Polity • Volume 42, Number 2 • April 2010

www.palgrave-journals.com/polity/

Statesmanship and the Problem of Theoretical Generalization*

J. Furman Daniel, III
Georgetown University

Brian Smith
Montclair State University

In this article we argue that in their quest for parsimony and through their denial of human agency, international relations scholars often endorse deterministic theories. The field of international relations suffers greatly for its devotion to excessive theoretical generalization. In rejecting the more pluralistic methodology of early international relations work, scholars may produce superficially valid predictive theories. Yet these theories rarely grant deep insight into why actual states behave as they do. Because of this, they provide little guidance for statesmen. While we do not advocate the complete rejection of any of the major approaches in the field, we argue that international relations scholars should reorient their work to account for the way leadership can overcome the constraints of structure. We suggest the field strive actively to embrace complexity and foster a greater epistemological modesty than it currently demonstrates.
Polity (2010) **42,** 156–184. doi:10.1057/pol.2009.13;
published online 14 September 2009

Keywords *international relations theory; methodology; human agency; complexity; statesmanship*

J. Furman Daniel, III *is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Government at Georgetown University. His research focuses on statesmanship, international security, and issues of conflict termination. He can be reached at* jfd42@georgetown.edu.

Brian Smith *is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Law at Montclair State University. His research interests lie in eighteenth- and*

*We thank Gator J. Greenwill, Kimberly Hill, Robert Lieber, Gerald M. Mara, Elizabeth Mercurio, Joshua Mitchell, Jay M. Parker, Kenneth Pollack, Robert Purdy, the anonymous peer reviewers for *Polity,* and audience members at the Georgetown Working Group on International Security (2007), the New England Political Science Association (2008), and International Studies Association (2009) for their comments on successive versions of this effort.

nineteenth-century political theory, politics and literature, and the links between political theory and security studies. He can be reached at smithbr@mail.montclair.edu.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, international relations theory has fallen on hard times. Although new research areas such as terrorism, the sustainability of American hegemony, human security, and globalization provide interesting and timely perspectives on current debates, such contemporary subjects do not address some of the existing shortcomings within international relations theory. Most scholars note conceptual and methodological problems within the discipline, but nevertheless accept or extend some variation of the dominant theories. Structural realist, liberal, constructivist, post-modernist, and other approaches suffer from flaws related to their treatment of human agency.[1]

Despite the explicit differences between the structural realist and constructivist research programs, these two schools suffer from curiously similar difficulties explaining the actual conduct of world politics. Because both approaches begin from the principle of investigating what constrains human choice and then develop general predictive theory, they pose serious difficulties for any policymaker who hopes to find insight in international relations scholarship. Specifically, structuralist and constructivist approaches lead one to place dangerous faith in general prediction shorn from political context. In order to return international relations to its rightful vitality and policy relevance, scholars must address this gap between how political actors and the academy views politics.[2]

In this article, we argue that in their quest for generalizable theories, international relations scholars of all schools promote a limited understanding of political life that focuses on how various sorts of structural, institutional, or

1. Some scholars dispute the relevance of international relations theory even in modeling the Cold War. Most notable of these critics is historian John Lewis Gaddis, who claims that every major school of international relations literature failed to accurately predict the end of the Cold War. For us, the failure of the international relations community to predict the end of the Cold War is a troubling symptom of the larger flaws within the international relations community and not the disease itself. See John L. Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 17 (Winter 1992–1993): 5–58. See also the Ted Hopf and John L. Gaddis correspondence, "Getting the Cold War Wrong," *International Security* 18 (Autumn 1993): 202–10. For a more complete discussion of international relations theorists' failures in predicting or explaining the end of the Cold War see also Richard N. Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

2. For a discussion of the idea of scientific progress in international relations theory, see generally Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). An alternative perspective advancing an understanding of international relations as art more than science may be found in Chapters 2 and 3 of Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

ideational compulsion *constrain* agency. While this sort of social science produces clear theories of world politics, it rarely grants us much insight into why states behave as they do. In rejecting the pluralism of early international relations work and the flexibility it allowed, the discipline disregards the causal role that individual policymakers and elite groups play in world politics, and ignores the sense in which these actors stretch or override the constraints of the international system. In the absence of an understanding of statesmanship's role in international affairs, theory may encourage perilous miscalculations. As such, international relations theory provides little guidance for statesmen or others interested in the actual conduct of international politics.[3]

Although we believe that scholarship in many areas of social science suffers from similar flaws, we have chosen to focus on international relations because it is a field in which the effects of slighting agency pose particular dangers for policy formation. As a comment on the state of international relations theory and a set of suggestions about where scholarship might go next, this essay proceeds largely via a textual analysis of several major representative figures in the field. We do not claim that this effort exhausts many of the nuances in the literature; we merely seek to diagnose some dangers implicit in how many leading scholars think about international relations and suggest one possible way forward.

We begin in the first two sections by developing an argument about the essential similarity of structural and constructivist approaches.[4] By examining the consequences that follow from their common claims, we hope to show that existing international relations theories actually undermine a robust understanding of political events and the circumstances of political choice that follow from them. Finally, we conclude by tracing some implications of our argument and proposing a few ways the field can redirect its efforts to develop arguments so as to incorporate agency and thus serve both the academic community and the world of policy.

---

3. Of course, we do not mean to say that all international relations scholars need to produce scholarship that is valuable to statesmen, but we would argue far too many scholars simultaneously deny they desire to do this while offering advice regardless. We suggest a proper understanding of international relations theory might be analogous to military planning. Although they know plans never approach reality, generals and military staffers work hard to account for various theoretical possibilities. Because it frames our minds for action, planning is analogous to theorizing; as Eisenhower once said, "Plans are nothing. Planning is everything." Cited in Charles L. Mercier, Jr., "Terrorists, WMD, and the US Army Reserve," *Parameters* 27 (Autumn 1997): 113. Also see Richard N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Interests, Ethics and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 183–86.

4. Fred Chernoff argues that although in some sense international relations scholars often construct their arguments in a manner that initially seems determinist, they in fact can and must render only the most probable general trends within the international system. See Fred Chernoff, *Theory and Metatheory in International Relations: Concepts and Contending Accounts* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), especially 38–39 and 185–88, and Chernoff, *The Power of International Theory: Reforging the Link to Foreign Policy-Making through Scientific Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2005), especially 127–29 and 166–67.

Disparate Theories, Similar Outcomes

We begin with a simple claim about the two of the most influential approaches to international relations scholarship, structural realism, and constructivism. Both research programs seek to explain world politics by developing general theories that emphasize various layers of structural constraint upon political choices. This move creates difficulties that flow across methodological boundaries, which we discuss in greater depth later in the section. For now, it suffices to note that international relations theories commonly reveal two major flaws. The first lies in the field's seldom-acknowledged failures at predicting general trends that have led to major world events. The second flows from the way scholars treat human agency, and follows directly from the methods used by scholars aiming at true scientific prediction.[5]

Despite the best efforts of international relations theorists, the track record of international relations scholarship in predicting future events or explaining the past remains mixed. Indeed, many of the seminal historical events of the past decades such as the end of the Cold War and 9/11 were not anticipated by mainstream international relations scholarship. Given the particularly high impact of such unanticipated events on international affairs, such predictive failures are especially worrying. We agree with Fred Chernoff that all policymaking requires some attempt to predict the likely outcomes of action. However, we contend that the method most scholars employ fails to convey insights useful to policy.[6] While international relations scholars assert the superiority of generalized theory over "point predictions," given the effects of such unanticipated events, it is unclear how such analysis improves our understanding of world politics. In defense of his structural model, Waltz claims:

> Structures never tell us all that we want to know. Instead they tell us a small number of big and important things. They focus our attention on those components and forces that usually continue for long periods. Clean and simple definitions of structure save us from the pernicious practice of summoning new systems into being in response to every salient change within a system. They direct our attention to the units and to unit-level forces when

5. For one account of the relative weight those who embrace the idea of science should place on prediction versus explanation, see Stephen Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding: An Inquiry into the Aims of Science* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), especially 18–43.

6. Against many scholars who deny the link between policy and theory in IR, Chernoff writes, "[s]ince all policy-formulation is future-directed, it is an attempt to influence what will happen in some time to come—near or distant—some connection must obtain between present actions and future outcomes." See Chernoff, *The Power of International Theory,* 129–30.

the particularity of outcomes leads us to search for more idiosyncratic causes than are found in structures.[7]

Despite this intellectual humility, such a structural approach may not have actually provided any additional insight to statesmen or scholars during the July Crisis of 1914, the Munich Crisis of 1938, the Cuban Missile Crisis, or in the post-9/11 world, other than to suggest that such events were important and deserving of additional study.[8] On its own terms, such a model fails to provide theoretical leverage because we cannot explain moments of systemic disruption through systemic modeling.

The second and less obvious flaw in recent international relations scholarship rests with the increasing tendency within international relations theory to minimize the role of human agency in world politics and in so doing promote a kind of determinism. Throughout the essay, we address different ways that scholars slight agency. We understand agency as the ability of human beings to control and change their personal environment. International relations scholars normally address agency by rooting it in collectives—in states and their cultures—and ignoring individuals. This trend results from the general preference within international relations research methodology for elegant and parsimonious theories that utilize a minimal number of independent variables.[9] Where early international relations scholars made insightful arguments in a minimalist form, by contrast many of their more recent progeny fare poorly.[10] Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik note that much of the recent neo-realist theory degenerates into incoherence precisely because of this fixation on a simple

7. Kenneth Waltz, "A Response to My Critics," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 329.

8. Moreover, far from presenting scholars some neutral record of fact, major historical events like these suggest often-unacknowledged difficulties. International relations scholars often mobilize schematic representations of events for highly partisan ends. Thomas W. Smith notes that "[i]n place of searching historical inquiry, we get a lawyer's brief that confuses evidence and advocacy." See Thomas W. Smith, *History and International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

9. According to Stephen Van Evera, "[g]ood theories elucidate by simplifying. Hence a good theory is *parsimonious*. It uses few variables simply arranged to explain its effects. Gaining parsimony often requires some sacrifice of explanatory power, however" (emphasis in the original). Although Van Evera does warn his readers that "[i]f that sacrifice [parsimony] is too large it becomes unworthwhile," it is unclear exactly how much complexity he or the international relations community is willing to "tolerate" in order to "explain the world." Van Evera's work remains the gold standard for introductory political science methodology, and its emphasis on linear elegance reinforces the existing reductionist trend within the academic literature. See Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), especially 17–19. On the limits of prediction, see also Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), especially 16–17.

10. For an account of how various scholars before Waltz framed their understanding of international relations, see Chapters 3 and 4 of Smith, *History and International Relations*, 33–91.

and parsimonious theoretical structure. In what follows, we build upon and extend their critique.[11]

While structural realism provides a clear heuristic for analyzing issues within the international system such as balance of power and alliance behavior, the parsimony inherent in this theorizing limits its usefulness for understanding world politics. Because such approaches only purport to predict the *broadest* global trends, they retain far less descriptive power than their proponents claim.[12] Indeed, many scholars argue that their efforts betray a rather abysmal record at even general predictive success.[13] As Robert Jervis notes, many problems within Kenneth Waltz's structuralism "arise out of its virtues—lucidity, parsimony, and broad reach."[14] The difficulty Jervis notes here is that while simple dyadic X-causes-Y relationships offer a certain surface plausibility, parsimonious models rarely survive tests inspired by deep empirical study of particular cases.[15] Within structuralist approaches that use Waltz as their common source, the general tendency to assume linearity and monocausality exacerbates these flaws.[16] This elegant theoretical modeling limits the policy relevance of struturalist works because their method cannot account for the particular facts of any given case, especially the likely options individual policymakers might consider. Although Waltz and many other theorists explicitly state their unwillingness to predict or influence policy, their admissions raise questions regarding the ability of such models to inform and enlighten non-academics—to say nothing of their import for the broader relevance of the discipline. If theory cannot and should not influence policy, the quest for relevance seems misguided.[17]

---

11. Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24 (Fall 1999): especially 18–22.

12. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 18 and Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 225.

13. For two persuasive accounts on this point, see Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War" and Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality versus Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 108–48. On Schroeder's contribution to the critique of conventional international relations, see Smith, *History and International Relations*, 75–77.

14. Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 124.

15. For an excellent example of the logic of X→Y modeling see Van Evera, *Guide to Methods*, 12–17. On issues regarding nonlinearity see generally Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17 (Winter 1992/1993): 59–90; Robert Jervis, *System Effects*; and Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996). On problems related to the cause-effect dyad, see Walker Percy, "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning," *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Picador, 1975): especially 161–66. For a recent study emphasizing the difficulties inherent in *any* predictive models, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), especially 3–22.

16. Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" 19–22; Jervis, *System Effects*, 34–35.

17. We agree with Thomas Smith that whatever their protestations, most scholars in international relations mean their work to be apropos of current events and problems—our work bears the marks not only of our time, but also of our aspirations to alter the nature of politics. See Smith, *History and International Relations*, 30–31.

We do not think it obvious that true scientific prediction is possible in political life or any complex adaptive system embracing millions of individual decision-makers. As we argue later in the article, relying upon the validity of attempts at general prediction within international relations may pose political dangers.[18] Like any event involving decision-making agents, international politics seldom lends itself to simple explanations for the obvious reason that human beings make unpredictable decisions frequently enough to make social scientific theories far less useful than their authors generally admit. It may be true that within a certain range, human action is very predictable; however, the profound limits to prediction in international affairs should give us pause before relying on them to negotiate complex issues such as war and peace.[19] Moreover, predictive theories may be dangerous because they give us a false sense of certainty about the future—especially if the moments that such theories cannot explain stand among the more catastrophic in world history.[20] Scholars often treat events such as World War II and 9/11 as statistical outliers in history, but few would doubt their profound impact on world politics. History presents us with long patterns of gradual change punctuated by radical, transformative, and disruptive events. Our social scientific models should account for such atypical and profoundly dangerous historical moments.[21]

When Waltz argues in *Man, the State, and War* for structuralism's value as the best means of studying international affairs, he displays unusual candor about the theory's limitations:

> The structure of the state system does not directly cause state A to attack state B. Whether or not that attack occurs will depend on a number of special

18. On the break between theory and policy, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10–12, and Vincent Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities," *International Organization* 62 (Spring 2008): 258–61.

19. On the unintended consequences of social action, see F. A. Hayek, "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design," *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). For some applications of this idea in international affairs, see Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, 68–78 and Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42 (Summer 1988): 427–60.

20. Here we follow Taleb's argument in *The Black Swan*. He writes: "*The inability to predict outliers implies the inability to predict the course of history*, given the share of these events in the dynamics of events . . . . This is all the more worrisome when we engage in deadly conflicts: wars are fundamentally unpredictable (and we do not know it)" (xx, italics in the original). More moderately, Chernoff presents an extensive account of various arguments about this issue in Chapter 5, "Prediction, Theory and Policy-making," in *The Power of International Theory*, 126–71.

21. See Paul Pierson, "Big, Slow-Moving, and . . . Invisible," in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For analogous views of unanticipated and disruptive technical changes that resulted in profound political changes, see generally James Burke, *Connections* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), and Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

> circumstances–location, size, power, interest, type of government, past history and tradition–each of which will influence the actions of both states. If they fight against each other it will be for reasons especially defined for the occasion by each of them. These special reasons become the immediate, or efficient, causes of war. These immediate causes of war are contained in the first and second images. States are motivated to attack each other and to defend themselves by the reason and/or passion of the comparatively few who make politics for the states and of the many more who influence the few . . . . Variations in the factors included in the first and second images are important, indeed crucial, in the making and breaking of periods of peace–the immediate causes of every war must be either the acts of individuals or the acts of the states.[22]

Waltz further buttresses the value that less parsimonious and non-structural explanations hold for theorizing by claiming that he does not intend his theory to predict or explain the specific politics of individual nations. Indeed, he provides very little space for understanding actual conflict and war—and freely admits this.[23] At the same time, the book remains balanced; it does not minimize the value of studying states and their leaders. For this reason, *Man, the State, and War* remains the sort of book practitioners might usefully read for insight into the conduct of politics. We suggest that by providing a richer descriptive account of the role all three images—the leaders, states, and international system—play in international relations, books like it may provide the sort of limited predictive power that Chernoff suggests remains vital for policymaking without slighting the fundamental importance of appreciating human agency and complexity in politics. This sort of writing frames the mind for action, which may aid us more than general prediction.[24]

Later, Waltz himself and most other structuralists abandoned this more moderate course in favor of parsimonious and monocausal modeling.[25] The difficulty here rests in the way these scholars value a sort of intellectual completeness and closure. We can trace this move away from what we might call "inclusive" theorizing back to Waltz's seminal 1979 work, *Theory of International Politics*, which extends the thesis developed in *Man, the State, and War* that the distribution of power and the resulting patterns of alliances provide the best metrics for predicting international conflict. As a result, he minimizes the attention we should devote toward other objects of study, such as states, their

22. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 232.
23. For this line of critique against Waltz, see R. Harrison Wagner, *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 19–20.
24. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 225–38, and Waltz, *Theory*, 69.
25. Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" 18–19.

individual characteristics, and policymakers.[26] Waltz strengthens the original claims of *Man, the State, and War* by formalizing his assumption that states follow microeconomic incentives to maximize their material benefits in any given situation.[27] By truncating his analysis of state motivations, Waltz undermines much of the flexibility implicit in his earlier work, reducing its value for policymakers and others seeking insight into the way states actually behave.[28]

In addition to the way the structural approach slights human agency, a further concern here rests on the very real possibility that not all states follow the same logic of action that Waltz and his followers assume. If even *some* of the time states do not act as self-preserving, rationally calculating, and risk-averse entities, international relations scholarship may do much harm. We often fail to recognize that for most of human history and in many places today, this description of political motivation does not comport with how people justify themselves. Nevertheless, we still project such motives upon peoples who do not ascribe to the international relations scholar's way of viewing the world. This may prove a grave error, particularly if the states with which we interact differ significantly in their values and their willingness to accept risk for goals that depart from our own.[29]

The apparent success of Waltz's structural approach inspired many others who attempted to apply the constraints of structure to other areas of international politics. Instead of working at a purely theoretical level, later scholars attempt to qualify and refine, if not also apply, Waltz's structural claims to specific policy issues. When used to explain actual events, these extensions of Waltz's argument often appear vague and causally indeterminate. To note a few examples: we might intuitively agree or disagree that threat perception shapes alliance behavior,[30] that shifts in power cause

26. Waltz, *Theory*, 1–17.

27. These theories are first presented in Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, especially 187–210, and are further strengthened and developed in his *Theory*, 116–123. A notable critic of Waltz's emphasis on microeconomic calculations and power maximizations is Alexander Wendt, who finds Waltz's assumptions unwarranted and overly simplistic. See Wendt, *Social Theory*, 2–3. Also see Smith, *History and International Relations*, 181–82.

28. Interestingly, Waltz did author a book regarding domestic institutions and the foreign policy process. In his second book, Waltz provides a rich description of how democratic institutions influence foreign policy. Although this work does not directly contradict Waltz's claim that the systemic level provides that most predictive leverage for international political analysis, it is interesting to see such a concession to the power of non-systemic factors. See Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (New York: Little Brown, 1967).

29. Taleb, *Black Swan*, 220. On the ways scholars often impute theoretical motives to the policymakers, see Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality," 261–62, and Chernoff, *Theory and Metatheory*, 42–43.

30. See generally Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

wars,[31] that a widespread belief in "the cult of the offensive" produces conflict,[32] or that states create or follow institutions that serve their interests.[33] All of these assertions may yield some descriptive value, yet they tend to provide incomplete theoretical explanations that apply equally well to a wide range of specific cases.

Taken together, the various recent structuralist theories help describe the events surrounding a single case such as World War I; individually, none constitutes a good explanation of that climactic event.[34] For example, consider the individual elements of the case: the Germans threatened many of their European neighbors and in response a balancing coalition rallied against them. The balance of power did indeed shift in Europe. We may also identify a widespread belief in offensive dominance among each state's leaders. It is further true that after the war the victorious Allies attempted to solidify their hard-won gains. The causal plausibility of all of these *individual* arguments suggests that no single variable—and perhaps no small group of them, even—actually suffices for explaining such a complex event, let alone gives us enough insight to predict the conditions under which another similar war might occur. The structuralist rush to prediction from stylized explanation leads scholars into dangerous oversimplification. Taken seriously, this difficulty with attributing causation suggests that a deep appreciation of political context matters more for policy-formation than whatever assistance a general social scientific theory can provide.[35]

Constructivists add a much-needed degree of richness to the parsimony of structuralism. Inspired by literary and social theory, as well as by the example of the English school, constructivists work to account for the importance of cultural and ideational elements within different societies. Despite this increased

31. See Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (Spring 1988): 591–613.

32. Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Offense, Defense, and War: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004); Steven E. Miller, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War: An International Security Reader*, rev. exp. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

33. For this argument, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal, "The Rational Design of International Institutions," *International Organization* 55 (Autumn 2001): 761–99.

34. For one relatively recent non-theoretical attempt at explaining some aspects of World War I, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

35. For two suggestions along this line of reasoning that emphasize the importance of *practice* for theorizing, see Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality," especially 260–64, and Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, "Eclectic Theorizing in the Study and Practice of International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114.

descriptive power, constructivism remains less useful than it might be for understanding the actual conduct of foreign affairs because it often remains unable to directly account for changes in ideas, norms, and cultures.[36] Much like structuralists, constructivists and liberals often radically curtail their discussions of human agency. This also leads to a kind of cultural determinism. In this essay we omit an extended discussion of liberalism, but both liberals and constructivists often fall into this trap.

Despite the fact that most constructivists purport to avoid much of the monocausality and determinism of structuralism, in reality they often do no better than structuralism at avoiding either danger. Constructivism focuses its analysis on shared ideas and norms, but it does so at a sufficiently abstract level that it is often unclear who influences and manipulates culture—like structuralism, it presents political action in the passive voice.[37] When used to predict war and peace, norms and shared beliefs constitute essentially monocausal explanations of events. "Thick" forms of constructivism may develop an additional predictive value, but also risk becoming even more deterministic. Wendtian constructivism conducts its analysis on a similarly abstract level, and often falls into the same trap.[38] Having granted decisive causal force to macro-level cultural factors, some constructivists suggest that "culture is destiny." However, this ignores the ways that ideas establish themselves in political life *only* when actual individuals and elite groups support them. Constructivist theories create a theoretical structure that purports to describe how ideas rule the world but never identifies the source of their power and influence over actual human minds.[39] Nonetheless, Wendt and his agentic constructivist critics open an interesting door for future scholarship.[40]

Both constructivist and structuralist approaches carry theoretical tendencies within them that some scholars utilize to even more deleterious effect. When we push the logic of constructivism far enough, the very idea of international or cross-cultural scholarship sometimes falls into doubt, particularly with post-modernism. At the opposite end of the spectrum, hyper-rationalist structuralism

36. See Chapter 7 in Wendt, *Social Theory*, 313–69. On some other difficulties with the empirical agenda in constructivism, also see Jeffrey Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory," *World Politics* 50 (January 1998): 324–48.

37. Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesmen Back In," *International Security* 25 (Spring 2001): 145–46.

38. On this general idea see Wendt, *Social Theory*, 1–44.

39. Jervis, *System Effects*, 18–19, 61–73.

40. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (Spring 1992): 391–425. For a lengthier version of this argument see Wendt, *Social Theory*, 246–312. For two examples of Agentic Constructivism in this vein, see Vincent Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities," *International Organization* 62 (Spring 2008): 257–88; and Antje Weiner, *The Invisible Constitution of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

effaces all explanations for state behavior outside the logic of purely material self-interest.[41] Both extremes rest on a faulty epistemology that expects either too little or too much from political inquiry. The weight of post-modern analysis in most academic fields falls on critique of existing thought and practice, not sympathetic understanding.[42] Vincent Pouliot notes that while post-modernism rightly emphasizes the way our representations of the world distort reality, this poses a danger in that "detached from, and in fact indifferent to, the social urgency of practices, many post-modernists intellectualize discourse to the point of distorting its practical logic and meaning."[43] Conversely, rational choice theories assume the universality of human preferences and presume that given perfect information, scholars might model behaviors across a wide variety of cultural contexts. They render persons and states as appetite-driven materialists and reduce all explanations of human action to motives of material interest rather than principle. As with rational choice theory and formal modeling, such assumptions quite commonly appear in structuralist accounts.[44]

Perhaps reacting to the success of structural theory, constructivists often engage in some similarly problematic efforts that focus on the *constraints* to human choice and action in political life. Because they share similar flaws with their structuralist counterparts, we remain unconvinced that constructivist theories fare any better than structuralism at avoiding problematic explanations of events in international relations. As it is, neither approach normally incorporates a thorough account of how structure interacts with the other layers of social and political life, specifically with how the other levels can maneuver within or overcome structure. This would not be cause for concern if scholars truly could avoid indirectly influencing policy. However, we will show that the tacit agreement between the approaches warps our understanding of political life.

Theoretical Generalization and the Reduction of Human Agency

Proponents of both constructivist and structuralist international relations theory agree about the role structure plays in shaping world events, specifically

41. Here it may be worth noting that while some scholars rely upon notions of maximizing self-interest as the sole standard of rationality, the idea only emerged as a mode of popular justification and rhetoric in modern times. On this, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

42. On this, see Katzenstein and Sil, "Eclectic Theorizing," 112–13.

43. Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality," 265. For an analysis of postmodern international relations that comports well with our analysis, see Chapter 7 in Smith, *History and International Relations*, 148–78.

44. See Stephen M. Walt, "Rigor or Rigor Mortis: Rational Choice and Security Studies?" *International Security* 23 (Spring 1999): 5–48 and the debate articles in *International Security* 24 (Autumn 1999): 56–130. On rational choice, also see Chapter 5 in Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality*, 51–99.

by constraining choice. Whether they look to the relationships of power or the influence of culture, these two general types of scholarship lead in the same direction: toward the reduction of human agency.[45] This drives scholars into a series of deterministic or at least strongly probabilistic claims about how the structure of international relations controls many actions within the states that comprise that system. We do not claim that studying each country's particular character traits or the beliefs of its leadership in isolation provides a completely *sufficient* explanation of world politics. Instead, this section further develops our argument about the consequences that follow from marginalizing or ignoring these other levels of analysis. By denigrating human agency in favor of grander causes, international relations theorists do real damage to our understanding of world affairs. By focusing almost exclusively on the *constraints* the system places upon action, their writings do little to aid in taming the violence of the international system.[46]

Early in his *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz recognizes that the complexity of political life often tempts scholars in international relations theory toward reductionism.[47] Yet in his later focus on structure, he cannot escape this tendency. According to his argument, true structuralism demands "leaving aside questions about the kinds of political leaders, social and economic institutions, and ideological commitments states may have."[48] Scholars who follow Waltz must examine structure in the name of seeing the system as an integral whole and not a number of interlocking, equally important, and irreducibly complex parts. Having observed some of the weaknesses of Waltz's structural realism, later realists work to amend or extend his theory while evading its insistence on the balance of power's sole basis in correlates of raw material capacity, "stretching" the theory in interesting, but still problematic ways. In evoking the various roles that interests, perceptions, motivations, norms, and cultural heuristics play in constraining choices concerning war and peace, these authors seek to defend the various structuralisms against their critics.[49]

45. This is not to say that first- and second-image theories cannot lapse into equally deterministic styles of argument—only that structuralist scholars more often err against agency at the systemic level than competing theories do.

46. On this, see the introduction to Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), especially 5–7.

47. Waltz, *Theory*, 19.

48. Waltz, *Theory*, 79–81.

49. For a good critical evaluation of Waltz's theory, see Jervis, *System Effects*, 103–24. For two accounts of the field's reaction to Waltz's structuralism, see Legro and Moravscik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" especially 22–45, and Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security* 23 (Summer 1998): 141–70. On conceptual "stretching," see Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64 (December 1970): 1033–53; David Collier and James E. Mahon, Jr., "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited:

To take one prominent attempt to correct Waltz, John Mearsheimer posits that the "tragedy" of the international system is that nations compete for power in a self-destructive quest to attain the privileged position of hegemony. According to this reasoning, hegemony is desirable precisely because it allows states to achieve security and act with fewer systemic constraints in the international arena. Unfortunately, hegemony is virtually unattainable and thus states are caught in a systemic trap in which their desire for security perpetuates the constraints of the anarchic international system. Mearsheimer argues that the structure of the system inexorably leads statesmen into tragic decisions, a claim that neatly effaces their capacity to choose how to operate within the system.[50]

The principal difficulty any attempt at theoretical revision faces stems from the fact that all research programs develop what Alexander Wendt terms an "ontological center of gravity." When international relations scholars observe their program's central tenets, "even as they reach outward to incorporate the concerns of others . . . the resulting theories or arguments remain somewhat truncated," always leaving crucial gaps in their explanations.[51] Despite many efforts to remedy its deficiencies, the discipline as a whole suffers from a blindness to the role powerful individuals and elite groups play in the formation of international politics. This is not to say theorists omit all mention of human agency from their explanations.[52] Rather, in vaguely stating the roles changing perceptions and interests play in the formation of alliances and the like, scholars in the field frame their arguments in abstractions and sidestep the notion that individuals actually work to bring such change about. By focusing on more powerful causes at the structural level and at best relegating human agency to the level of a second-order variable, structural theorists fall into a paradox. At first glance, contemporary international relations scholars seem to hope that by understanding the deep structural causes of state behavior, we progressively achieve a measure of control over the causes of conflict and state behavior.[53] Yet

Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 87 (December 1993): 845–55; and more generally, Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

50. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1–5.

51. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 29–30.

52. Indeed, early in his career, Waltz admits that without directing our attention to an actual state and the individuals within it, we cannot predict any particular war. See Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 218.

53. Waltz identifies this tendency in behaviorists, but given the more determinist trends in recent IR scholarship, it also bears on the current state of affairs. See *Man, the State, and War*, 58–59. Toulmin argues that "the central aims of science are . . . concerned with a search for understanding—a desire to make the course of Nature not just predictable but intelligible—and this has meant looking for rational patterns of connections in terms of which we can make sense of the flux of events" (Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding*, 99).

at the same time, by concentrating on and beginning from the power of structural constraint, these theorists often betray a rather striking disbelief in the ability of human agents to affect the international system.[54] This would seem self-contradictory.

Stephen Walt admits the importance of threat perceptions for determining alliance behavior. Yet by discussing isolated cases of how one state views its competitors or enemies and tracing the consequences of this for his balance of threat theory, he fails to address how any state's visible intentions actually change. Indeed, he provides no framework for beginning to think theoretically about the potential relationship between leaders and the international structure.[55] Approaching the problem from an entirely different methodology, Wendt envisions the state as the only true agent in international politics. As we noted earlier, he claims "that power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up," and that in many ways perceptions determine the way states respond to crises. Wendt observes that states "always have an element of choice in defining their identities and interests," yet he considers these decisions only in terms of their place within social collectives; the culture or a people make the decision, rather than any influential individual. Since the state remains the relevant agent, we only find the locus of perceptions and interests in national culture.[56] He roots this understanding of national interests in a composite of four important desires that all states must satisfy. Even though these include a wide range that comprises physical survival of the state as a whole, its continued autonomy, its well-being (especially economic), and its collective self-esteem, Wendt leaves us with little in the way of understanding about the role *particular* people or groups play in maintaining this system of cultural values. Having criticized neorealism and neoliberalism for their inability to explain change, Wendt opens a promising route for scholarship that he himself does not take.[57]

It matters little whether international relations scholars root structural constraint in ideas or material forces. This is not to say they provide no reason for omitting individuals and elites from their analyses. They rightly note that a purely first- or second-image approach can create equally problematic explanations that blame war solely on either a few wicked men, or more

54. Alexander George observes that a "passive orientation to action" logically follows from determinism. See Alexander George, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making," *International Studies Quarterly* 13 (June 1969): 203.

55. Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9 (Spring 1985): 12–15.

56. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 10, 135, 137–38.

57. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 233–38.

generally, the perversity of human nature.[58] Yet, even theorists who retain a significant space for understanding the role individual agency plays in the construction of international order have difficulty expressing it within the established categories of the discipline. Noting that "the external environment is rarely so compelling as to obviate the need for difficult judgments and choices," Jervis provides perhaps the best structuralist explanation of the causal force statesmen maintain in politics because of his efforts at exploring the weight of complexity in political life.[59] However, despite his recognition that sometimes "policy that is followed depends on the beliefs of those who are in power" and that "strange" notions such as honor or glory might weigh heavily in their decisions, Jervis' analysis of these forces never transcends the minimal and overly rationalistic, and belies the fact that motives we find incomprehensible may stand at the center of other states' policies.[60]

When scholars directly address this issue with the intent of rendering both agency and structure in a robust way, the result remains narrowly directed toward outlining the limitations to human action. To take the most important example of scholarship attempting to reckon with this agent-structure dilemma, Colin Wight's agentic constructivism seems at first to provide a much-needed balance to the generic presentation of the argument. Endorsing Marx's idea that men make history, but not in a context of their own choosing, Wight presses this point too far. He argues that certain irreducible properties emerge from the interaction of social structure and individual agency, elements that acquire causal force and largely stand outside of human control.[61] Moreover, he too focuses his energies on delineating the precise nature of social constraint upon individual people. For him, the ideational structure of human life "can be regarded as intransitive" to individuals and perhaps even large groups; only "humanity as a collective" possesses control over the concepts and meanings that drive politics.[62] While it may provide a more precise understanding of the ontology beneath contemporary international relations theory, Wight's discussion of leadership itself remains opaque. Wight circumscribes individual action into the realm of the "so-called," and he completely eschews discussion of the range of space in which people

58. Waltz, *Theory*, 62–64. See also more generally Waltz's criticisms of first- and second-image theories in *Man, the State, and War*, 16–158.

59. Jervis, *System Effects*, 204.

60. Jervis, *System Effects*, 208 and Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (Spring 1988): 677–79.

61. Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49–50. Marx's aphorism may be found in Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Later Political Writings*, trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

62. Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, 55–56.

engage in politically meaningful action or disproportionately shape the opinions of others.[63]

We argue that at least part of the reason these and other writers avoid discussing statesmen stems from the way the discipline remains essentially undecided over the relationship theory should maintain with foreign policy. Every scholar seems to understand this role in a slightly different way, yet they write as if they hope to influence how states conduct themselves. Despite drawing a fine *theoretical* line between international politics, which "bears on the foreign policies of nations although it claims to explain only certain aspects of them," and the domain of policymaking, scholars often blend the two.[64] Torn between their simultaneous desires to promote social scientific prediction and serve as effective counselors for statesmen, international relations theorists generally explain international affairs through grand, systemic causes. An abstract analysis of potential general trends never claims any capacity for even probabilistic point-prediction. By avoiding any discussion of the importance of individual agency, parsimonious theorizing in this fashion severely limits the field's usefulness for analyzing the *process* of international affairs.[65] This failure to address the role of actual leaders holds profound consequences for our understanding of politics.

In recent years, many scholars in international relations retreated from attributing causal agency to leaders. This failure to give statesmen more than passing causal emphasis leads directly to the over-determination of material, ideational, and social causes. Implying the presence of leadership, Randall Schweller and Jervis correctly note that states perceive similar material threats and opportunities differently. Similarly, Wendt reminds us that every culture provides its members with a set of cognitive byways through which they navigate decisions in the world, and that these ideas act as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that works to determine the outcome of deliberation.[66] Both of these approaches talk around individual agency, rather than deeply analyzing it as a political force; in the language they utilize, these descriptions neatly evade some significant problems in the field.

---

63. Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, 200.

64. Kenneth Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (Spring 1988): 619. For similarly strong definitions of IR's role vis-à-vis other sorts of thinking, see Waltz, *Theory*, 67–73 and Wendt, *Social Theory*, 10–15. Also see Chernoff's summary of the relationship between theory and policy in Chernoff, *Power of International Theory*, 215 and Chernoff, *Theory and Metatheory*, 185–88.

65. On the idea of studying process rather than attempting to theorize, see Desch, "Culture Clash," 152 and 152n62.

66. Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 88–92; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978): 174–6; and Wendt, *Social Theory*, 184–89. On the notion of culture creating a kind of inertia in ideas and actions, also see Alastair Iain Johnson, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19 (Spring 1995), especially 33–36.

International relations scholars tend to construct arguments as if policy choice always flows logically from any given set of circumstances.[67] We think it wiser to assume that the quality of statesmanship often determines the range of practical diplomatic and strategic options open to a state in both everyday affairs and moments of crisis.[68] This point matters because a significant number of the major debates in international relations theory center on how intentions and perceptions shape alliance behavior in war and peace. Yet, even when they study cases with similar material circumstances, most scholars hesitate to claim that statesmanship forms a crucial reason why a state's intentions change from peaceful to aggressive, or that under certain circumstances statesmen and elites decisively shape the way a country perceives its competitors' actions.[69] Jervis notes that when "elements interact it is difficult to apportion the responsibility among them as the extent and even the direction of the impact of each depends on the status of the others," and this fact militates strongly against attempts to explain the course of world events in only a few variables.[70]

Most scholars consider states that override systemic constraints as outliers, or see them as exogenous actors "coming from outside" our ability to predict. Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues "predictors may be good at predicting the ordinary, but not the irregular, and this is where they ultimately fail." Whenever we attempt to predict human choices apart from knowledge of the specific context, our chances of success diminish greatly. Predictions may indeed fail on other grounds instead. However, the danger we emphasize is that even a theory that predicts accurately most of the time may still fail catastrophically. It may well be that predictive theory leads us to pay less attention to extremely unlikely cases. The threat posed by such theory, then, arises from its method of handling the anomalous.[71] By ignoring the causal force of leadership in favor of cleaner,

67. On this tendency toward reductionism in modern scholarship, perhaps the most insightful account is Alexis de Tocqueville's. Writing of historians—though it equally applies to all social scientists—he notes that "[m]ost of them attribute hardly any influence over the destinies of mankind to individuals, or over the fate of a people to the citizens. But they make great general cause responsible for the smallest particular events." See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 1969), 493–94.

68. Samuels observes: "Still, a range of constraints continues to dominate our analytic lenses. We must address two questions: Are real leaders as constrained as most scholars assume? What alternatives do we have to the privileging of constraints and the discounting of choice?" Instead of the default assumption, he approaches statecraft as the "stretching of constraints"—a move that gives leadership real due (Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children*, 5).

69. Byman and Pollack note that "[r]ecognizing the importance of individuals is necessary to explode one of the most pernicious and dangerous myths in the study of international relations: the cult of inevitability." See Byman and Pollack "Let Us Now Praise Great Men," 145.

70. Jervis, *System Effects*, 40.

71. Taleb, *Black Swan*, 149. For one account of the consequences of leaders taking this notion seriously, see Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

more parsimonious explanations, scholars do those seeking to understand world events a disservice. In effacing complexity, they prefer elegant theorizing to a deep understanding of the concrete particulars of the past and present that might grant us dim insight into the future.

This failure to appreciate statesmanship seems peculiar in light of the numerous ways that even consistently structural theories fall back on individual choices. To provide two examples: Glenn Snyder notes that even amidst the logic of the security dilemma, a state could alter its notion of self-interest thoroughly enough "that it is no longer subject to structural compulsion."[72] Snyder leaves who or what exactly overrides these constraints open to question, but this begs the issue of why we claim that a theory of war and peace works if it cannot predict the most destructive "outliers" in major wars (undertaken by those who work to undo or who simply override the limits suggested by structure). Working to revise the field's standard understanding of balancing behavior, Randall Schweller argues that the combination of "charismatic leaders and dynamic ideologies" can lead states into potentially dangerous situations where they bandwagon with revisionist powers. But in Schweller's argument, the public's desire for change only enables the demagogue to act in pre-approved ways; such leaders represent little more than the force of public opinion and seemingly have little ability to shape public sentiment.[73] Snyder and Schweller argue *around* human action without acknowledging that it maintains any causal force within events. Neither allows for a robust understanding of the statesman's role in determining international relations. Indeed, they hardly leave space within international relations theory for exploring questions related to the independent causal role of leadership.

In the act of deliberation, statesmen and elites filter myriad forces according to particular priorities and delimit their potential responses in reaction to their circumstances. Yet few mainstream theorists recognize—let alone fully develop—the way we as scholars cannot totally reduce this activity of choice to the external causes decision makers face.[74] Cultural ideas or national history may affect their

72. Glenn Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36 (July 1986): 495. On how structure creates incentives to act within the normal boundaries of the system, see Waltz, *Theory*, 104–07.

73. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit," 96–98.

74. On this point, Alasdair MacIntyre observes that "it is an obvious truism that no institution or practice is what it is, or does what it does, independently of what anyone whatsoever thinks or feels about it. For institutions and practices are always partially, even if to differing degrees, constituted by what certain people think and feel about them." Of course, we must acknowledge that most constructivist scholars agree with MacIntyre on this point, but where he suggests this should lead us to reevaluate our methods of studying world affairs, constructivists often view individuals as abstractions embedded in social collectives. See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?," in his *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 263.

understanding of reality, but in the moment of decision statesmen give meaning to the data that confront them, narrow the alternatives the situation presents, and determine the course of action. This fact may make trends in international relations difficult to predict, but that does not provide a sufficient reason to ignore leaders.[75]

When scholars ignore the agency of particularly influential leaders or begin from the constraints they face rather than the possibilities they reveal, their theories ignore the way leaders form another sort of "capability" that alters a state's range of options:

> Between potential force and actual force the factor of mobilization intervenes. The force available to each political unit in its rivalry with others is proportional not to its potential but to its *potential of mobilization*. The latter . . . depends on many factors which can be reduced to two abstract terms: capacity and will. The conditions of economic or administrative capacity . . . are not constant throughout history; they vary from period to period.[76]

Individual leaders and elite groups matter because they affect a state's power to influence its own people and others. Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack observe that before Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed him, "Bismarck defied the systemic logic of balancing in forging his coalitions," turning Prussia's natural enemies into partners; through his subsequent choices, Wilhelm himself inverted Bismarck's diplomatic order, leading Germany into World War I.[77] International relations scholars tend to treat individual people arithmetically—a given leader or soldier is like any other, both in quality and effect. So understood, human actions appear significant only when they occur in large numbers, and no one person acquires a disproportionate causal effect. But a more accurate way of thinking might understand certain individuals as producing a *geometric* effect—that is, when they turn, events have a tendency to turn with them.[78]

We do not mean to argue that statesmen form the sole or most important cause of every event, only that they make determinations about what causes deserve attention and that through this function they help shape the course of

75. Byman and Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men," 134–35.

76. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 1981), 49.

77. Byman and Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men," 121–25.

78. For a relevant discussion on this topic, see Book I, Chapter 3 in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). This disproportionate influence individuals hold on international affairs brings to mind the Duke of Wellington's description of Napoleon Bonaparte: "in short, I used to say of him [Napoleon] that his presence on the field made the difference of forty thousand men." Cited in Philip Henry Stanhope, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington, 1831–1851* (Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2006), 9.

international affairs. As Richard Samuels argues, "leaders may stretch" the constraints under which their states operate, yet they cannot entirely create the conditions under which they make decisions.[79] Nor do we mean to claim that statesmen's individual intentions always turn out the way they plan—chaos, complexity, and friction undo or force modifications to most plans.[80] We merely mean to underscore the largely unacknowledged importance of individuals in shaping the major events, and subsequent trajectory, of world politics. If international relations scholars care about policy relevance, they must make political elites a topic for serious study.

In sum, whenever theorists eliminate human agency from their studies of international affairs, they promote a kind of determinism. Whether authors ground this work in a particular assertion about how states perceive their material interests or find it in a type of "cultural destiny," they undermine our ability to reach a deeper understanding of how and why countries interact with one another. In following what they believe conforms to a rigorous understanding of social science, these scholars promote the idea that we might best learn about the social world in the same way we develop knowledge about nature. Where natural phenomena often lend themselves to a straightforward dyadic model of cause–effect relations, the presence of unpredictable human beings adds an aspect of nonlinearity to all causes and effects. This complexity demands more than a narrowly structural approach to international relations.[81]

Reviving Methodological Pragmatism and Eclecticism

We now turn to a remedy for the flaw that international relations scholarship suffers for its devotion to excessive theoretical generalization incompatible with recognizing the political importance of human agency. Statesmen and elites act as an important factor in many political events, synthesizing the relevant forces arrayed against them and then, to varying degrees, determining a course of action from an often-dizzying menu of practical possibilities. Depending on their skill or lack thereof, leaders may open up or rule out hitherto unexplored options. Our argument suggests the need for a change in the way we think about our work and challenges the international relations field to answer one of its most basic

79. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children*, 5.

80. On unintended consequences, see Jervis, *System Effects*, 61–67.

81. One difficulty with modern scholars of all sorts lies in their tendency to embrace general rules. There is an enormous theoretical literature on problems with this. Two of the best examples include Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 5–42 and Part I of FA. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979). Tocqueville also observes that in modernity "it becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human spirit to discover common rules for everything . . . and to explain a group of facts by one sole cause" (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 439).

questions: are our explanations of actual conflict any improvement over Thucydides?[82]

Although faculty at the leading doctoral programs in international relations might reject any of the founding books in the discipline as dissertations today, we think these works retain a tangible value because they offer more *insight* than predictive power.[83] Perhaps because of this difference in orientation, statesmen read and continue to learn from the classic works and often eschew the products of today's academy. We might understand these earlier works simply as a kind of valuable mental training that orients students of politics rather than an effort claiming to define the best course of action.[84]

Despite Chernoff's persuasive argument that policymakers always require some tacit or explicit theory to guide their deliberations, in crucial ways the field of international relations seems increasingly irrelevant as a source of wisdom for action. Some of the earliest works in the field caution against generalizing to excess and demand scholars examine a wide range of topics in addition to constructing theories or models about political life. While Waltz insists on the importance of structure, in *Man, the State, and War* he also emphasizes the degree to which scholars cannot isolate the international system from states and individuals. Waltz never denies the crucial importance of empirical context as a modifier to any general theoretical judgment.[85] In *Man, the State, and War*, he claims we must examine the different images together and in the process draw on insights from a wide variety of disciplinary sources.[86] Early work like Waltz's

82. Andrew Bennett, "A Lakatosian Reading of Lakatos: What Can We Salvage from the Hard Core?" in Elman and Elman, eds., *Progress in International Relations Theory*, 455. On this point Bruce Bueno de Mesquita notes that "[d]espite the attention of such intellectual giants as Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, and Clausewitz, we know little more about international conflict today than was known to Thucydides four hundred years before Christ." See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 2.

83. For a sense of the divide within political science on this topic, see David Laitin, "The Political Science Discipline," in *The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Theory and Inquiry in American Politics*, ed. Edward D. Mansfield and Richard Sison (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 11–40, and Ian Shapiro's response in Chapter 6 of *The Flight From Reality*, 204–12. Even Kenneth Waltz met with significant resistance to the research that eventually became his *Man, the State, and War*. According to his 2001 preface to the work, when Waltz initially approached his dissertation advisor with an outline for what would become the book, he was told that "it might be useful for a course" he could eventually teach. The dissertation appeared to hang in limbo until "many weeks later, a letter reached me in Korea saying that the tenured members of the department did not understand what I proposed to do but agreed that I should be allowed to go ahead and do it" (Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, viii). For a scathing critique of the way the "ism's" fragment inquiry, see in Puchala, "Beyond the Divided Discipline," 216–17.

84. To cite just one example, Thomas Smith implies that great works of political thought and history serve this purpose. See Smith, *History and International Relations*, 26–31.

85. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 230–38.

86. In writing *Man, the State, and War,* Waltz even suggested that political philosophy—a subfield that in many ways has become the orphan child of political science—would be a fruitful source of ideas (11–12). Until the advent of constructivism, scholars in the field largely ignored this admonition. See also

largely avoided the trap of genuine determinism by attributing significant explanatory power to the choices of statesmen; instead of being prisoners to structure, efforts like his acknowledged the ways leadership affects international order.[87]

As we note above, when structural realism came to dominate the intellectual scene, various authors worked to counteract this trend by insisting on the ways ideas matter for politics. At first, this took the cast of a debate within realism modifying the existing theory. Later, Wendt and other constructivists shifted the nature of the struggle entirely. But nearly all agree on the value of general theorizing and dream of its predictive power. This is erroneous because it focuses political analysis on the systemic level rather than the more complex and less predictable state and individual levels. Those driven by the desire for theoretical parsimony usually produce somewhat truncated discussions of both historic events and future possibilities.[88]

In the course of their work, international relations scholars habitually attack history and other cognate fields for their lack of predictive power or social scientific rigor. Yet ironically, statesmen constantly refer to those very sources for inspiration and guidance, rather than works in international relations. This should trouble scholars. While many international relations scholars explicitly deny any desire to affect the conduct of politics, we wonder whether political science scholarship may actually be driven by such a desire.[89] If scholars wish to affect international politics, a second question emerges: given the field's systematic reduction of human agency, how *could* it serve as a source of wisdom for statecraft?

International relations theorists often comment on how states might conduct themselves differently in light of the field's predictions. Theorists accurately note that all things being equal, any state that seeks to acquire more power or influence for self-described "defensive" reasons may find that other states

---

Kenneth Waltz, "Political Philosophy and the Study of International Relations," in *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations*, ed. William T.R. Fox (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 51–67, and Smith, *History and International Relations*, 67–69.

87. See George, "The 'Operational Code,'" especially 190–97. Aron also emphasizes the complexity and indeterminacy of international politics. See the introduction to Aron, *Peace and War*, especially 1–18.

88. Vague prescription is one of the most important issues Waltz initially warned against: "One cannot say in the abstract that for peace a country must arm, or disarm, or compromise, or stand firm. One can only say that the possible effects of all such policies must be considered." See Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 222.

89. It appears that in many cases statesmen use their past experiences and historical knowledge as heuristic short cuts to make decisions, not the nuanced opinions of experts or political scientists. See Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Given the difficulties intrinsic in successfully governing, one might further ask why statesmen so often write histories or books of maxims rather than theoretical accounts of international politics.

construe its actions as a potential threat, leading to a spiral of misperception and conflict.[90] These observations prompted major authors in the field—especially during the Cold War—to argue that states should work to reduce their footprint on the world or minimize their responses to various provocations. For example, Waltz argues this tendency among the powerful to "overmanage" the world causes much conflict and instability.[91] But precisely because they fail to give due credit to human agency, scholars rarely note the statesman's real dilemma when handling crises.

If leaders tend to overestimate the threats their states face and often overcompensate against them, good reasons exist for them to do so.[92] Statesmen cannot act on the fragile hope that an observed tendency in international affairs will hold true in their particular case. Because the lives and prosperity of their people rest on their decisions, they must instead plan for and act in response to the worst-case scenario. The fact that all statesmen face this dilemma of suspicion means that we cannot fully overcome it with theory-driven suggestions.[93] Those in power cannot take supposedly predictive theory too seriously when facing threats because prudence demands a close examination of specific facts rather, the broad application of a general theory. The dilemma this presents demands more study, but also a somewhat different approach than the one most commonly employed regarding individuals and structure in international relations.[94]

While international relations theory can articulate some of the causal mechanisms underlying a state's decision to choose one alliance over another, it does very little to help understand the relationship between the statesmen and elites who lead countries and the system within which they operate. As causal agents with responsibilities and goals, leaders rarely wed themselves to the sort of ideas international relations suggests they should follow.[95] Many practical and philosophical problems remain within international relations theory. We wonder if in building theory rooted in developing our understanding of constraints on

90. One of the best brief explanations of the security dilemma is found in Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," especially 461–62.

91. Waltz, *Theory,* 207–08.

92. Jervis, "War and Misperception," 688–89.

93. On this, see Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), especially 1–6, 20–28 and 142–61.

94. For a good account of the dangers associated with applying abstract theories to the conduct of foreign policy, see Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Establishing a Viable Human Rights Policy," *World Affairs* 143 (Spring 1981): 323–34.

95. Schweller explores the extent to which states might not work to maintain the *status quo.* However, his explanation largely evades extensive exploration of the role statesmen play in changing their state's "intentions." He mentions statesmen and then moves on. See his "Bandwagoning for Profit," especially 85–92.

human action, the field does not subtly encourage political quietism and fatalism.[96]

The current tools theorists usually employ to understand world affairs rarely provide an explanation of the relationship between states and the international system without so narrowing human agency that they neutralize the theory's value for policy. After all, most human beings—perhaps especially politicians, diplomats, and generals—commonly act in rather unpredictable ways that defy structural constraint. At the very least, scholars must abandon their insistence on finding simple causes for irreducibly complex events; taken seriously, our argument suggests the need for scholarship that returns "an eclectic and pragmatic spirit" to the discipline and its understanding of methodology.[97] In this vein, we suggest that scholars of international relations might consider adopting a new goal. Instead of constantly refining vague predictive models while simultaneously denying the role of individuals in shaping events, we suggest that international relations theorists might work harder at studying the role human agency plays in world affairs.

While one normally finds the concept of "friction" in studies of war, we argue that this idea might have broader application. Friction is a general term popularized by Carl von Clausewitz that observes the gap between one's theoretical understanding of a situation and how it actually progresses in reality. Once we attempt to translate our objectives into action, "[c]ountless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal."[98] Given that friction constantly accompanies all human endeavors, new kinds of international relations scholarship might work harder to understand the complex relationships between individuals and the system. This might involve studying decision making under conditions of stress and uncertainty within the international system or the extent to which individual leaders can overcome the inertia of their domestic political system and enact policy on the international stage. To this end, we suggest four broad, analytically eclectic paths research might take.[99]

96. Here again, Tocqueville's arguments remain instructive: Scholars rarely content themselves with showing how events occur and instead, "they pride themselves on proving that they could not have happened differently. . . . If this doctrine of fatality, so attractive to those who write history in democratic periods, passes from authors to readers, infects the whole mass of the community, and takes possession of the public mind, it will soon paralyze the activities of modern society." Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 496.

97. George, "The 'Operational Code,'" 221.

98. Clausewitz, *On War*, 119. On friction's role in politics and war, see Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, especially Chapters. 1, 2 and 4.

99. For a general account of how this eclecticism might proceed, see Katzenstein and Sil, "Eclectic Theorizing," especially 119–24. For a deeper theoretical inquiry into this notion, see Rudra Sil, "The Foundations of Eclecticism: The Epistemological Status of Agency, Culture, and Structure in Social Theory," *The Journal of Theoretical Politics* 12 (2000): 353–87.

First, scholars might pursue an understanding of leadership through less theory-driven and prediction-oriented case studies in military, diplomatic, and political history that are geared toward solving the peculiar puzzles presented by complex systems.[100] The best recent example of this work may be seen in Richard Samuels' *Machiavelli's Children*, which inverts the usual mode of analysis by presenting the ways in which leaders "stretch" the material constraints presented by their nations and political systems. Samuels invokes Machiavelli as the preeminent thinker regarding this problem. Instead of the modern approach, in which scientific imperatives drive scholarship, Machiavelli understands that the comparison of one similar historical case to another in and of itself constitutes a form of political education. In his dedicatory letter to *The Prince*, Machiavelli claims to give Lorenzo de Medici "the means to be able, in a very brief time, to understand all that I, in many years and with many hardships and dangers, came to understand and appreciate."[101] Presenting an "accurate complexity over an inaccurate parsimony," this effort might remind us that "[v]icarous experience acquired from the past, even the remote past, gives such guidance to the present that history becomes more than its own reward."[102] Far from falling into some "humanistic fallacy," this work could still be undertaken with rigor, and would redefine what we hope for theory to accomplish, aiming at training our minds to interpret events and helping us reconcile our minds with irreducible complexity. So understood, various forms of collaboration between international relations scholars, historians, and political philosophers may acquire new value.[103]

Secondly, scholars in comparative government and those working in the neorealist tradition might spend more time examining the scope within which

100. For an inquiry into how this method might be pursued, see Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986). For an excellent book highlighting the issue of problem versus theory driven research, see also the essays in Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek E. Masoud, ed., *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

101. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Portable Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Penguin, 1979), 78. For Machiavelli and his humanist contemporaries, history served as a source of inspiration; it acted as a "school of prudence" and the principal method by which philosophy teaches us by example. See James Hankins, "Humanism and Modern Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123–24.

102. Byman and Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men," 113n13; Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, 232.

103. Three powerful examples of this include Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Richard N. Lebow's books *The Tragic Vision* and *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

particularly dangerous leaders emerge. Acknowledging that leaders and elite groups bring disproportionate influence to bear on the conduct of their state's foreign policy and in turn affect the international system does not destroy the structuralist research agenda so much as suggest ways scholars might rethink how powerful individuals affect the system. Studies that trace out the structural conditions most likely to produce powerful leaders could bear real importance.[104] Explorations of this sort might help explain how an elite group can alter the intentions of a state and give us insight into what creates revisionist or *status quo* powers. They might also give us a better understanding of hitherto "anomalous" cases in which individuals or small groups radically alter their country's goals and intentions within the system, and thus prevent the intellectual evasion currently present when scholars slight powerful leaders as "one-offs" in international affairs.[105]

Thirdly, constructivists might fulfill the very real promise their research agenda holds by helping us understand the way different ideas and norms drive non-Western nations. For example, Wendt's cultures of anarchy root the imperatives of national cultures in an essentially *liberal* anthropology. The Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian versions of this differ considerably in emphasis, but none of them eschew deeply material concerns of physical well-being, stability, and prosperity. But what of cultures and leaders whose deepest religious, moral, and political imperatives do not comport with a liberal or materialist scale of values? Constructivist examinations of culture might aid us considerably by further developing arguments that recognize deep cultural difference. However, to accomplish this they must shed their structural focus and narrow assumptions about the stability of preferences and values across cultural lines.[106] We believe one promising path already taken by students of strategic culture rests in the analysis of the ways cultural dynamics shape but do not entirely control actual decisionmaking. This work can tell us much about conditions under which

104. A recent popular work that explores this is Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 2002). Some scholarly accounts include James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper, 1979); Brian Reed, "A Social Network Approach to Understanding an Insurgency," *Parameters* 37 (Summer 2007): 19–30; and Robert W. Oldendick and Barbara Ann Bardes, "Mass and Elite Foreign Policy Opinions," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46 (Autumn 1982): 368–82.

105. For one prominent example of this tendency, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 216–24.

106. On this, see Wendt, *Social Theory*, 246–308. In a future work, we intend to more fully detail this argument, but we would emphasize the degree to which much modern international relations theory rests on a set of liberal ideas about the interests, goals, and desires of human persons. Two essential studies of the development of this liberal ideal may be found in Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978) and Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*.

individuals can overcome or modify cultural dispositions. Efforts like these bring the state and individual back in to international relations theory—and they make theory relevant for policymaking.[107]

Finally, various forms of psychological, anthropological, cultural, and theological studies of specific people, places, and events might have real value for the thick descriptions and consequent insights they provide us into how states and leaders actually behave. Scholars rightly note the ways in which beliefs, customs, and memory work to condition actions in international affairs.[108] Work that traces the extent to which these cognitive byways affect decisionmaking or frame our understanding of the world might illuminate ways specific groups tend to view the world differently, providing necessary background for other scholars to relate how these elites affect the international system.[109] Without this sort of contextual knowledge, international relations scholarship can never hope to develop accurate analyses that apply in a variety of cases and still inform those who practice the art of statecraft.

Taken together with an eclectic mix of existing structuralist and constructivist methods in international relations that still acknowledge the importance of human agency, a wide variety of approaches to understanding political life can only help broaden our understanding of how and why states act the way they do. If this requires sacrificing parsimony or some apparent predictive leverage, the loss is not great. On the contrary, acknowledging the constant presence of human agency might allow for a much richer appreciation of complexity in international relations. Ultimately, it may be that the best political scientists can hope for is Machiavellian maxims about the conduct of international relations instead of Hobbesian laws that look to predict its course.[110]

---

107. See generally Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jacques Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness*, 1948–1991 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

108. Aron, *War and Peace*, 82; Wendt, *Social Theory*, 325–26.

109. For a few representative examples of anthropological and psychological accounts useful for understanding issues in international relations, see Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Stephen P. Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Albert Bandura, *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973); and Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

110. MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" 273.

Political life has not changed so much in the past five hundred years that scientific inquiry accurately predicts human action. Until it can, international relations scholars would be wise to exercise an additional degree of epistemological humility and embrace the importance of statesmanship in politics.[111]

111. We are reminded of Beralde in Moliére's satire, *The Imaginary Invalid*, which suggests we believe in seemingly scientific approaches despite the fact that, "these opinions are pure fancies, with which we deceive ourselves. At all times, there have crept among men brilliant fancies in which we believe, because they flatter us, and because it would be well if they were true . . . when you test the truth of what he has promised to you, you find that it all ends in nothing; it is like those beautiful dreams which only leave you in the morning the regret of having believed in them." See Beralde in Moliére, *The Dramatic Works of Moliére*, trans. Charles H. Wall (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1919), III: 447–48.