Anarchy and War: A Critique of Waltz's Third Image

'What is called wisdom is concerned with primary causes.'
Aristotle

War is one of the major themes in the study of international relations. Ever since war became part of man's life, a big question has been raised: why do wars happen? Or more accurately, where do the causes of war lie? The need to find that particular answer is based on a basic assumption. Since war is associated with devastating results for the well-being of men, a solution for eradicating it should be found. The first and most decisive step towards finding such a solution is to identify the fundamental factors that lead to war. This effort was intensified especially in the twentieth century when two catastrophic World Wars and the shadow of a nuclear holocaust made it evident that future wars should be prevented. However, wars have never completely ceased to take place.

The complexity of this issue can be easily understood by the fact that there is still no consensus on what the essential causes of war are. Scholars preoccupied with this phenomenon have traditionally found the causes of war in different starting points: human nature, the nature of particular types of states and the nature of the state system. One of the most important and most influential books written on this topic is Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State and War.* Waltz had two main goals in this book: firstly, to classify the diverse positions on the causes of war in three broad groups or 'three images'. The first image representing approaches based on human nature, the second those based on the state level and the third those arguing about the qualities of the anarchic state system. Secondly, he aimed to stress the significance of the third image as the major source of the causes of war. He was not of course the first one to think about these three broad variations. C.A.W Manning, for example, made a reference to the three levels of analysis before him (1942:115). However, it was his rigorous and systematic analytical approach on the tripartite classification of the arguments about war that made his work stand out and become one of the prominent examples of the realist school of international relations.

The objective of this essay is to engage with Waltz's third image and critically assess the main thesis of *Man, the State and War* that 'wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them' (Waltz 1959: 232). More precisely, it will be examined whether the anarchic structure of the international system constitutes an actual cause of war or just a permissive condition which greatly facilitates the occurrence of war but does not necessarily generate the bellicose behavior of states. In addition, it will be argued that Waltz didn't engage with the third image in the same rigorous critical spirit as he did with the first two mainly due to his theoretical favoritism towards this approach, given that his intellectual ambition was not only to describe and criticize the different approaches on the relevant literature but to promote and defend the explanatory power of his third image.

A View of the First Two Images

Through *Man, the State and War*, Waltz became famous for his tripartite division of the levels of analysis regarding the causes of war. Specifically, he introduced the term 'image' for each level. 'The first image' finds the major cause of war in the first level of analysis; 'within man'. 'The second image' in the second level; 'within the structure of separate states' and 'the third image' in the third; 'within the state system' (Waltz 1959: 12). Waltz's core subject is a range of positions taken on the causes of war and the conditions of peace. He aimed to illustrate the assumptions underlying the various positions taken and critically analyze their implications.

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In addition, the subtitle of the book—'A theoretical analysis'— indicates that, apart from enabling us to acquire a better and more comprehensive understanding of the various approaches and arguments on the causes of war, it is also a theoretical analysis of international relations. Therefore, it is argued that *Man, the State and War* is at once a meta-theoretical work on causal theories of war and a theoretical work on international politics itself (Suganami 2009:374). In other words, as Singer argued in one of the first reviews on the book, Waltz's attempt was an examination of the assumptions that lead an observer to select one of these three images, and the theoretical and conceptual outcomes that derive from such a selection. 'His major concern is that of ascertaining which level offers the most fruitful approach to answering the question: what are the sources and causes of war?' (1960: 453). However, if we take a closer look, the three images do not answer the question of what the causes of war are, but they provide the answer to where the major causes are found (Suganami 2009: 374). Hence, Waltz's task is not to discover new sources of war. He worked on ordering the already identified causes of war according to their relative significance and value. Judging the value of causes is a different intellectual process from finding them. It should also be stressed that the relative importance of a cause can only be determined in comparison with other causes. It follows that 'all three images implicitly take a multi-causal stance'. For without a 'prior acknowledgement that there are a number of causes that produce a war, it is impossible to assert that this or that kind of cause is a major one' (Suganami 1996, 2009:375).

With his debut book, Waltz wanted to detach himself from the traditional realist reasoning of established figures such as Niebuhr and Morgenthau. He argued that the first two images fail to account for the recurrence of war, while the third one, deriving from the inescapable anarchic nature of the international system, can (Craig 2003: 121, Little 1991). Waltz renounced the idea that war was a result of the "fixed nature of man" only (Waltz 1959: 20-21). A position which directly challenged the argumentation of Niebuhr and Morgenthau, who both concluded that the root of all evil, meaning the source of human conflict, is hidden within man, either as the original sin (Niebuhr) or the animus dominandi (Morgenthau). In accordance with Durkheim's reasoning, he supports that human nature mono-causal explanations are inefficient because they fail to explain anything when they strive to cover a multitude of political phenomena (Craig 2003: 122, Durkheim 1982). Consequently, in Waltz's words, 'human nature may in some sense have been the cause of war in 1914, but by the same token it was the cause of peace in 1910' (Waltz 1959:28). Therefore, such a reductionist argument fails to explain anything at all.

Turning to his second image critique, Waltz focused on the argument that the ideological character of the state is the decisive factor in determining states' behavior. He concentrated his critique on the two dominant strands of his time, Liberalism and Marxism. He claimed that the ideology argument was flawed, because eventually liberal or Marxian ideals would have to succumb to the imperative of the survival of the state. He stressed that liberal states inescapably have to contend with illiberal states and hence in this process they become less liberal, despite their desire to create a utopia of liberal states. Following a similar reasoning, he discredited Marxist approaches by using the example of the Marxists behavior in WWI. In spite of their initial pacifist rhetoric they participated in the war from the side of their respective nations (Doyle 1997:315-321). Waltz accurately illustrated that the nature of these ideologies required a global scale simultaneous adoption of the same ideals by every state; a rather unattainable and utopian task. For, 'adherence to principle invites defeat at the hands of the unprincipled' (Craig 2003:125). Having exposed the inadequacies of the first two images as the major causes of war, Waltz proceeded to the assessment of the third image reasoning, where he explicitly described his main thesis.

In Waltz's Image

In international politics there is no higher authority than that of the state, thus states interact in an anarchic realm. This is the foundation of Waltz's thought. International anarchy is the definitional quality of the state system. In his point of view, this is where the major cause of war can be found. International anarchy is accountable for the constant possibility of war (Waltz 1959:188,227). It is also responsible for the fact that in some cases power competition between states result in war (Waltz 1959: 234). The imperative influence of anarchy is the 'underlying' or 'permissive' cause of war. Consistent to his denial of mono-causality, Waltz distinguishes between efficient or immediate and permissive or underlying causes. According to him, the first and the second image contain the 'efficient causes', meaning the factors explaining why particular wars occur. On the other hand, the third image represents the "underlying cause," which explains the very possibility of war (Waltz 1959: 231-233). In other words, his main

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conclusion is that 'wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them' (Waltz 1959: 232).

Underlying Cause or Permissive Condition?

Waltz's argument that wars happen due to the lack of something preventing them seems plausible at a first glance but actually it is not. The problem begins with its characterization as the most fundamental cause of war, 'the underlying' one. When stating that the absence of something causes a particular result, in our case war, then in order for this statement to be valid and have meaning the following should be true as well; the presence of this thing will not permit war to happen at all (Suganami 2009: 377). Otherwise, war would be possible regardless of the presence or absence of this factor. According to Suganami's term, what is missing from the international system in Waltz's thought is an 'anti-war device' (1996, 2009:378). But still, for the lack of that kind of anti-war device from the international environment to count specifically as the permissive cause of war, which is what Waltz claims to sustain his third-image thesis, 'the device would have to be of the sort that, if it were present in the international environment, the possibility of war would be ruled out; and there simply could not be such an item' (Suganami 2009:378). Consequently, the structure of the international system is not by itself an actual causal factor of war. It is rather a condition that permits and facilitates the occurrence of war. It may be a war-conducive catalyst, but it cannot be safely argued that it is the primordial force of bellicose behavior.

Furthermore, Waltz believes that there is only one case where the nature of international politics may change and that could only happen if there is a change of the system. That is, a transformation from anarchic to hierarchic. However, it is doubtful that such a change could rule out war. Civil wars occur in hierarchical orders; therefore, even if a hierarchical world state was ever achieved, war would still be a possibility. Hence, anarchy, following the argument above, is not an underlying cause but an enabling condition. This does not mean that we should underestimate the importance of anarchy, for it is what shapes the environment of the international arena. However, anarchy is not necessarily characterized by a predetermined pattern. It may facilitate war in some cases, but it does not make war inevitable. States do not always fight with each other, they cooperate as well, and this happens under anarchy. In Alexander Wendt's words 'self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. Anarchy is what states make of it' (1992: 395). Moreover, in Waltz's reasoning, anarchy is the source of the sole motive of states and that is survival, a position that was further elaborated at his later seminal work "Theory of International Politics" (1979). Nevertheless, such an assumption makes war unlikely and inexplicable, for at least one state seeking new acquisitions is necessary to generate the realist world of inescapable conflict and fear of violent death (Donnelly 2000: 53). As Randal Schweller argues, "What triggers security dilemmas under anarchy is the possibility of predatory states existing among the ranks of the units the system comprises. Anarchy and self-preservation alone are not sufficient to explain the war of all against all" (1996:91). Otherwise, we would have "a world of all cops and no robbers" (Schweller 1996:91). It is evident that anarchy by itself is difficult to explain the mechanical occurrence of war, in the way Waltz attempts to.

If someone carefully analyses Waltz's engagement with his three images, they cannot fail to realize that he portrays a distinct favoritism towards the third image. Despite his initial effort to deal with the problematic causes of war in an objective and impartial way in the first two images, he fails to do so with the third. He is obviously influenced by his intellectual choice in favor of systemic explanations. Hence, he tends to promote and defend third image explanations rather than critically engage with them. For instance, he claims that the 'permissive cause' lies exclusively in the system level. As it was mentioned before, this cause is based on the fact that there is nothing to prevent war in the international environment. By the same token, 'this absence of the same kind, in the make–up of man, or anywhere else for that matter, must also count as war's permissive cause. Impartiality dictates this' (Suganami 1996: 24). In addition, for Waltz, the nature of man has little explanatory power because by being a constant it cannot explain the variations between war and peace. The same human nature is responsible for the war in 1914 and for the peace in 1910. At the same time, international anarchy is also a constant, therefore the same anarchy accounts for both peace and war in 1910 and 1914 respectively. But Waltz did not apply this argument on the third image, as it is obvious that it would weaken its explanatory power. International anarchy may indeed play a role in permitting violence to exist between states, but constants are unlikely to be able to tell us why some historical periods were more war prone than others (Cashman 1993: 228). This is an obvious inherent contradiction in Waltz's argument.

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Concluding Thoughts

Waltz's work in "Man, the State and War" carried the seeds of his groundbreaking structural theory of international politics. The timing of its publication was also crucial. At that point, Realism seemed as if it was trapped in a normative interpretation of international relations based mainly on a philosophical human nature argumentation. Waltz offered a new perspective. He wanted to move the epicenter of analysis to the dynamics of the structure. He was in favor of describing how international politics work in a detached and objective way without getting distracted by policy prescriptions. His objective was to transform realism to a proper social science (Craig 2003: 131). This is the reason of his partiality to the third image. By leaving aside or more accurately downgrading the significance of explanations deriving from the flawed nature of humans, it would be easier to conceive the essence of international politics by explaining, describing and analyzing what actually happens.

This partiality, however, did not allow him to treat the third image in the same critical rigorous way as he did with the first two. This is why he exaggerated on the importance of anarchy in itself. For this reason, he argued that 'man' and 'the state' are also important, because we cannot explain particular wars without reference to what they do, whereas anarchy or the absence of anything to prevent war explains the possibility of war. Claiming that wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them is like saying that a sick man died because he did not take any medication and not because of his illness. Undoubtedly, the use of medication is of paramount importance, but it was not the actual cause of death. Similarly, anarchy is a definitional aspect of international politics and exerts great influence on the behavior of states but it is a permissive condition of war and not the driving force. Waltz did embrace a multi-causal approach in explaining particular wars, but as we saw in this brief analysis, it is also necessary to maintain the same attitude when searching for the underlying cause of the very possibility of war. Undoubtedly, war is a complex phenomenon and this derives from the fact that every related factor influences the other regardless of the image they belong to. Genuine multi-causal approaches are necessary in order to acquire a better understanding. However, if we have to locate the *condition sine qua non* causing war (a fundamental underlying cause) then our quest should begin from 'man', for we can have war without states but there can be no war without men.

Nevertheless, "Man, the State and War" is a classic text in International Relations and this did not happen accidentally. Waltz introduced a series of powerful and intriguing arguments which triggered a prolific academic debate continuing to our day. It is no exaggeration to claim that much of the International Relations scholarship since the emergence of Waltz's theory is a response to him. His third image argumentation may not be flawless but it was definitely a major contribution in comprehending the way international politics work and especially its negative culmination; war.

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