1 INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A NEW SYNTHESIS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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The 1980s was a decade of upheaval unknown since the end of World War Two. The decade began with the onset of the Second Cold War and ended with unparalleled cooperation between the superpowers. In 1980, the Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan, and many in the West feared this action reflected Moscow’s heightened global ambitions. Meanwhile, the American military establishment had become gravely concerned over the USSR’s first strike nuclear capability, and urged the American president to take urgent countermeasures. The Soviet Union, for its part, believed the West was embarking on a renewed arms race in a desperate bid to attain strategic superiority. Moreover, the Kremlin feared a newly emerging encirclement, at Western instigation, among neighbouring states hostile to Moscow.

The two superpowers appeared to be locked in a relationship of tension and danger from which there seemed no escape. Yet, by the end of the decade, the Cold War was officially declared to be over. Moscow had pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, the old communist elites in Eastern Europe had been toppled by popular revolution, and even the USSR itself had begun the process of disintegration. Both superpowers were cutting their nuclear arsenals, while all the time calling for bigger reductions and new initiatives. The United States and the Soviet Union no longer saw each other as enemies. Instead, the mood was in favour of cooperation and mutual aid. The Cold War system, with which the world had grown so familiar since its formation in the late 1940s, had suddenly collapsed. The future, in the post-bipolar world, looked very uncertain.

The rapidity of the change took participants and observers alike by surprise. Although many doubts had been expressed about the stability of the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, few imagined that the leaders of the USSR would permit such rapid dismantling of the ‘gains of socialism’. This surprise, even among the experts in the field, led many to challenge academic understanding of global politics and the
utility of International Relations Theory. Many questions were raised. How do the ideas of the main IR theorists stand up to the test against the realities of global politics? Can they account for the radical changes in the 1980s? What limitations have been revealed? And in what directions should the discipline move to remedy any perceived weaknesses? These questions form the central focus of this volume. The papers collected here represent a first attempt to answer them.

Despite the variety of answers to the questions, these papers share several assumptions and can be seen as part of an emerging synthesis of some of the apparently contradictory approaches to the subject. Approaches to world politics are increasingly seeking to link the international and the domestic, the societal and the transnational in a way that incorporates some of the elements of traditional Realism. The remainder of this chapter outlines the background to this synthesis and some of the other issues which need consideration.

The emergence of Neo-Realism

The story of the emergence of International Relations as an academic discipline is a familiar one and there is no need to repeat it here. It need only be noted that during the 1980s, it became conventional to divide theoretical approaches to the subject into three categories: the Realist, Pluralist/Liberal, and Marxist/Structuralist ‘paradigms’. But what concerns us most in this chapter is the shifting interaction between these approaches in the last ten years, and the state of the dialogue between them.¹

Realism, which had emerged back in the 1940s, remains to this day the dominant paradigm in International Relations. However, Realism has changed its form constantly over time. There is a world of difference, for example, between a behaviouralist treatment of the balance of power and Morgenthau’s Scientific Man Versus Power Politics in their assumptions about the nature of international politics and the best approach to its study. This capacity for transformation is one of the reasons for the continuing hegemony of Realism within anglophone International Relations. Nevertheless, it is still possible to define a core of common interests in Realism. These are: the state, anarchy of the international system, power and security.²

During the 1960s and 1970s, Realism came under attack from two directions. Firstly from the behaviourists, who regarded the founding texts of Realism as impressionistic and unscientific. This, in part, stimulated the so-called ‘Great Debate’ in the discipline between
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‘scientific’ and ‘classical’ approaches. Looking back, twenty-five years later, it is clear that the debate has resolved nothing.3

The second assault from the ‘transnationalists’ was more substantive. They attacked the Realist model on two fronts. The first attack referred to an alleged change in the basic nature of world politics. While the Realists may have been correct in their emphasis on power and security back in the 1940s, the world of the 1970s had changed to such an extent that Realism no longer provided a ‘usable map of the world’. It had been overtaken by new actors and new issues. The new international actors included terrorists, multinational corporations, intelligence agencies and drug dealers, and they were operating, without heed to borders, on a global scale. It was further argued that these new actors had a significant impact on world politics. Partly as a result of the emergence of these new actors, a new set of issues arose which could be bracketed under the heading of ‘interdependence’. Issues like pollution, overpopulation, nuclear proliferation, resource depletion and poverty, it was said, could no longer be resolved satisfactorily within the confines of the state unit. Thus, transnationalist writers either predicted and/or advocated the demise of the nation-state as the dominant form of political organisation.4

The second thrust of attack was one based on method. This was part of a more general movement in political science towards the disaggregation of the state and analysis in terms of political systems and interest groups. In International Relations, this movement was reflected, not only in the writing on transnational relations, but also in Foreign Policy Analysis which utilised bureaucratic politics models and decision-making analysis.5

The most carefully considered response to the critics of Realism came from Kenneth Waltz. In his book, Theory of International Politics, published in 1979, Waltz effectively set the agenda for mainstream International Relations in the 1980s. Waltz’s responses can be considered on three levels: his method; his substantive response to the Realist critics; and his conclusions.6

The methodological style of Waltz’s work derives from his concept of theory. The quality of a theory, in his view, is a function of its breadth of applicability. The wider the range of cases that it can explain, the better the theory. The starting point for a theory of International Relations is the recurrence of patterns of behaviour over time. For Waltz, the dominant pattern in international relations is the balance of power. Therefore, a good theory of international relations is one which will explain balancing in the whole range of cases in which it occurs, not just some of them.7 Consequently, he rejects
‘reductionist’ theories which explain events in terms of the characteristics of the members belonging to the international system. If balance or power politics operated in the Ancient Greek states-system, then attempts to explain them by reference to the characteristics of modern states, for instance by explaining imperialism by reference to capitalism, become unnecessary. For this reason, he argues that the importance lies, not in the characteristics of the units of the system, but in the structures of the system itself. In other words, there is something about the structures of international relations that cause states to act in the way that they do.6

Waltz takes micro-economics as his model. Micro-economics, he claims, is able to explain outcomes on the basis of the structure of the market, be it monopolistic, duopolistic, oligopolistic, or one of perfect competition. This can be done without reference to the characteristics of the firms, beyond the limited assumption that they will act in a rational profit-maximizing way.9 In the case of International Relations, political structure is defined in terms of three criteria. Firstly, is the organising principle one of hierarchy or anarchy? Secondly, what is the differentiation among the units? (Or, in other words, what is the division of labour?) Finally, what is the distribution of capability or power? Waltz answers that the organising principle is one of anarchy, and there is no division of labour, since states are essentially the same kind of entity. As a result, the crucial factor in the international system is the distribution of power which is determined by the number of poles or great power states existing at any one time. Given this spartan definition of structure, Waltz could point to only one major change in the international system since 1648 – the transition from a multipolar system to a bipolar one at the end of the Second World War.10

Two things were of particular importance about Waltz’s work. Firstly, from a very simple basis, he was able to generate considerable explanatory power. Secondly, he made an explicit attachment to the methodology of economics with its assumptions of rational choice and its employment of model-building. This enabled him to abandon the more questionable assertions on human nature which traditional Realists, such as Morgenthau, had used as a basis for their theoretical model.

The substantive content in the book was rigorous, albeit perhaps rather artificial. It stated that the rise of transnational activity had not changed the ordering principle – the division of labour or distribution of power in the international system – and was consequently unimportant. Waltz demonstrated that the degree of economic interdependence between the Great Powers was lower in the late 1970s
than it had been before 1914. As the distribution of capabilities in the system narrowed, the importance of the Great Powers inevitably increased. As a result, low interdependence was only to be expected. Therefore, the substance of Waltz’s analysis was an attack on the theories of transnationalism and interdependence. In his conclusion, Waltz stated that bipolarity was extremely stable; therefore, it was likely to endure. Bipolarity provided the best framework for dealing with the problems of interdependence because cooperation, which was deemed necessary to cope with the new international issues, was easiest with a small number of actors. Hence, two Great Powers were better than three or five. In sum, Waltz suggested that the Cold War system had its merits. In the nuclear age it was perhaps the best option available.

There were many critics of Waltz. One critique, however, deserves special attention here. This concerned his reification of the postwar bipolar system. Waltz, these critics maintained, omitted any discussion in his work on the dynamic of systemic change. How could the system have been transformed in the past? How could it be transformed in the future? Moreover, the abstraction of his theory meant that it had nothing to say about the everyday interactions of international relations.

The Rise of International Political Economy (IPE)

To some extent these shortcomings were compensated by the other key strand of Neo-Realism, the attempt to develop a better understanding of the interaction of the state and the economy in world politics. One of the main criticisms of Realism was its lack of attention to economic issues, which the interdependent theorists argued were becoming vastly more important in the international system of the 1970s. The critics often quoted Henry Kissinger as an example of an American foreign policy-maker who showed a lack of interest in economic issues while in government.

Like all the main schools of thought in International Relations, the rise of interdependency theory had deep intellectual roots. Theorists of interdependence drew on the liberal distinction between state and society. They assumed that the development of a modern economy would produce a more pacific world order since the state’s freedom of action would be constrained by transnational activities and the resultant interdependence. In some versions of the argument, the end result would be either the replacement of the state by large-scale international integration or the rise of the multinational corporation.
Realist IPE rejected the assumption that there was any fundamental tension between economic activity and state power. Indeed, they went further and argued that the two belonged together. States used their power to secure favourable economic conditions. The growth of transnational activities was a function of the kind of policies preferred by states. The modern state had been forced to take responsibility for the economic well-being of its citizens. Therefore, it sought to create the conditions for economic success. Despite this common interest, states have different types of economy, different resources and different levels of development. As a result, different states favoured different types of economic activity, using political means to promote their economic goals. The obvious example of this was the nineteenth-century German analysis of Britain’s commitment to free trade. According to this view, free trade was promoted for purely national reasons since it worked to the advantage of the British as the world’s strongest industrial power. These kinds of arguments began to surface again with new formulations in the mid to late 1970s. They appeared in the work of Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner in the International Relations literature, whilst Charles Kindleberger was prominent in the field of economics.\(^\text{15}\)

The centrepiece of the Realist reinterpretation of the global political economy was the ‘hegemonic stability thesis’. Drawing on rational choice theory, the central argument stated that in a world of egoists, cooperation will always be difficult. No member of a group can be sure that cooperative projects will not be sabotaged by the defection of one of the other members of the group. Consequently, each will be prepared to defect given the chance. This, it was argued, described the economic behaviour of the Great Powers during the 1930s. While free trade benefits all, it does so unequally. Each state may be better off if it can pursue protectionist policies, provided the others play by the rules of free trade. Attempting to do this produces a situation where everybody defects and everybody is worse off. In the 1930s, global depression had been encouraged by the widespread adoption of ‘beggar-my-neighbour’ policies. Kindleberger argued that in the post-Second World War period the United States had acted as ‘hegemon’ in the system. The other Western states had accepted US leadership because they concluded that it was in their interest to do so. It was true that Washington had provided both negative and positive incentives for cooperation, but Kindleberger wondered if these cooperative arrangements could survive if the relative power of the United States declined. Would the loss of hegemony allow the basic difficulties facing cooperation to re-emerge? This argument led to the development of two sets
of literature – one exploring the problems of cooperation with and without a hegemon; the other, the decline of American power.\textsuperscript{16}

Robert Gilpin, in his book, \textit{War and Change in World Politics}, pointed to the danger that the cost of defending America’s dominance in world politics could in itself lead to it losing that very position. In many respects pre-empting Paul Kennedy’s \textit{The Rise and Fall of Great Powers}, he argued that economies and states have a life-cycle.\textsuperscript{17} The history of international relations can be seen as a series of hegemonies. A state’s political influence expands as a result of its domestic strength. However, the process of expansion unleashes countervailing forces both at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{18} Abroad, the state acquires a broader range of commitments that have to be defended, but at the same time it comes up against the other members of the system who are in a position to copy the economic, administrative and military innovations of the dominant power. At home, rising political and military commitments damage economic strength. Thus, the cost of defending the positions acquired during the period of expansion becomes increasingly debilitating. The great power, therefore, begins to lose its dominant position. Furthermore, Gilpin notes that the major wars that have occurred are those that took place when a declining hegemon was challenged. Gilpin relates this to the current position in the international system of the United States, and before that to the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{19} Gilpin saw world politics as an arena where Waltz’s balance of power was only one aspect of an international system where competition was taking place on economic terms, not simply in the pursuit of wealth, but as a means to political power. Whereas Waltz abolished history, Gilpin returned to Machiavelli’s cycles of growth and decay. In so doing, he provided a motor for change in the Neo-Realist perspective.

The debate over hegemony had several sides to it. Although some advocates of the stability thesis could point to a variety of indicators that suggested the decline of American power, others called into question the pessimists’ notion of power. For despite America’s decline in relative terms, the United States still retained disproportionate means for influencing the world political economy, and its hegemony was never seriously under threat.\textsuperscript{20} A second optimistic response to the doom-laden pronouncements of Kindleberger and Gilpin came from those Robert Keohane liked to call, the ‘neoliberal institutionalists’. While in terms of the inter-paradigm debate, neoliberal institutionalists can be located in the Realist camp, Keohane distinguished them from the Neo-Realists. For him, Neo-Realism posited an international system with a single variable – the distribution of power.
Institutional arrangements in any issue area would reflect that distribution, and as it changed, so would those arrangements. In Keohane’s view, however, those institutional arrangements were important in themselves. Over time, a set of rules, practices and understandings (or regimes) evolved which regulated behaviour. As a result, changes in the distribution of power were mediated by the pre-existing regimes, so that the relationship between power and outcomes is less direct than Realists suggest. The institutionalist perspective on the American decline argues that during the period of US hegemony, institutions were created which may have simplified the problems of cooperation to such an extent that a hegemon is no longer required. Whatever the labels, however, the institutionalist analysis, like the Neo-Realist, is based on rational choice theory, and in particular on Robert Axelrod’s work on the evolution of cooperation.

The key development in mainstream (American) International Relations during the 1980s has been the development of Neo-Realist IPE. The scope of Realist analysis has been extended into areas where it was thought to lack purchase. Even the cooperative aspects of world politics can be treated within the framework of anarchy, power and security. For cooperation is a direct result of state power. Three aspects of IPE deserve special mention. Firstly, the recognition that the state is as much an economic actor as a military one means that it will act to preserve national interests in a number of ways. Secondly, the above suggests that insecurity can be used to explain international outcomes that go beyond military threats. Thirdly, this change of perspective has important consequences for the concept of ‘power’. In this view, power is seen as essentially variable and dependent on specific issues. As a result, power is as much a matter of societal structures and procedures as military force. Thus, the traditional view of Realism can be extended to one that acknowledges, in principle at least, the relevance of the internal workings of states and their interaction with societies.

Although Gilpin identifies three paradigms in IPE: the Realist (otherwise known as the Nationalist or Mercantilist), the Liberal and the Marxist, the relationship between the first two is hardly exclusive. Gilpin is not an advocate of Mercantilism, which is the subordination of economic well-being to the needs of national power. His work is more about the interaction between a set of economic actors – individuals and firms, and self-interested political actors – states, which attempt to manipulate the world economy to their own interests. The self-interest of the economic actors might give rise to a liberal global economy, but the states have national interests which they seek
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to advance often at the expense of the wider international perspective. The basic propositions of Realist IPE emerge from the interaction between these two sets of actors, and the processes they initiate.

Marxism and the rise of the state

A second strand of the new synthesis can be found in Marxism and more generally in historical sociology. There is a cliché that Marxism has nothing to contribute to International Relations because of its focus on class and economics. This can be supported by the fact that the most prominent school of Marxist writing on world politics – dependency theory – is only tangentially concerned with relations between states.\(^{26}\) It can be argued that relations between states are determined by class interests, hence there is no need for a theory of relations between states, and indeed the attempt to formulate one simply serves to disguise the true nature of the capitalist global social system. In other words, relations between states is simply another aspect of capitalism. However, it can be demonstrated that implicitly, at least, Marx and Engels separated the question of inter-state conflict from that of capitalism. For in their writings, it is implicit that the existence of independent communities is in itself sufficient for conflict to occur.\(^{27}\)

Despite this, most Marxist writings have tended to follow Lenin in reducing international relations to class interests. They have, to coin Christopher Chase-Dunn’s useful expression, come to treat the inter-state system and the global economy as possessing one logic rather than two. Put more plainly, in the traditional Marxist view, class conflict takes primacy over inter-state conflict.\(^{28}\) Wallerstein’s Modern World System accepts the one logic concept. It claims that the state system is purely parasitic on capitalism, and as such, could be incorporated into the wider framework. However, the past decade has seen the emergence of a body of writing, within the Marxist school, which challenges the single logic model. Such writers have come to acknowledge the importance of inter-state relations, but they have attempted to formulate the interaction within historical materialist categories. This group has joined the growing number of Marxists who accept the concept of ‘the relative autonomy of the state’. Therefore, they are able to concede that inter-state relations represent an important dynamic in understanding change within societies.\(^{29}\) This critical view was a response to the renewed East–West conflict in the early 1980s. The oppressive and militaristic nature of the Soviet regime made many theorists unwilling to seek explanations simply in terms of capitalism.
Instead, explanations were sought in the nature of the states-system which promoted militarism.  

This view grew out of, and in turn stimulated, a wider move in the social sciences to ‘bring the state back in’.  

The habit of ignoring the state in favour of other concepts, such as class, was perceived to have been premature. The ‘state’ remained a distinctive entity. Within sociology it had become commonplace to discuss ‘society’ as something contained within national boundaries. This ignored the fact that society was defined by boundaries which had been determined by the power of the state, and its interaction with others. It also downplayed interaction between the societies themselves. Thus, capitalism remained an important, but not sufficient, explanation of state structures.  

In the case of Europe, states developed through competition with each other. This competition could take several forms, from war and the preparation of war, at one end of the spectrum, to trade at the other. In order to compete more effectively, states had to change or improve the internal functioning of the state. This could involve administrative techniques, labour discipline or scientific research and development. Therefore, it became illusory to study either the European state or the European states-system separately. They existed in an essentially symbiotic relationship. Consequently, historical sociology took a renewed interest in the area conventionally covered by International Relations – the analysis of the modern state, not only as a function of capitalist modernity, but also as a function of the states-system. Such writing has brought many insights into the subject, but it should be noted that the school owed as much to Weber as to Marx.  

The Gramscian school represented a second type of Neo-Marxism. The main figure in this school is Robert Cox, whose work, like Robert Gilpin’s, was concerned with the rise and fall of hegemony. Hegemony is a term used in Gramsci’s writing which indicates a domination maintained through ideologically based consent, rather than force or repression. Cox’s work attempted to outline the development of the global political economy in terms of three levels of analysis: the organisation of production, the form of the state, and the form of the world order. Interestingly, in the end, Cox concluded that the single most important factor in the overall pattern of global politics was the form of the state.  

**Critical International Relations Theory (CI RT)**  

There was a striking congruence between the concerns of Realism and historical materialist writings on world politics during the 1980s, in that both emphasised the inter-action of the states-system