

# Waltzian Metatheory: A Rejoinder to Brittnee Carter

Written by Robert W. Murray

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/31/waltzian-metattheory-a-rejoinder-to-carter/>

ROBERT W. MURRAY, JUL 31 2013

This representation will likely give rise to doubt in the minds of many of the field's scholars and students because it stands in vivid contrast to traditional representations of Waltz as an empiricist and Popperian. That said, positivist representations of Waltz are not without merit. In fact, it is through the testing of neorealism that the field has been able to identify the theory's strengths and weaknesses, and Waltz admits in TIP that hypothesis testing can be useful in this respect. However, his concern for what theory is and how it should be created can offer prudence and caution to those looking to create and test theory. And ultimately, the argument for Waltz as a metatheorist who was greatly influenced by his studies in philosophy of science is strengthened by what is written in TIP: theory is a simplification of reality constructed within our minds, and it is useful for ordering experience and facilitating discourse.[1]

In a recently published article on e-International Relations, Brittnee Carter examines some of the metatheoretical implications of Waltz's 1979 *Theory of International Politics* and of Waltz's theoretical work more broadly. The above quote aptly summarizes Carter's point mainly that Waltz's conception of theory extends far beyond simple notions of hypothesis testing and empirical verification. I want to offer a further point to Carter's excellent article by way of dissecting where much of Waltz's views on theory building and testing were focused.

At the heart of Waltzian realism is a preoccupation with the metatheoretical foundations of how one approaches theory and the value theory brings to social science in a broad sense. In the various tributes to Waltz after his passing, many scholars highlighted the fact that Waltz did not publish nearly as often as many current scholars we consider prominent, and a contributing reason for this was Waltz's almost-obsession with his quality of writing but also the construction of the theoretical argument he was putting forward. Waltzian neorealism has since evolved into what some refer to as structural realism, and others, like Rose, Schweller and Wohlforth have used it as a partial basis for what is now known as neoclassical realism. Contemporary realists tend not to spend nearly as much time on the metatheoretical elements of theory construction and, as Carter rightly points out, often get bogged down in empirical verification to justify realism's continued relevance.

To comprehend what Waltz's view of theory and theory-testing was one must look at what he rejected. In her essay, Carter argues that "traditional representations of Waltz [see him] as an empiricist and Popperian." I interpret Waltz as empirical to the point that he felt his work had empirical relevance but he was also very sure to define the limits of what neorealism was capable of doing. Further, any representation of Waltz as Popperian is inadequate insofar as Waltz was far more attracted to the work done by Lakatos on scientific research programs as the ideal means by which to evaluate a theory and was not interested in Popper's views on falsification.

In my edited volume on the English School published by e-International Relations[2], I dedicate my chapter to exploring Lakatos' continued relevance to international theory (in that case the English School) as a way of allowing theories to evolve and change over time without being immediately falsified should they be proven not to be empirically viable in a given case. Waltz himself noted "Lakatos' assaults crush the crassly positivist ideas about how to evaluate theories that are accepted by most political scientists. He demolishes the notion that one can test theories by pitting them against facts...One should think hard about why this is true." [3] Waltz agreed with Lakatos' view that a constricted hard core assumption would be necessary to construct a grand theory and that generalizing was required to be able to explain a wider array of outcomes. He also recognized the inevitable fact that grand theories would not be perfect and would be incapable of explaining everything all of the time.

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The beauty of Lakatosian logic was to find a middle ground between Popper and Kuhn in a metatheoretical sense. Lakatos saw Popper's views as too dependent upon falsification and a view of science as too open to dissent. "[Popper] still construes falsification as the result of a duel between theory and observation, without another, better theory necessarily being involved. The real Popper has never explained in detail the appeal procedure by which some accepted basic statements may be eliminated." [4] Kuhn's theory, on the other hand, was far too subjective for Lakatos, as Kuhn believed that science was what the powers at large thought it was.

Kuhn certainly showed that the psychology of science can reveal important and, indeed, sad truths. But the psychology of science is not autonomous; for the rationally reconstructed-growth of science takes place essentially in the world of ideas, in Plato's and Popper's third world, in the world of articulated knowledge which is independent of knowing subjects. [5]

To summarize, Lakatos felt that a change to a research program could allow for the theory to evolve should it be progressive, and not degenerative, to the initial hard core assumptions. Lakatos' methodology of scientific research programs was certainly not intended for international relations theory, but his work has been constantly applied to the field throughout its history. [6]

Carter is quite correct in her article to highlight the complexities of how Waltz constructed theory and the purpose of theory overall. A true analysis of Waltz's work must pay close attention to philosophies of science, systems theory, mathematics, rational choice, economics, philosophy, law and history. It is in this context that critics accusing neorealism of being too "simple" have more homework to do to truly comprehend what the body of thought is all about.

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*Read more from Robert W. Murray on his e-IR blog Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality.*

[1] See Brittnee Carter's article here: <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/29/kenneth-waltz-metatheorist-mind-world-monism-in-theory-of-international-politics/>

[2] See <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/28/exploring-the-english-school/>

[3] Waltz "Foreward: Thoughts about Assaying Theories," *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), xii.

[4] Lakatos, *The methodology of scientific research programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 94.

[5] *Ibid*, 92.

[6] For an excellent volume on Lakatos' relevance to IR theory, see Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.). *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

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*R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.