

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IS NOT FOREIGN POLICY

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COLIN ELMAN ASKS whether neorealist theories of international politics can also run the foreign-policy course, and if they try, whether or not they will win. My old horse cannot run the course and will lose if it tries. Indeed, any theory of international politics can at best limp along, able to explain some matters of foreign policy while having to leave much of foreign policy aside. The scope of a theory is a measure of its power, but the fact that my *Theory of International Politics* does answer some questions about foreign policy with more or less precision—usually less—does not turn it into a dual theory.¹

A theory marks out the domain to which it applies and shows how it can be conceived of as an autonomous realm. *Theory of International Politics* does that by showing how the interaction of states generates a structure that then constrains them from taking certain actions and disposes them toward taking others. The theory is based on assumptions about states: They are unitary actors with a single motive—the wish to survive. One of the main tasks of the theory is, then, to explain how variations in conditions external to states push or pull them in various directions. The theory explains why states similarly placed behave similarly despite their internal differences. The explanation of states' behavior is found at the international, and not at the national, level. That is why the theory is called a theory of international politics. In contrast, a theory of foreign policy would explain why states similarly placed in a system behave in different ways. Differences in behavior arise from differences of internal composition. Foreign policies are gov-

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1. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). In what follows, I take the theory presented in that book as an example of international-political theory in general.

ernmental products. A theory has to take the performance of governments as its object of explanation in order to be called a theory of foreign policy.²

Comparison with economic theory makes the distinction between international-political and foreign-policy theories clear. Neoclassical economics assumes that men are profit maximizers. In a perfectly competitive economy, all of the units (individuals or firms) find themselves in the same situation and must behave as it requires in order to maximize their utilities. Rationality is assumed, and the market selector disposes of those who fail to conform to the assumption. The model of a competitive economy is a static one. If, however, someone builds a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to his door; and the successful innovator will be imitated throughout the system. All mouse catchers will use the improved tool in their trade. The market prevails, outcomes are determined, and behavior can be predicted precisely. In perfectly competitive economies, theories of the firm are superfluous.

In one of history's striking cases of simultaneous discovery, E. H. Chamberlain and Joan Robinson published books in 1933 showing that in oligopolistic sectors of an economy the behavior of firms and market outcomes are indeterminate. From theories of "competition among the few" one can say quite a few useful things about the behavior and fates of oligopolistic firms, but nothing for sure.³

Theories of imperfect competition created the need for theories of the firm. Oligopolistic firms are constrained by their markets, but not so closely that their behavior is determined. They are able to manipulate the market and maneuver among competitors. *Theory of International Politics* draws its inspiration partly from economic theory, and the pertinent theory is of oligopolistic markets rather than of perfectly competitive ones.

Market theory does not deal with characteristics of firms. International-political theory does not include factors at the level of states. How can one handle problems posed by theories that fail to comprehend factors needed to explain the behaviors one wants to account for? Elman mentions three ways that he says have been tried. First, one may choose simply to ignore domestic-level variables and hope to make improved predictions by refining the concepts of neorealist theory. As an example, Elman cites Stephen

2. For an attempt to explain differences in foreign-policy performance between the United States and Britain, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (1967; reprint, Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Governmental Studies, 1992).

3. E. H. Chamberlain, *The Theory of Monopolistic Competition: A Reorientation of the Theory of Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933); Joan Robinson, *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* (London: Macmillan, 1933). *Competition among the Few* is the title of William Fellner's book (New York: Knopf, 1949).

Walt's using a "balance of threat variant of neorealism" to predict alliance formation. This variant seemingly makes the idea of power balancing more precise and thereby enhances the theory's explanatory power. It remedies the underspecification of variables with which neorealist theories are often charged.⁴ Elman gives another example: Neorealist theories are confused because they fail to incorporate a clear choice between offensively and defensively motivated states ("Horses," 29–30). Underspecification, however, is a characteristic of theories. Think of economic theories or theories in the natural sciences. Specification is found not in theories but in work done when testing and applying them. Moreover, to incorporate threat or the various motivations of states would infuse theories of international politics with unit-level factors. This would be something quite different from sharpening the concepts of an established theory. One cannot play with the concepts of a theory without transforming the theory into a different one.

Second, according to Elman, one may take neorealist theory as it is, without sharpening its concepts, and be content to make probabilistic predictions while leaving some variables aside even though they may affect outcomes. Some neorealists, he says, "argue that unit-level factors matter, but...refuse to include them in their analysis" ("Horses," 34). This must be a class of neorealists with no members, even though I am said to belong in it. Elman has confused analysis with theory. Neither realists nor anyone else believe that unit-level factors can be excluded from foreign-policy analysis. The question is not what should be excluded from one's account of foreign policy, but what can be included in a theory of international politics. Much is included in an analysis; little is included in a theory. Theories are sparse in formulation and beautifully simple. Reality is complex and often ugly. Predictions are not made by looking at a theory and inferring something about particular behaviors and outcomes from it. How could that be done when the empirical matter that must be considered in making predictions can never be included in a theory? A theory is an instrument used in attempting to explain "the real world" and perhaps to make some predictions about it. In using the instrument, all sorts of information, along with a lot of good judgment, is needed.

Third, according to Elman, one may add a limited number of "domestic-level variables" to neorealist theory in order to improve the accuracy of its predictions. Three problems, he believes, may be encountered in adding the variables. One sacrifices parsimony; one risks removing a theory from "the

4. Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996): 7–51, 33.

neorealist camp”; and one may be making, in Imre Lakatos’s terms, “a regressive problem shift” (“Horses,” 38). The last problem does not bother me because I am concerned with developing theory rather than with conforming to Lakatos’s notions about research programs. The first problem does not bother me because the explanatory power of a theory, not its parsimony, is the criterion of a theory’s success.

The second problem is the one that no one has been able to solve. Like many others, Elman believes that if a variable is omitted from a theory, adding it will make the theory stronger. A theory, however, is not a collection of variables. To add to a theory something that one believes has been unduly omitted requires showing how it can take its place as one element of a coherent and effective theory. If that were easy to do, we would be blessed with a wealth of strong and comprehensive theories. Our problem, recall, is that a neorealist theory of international politics explains how external forces shape states’ behavior, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous foreign-policy predictions. An international-political theory can explain states’ behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens. When they do not, a theory of international politics needs help.

Help can be given in two ways. The most satisfying way would be to provide a single theory capable of explaining the behavior of states, their interactions, and international outcomes. Unfortunately, no one has even suggested how such a grand theory can be constructed, let alone developed one. Someone may one day fashion a unified theory of internal and external politics. Until that day comes, the theoretical separation of domestic and international politics need not bother us unduly. Economists get along quite well with separate theories of firms and markets. Students of international politics will do well to concentrate on, and make use of, separate theories of internal and external politics until someone figures out a way to unite them.⁵

5. Cf. Waltz, “Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Response to My Critics.” In *Neorealism and its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 322–45.