics* matters.<sup>3</sup> Williams, and now Bessner and Guilhot, insist that the standard story obscures the political or ideological work that *Theory* does, namely, in rescuing realism from the "anti-liberal political ideology" and nostalgia for "elitist forms of rule" (88) that colored the views of men like Morgenthau. For proof, Bessner and Guilhot again follow Williams in turning to what he calls Waltz's "often ignored 1967 book," and they "his least-noticed book," *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (102).<sup>4</sup> In it Waltz mounts a defense of the abilities of democracies in navigating the great foreign-policy

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), and Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Michael C. Williams, "Waltz, Realism and Democracy," *International Relations* 23:3 (2009): 328-340.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

challenges of the era when others, and not just the émigré realists with their pessimistic readings of the history of Weimer Germany, were expressing “doubts about the governance of complex societies” and a looming “crisis of democracy” (113). They all read *Theory of International Politics* in the shadow of *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*, that is, as an explanation for the positive performance that side-steps the irrationality of mass opinion, that derives in large part from the anarchical structure of the international system itself.

The most original part of their argument comes in the explication of the place of two other important trends in behavioral social science known as system theory and cybernetics in Waltz’s *Theory*. Most basically, to quote John Steinbrunner, one of its leading lights, system theory explained successful or, better, adaptive policy outcomes without “assuming any underlying deliberative thought process, rationality, or intention.”<sup>5</sup> Readers may recall Graham Allison’s application of these ideas in *Essence of Decision*, an account of decision-making in the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>6</sup> Allison describes alternative “organizational process” and “governmental politics” models to that of the “rationale actor.” Bessner and Guilhot rehearse the basic claims of cybernetics and systems theory and, importantly, recover the citations to the canonical works in Waltz’s bibliography. Those who believe that Waltz’s best-known work rests on the assumption of rationality have gotten it wrong.

They conclude on a critical note. Waltz’s defense of democracy that putatively drives his later theorizing is “weak” because it obscures rather than solves the problem of “who decides”; “neorealism was Waltz’s effort to rid realism of its ideological ballast by providing a scientific spin on the question of executive decision making that made realism’s conservative assumptions nonthreatening to liberals” (118). Yet it still presumes an elite now recoded as ‘decision makers’ who are best able to understand systemic constraints and act in accordance with them.

One cannot help but admire the verve with which they challenge the practitioner accounts of the origins of neorealism. The counter history is plausible, but direct evidence, that is, beyond their juxtaposition of the texts and aligning these with debates about the crisis of democracy as the context that matters, is missing. Waltz attended the conference where Williams gave the paper that discussed the liberal commitments underpinning *Theory*. An audience member then asked Waltz to respond, but as Williams reports, “he demurred.”<sup>7</sup> Bessner and Guilhot raise the stakes in implying that Waltz underwent some kind of conversion after publishing *Man, The State, and War*. Did any of his contemporaries take note of it in reviews of *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*? What are the recollections of others from that time? And since they suggest that other international-relations theorists adopted systems theories for the same reasons, are there ways to establish this more systematically through retrospective interviews and archival evidence? Perhaps not

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<sup>5</sup> John Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 48, as cited in Bessner and Guilhot, 109.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Williams’s correspondence with the author.

## Authors' Response by Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot

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Before we turn to the substance of our response, we would like to state what an honor it is to have our article reviewed as an H-Diplo/ISSF roundtable by such distinguished scholars. It is not an exaggeration to say that in different ways each of the respondents has shaped how we understand intellectual history and international relations. We are further grateful that the assembled reviewers read our piece so closely, and are thankful to have the opportunity to respond to their important critiques and questions.

Robert Jervis provides a typically incisive and comprehensive account of Kenneth Waltz's intellectual interests in the 1960s and 1970s that is informed by his deep knowledge of the IR literature during that period and his own relationship with Waltz. We in fact agree with Jervis's two major claims: first, that Waltz's 1967 *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics (FPDP)* was to a large degree intended to demonstrate that the United States made policy at least as effectively as Great Britain, and, second, that 1979's *Theory of International Politics (TIP)* sought to correct the assumption that multipolar systems were more stable than bipolar ones.<sup>1</sup> However, we do not believe that Jervis's arguments, correct though they may be, disprove our own. Instead, he highlights other relevant sources of Waltz's ideas.

We came at Waltz from a different angle, seeking to answer what to us was a puzzling question surrounding *TIP* specifically and neorealism generally: Why would a theory of IR attribute actions solely to systems and not people? We might state here that our desire to explore this question emerged from two sources. First, the manifold discussions about structural realism's failure to explain or predict world events, to which Campbell Craig and William Inboden point.<sup>2</sup> Second, the fact that, perhaps unsurprisingly given our own identities as intellectual historians, we believe that classical realism, with its historical sensibility and emphasis on decision-making, had more to offer IR scholars than structural realism, and were perplexed at the latter's almost total displacement of the former in the 1970s and beyond. In short, we wanted to understand what made Waltz, an obviously brilliant thinker who (as Craig discusses) emphasized decision-making in his non-theoretical writings, make an intellectual move that (as Craig and Inboden maintain) fundamentally undermined the theoretical and practical utility of structural realism.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, we sought to explore why neorealism found such traction in the IR field.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, we wish that Stephen Walt had elaborated the connections he sees between Waltz's structural realism and the theorist's (prescient) belief, expressed in *TIP*, that the Soviet Union might not be able to "keep up" with the United States, which on its face appears at the very least to require a discussion of the Soviet Union's domestic political system.

<sup>3</sup> We should note here that Walt's claim, that structural realism explains the United States' actions in a unipolar world because it insists that in unipolarity structure does not particularly matter, seems to us an attempt to have one's theoretical cake and eat it too. Moreover, though we wholeheartedly agree with Walt that the United States has largely ignored power politics since 1989, we do not understand his implication that Waltzian neorealism is needed to correct this problem, especially when Morgenthau and other classical realists regularly highlighted the balance of power's centrality to IR.

As our article makes clear, we believe that the origins of neorealism may be found in Waltz's relationship to an issue that our own work has revealed animated western scholars of IR from at least the 1930s to the 1960s: What role should the public play in democratic foreign policymaking? Given the history of academic realism, Waltz's silence on this issue in *TIP* was deafening. Until *TIP*, the majority of realists, including Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, John Herz, and Arnold Wolfers, discussed this issue and concluded that an elite unaccountable to the public should guide U.S. foreign relations.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Waltz himself had implicitly addressed the relationship between public opinion and policymaking in *FPDP*, which can be read as a book-length rejoinder to the notion, popular in the 1950s and 1960s, that the centralized nature of totalitarian states made them more effective at making foreign policy than democracies. Even though, as Jervis highlights, Waltz did not use *FPDP* to compare a democracy and an authoritarian regime, it is still the case that, in both the preface and conclusion of the book (the only two sections that actually advance some form of argument), he referenced the notion of totalitarian advantage, suggesting that democracies and totalitarian states were not that different with regards to their policymaking processes. When understood in these lights, it seems strange to us that in *TIP* Waltz totally ignored the issue of democratic foreign policymaking.

We argue that Waltz took a structural turn because, similar to the classical realists who came before him, he did not believe that a fickle public could serve as an effective guide for U.S. foreign policy. Despite its attempt to do so, *FPDP* ultimately provided, as we note, "a circumstantial and provisional answer" to the problem of the public: "Waltz limited himself to two case studies, and he was unable to articulate a vision of international relations that complemented his focus on the policymaking process." (105) When he began to focus in earnest upon writing *TIP* in the 1970s, Waltz therefore confronted the dilemma of reconciling the normative commitment to U.S.-style democracy he expressed in *FPDP* with his implicit conviction that the classical realists were correct to doubt public opinion's wisdom. We argue that the turn to structure was Waltz's escape hatch, enabling him to circumvent the problem of the public by asserting that IR was best understood from the perspective of the third image he had described in his very first book, 1959's *Man, the State, and War* (*MSW*).<sup>5</sup> In fact, one might argue that neorealism may be best distinguished from classical realism not by its emphasis on structure, which was a secondary phenomenon, but by its elision of the question of the public, which until *TIP* had animated much realist scholarship.

Craig offers a different explanation for Waltz's structural turn. Instead of emphasizing the problem of public opinion, he avers that neorealism was ultimately steeped in concerns about nuclear war, and that Waltz's turn to structure was a means for the theorist to "absolve[e] himself, and everyone else, of blame for a war that could exterminate the human race ... by removing responsibility for waging such a war from the hands of actual people." Meanwhile, Craig also declares that, based on his discussions with Waltz, *TIP* emerged from the latter's desire "to surpass a faltering tradition [classical realism]." We fully concur with Craig when he writes that Waltz solved the nuclear dilemma that beset classical realism. (Craig has written the definitive

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<sup>4</sup> We would like to make clear that we agree with Jervis that the émigré classical realists' argument that democracy engendered the West's interwar foreign policy mistakes was "questionable at best." See especially Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

account of this issue.)<sup>6</sup> But we believe that his reading is fully congruent with ours, since it also revolves around a dismissal of discrete (state-level) decision-making. Waltz's structural turn can be legitimately understood from both our and Craig's perspectives. Similarly, we concur with Stephen Walt's claim that one of Waltz's major interests in *TIP* was to "target ... scholars of all stripes whose theorizing falls short of proper philosophy of science standards." However, while these arguments may be accurate, are they the *only* ways to understand Waltz's development of structural realism? All of Craig's and Walt's explanations, as well as those offered by Jervis and ourselves, can at the same time be true. Great books like *TIP* have various purposes, both conscious and unconscious; some, such as those suggested by Craig, Walt, and Jervis, emerge from the conscious desires of authors; others, such as the one proffered by us, are found at a deeper level.

To the extent that we have only dealt with Waltz's texts and a few interviews (and not even his private papers), our interpretation is obviously open to further elaboration and criticism. One of the concerns raised by Jervis and Walt, on the basis of their intimate knowledge of Waltz's work and personal acquaintance with Waltz himself, is that the subject of our article would not have recognized himself in our portrait of him. This is a fair, albeit counterfactual—we'll never really know—criticism that highlights ambivalent formulations in our piece. We are particularly thankful for it because it gives us the opportunity to rephrase our argument in a slightly different way. First, it is difficult to say with certainty what Waltz really wanted to do when he wrote *TIP* (or even *FPDP*), and Waltz's intentions can only be carefully reconstructed on the basis of contextual, textual, and inter-textual analysis. (This helps us answer Robert Vitalis's potentially damning critique of our thesis, which is that we do not provide a "smoking gun" wherein Waltz states that he took a structural turn in order to reconcile liberalism with realism.) The notion of authorial "intention" received a brilliant and nuanced treatment decades ago in the early work of Quentin Skinner, and it is not our intention here to dwell on these methodological issues.<sup>7</sup> But we may have lacked caution in letting our readers believe that we were solely interested in recovering Waltz's intentions: whatever these were (and they may remain forever an object of debate), we were also interested in the reception of his work and in the intellectual circumstances that turned it into a disciplinary landmark. Because *TIP*, as we show, was neither methodologically innovative nor fundamentally different than classical realism, we believe that its stature can be explained by the way it solved the qualms about decision-making under liberal-democratic conditions that had plagued realism since its disciplinary beginnings. In some ways, the cultural impact and public meaning of structural realism matter more to us than Waltz's own purposes.

This last point leads us to a different conclusion than our critics regarding the originality of Waltz's work. Craig writes that *MSW* was pathbreaking in identifying the weaknesses of classical realism. But intellectual history, as Craig says, requires tracing how ideas emerge and change: in that case, it requires acknowledging that there was nothing new in the structural image of IR proposed in *MSW*, which had been clearly laid out in the early 1950s by Herbert Butterfield and John Herz, two prominent classical realists.<sup>8</sup> Again, it seems to

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See the texts collected in James Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> See John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2:2 (1950): 157-80; Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951).

us that Waltz repackaged (with his distinctive brilliance) an idea already present in the IR literature. Similarly, we do not believe that the “philosophy of science” sets unobjectionable “standards” for theories (rather, it gauges *ex post facto* what scientists do). If anything, reliance on the philosophy of science has fueled a considerable amount of confusion among IR scholars.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that Waltz’s clarity and rigor have contributed to the success of *TIP*, but his version of what a “theory” should be was historically contingent and entirely dependent on the intellectual context of cybernetics, a movement already on the wane in economics and other disciplines when *TIP* was published.<sup>10</sup> Explaining *TIP*’s enduring success by its methodological prowess is to us unconvincing.

In our opinion, the success of *TIP* must be explained with reference to the realist “tradition” of which it was a part. *TIP* was a book that, for one of the first times in the history of academic realism, did not imply any rejection of the basic tenets of liberalism and did not suggest any inherent weakness of democracy. We believe that the tremendous impact of *TIP* has to do with this intellectual breakthrough: realists could have their cake and eat it too—they could defend American democracy without having to limit it. We have no reason to doubt Waltz’s claim that Waltz was an optimist who did not think that “the United States had to abandon its liberal creed in order to survive and prosper.” This is, in fact, exactly what we argue. Waltz’s genius is to have found the theoretical framework that could accommodate his optimism.

Craig offers two other objections to our interpretation of classical realism that we would like to address. First, he asserts that not all classical realists—like Inboden, he is here referring primarily to Reinhold Niebuhr—promoted an elitist democracy, and second, he maintains that Morgenthau was not “devoted to the idea of an immutable interstate order.” With regards Craig’s first point, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was Morgenthau’s and Kennan’s arguments, not Niebuhr’s, which became standard in IR. As William Caspary discussed in 1970, during the previous two decades the view that public opinion could not serve as the basis of sound foreign policymaking permeated the “important textbooks and treatises” of IR scholars and had “not been challenged.”<sup>11</sup> It is our contention that Waltz, who as Jervis reports began the work that became the basis for *TIP* in the mid-1960s, would have felt compelled to respond to these dominant arguments, especially in a book that sought to redefine realism. Moreover, we do not see Niebuhr as fundamentally different from the other realists when it comes to his normative orientations vis-à-vis democracy. There certainly was a difference of tone and orientation between a (former) American liberal and German émigrés who were distrustful of mass democracy. Yet, Niebuhr was not just a democrat; he was a critic of *liberal* democracy who was transformed by the neo-orthodox reaction of the 1930s. By the end of the war, he represented a conservative theology that placed limits on the possibility of political reform. Of course, Niebuhr still defended democracy, but the “defense” of democracy against totalitarianism was a powerful outlet after 1945 for the elitist and anti-

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Guilhot, “The Kuhning of Reason: Realism, Rationalism and Political Decision in IR Theory after Thomas Kuhn,” *Review of International Studies* 42:1 (2016): 3-24.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Ronald Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment: Or Why We Call Our Age the Information Age*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> William R. Caspary, “The ‘Mood Theory’: A Study of Public Opinion and Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review* 64:2 (June 1970): 536.

liberal rhetoric that ran through classical realism.<sup>12</sup> Adding Wolfers to the lot of classical realists we discussed—as Jervis suggests we should have done—would only have strengthened our argument about realism’s ambivalent relationship to democracy, as Wolfers expressed explicit sympathy for Nazi Germany both before and after his emigration to the United States.<sup>13</sup> We have not found one classical realist who could accurately be described as an “enthusiastic” proponent of liberal democracy in the American sense.

Craig’s second criticism, which stresses that in the 1960s and beyond, classical realists’ confrontation with the realities of a nuclear world led some (he only discusses Morgenthau) to begin to imagine a transformation of the world order, is irrelevant to our argument. Morgenthau’s writings in the 1960s have no bearing on our claims, as by this point in time his and other realists’ earlier anti-public opinion had become IR dogma. Thus, while we appreciate Craig’s advice to “trac[e] how, and why, ideas change over time,” doing so with Morgenthau would have been a diversion with no consequence for our thesis. Besides, Morgenthau’s view of democracy was not particularly transformed by his assimilation of the nuclear revolution into his thought. In the late 1950s, he was still arguing that “a democratically conducted foreign policy is of necessity a bad foreign policy.”<sup>14</sup> All of Morgenthau’s “defenses” of democracy were really lamentations for the supposedly lost virtues of American democracy that corresponded primarily with his own estrangement from the corridors of power and the weak intellectual influence of realism on decision-makers. Moreover, the motives for which Morgenthau criticized both U.S. domestic and foreign policy were fundamentally different from those that animated the social movements of the time. It is thus a mistake to see Morgenthau as “a stalwart of the internationalist left,” as Craig ventures. In fact, if he ended up being a poster child of the anti-Vietnam War protest movement of the 1960s, it was largely on the basis of a general misunderstanding of the nature of his opposition to the war, something that also happened in the case of his fellow émigré, the conservative historian Ernst Kantorowicz.

Our article, of course, raises more questions than it answers. As Vitalis points out, we did not use (because we did not have access to) Waltz’s personal papers. More work on Waltz must be done before scholars can more definitively discuss the reasons for his development of structural realism. We hope, though, that our article offers a plausible, exploratory account of the development of neorealism and the transition from classical to structural realism.

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<sup>12</sup> On this, see Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*; and Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Thought in the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2017)

<sup>13</sup> See Rainer Eisfeld, “From the Berlin Political Studies Institute to Columbia and Yale: Ernst Jaeckh and Arnold Wolfers,” in Felix Rösch, ed., *Emigré Scholars and the Genesis of International Relations*, 113-131 (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Restoration of American Politics*, vol 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 326.