The Great Powers and the International System

Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective

Do great leaders make history, or are they compelled to act by historical circumstance? This debate has remained unresolved since Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx framed it in the mid-19th century, yet implicit answers inform our policies and our views of history. In this book, Professor Bear F. Braumoeller argues persuasively that both perspectives are correct: leaders shape the main material and ideological forces of history that subsequently constrain and compel them. His studies of the Congress of Vienna, the interwar period, and the end of the Cold War illustrate this dynamic, and the data he marshals provide systematic evidence that leaders both shape and are constrained by the structure of the international system.

BEAR F. BRAUMOELLER is a political scientist and an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University. He has previously held faculty positions at Harvard University and the University of Illinois. His research lies at the intersection of international security, statistics, and diplomatic history, and in particular on translating the nuanced and contextual arguments of students of world politics into new statistical methods for political scientists. His work has been published in journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, *International Organization*, *Political Analysis*, and *International Studies Quarterly*.

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To Molly
whose perseverance and grace are an inspiration

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Preface

The idea that the environment within which people interact has an impact on their behavior is anything but radical. Indeed, to urban architects, physicians, sociologists, economists, and policy analysts, it will seem commonplace. And because people are both aware of the impact of their environment and able to alter it, it comes as little surprise that we seek to do so: strategic placement of one-way streets eases traffic congestion, snack machines with healthier options improve diets, restructuring government subsidies alters consumer behavior. The combination of these two ideas – that environments have an impact on people's behavior and that people act to alter their environment – is the essence of systemic thinking.

This mode of thinking has made remarkably little headway in the field of international relations. We generally take key elements in the international environment as given: the balance of power, for example, is seen to be either immutable or something that changes of its own accord. Not only do we not understand how people seek, collectively, to influence the international environment within which they interact, but – almost entirely without exception – we do not even try. This is a problem because for many of us the international system is our fundamental object of study, and our understanding of the parts far outstrips our understanding of the whole. The field of astronomy would be embarrassed, and rightly so, if its most prominent academics could be grouped into "gravity theorists," "orbit theorists," "Jupiter theorists," and so on, none of whom could give a coherent account of the workings of a solar system.[1]

Objectively, there is no reason for this neglect. Clear attempts to influence the milieu within which states interact go back at least two centuries, if not earlier. European statesmen at the Congress of Vienna sought very explicitly to establish, and later to maintain, distributions of material capabilities and political ideology on the Continent that would render war less likely. Their successors, too, sought and upheld settlements that were meant, explicitly, to structure the international environment in a manner that would influence the behavior of its members in beneficial ways. In short,

[1] This analogy, I think, helps to explain why those few system-level studies that do exist are represented far out of proportion to their number on international relations syllabi and in bibliographies: the endeavor is seen as an important one, even if the extent of those theories' ability to explain the world has at times been unclear. At this writing, for example, Google Scholar shows nearly 3,000 citations for Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* and more than twice that many for Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics.*

international relations is every bit as systemic as other disciplines. Our theorizing should reflect that fact.

It is possible that scholars of international relations do little to comprehend systemic politics because our instinctive focus is on smaller-scale interactions: systemic phenomena may not attract attention, perversely, precisely because they are so monumental. To continue the example, the Vienna statesmen and their successors did not just fight wars: they also sought, on an ongoing basis (and to varying degrees), to transform the environment within which wars were fought. It is easy to focus on the wars rather than their context and in so doing not to notice that that context was neither accidental nor irrelevant to the outcome.

It is also possible that the lasting influence of the division of the field into so-called levels of analysis (Waltz 1959; Singer 1961) explains our neglect of systemic politics. Rather than just theorize – a difficult enough challenge as it is – international relations scholars typically meta-theorize, dividing reality up according to level of aggregation (individual, state, or international system as a whole, for example) before analyzing it. The historical justification for this division – Singer cited the "general sluggishness that characterizes the development of theory" in "our emerging discipline" as a result of "failing to appreciate the value of a stable point of focus" (77–78) – is now far less a concern than it was when he made these points a half-century ago. Today, it seems more likely that the greater danger lies in reflexively continuing to develop explanations within levels of analysis, a practice that degrades our ability to derive useful explanations that bridge them.

Regardless of the reason, international relations remains a subject in which, despite the signal importance of system-level variables like the balance of power, truly systemic explanations – those that explain the impact of the actors on the structure of the system and vice versa – are unbelievably scarce. This book represents my attempt to rectify that situation. It is probably worth explaining its main contributions in some depth, if only because the latter are usually much clearer to authors than to readers.

First of all, as already mentioned, **this book constructs a systemic theory of international politics.** That is, it explains international relations as a whole, not the foreign policies of individual states or groups of states. Moreover, it explains international relations not as the result of individual motivations or the interactions of pairs of states, but rather as the outcome of systemic forces – the interplay between the structure of the international system (the balance of power, for example) and the units that make it up (the individual countries, or states).

Reasonable scholars differ on the question of whether this has been accomplished before. Most, however, implicitly or explicitly concur with Wendt's (1999, 11) coding rule: a theory is systemic if it *either* explains structural outcomes *or* points to the structure of the system when explaining state behavior. As the earlier discussion makes clear, I take a systemic theory to be one that does both. By that definition, fully systemic theories of international politics are, at best, extremely rare.

In addition to constructing such a theory, **the book evaluates the systemic theory of international politics that it proposes.** Evaluating systemic theories (however defined) in a concrete and systematic manner is also extremely rare. Even their

proponents have been frustrated by the difficulty of deriving unambiguous predictions from them. This book does so in two ways. The first is a statistical analysis of a dataset that contains original data and spans nearly two centuries of Great Power interactions. The second is a set of three detailed historical case studies of critical junctures within that period that allow me to trace the theory's causal mechanisms in depth while accounting for the idiosyncrasies particular to each case.

More specifically, I design this theory to predict how active a state will be (from extremely internationalist, on one end of the spectrum, to isolationist on the other) but not anything about the specific form that that activity will take: it can predict when a state will increase its level of activity, for example, but other factors will determine whether that increase in activity will take the form of increased armaments, an alliance, or an invasion. In other work (Braumoeller 2008), I demonstrate how the theory can be combined with lower-level theories (deterrence theory and the spiral model) to predict more specific outcomes – in that case, the onset of militarized disputes.

At a preliminary presentation of the book manuscript and its findings at Northwestern University, Professor Hendryk Spruyt offered the thought-provoking comment that the argument brought us full circle, back from the deductive systemic theorizing of Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* to the inductive reasoning of Richard Rosecrance's (1963) *Action and Reaction in World Politics*. This comment stands out in my mind, in large part because it captures so much of the essence of what I have sought to do here. Each of these works strikes me as iconic, fascinating, incredibly useful . . . and capable of benefiting from an infusion of what the other provides. My goal was not to return completely to an inductive mode of thinking, but rather, to marry the two as effectively as possible – to construct a work that retained a rigorous deductive theoretical superstructure but evaluated that deductive theory using rich historical content.

A third point is of particular interest to scholars of international relations: **the book integrates different theories of state behavior into a single, unified explanation** and, in so doing, demonstrates that they produce more complete answers than any one of them could separately. Because parts of the theory are drawn from different traditions in the political science literature (in particular, from the study of ideas and politics, the study of domestic political institutions, and the study of power politics, or *realpolitik*), the answer to this question will have implications for the ability of scholars within those paradigms to explain international politics. As I explain later, this is new and exciting: although in the past partial theories drawn from these traditions have been compared in an ad hoc manner, they have hardly ever been integrated into a larger theory so that they can be tested against one another directly.[2]

For exactly this reason, the theory is not associated with any single theoretical paradigm, or "-ism." This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of it for traditional students of international relations, many of whom have become accustomed to dividing the literature along paradigmatic lines. The book draws on and integrates insights from scholars who would label themselves realists, rationalists, liberals, public choice

[2] The exception that proves the rule is Niou and Ordeshook (1994).

theorists, and constructivists, just to name a few. As I demonstrate, the end result cannot be reduced to any one of them.

This book was a very substantial undertaking.[3] Over the course of writing it, accordingly, I accumulated many debts. In fact, when I sat down to think about who to thank, I realized it was not much of an exaggeration simply to write "everyone I know." A remarkable number of colleagues have had some input into the book at some stage, and friends and family who have only an imprecise sense of what it is about have nevertheless lent essential support during the course of its completion, whether they knew it at the time or not.

The germ of what would later become the book was my doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan, the subject of which was isolationism. In that undertaking, I incurred a long list of debts, starting with my advisor, Robert Axelrod. Bob not only provided outstanding advice but also provided me with an excellent model for how to advise my own students: letting me find my own direction and knowing how to encourage worthwhile trains of thought while curtailing less promising ones, he was the intellectual equivalent of a Bonsai master. I benefited greatly from his advice and his example.

Christopher Achen and William Zimmerman also served on the committee, and the end product was greatly enhanced by the breadth and depth of their knowledge. Each is a respected expert in his own area, but I found their comments on the project to be impressively wide-ranging and deep. They prompted me to rethink a long list of issues involving everything from the finer points of American foreign policy to the utility of a basic crosstab, for which I am immensely grateful. Paul Huth and Bradford Perkins rounded out the committee, and each not only provided excellent feedback but also showed me a platonic ideal of a committed, dedicated scholar working in a particular idiom.

Only after I received my Ph.D. did I fully realize that, in designing a rudimentary systemic theory to answer a question about states' foreign policies, I had used a sledgehammer to kill a fly. I had also written a dissertation that was begging to be substantially rewritten before publication. I am indebted to Andrew Moravcsik, now at Princeton University, who, more than anyone else, nudged me off the fence and toward redrafting the manuscript, though he may never have been aware of the fact that he did so. I co-taught the introductory graduate seminar at Harvard University with Professor Moravcsik for two years, and his perspective on the field enriched my own greatly, in particular with regard to the potential place of my own work in the larger picture.

I am also indebted to Professor Iain Johnston, still at Harvard, who helped me past one of the most difficult hurdles I faced: obtaining data. Over lunch one day I remember expressing my frustration at not being able to obtain comparable cross-national data on my quantities of greatest interest, dating back to 1815. Our discussion prompted me to consider expert surveys, which ended up costing me years and

[3] When I introduced draft versions of the book at talks, in fact, I told audiences that, when I took a position at an Ivy League institution, I found that my contract obliged me to commit one act of unmitigated hubris, and this was my fulfillment of that obligation.

considerable effort – but which provided the data for the few key missing variables that I needed to make the statistical analysis work.

Although he also might not realize it, Professor Jorge Dominguez at Harvard had a considerable impact on how I carried out the study. His advice with regard to papers and job talks – "Always leave them whistling a tune" – impressed upon me the importance of focusing one's message and communicating it succinctly. Unfortunately, in this manuscript in particular I seem doomed to whistle multiple tunes, but that does not obviate the importance of separating them and clarifying each, as I have attempted to do earlier and throughout.

These are just the tip of the iceberg, however, of the community of scholars, assistants, and staff who helped me immensely over the course of the book's evolution. Anne Sartori, now at Northwestern University, gave me innumerable and very valuable comments over many years and even more valuable friendship to ease the difficult times. Ted Hopf discouraged me quite effectively (and kindly) from pursuing my first dissertation idea and was equally enthusiastic about the second; later, he read the entire manuscript and provided detailed comments, as did Bob Pahre, Paul Diehl, Randy Schweller, and Daniel Verdier. Two scholars outside my field, Bruce Hannon, a geographer at the University of Illinois, and Steve Dunbar, a mathematician at Nebraska, took an interest in the model and, to my great surprise and delight, engaged me out of the blue in thoughtful discussions of its characteristics. Beth Simmons goaded me into organizing an author's conference toward the end of my time at Harvard, with a terrific team of scholars – Iain Johnston, Andrew Kydd, Bill Zimmerman (again), Allan Stam, Jake Bowers, Michael Hiscox, and Adam Berinsky – who read part or all of the manuscript and provided truly invaluable advice on how to improve it. David Atkinson, Lars-Erik Cederman, Michael Cohen, Sarah Croco, Matt Evangelista, Maria Fanis, Erik Gartzke, Hein Goemans, Rick Hall, Michael Horowitz, Paul Huth, Mark Kramer, Charles Maier, Iain McClatchie, Greg Mitrovich, Jim Morrow, Karl Mueller, Dan Reiter, David Rousseau, Erin Simpson, Nikolai Sokov, Cindy Skach, and Dina Zinnes all provided valuable feedback at one point or another. Shannon Rice and Ethan Kiczek did a terrific job of setting up the expert survey; a significant number of anonymous experts took the time to answer it; and Merve Emre, David Margolis, Jeff Rosenfeld, and Doug Stinnett provided excellent research assistance. I am grateful to all of them.

I was also fortunate to have the opportunity to present the book at various stages in its development to some outstanding audiences, all of which offered stimulating feedback as well. I am grateful to participants in seminars at Northwestern University's Department of Political Science; the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zürich, Switzerland; the University of Maryland, Department of Government and Politics; the University of Wisconsin, Department of Political Science; the University of Michigan, Department of Political Science; Princeton University, Department of Politics; Rutgers University, Department of Political Science; The Ohio State University, Mershon Center; Rochester University, Department of Political Science; Columbia University, Department of Political Science International Politics Seminar; the 2006 Conference on New Macrotheoretical Approaches to International Relations; Fakultät für Soziologie, Institut für Weltgesellschaft, Bielefeld, Germany; the Junior Masters Class at

the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and annual meetings of the Peace Science Society International, the American Political Science Association, and the International Studies Association.

And finally, family. My brother Rick was invariably there when I needed him, without complaint, and given how unexpected the twists and turns in a young faculty member's life can be I ended up needing him far more than I would have thought. Looking back at our childhood, I can only imagine that our parents would be stunned. My ex-wife, Colleen Yuhn, supported and encouraged me and put up not just with the ordinary stresses and strains of married life but also with the infuriating air of distance that comes over scholars in the midst of a project that never sleeps. And my mother, Molly, to whom this book is dedicated, and who only grasped what I do in the vaguest terms but was proud of it anyway, mostly taught me, both in life and in her early death as this book was completed, about the person I want to be.

It goes without saying, given the number and quality of the supporters just listed, that any remaining errors are my own.

Columbus, OH