



Article

International System, not International Structure: Against the Agent–Structure Problématique in IR¹

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Abstract

Since the very beginning of social sciences, the relationship between agents and the social system has been a central problématique. Unfortunately, the agent–structure problem, which is a much narrower version of the agent–system problem, has mostly replaced the latter in social sciences, including international relations (IRs). This article argues that our long-standing affair with the agent–structure problématique has been disastrous for IR and the broader social sciences, and that it is time to end it. Our obsession with structure or the agent–structure problématique has blinded us to the simple reality that system encompasses much more than agent-and-structure and as such, that focussing on structure alone cannot possibly lead us to an adequate understanding of the dynamics of any social system. Social scientists should embrace a genuinely systemic approach if they desire to understand adequately the dynamics within a system. A refocussing on system rather than on structure not only clarifies some of the key debates in IR theory but also points to important new directions for further research. The discussion here contributes to the recent resurging interest in the systemic approach within the broader social sciences, and IR in particular.

1 This article significantly expands and critically refines one of the two key themes in Chapter 5 of *The Social Evolution of International Politics*.

Introduction

Since the very beginning of social sciences, the relationship between agents (i.e. individuals or collectives) and a society (i.e. the system) has been a central problématique.² Unfortunately, the agent–structure problem, which is a much narrower version of the agent–system problem, has mostly replaced the latter in social sciences, including international relations (IRs). This results in our longstanding affair with the agent–structure problématique. The field of IRs is no exception.³

This article argues that our affair with the agent–structure problématique has been disastrous for social sciences, and that it is time to end it. Our obsession with structure or the agent–structure problématique has blinded us to the simple reality that system encompasses much more than structure and that as such, focussing on structure alone cannot possibly lead us to an adequate understanding of the dynamics of any social system. Instead, social scientists should embrace a genuinely systemic approach rather than structuralism—which is a pseudo-, or at most a quasi-, systemic approach—if they desire to understand adequately the dynamics

- 2 For a classic statement, see Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939 and 1991); see also Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1937); Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951); Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (London: Polity, 1984); Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). While there is an easy consensus on how agents can have impact on the society (i.e. agents have impact on the system through their behaviours), there exists no consensus on how the system has impact on agents. This article focusses on the second part (thus also contributing to our understanding of the first part).
- 3 See, for example, Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1987), pp. 335–370; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); David Dessler, 'What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?', *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1989), pp. 441–73; Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent-Structure Problematique in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), pp. 365–92; Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures, and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Georg Sørensen, 'The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2008), pp. 5–52; Jack Donnelly, 'The Elements of the Structures of International Systems', *International Organization*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (2012), pp. 609–43; Bear F. Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

within a system.⁴ The framework developed here thus contributes to recent resurging interest in the systemic approach, most prominently in IR,⁵ and moreover applies to the broader social sciences rather than IR alone.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I give a brief definition of a social system, emphasising that it consists in much more than agents and structure (however defined). In the second section, I address the agent–structure problématique, stressing its inadequacy for understanding a social system. I emphasise that structure alone dictates very little, and that even a focus on the interaction between agents and structure through a ‘structuration’⁶ or an ‘emergentist (or morphogenetic)’ approach⁷ is inadequate for an understanding of the dynamics within and the transformation of a system.⁸ This is so simply because the so-called agent–structure problem still leaves out a large chunk of human society. Consequently, any further playing within the agent–structure problématique is doomed to fail.

Building on the first two sections, the third section reinforces the notion that structure alone dictates little, and that we in social sciences need to do away with our long-standing ‘structuralist’ obsession with structure (and the agent–structure problématique) by examining an important debate about the ‘logic of anarchy’. I show that there is no such thing as ‘the logic of anarchy’—there is only logic of system. Implications and a brief conclusion follow.

Three caveats are in order before I go further. Firstly, I do not deal with the many thorny issues associated with defining systemic theories and how to theorise human society as a whole through a systemic approach, although I do touch upon them briefly in the second section below.⁹ These issues are simply too complex for

4 Here, structuralism merely denotes theories that (over-)emphasise structural constraints rather than a particular school of social theories called ‘Structuralism’, heavily influenced by Saussure’s structural linguistics.

5 Key contributions include: Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society?: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*; Seva Gunitsky, ‘Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics’, *International Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013), pp. 35–63; Neil Harrison, ed., *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); and Mathias Albert, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Alexander Wendt, eds., *New Systems Theories of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

6 Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

7 Archer, *Realist Social Theory*; Archer, *Being Human*.

8 See also Kyriakos M. Kontopoulos, *The Logics of Social Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For discussions in IR, see the references cited in footnote 2 above.

9 For recent discussions of system theories in IR, see Albert, Cederman, and Wendt, eds., *New Systems Theories of World Politics*; Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*, pp. 10–16.

any brief treatment possible here, and I shall leave a more detailed discussion for a later work. Secondly, by stressing system over structure, I am not suggesting that 'structure' *per se* should be eliminated from social sciences. Rather, I am suggesting that system, of which structure is a component, is a far more promising starting point for understanding IR and other (sub-)systems of human society. Finally, to some extent, this contribution is more on the 'negative' side (i.e. against something, for something); more 'positive' contributions can only be provided elsewhere, simply because the issues to be dealt with are way too complex to be adequately treated here: systemic approach to international politics demands far more effort on both the meta-theoretical and empirical levels. I have done some preliminary works at both levels elsewhere, and ask readers to refer to those works.¹⁰

Defining a Social System

Any 'society' is a social system: Society and 'social system' are thus equivalent. Statically, a society is a system comprising agents or actors (i.e. individuals and collectives), some (emergent) system-level properties (including a 'structure', however defined), and the physical environment (including time and space).¹¹ Dynamically, society contains all possible processes and outcomes within the system (e.g. ideas, behaviour, interaction, relationships, institutionalisation, socialisation, and internalisation, etc.). Moreover, interactions are more than just interactions among units (including their behaviours) and between agents and the structure: *Certainly, units' interactions with the physical environment constitute key processes within the system.* Further, interactions within the system produce 'emergent' trends within it (e.g. industrialisation, colonisation, decolonisation, modernisation, globalisation, global warming, tides of nationalism, and democratisation) and these trends are critical systemic properties.¹²

In sum, a social system exhibits systemic, including 'emergent', properties that cannot be reduced to the sum of the individual agents or other components within the system.¹³ Because structure is only a specific aspect of the system-level properties of a system, the fact that a society has a structure is only one of the fundamental

10 Tang Shiping, 'The Reaches of the International System: Six Channels', *Unpublished Manuscript*.

11 Because the English School has emphasised the differences between 'international system' and 'international society', I shall use 'international system' only. Careful readers may notice that my definition of society as a system largely follows that of Bunge. Bunge insists that a system has 'composition, environment, and structure'. Here, there is no need to differentiate the overall international system from other smaller systems (e.g. a regional system). Mario Bunge, *Finding Philosophy in Social Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 21, 264.

12 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 145–47.

13 Bunge, *Finding Philosophy in Social Science*, Chapter 10; Jervis, *System Effects*.

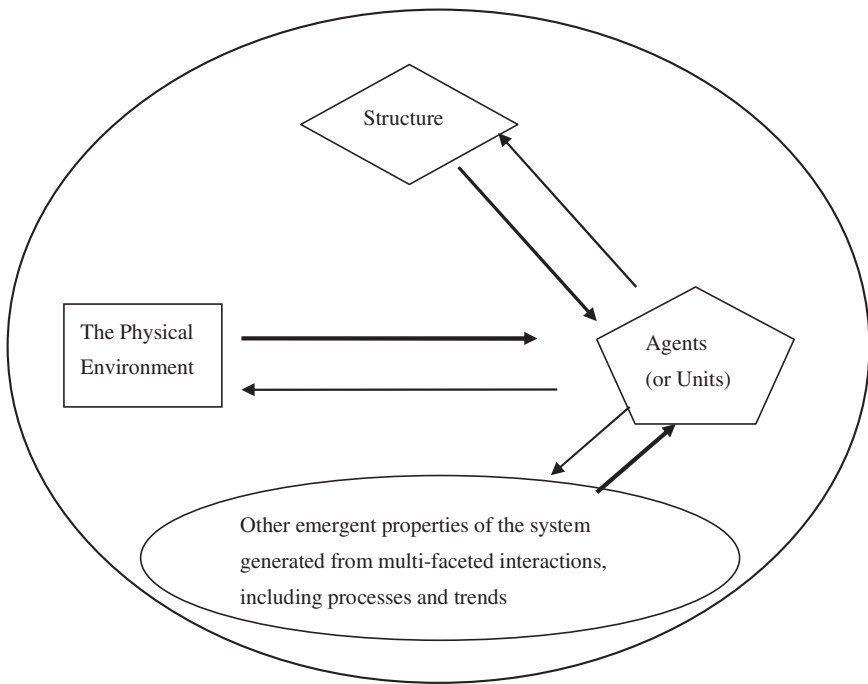


Fig. 1 The International System.

Source: Reprinted from Tang, *Social Evolution of International Politics*, p. 153, Figure 5.1.

reasons why society cannot be reduced to a sum of individual agents or its other components.¹⁴ The same definition applies to the international system. This is summarised schematically in Figure 1.

With our more complete definition of a social system, it becomes clear that most existing definitions of the international system are incomplete.¹⁵ Most prominently, following Waltz,¹⁶ most authors have left out the physical environment as part of their definitions of the international system, other than the (relative) distribution of capability among states.¹⁷ Thus, Buzan et al. define a system as comprising ‘units,

14 Bunge, *Finding Philosophy in Social Science*, pp. 19–46, 264–81.

15 For a good survey of the various definitions of international system and structure, see Patrick James, *International Relations and Scientific Progress: Structural Realism Reconsidered* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), Chapter 2.

16 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 79; Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics’, in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 327.

17 For exception, Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

interactions, and structure'.¹⁸ Apparently, although their definition contains some static and dynamic aspects of a system, it still leaves out the physical environment.¹⁹ The same problem bedevils Wendt's discussion, which is based on an implicitly similar definition of the social system to that of Waltz.²⁰ More recently, in an ambitious undertaking of systemic theorising, Braumoeller defines a system as consisting only of agents and structure.²¹ As becomes clear below, such an incomplete definition of the system can only result in misleading understandings.

Here, it is imperative to state categorically that by defining a social system or a society as literally including everything, I am not suggesting that we theorise everything at all times. In fact, the exact opposite is true: Precisely because the social system is immensely complex, we can only theorise part of it by bracketing other parts. Yet, by keeping the whole system in mind rather than claiming that a system contains only the part that we want to theorise, we more aptly avoid theoretical blind spots. Equally important, by defining a society as a system, I am not suggesting that a society is an organic whole or a holistic system. Indeed, such a stand is the typical structural functionalism fallacy that I unequivocally reject.

(International) System, not (International) Structure!

In this section, I first sort out the various notions of international structure. I then underscore my argument that structural theories, however sophisticated, are inherently inadequate for an understanding of the international system, simply because structure, however defined, is only a part of the system but never the whole. Structural theories, therefore, can only at best be quasi-systemic theories.²² To understand IR (and broader human society), systemic theories rather than structural ones are the way to go.

What is Structure Anyway?

Waltz's structural realism (neorealism) brought the structure of international politics to the centre of IR. But exactly what is structure? For Waltz, the international structure has three dimensions: The principle of organising (in the case of

18 Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*, p. 18.

19 See also Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; Archer, *Realist Social Theory*. This easily leads us to the pitfalls of extreme ideationalism (e.g. social constructivism) and an over-emphasis on agent–structure.

20 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

21 Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*, p. 23.

22 Jervis, *System Effects*. See also John G. Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (1983), p. 271; Michael Spirtas, 'A House Divided: Tragedy and Evil in Realist Theory', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), p. 392.

international politics, anarchy, as in lacking a central authority),²³ differentiation of units, and distribution of power.²⁴ Since anarchy remains constant and there is no differentiation among units (for Waltz), the only variable that can truly vary in Waltz's structure is hence distribution of power, or 'how they [units] stand in relation to one another (how they are arranged or positioned)'.

Obviously, Waltz's definition of structure is a purely materialist one. Since Waltz, IR theorists have advanced other notions of structure, usually by adding to Waltz's sparse definition. Other realists have added technology (e.g. offence–defence balance, nuclear weapons) to this materialist definition of structure.²⁵ For neoliberalists, structure definitely includes interdependence and international institutions that govern interactions.²⁶ Interdependence is both material and ideational, but more the former. Since institutions are codified ideas,²⁷ however, the neoliberalist definition of structure is more ideational than that of Waltz.²⁸ For constructivists, consistent with constructivism's overall ideationalism stance, international structure is mostly ideational: The most critical component of international structure is culture, which may include norms, institutions, (common) identity, and shared knowledge.²⁹ More recently, seeking to transcend the divides between

- 23 There have been many definitions of anarchy. Here, I used the sparest definition: Anarchy is a lack of central authority. For a discussion on the various definitions of anarchy, see Helen Milner, 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991), pp. 67–85.
- 24 There is indeed differentiation among units within the international system, most critically, the differentiation of offensive realist states versus non-offensive realist states. For details, see Tang Shiping, 'Fear in International Politics: Two Positions', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008), pp. 451–471; Tang Shiping, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010). For a different take on differentiation of units, see Barry Buzan and Mathias Albert, 'Differentiation: A Sociological Approach to International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011), pp. 315–337.
- 25 Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214; Jervis, *System Effects*, Chapter 3; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 'Neorealism and Neoliberalism', *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1988), pp. 235–251. Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1994–95), pp. 50–90.
- 26 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1989); Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 'Power and Interdependence Revisited', *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1987), pp. 725–753.
- 27 Tang Shiping, *A General Theory of Institutional Change* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2011).
- 28 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 160.
- 29 Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1992), pp. 391–425; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 3; see also Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2005); Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'A Framework for Studying Security Communities', in

different grand theories of IR, Braumoeller defines structure as the distribution of (almost) anything, from power (capability) to ideologies.³⁰

Apparently, when it comes to defining structure, Waltz and Wendt are the two poles along the continuum from materialism to ideationalism, with Keohane, Nye, and Braumoeller occupying a somewhat middle ground. By any measure, then, there is no consensus on what exactly structure (of international politics) is. This is hardly surprising. In other fields of social sciences, structure too remains a 'contested concept', and no definition of structure will achieve even a marginal consensus among social scientists any time soon.³¹ Yet, even if there were a consensus on structure, we could not possibly arrive at an adequate understanding of IR. This is simply because structure is only one part, not the whole, of the international system: System and structure are not the same.

Waltz essentially takes systemic theories and structural theories as interchangeable, thus implicitly conflating structure and system.³² In his words,

structural realism presents a systemic portrait of international politics depicting component units according to the manner of their arrangement... Changes of structure and hence of system occur with variations in the number of great powers... Systems theories... are theories that explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it.³³

Apparently, for Waltz, the paramount dimension in a system is its structure (i.e. 'the organisation of a realm') and only a structural change can qualify as a systemic change.³⁴ Most realists have accepted Waltz's claim that his structural theory is a

Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

30 Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*, p. 23.

31 Douglas V. Porpora, 'Four Concepts of Social Structure', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1989), pp. 195–211; Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate', *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994), pp. 313–344; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 4; José López and John Scott, *Social Structure* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); Wight, *Agents, Structures, and International Relations*, esp. Chapter 4; Craig Parsons, *Mapping Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 49–52.

32 Buzan, Jones and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*. In sociology, Parsons also prominently took system and structure to be essentially equivalent. For the similarities between Waltz and Parsons' functionalism, see Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Paradigm Lost? Reassessing Theory of International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2005), pp. 9–61.

33 Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), p. 618; see also Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 5.

34 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 100–01.

systemic theory,³⁵ and only perhaps Buzan et al., Spirtas, and Jervis have explicitly pointed out that Waltz's theory is more structural than systemic.³⁶ Indeed, even many of Waltz's non-realist critics have conflated structural theory with systemic theory.³⁷

This equating of structure with system is seriously mistaken. Although structure can only exist within a system and is a critical dimension of a system, *structure plus units still does not constitute the system, contra Waltz*.³⁸ A social system has at least three components: Agents, a social structure, and the physical environment (foremost, time and space). Moreover, not just units, but all three components of the system interact,³⁹ and these interactions generate properties that cannot be understood simply by adding them together or admitting parts of them. As a result, only a systemic approach can adequately understand the dynamics within a social system. A structural theory, no matter how elaborate, cannot possibly be up to the task. Structure alone explains little: Consequently a purely structural theory makes little sense.⁴⁰

A purely structural theory merely has to state what the structure is and how the structure shapes certain social outcomes. Waltz's theory, by emphasising how anarchy and polarity shape units' behaviours (e.g. balancing) and the possible outcomes from their interactions (e.g. de facto balance of power), is a structural theory, not a full-blown systemic theory by any measure. Although Waltz was correct to argue 'that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to the unit-level explanations of traditional realism', he was mistaken in claiming that 'if an approach allows the consideration of both unit-level and structural-level causes, then it can cope with both the changes and the continuities that occur in a system'.⁴¹ *Contra* Waltz, such a theory cannot possibly be adequate for understanding 'the changes and the continuities' within a system,⁴² because the system is more than units and the structure. Like other structural theorists before him (e.g. Parsons), Waltz, too, vastly exaggerates the explanatory power of structural theories.

35 Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), pp. 122–66; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

36 Buzan, Jones and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*, Chapter 2; Spirtas, 'A House Divided', p. 292; Jervis, *System Effects*, pp. 107–10. See, however, Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', p. 124.

37 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 11.

38 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 79.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

40 Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory', pp. 313–344.

41 Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', pp. 617–18.

42 Richard Ned Lebow, *Coercion, Cooperation, and Ethics in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 418–21; see also Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity', pp. 261–285.

A systemic theory certainly considers both unit-level and structural-level factors and the interactions between them. A systemic theory, however, is much more than putting units and structure together via constraining⁴³ structuration⁴⁴ morphogenesis,⁴⁵ or interaction/constitution.⁴⁶

At the very least, a systemic theory must deal with how units interact within the system (wherein the structure is only one source of systemic constraints), how units interact with other parts of the system, and how these interactions together drive the change of system. A systemic theory, when properly constructed, is thus vastly more complex and potent than a structural theory could ever hope to be.⁴⁷ A systemic theory subsumes structure and the so-called agent/agency–structure problem.

Certain Properties of the International System

In this section, I single out certain key properties of the international system that are critical to understanding the system, without claiming that I can exhaust the list. By doing so, I reinforce the notion that structural theories can never be adequate, simply because these systemic properties cannot be accommodated by structure, however defined.⁴⁸ I shall leave out the distribution of material capability among units and ‘collective identity’ or ‘(common) culture’ among units, because they have been much emphasised by realists and constructivists, respectively.⁴⁹ I shall also leave out other more widely recognised systemic properties such as relationships/relations among units.⁵⁰

Needless to say, all of the properties noted below are properties at the system level: They are not the properties of individual units *per se*, but emergent properties

43 Parsons, *The Social System*; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

44 Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*.

45 Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.

46 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

47 Jervis, *System Effects*, esp. Chapter 3.

48 Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*, p. 23.

49 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Adler and Barnett, ‘A Framework for Studying Security Communities’; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

50 R. A. Hinde, ‘Interactions, Relationships, and Social Structure’, *Man*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1976), pp. 1–17; Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 16–39. Snyder, however, erred in insisting that ‘relationships lie between structure and interaction’. While relationships certainly are outcomes and the context of interactions among units, relationships do not necessarily lie below structure just because structure is system-wide property, whereas relationships are local.

underpinned by properties of individual units. As such, they cannot be dismissed as 'merely unit-level'.

Here, it is important to emphasise that the more material properties of the international system (i.e. the geographical environment, the number of units within the system, the amount and scope of interaction between units and the physical environment, and the amount and scope of interactions among units) hold ontological priority versus other more ideational properties (i.e. the degree of institutionalisation, the amount of agents' knowledge about each other and the system, and the commonality of agents' knowledge about the system). As such, those properties with a more material composition should never be ignored: Doing so almost invariably makes an explanation invalid.⁵¹

The Geographical Environment

Social interactions unfold in real (and now virtual) space, and geography is the key dimension of space. Geography has been one of the most crucial factors in shaping human history, especially the early years,⁵² although it certainly did not determine human destiny as geopolitics had maintained.

Most prominently, geography had decisively shaped the amount and scope of interactions among units. The advent of sea-voyaging, air travel, intercontinental missiles, and finally telecommunication and the Internet has greatly reduced geography's shielding and restraining power, but geography's impact on human interaction remains powerful.

Geography's impact is perhaps most visible at the level of region. Region has been a critical force in shaping the interaction among states within it.⁵³ Most of the time, external forces (e.g. an extra-regional state) can have impact on the dynamics within a region only if they can penetrate the geographical barrier encircling the region.⁵⁴ Hence, for much of our history, there were only regional international systems; a genuinely global international system emerged only after the 18th to 19th centuries, and the system has remained only partially globalised.

The Number of Units

The total number of units within a particular system is an important property of the system. Today's international system, with about 200 units, is certainly very

- 51 For a more detailed and philosophy of social science discussion, see Tang Shiping, 'Priority and Weight in Social Sciences: Ontological and Epistemological', Unpublished Manuscript.
- 52 Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1997).
- 53 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 54 Tang Shiping, 'A Systemic Theory of the Security Environment', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2004), pp. 1–32.

different from the post-Holy Roman Empire European system, with more than 600 units.⁵⁵ Quantitative change in the number of units within a system can indeed lead to a qualitative transformation of the system.⁵⁶

The Nature of Most Units

The objective nature of most units within the system, which is different from the identity of each individual unit or the collective identity among a group of units, is another critical property of an international system. As this author has shown, whether most states within the system are offensive realist ones or non-offensive realist ones has a powerful effect on states' behaviour.⁵⁷

The Amount and Scope of Interaction among the Units

Because interaction among units is a key dynamic within any system,⁵⁸ many IR theorists have emphasised interactions among units (e.g. states) to a various degree and in different aspects. Indeed, some key divergences of major IR theories are due to their different emphases on these different interactions and their consequences. Yet, even if interactions *per se* are unit-level things,⁵⁹ the amount and the scope of interactions among units is a systemic property.⁶⁰ Amount is the total sum of interactions, whereas scope is the number of domains in which units interact with each other (e.g. economic, political, social). The greater the amount and the more extensive the scope, the more interdependence there is among units. Not surprisingly, interdependence can reappear to shape further interactions, as most major IR theories have recognised.

Here, it is important to note that whereas social theorists tend to emphasise the more intentional and regular kind of interactions, a systemic approach insists that all interactions, whether intentional or unintentional, regular or irregular, have impact on a system. Surely, our instinctive behaviours of low intentional input, such as

55 Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*.

56 Robert L. Carneiro, 'The Transition from Quantity to Quality: A Neglected Causal Mechanism in Accounting for Social Evolution', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of USA*, Vol. 97, No. 23 (2000), pp. 12926–12931.

57 Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'; Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*; Tang Shiping, *Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Robert Jervis, 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (2002), pp. 1–14; Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*.

58 Jervis, *System Effects*.

59 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 80.

60 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 145–50. Wendt may want to label these properties of interactions as part of 'structure', partly because interactions (as micro) have a 'micro structure'. Wendt's move is a hard squeeze and unnecessary: It is far more convenient to treat them as properties of the system rather than part of the structure. Snyder uses directionality and intensity to capture a relationship of interest.

seeking safety, eating, and having sex have shaped our history no less profoundly than our consciously intentional behaviours, and certain episodes of irregular interaction (e.g. the Mongol invasion) have had a far more profound effect upon the whole system than many regular ones.

The Amount and Scope of Interaction between Units and the Physical Environment

Processes within the system are more than interactions among units (including their behaviours) and those between agents and the structure (however defined) alone. Certainly, units' interactions with the physical environment constitute key processes within the system. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of human history would admit that this interaction has had a profound impact on the history of human society. One only needs to recall the coming of settled agriculture, sea-voyaging, the Black Death, and the discovery of the Americas.

The Degree of Institutionalisation

This dimension has received much attention from IR theorists, with the notable exceptions of (offensive) realists.⁶¹ It can be measured along three dimensions: Density, rigidity, and internalisation. The different takes on international institutions by realism, neoliberalism/the pluralist strain of the English School, and constructivism/the solidarist strain of the English School, can be plotted along these three dimensions.⁶²

Put somewhat crudely, realism (both offensive and defensive) denies that international politics can have a lot of institutions (i.e. density low), whereas both neoliberalism and constructivism believe that international politics can have a lot of institutions (i.e. density high). Moreover, realism believes that institutions do not have much of a bite (i.e. rigidity low), whereas neoliberalism, the English School, and constructivism believe they have quite a bit of bite (i.e. rigidity high). Finally, both defensive realism, neoliberalism, and the pluralist strain of the English School deny that states will internalise those ideas dictated by international rules (i.e. internalisation low), and constructivism and the solidarist strain of the English School

61 Waltz, 'Reflections on Theory of International Politics', p. 336; John J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1994–95), pp. 5–49; Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 50–90.

62 For details, see Tang Shiping, 'Order: A Conceptual Analysis', Unpublished Manuscript. For earlier discussions, see Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', pp. 5–49; John Mearsheimer, 'A Realist Reply', *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1995), pp. 82–93; Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, 'The Promise of Institutional Theory', *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1995), pp. 39–51; Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1995), pp. 71–81; Robert Jervis, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1999), pp. 42–63; Tang Shiping, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, Chapter 6.

emphasise that states often do internalise those ideas (as rules) to be part of their value system and self-identity (i.e. internalisation high).

Here, it is important to emphasise that interdependence does not automatically lead to institutionalisation, at least not formally, although institutions most likely need interdependence to exist: Unless agents are in regular contact with each other, there is little need for institutions. Of course, the more interaction there is, the denser the institutional system that governs the interaction is likely to become. Moreover, because the institutional system of a society constitutes the bulk of a society's structure for most sociologists and social scientists,⁶³ the more interdependent agents are, the more pervasive the reach of the structure becomes.

The Amount of Agents' Knowledge about Each Other and the System

The amount of agents' knowledge about the nature of each other and the nature of the system is another critical property of a social system.⁶⁴ Apparently, the larger the amount of agents' knowledge about each other and the system, the greater the extent agents' actions will be shaped by each other and the system.

The Commonality of Agents' Knowledge about the System

The commonality of agents' knowledge about the nature of each other and the nature of the system constitutes another critical property of a social system. Here, it is important to differentiate the commonality (or convergence) of knowledge from constructivism's notion of 'culture', which covers everything from taboos, norms, collective identities, to (common) knowledge.⁶⁵ First, commonality of knowledge is even thinner than the rational choice/game theory-based notion of 'common knowledge' (i.e. 'something is common knowledge if all actors know it, all know that all others know it, and so on *ad infinitum*').⁶⁶ As such, commonality of knowledge here is much thinner than constructivism's notion of 'collective knowledge'.⁶⁷ Commonality of knowledge here merely says that agents' knowledge of each other and the system overlap somewhat. Second, although both knowledge and culture can be attained, inherited, transformed, rejected, or discarded, knowledge is something to be tested, whereas culture is something to be enforced, believed, and internalised.

63 Tang, *A General Theory of Institutional Change*; see also López and Scott, *Social Structure*.

64 Note, however, that this property says nothing about the exact content (e.g. whether the knowledge is true or false) of units' knowledge.

65 Adler, *Communitarian International Relations*; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, esp. pp. 141–42.

66 James D. Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 349.

67 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 157–65. As Wendt correctly noted, a culture does not necessarily entail cooperation or conflict.

Perhaps, the most critical component of this dimension is states' awareness of the overall nature of the system. There have been at least four broader conceptualisations of the international system: (1) the international system is a peaceful paradise; (2) the system is a Hobbesian world; (3) the system is a Lockean world; and (4) the system is a Kantian world.⁶⁸ Because states' behaviour can be profoundly shaped by their conceptualisation of the whole system, whether their conceptualisations converge or diverge has an important effect on the dynamics within the system.

Logically, this sub-dimension is at least partially underpinned by the objective nature of the system as captured by 'the nature of (most states) within the system'. As such, objective reality and agents' (subjective) understanding of the objective reality interact to re-shape each other. When most states see each other as offensive realist states (correctly or incorrectly), they tend to behave as offensive realist states and thus (re-)make the world into an offensive realism world while laying the foundation for the coming of the defensive realism world. By the same token, when most states see each other as non-offensive realist states (correctly or incorrectly), they tend to behave as non-offensive realist states and thus (re-)make the world into a non-offensive realism world while laying the foundation for the coming of a more rule-based world. There are indeed self-fulfilling and self-negating tendencies operating within the system.⁶⁹

Another important sub-dimension within this dimension is states' memories of their past, singled out first by Schweller and developed further by He.⁷⁰ Schweller noted that past memory of predatory states is a necessary condition for the security dilemma: 'In a world that has never experienced crime; the concept of security is meaningless.'⁷¹ Apparently, if there is no memory of violent past, defensive realist states may totally overlook the possibility that there may be greedy states out there (or that other states can become aggressive now or in the future). In so doing, states can firmly believe that all their fellow states are just as peace-loving as themselves and eliminate much of the uncertainty about each other's intentions, so greatly diminishing the power of the security dilemma.⁷² Examining reconciliation as a process of building peace, Yanan He noted that the national myths of two states who were formerly enemies—which at least partly contain memories of their past—can either diverge or converge. When they diverge, they are likely to end up in a vicious

68 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

69 Jervis, *System Effects*; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; David Patrick Houghton, 'The Role of Self-Fulfilling and Self-Negating Prophecies in International Relations', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2009), pp. 552–84.

70 Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', pp. 122–66; Yanan He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

71 Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', p. 91.

72 Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, Chapter 2.

cycle of increasing tensions. When they converge, they are more likely to end up in a virtuous cycle of building deep peace.⁷³

Major Trend(s) in the System

Finally, the major trend(s) in the system, such as (de-)colonisation, globalisation, and democratisation, that have been greatly underappreciated by major grand theories of IR (with the exception of neoliberalism on interdependence perhaps), constitute another major property of the system. All else being equal, units that readily recognise and efficiently adapt to these trends will do better than units which do not.

In sum, a social system possesses many critical properties that cannot be easily accommodated under 'structure', however defined. Fundamentally, without taking units, structure, and the physical environment together as a system, it is impossible to understand the dynamics within the system, much less its transformation. By singularly focussing on agent-structure, pitting structure against units, or even attempting to transcend the agent-structure divide, students of IR have missed a great deal of what has been going on within the international system for a long time.

Structure alone Dictates Little: An Illustration

The preceding discussion suggests something obvious yet extraordinarily important: Structure alone, whether or not taken to be equivalent to anarchy by IR theorists, does not dictate a whole lot of international politics. When this is the case, all IR (and the broader social science) theories in the structuralism tradition have committed the sin of exaggerating structure's impact upon the dynamics within the system, including units' behaviour. In this section, I illustrate my general case against structuralism through the debate between structural offensive realism and structural defensive realism. I demonstrate that both sides in the debate, being two structuralists, have exaggerated structure's impact upon states by staking on and trying to monopolise the logic of anarchy.⁷⁴

Here, I shall categorically state that illustrating my case against structuralism through structural realism does not mean that I am against realism *per se* or that my case against structuralism applies to realism only.⁷⁵ Rather, I shall claim that my

73 He, *The Search for Reconciliation*. See also Tang Shiping, 'Reconciliation and the Remaking of Anarchy', *World Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2011), pp. 711–49.

74 For earlier discussions, see Jervis, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate', pp. 42–63; Glenn H. Snyder, 'Mearsheimer's World: Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2002), pp. 149–73.

75 As a matter of fact, I have made tangible contributions to realism. Tang Shiping, 'The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis', *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2009), pp. 587–623; Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*; Tang Shiping, 'Offence-Defence

case against structuralism applies equally forcefully to other structuralism theories in IR or the broader social sciences, such as Wendt's structural constructivism and structural Marxist 'Dependency Theory'.⁷⁶

Following Waltz's structuralism revolution,⁷⁷ both offensive realists and defensive realists, regardless of whether they are hardcore structuralists themselves, have embraced structuralism wholeheartedly. Most prominently, seeking to bolster their cases, both offensive realists and defensive realists thus argue that it has been the structure that ultimately decides why their favoured theory is a more accurate theory of international politics and thus should be the more appropriate theory for guiding states' policies.⁷⁸

Because anarchy remains a constant for both strains of realism, each of the two realisms must insist that anarchy favours (or induces) only the type of behaviour that it emphasises, and denies that anarchy can also favour the type of behaviour that the other side emphasises: Both camps have thus sought to monopolise the meaning of anarchy. Defensive realists argue that anarchy favours mostly (but not only) defensive strategies,⁷⁹ whereas offensive realists argue that anarchy favours only offensive strategies.⁸⁰ Seeking the moral high ground, each side also charges the other with introducing a normative bias to the 'logic of anarchy'. Offensive realists charge defensive realists with introducing a normative bias for defensive measures into the 'logic of anarchy',⁸¹ without admitting that they have committed the same sin (just the opposite way around). Like a mirror image, defensive realists too can charge offensive realists with misreading the 'logic of anarchy' and introducing

Theory: Towards a Definitive Understanding', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010), pp. 213–60.

- 76 See, respectively, Eric Ringmar, 'Alexander Wendt: a Social Scientist Struggling with History', in Iver B. Neumann and Ole Weaver, eds., *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 269–89, and Tony Smith, 'The Underdevelopment of Development Literature: The Case of Dependency Theory', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1979), pp. 247–68.

77 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

- 78 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 50–90; Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', pp. 167–214; Jervis, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation', pp. 42–63.

79 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', pp. 167–214; Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 50–90. Although Waltz's neorealism is closer to defensive realism, it straddles between offensive and defensive realism. For a more detailed discussion, see Tang Shiping, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, Chapter 6.

- 80 Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', pp. 5–49; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

81 Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', pp. 90–2; Fareed Zakaria, 'Realism and Domestic Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1992), p. 196; Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 26–31.

an offensive bias to it, because for defensive realists structural imperatives and factors, such as nuclear deterrence and offence–defence balance, strongly favour defensive strategies.⁸²

In reality, structure does not dictate many things that it can supposedly dictate: Both sides in this debate have thus exaggerated the impact of structure. As a result, both sides have great difficulties in admitting transformational changes in international politics. Offensive realists, by introducing an offensive security-seeking bias into their theory, have had great difficulties in explaining the drastic reduction of war in our more recent history, not to mention the essential elimination of war as an option of statecraft in certain key regions of the world.⁸³ In contrast, defensive realists, by introducing a defensive security-seeking bias into their theory, have had great difficulty in explaining the prevalence of (successful) wars of conquest in much of our history.⁸⁴

Put differently, the two structural realisms cannot cope with the possibility that the nature of international politics has undergone fundamental changes, because anarchy is constant.⁸⁵ Both can only attempt to deny that any transformational change has taken place or ever took place,⁸⁶ because such changes, if true, fundamentally unravel their logic.⁸⁷

- 82 Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', pp. 167–214; Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 50–90; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); see also Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For earlier reviews of the debate, see Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1997), pp. 445–477; Jervis, 'Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation', pp. 42–63; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2000–01), pp. 128–61; Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'.
- 83 John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Jervis, 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace', pp. 1–14; Tang, *Social Evolution of International Politics*.
- 84 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 85 Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism', *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994), pp. 277–78.
- 86 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 66; Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5–41, 5; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 2.
- 87 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 248. Indeed, Mearsheimer had to wish for (or predict) that Europe will be back to its future (of violent struggles) now that the stabilising bipolarity had collapsed in order to save (structural) offensive realism. Not surprisingly, (structural) defensive theorists strongly object to Mearsheimer's predictions. See, John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War',

Worse, being overzealous in stressing the primacy of structure (or anarchy) and so monopolising the logic of anarchy, many (structural) realists have twisted things to fit their structuralist logic. For instance, Grieco asserted: 'An absolutely necessary effect of anarchy is the danger states perceive that others might seek to destroy or enslave them.'⁸⁸ Similarly, Glaser (1992, p. 502) asserted, 'These motivations [i.e., greed and insecurity] arise from different sources, and are therefore essentially independent of each other.' For Glaser, insecurity comes from anarchy (i.e. structure), whereas greed from states within.⁸⁹

Yet, anarchy alone does not dictate insecurity or fear for one's survival. Individuals' and groups' insecurity or fear for one's survival was apparent in most vertebrates long before *Homo sapiens* came along.⁹⁰ Moreover, for much of early human history, anarchy (among groups) was a free-wandering paradise for our ancestors, and human groups feared each other little.⁹¹ Hence, anarchy *per se* does not dictate insecurity. Rather, 'the acuteness of states' insecurity varies substantially as a function of conditions other than the lack of common government.'⁹²

In addition, all structural theorists, whether realists or not, believe that structure dictates our uncertainty over others' intentions.⁹³ Yet, our uncertainty over others' intentions and the fear derived from it has nothing to do with anarchy: It is everywhere, even in our daily life under hierarchy. After all, calling 911 after being hurt by somebody else provides only marginal comfort to victims, and sometimes victims do not get to call 911.

Finally, when addressing alliance politics, Glenn H. Snyder too exaggerated the logic of anarchy. He stipulated that 'anarchy is both the cause of alliances and their Achilles' heel [i.e., alliance commitment may not be honoured and alliance can be

International Security, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1990), pp. 5–56. For defensive realists' objections to Mearsheimer, see Jervis, 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace'; Jervis, *System Effects*, p. 103, fn 38 and references cited there.

88 Joseph Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 10, 49–50.

89 Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models', *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (1992), p. 502. See also Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

90 Michael L. Wilson and Richard W. Wrangham, 'Intergroup Relations in Chimpanzees', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 32 (2003), pp. 363–92.

91 Tang Shiping, *Social Evolution of International Politics*, Chapter 2.

92 Helen Milner, 'International Theories of Cooperation among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses', *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1992), p. 483; see also Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It', pp. 391–425; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', pp. 90–92; Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*; Donnelly, 'The Elements of the Structures of International Systems', pp. 609–43; Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*, p. 23, fn 2.

93 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 50–90; Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*.

abandoned or violated]'.⁹⁴ Yet, apparently, alliance (or formation of military cooperation among units) does not depend on anarchy: Under hierarchy, alliance can still form. As long as there is conflict of interest among more than two units, whether under anarchy or hierarchy, alliances can, and most of the time will, form. Hence, although anarchy may be a sufficient cause of alliance, it is not a necessary cause of alliance.

In sum, both realisms have staked a position wherein anarchy (or structure) dictates a lot of things within a system and thus have greatly exaggerated the power of structure (or anarchy). In reality, structure, not to mention anarchy as part of structure, does not dictate a whole lot: Structure or anarchy has little logic by itself.⁹⁵ Surely, anarchy alone cannot lead states to war, peace, alliance, uncertainty regarding others' intentions, fear for one's survival, evil, or tragedy, *contra* Waltz, Spirtas, Snyder, and Mearsheimer.⁹⁶

Understanding Systemic Effects and Systemic Transformations

If our argument that system rather than structure is the right starting point for understanding social systems holds, then a (re-)focussing on system rather than structure would hold important implications for understanding the dynamics within and the transformation of the international system and the broader human social system. I shall underscore two aspects.

Foremost, if system rather than structure (thus structuralism) is the correct starting point, then we shall stop wasting more intellectual capital in the sterile enterprise of the agent–structure problématique. Rather, we shall devote more capital to the actual understanding of systemic effects. Put differently, rather than the logic of structure, we need to strive towards the logic of system. Here, Jervis' masterful synthesis should be an ideal launching pad.⁹⁷ But although Jervis has alerted us to many facets of systemic effects, he did not provide us with a readily deployable framework for understanding systemic effects, especially those effects produced by actors' intentional behaviours (actions) and their interactions. This is a major lacuna to be filled. Other worthy projects may include the specific channels through which

94 Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, pp. 17–18.

95 Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory', pp. 324–6; Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias', pp. 122–66; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers do not Fight Each Other', *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1997), pp. 114–155; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 146, 247; Donnelly, 'The Elements of the Structures of International Systems', pp. 609–43; Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*.

96 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', pp. 615–28; Spirtas, 'A House Divided', pp. 385–423; Snyder, *Alliance Politics*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

97 Jervis, *System Effects*.

the international system has impact on agents (from individuals to organisations to states), the different modes of interaction of agents' behaviours that drive cooperation and conflict, and how major emerging trends within a system come back to shape agents' behaviours and their interactions. All these projects require more serious investment that the scholarly community has so far been willing to spare for them.

Second, once we deny that structure is equivalent to system (or that a system consists of only agents and the structure), we can then easily grasp that systemic changes are constant; only grand transformations of the system have been rare, although not ever as rare as Waltz had anticipated. Likewise, once we deny that structure is equivalent to system, we can easily grasp that a system can be transformed even if some of the dimensions within the structure, however defined, remain the same. As a result, a far more dynamic view on systemic transformation becomes inescapable.

As noted above, Waltz had essentially taken systemic theories and structural theories as interchangeable, thus implicitly conflating structure and system.⁹⁸ As a result, for Waltz, the paramount dimension in a system is its structure (i.e. 'the organisation of a realm') and hence only a structural change can qualify as a systemic change.⁹⁹ In his words, 'Changes of structure and hence of system occur with variations in the number of great powers.'¹⁰⁰ For Waltz, then, when there is no structural change in the terms of 'variations in the number of great powers', there is no systemic change. Not surprisingly, for several years (1988/89–1993), Waltz stringently denied that the end of the Cold War constituted a systemic change of the post-World War II world system because bipolarity had endured (at least for him).¹⁰¹ The same logic underpinned Mearsheimer's claim that his offensive realism applies to all international systems through time and space because anarchy endures.¹⁰² Once we deny that structure is equivalent to system or that structure is all that matters within a system, it becomes evident that Waltz and Mearsheimer could not have been more mistaken, because both have explicitly or implicitly conflated structure with system.

Because system is much more than agents and the structure (however defined), structural change or transformation is not the same as systemic change or transformation. Put differently, systemic transformations can occur even if key dimensions of the structure remain unchanged. Thus, the international system can be

98 Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*. In sociology, Parsons also prominently took system and structure to be essentially equivalent. For the similarities between Waltz and Parsons' functionalism, see Goddard and Nexon, 'Paradigm Lost?.'

99 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 100–01.

100 Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', p. 618; see also Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 5.

101 Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), pp. 44–79.

102 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

transformed without anarchy being changed into hierarchy. Likewise, a bipolar system can be transformed even though the bipolar structure remains firmly in place. Here, one illustration will suffice.

During the Cold War years, globalisation, even though it was largely restricted to the capitalist world, had profoundly transformed the international system despite (or because of?) the enduring bipolarity. Indeed, the different responses towards globalisation from the two opposing camps were a decisive factor in shaping the fates of the two camps and the outcomes of the Cold War. Whereas states within the Western camp embraced globalisation, states within the Soviet camp either resisted or reacted to it clumsily.¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, the West came out on the winning side, whereas the Soviet Camp was the losing side. The lesson here is that emerging trends within the international system constitute a critical part of the real world in which states operate, even if the possibility of anarchy being changed into hierarchy, or even the collapse of the bipolar structure, also constitutes a critical part of the real world. More critically, states do respond to these powerful trends and other key dimensions of the international system that have little to do with structure, and states' behaviours and their interactions with those trends and other key dimensions of the international system can be a decisive force in the transformation of the international system (including its structure).

Moreover, interaction among units (agents) can lead to systemic changes (not just at the structural level), often to the surprise of agents and without any actual conscious intention of the agent: In any social system, changes can be brought about by unintended consequences.¹⁰⁴ In other words, states can end up making something without consciously doing so. As such, there is no logical ground for insisting that only intentional behaviours that are designed to improve one's welfare can transform the system. Instead, unintended consequences might have been far more decisive than intended consequences in transforming systems. Therefore, it is simply misleading to look only for intended consequences as the drivers of systemic (or structural) transformation, and such enterprises eventually do fall apart. Not surprisingly, despite its ambitious goal of simultaneously tackling how agents shape system and how system shapes agents, Braumoeller's effort ultimately fails, not only because he too starts with an agent–structure definition of the system, but also because he relies only on intended consequences.¹⁰⁵ The same mistake has been committed by Wendt: For Wendt, it was as well 'desires all the way down' despite his claim otherwise. After all, all of Wendt's master variables and central processes that supposedly drive structural (or systemic) transformations are intentional.¹⁰⁶

103 Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2000–01), pp. 5–53.

104 Jervis, *System Effects*.

105 Braumoeller, *Great Powers and the International System*.

106 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 7.

As Norbert Elias masterfully demonstrated long ago, most transformations of the social system had been the cumulative results of unintended consequences incurred by intentional (and unintentional) behaviours and their interactions across time and space. Thus, the challenge remains of how to understand systemic transformations without banking exclusively on intentional agents and actions.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Owing to our obsession with structure, generations of scholars have failed to grasp that structure has never been as forceful in shaping the real world as we have believed. *Contra* Waltz and many other structuralists before and after him, a structural explanation cannot possibly be a final explanation of anything in society.¹⁰⁸ By exaggerating the impact of structure, structural theories inevitably marginalise, if not totally obscure, the impact of other forces (not just agents) within the social system. Our long obsession with structure and the agent–structure problem has been profoundly misplaced.

IR's obsession with structure (or even more narrowly, anarchy) has been equally unhelpful. By exaggerating the impact of structure, structuralist IR theories inevitably obscure, if not eliminate, much real politics from international politics. Structural theories therefore cannot take us far towards an adequate understanding of international politics, such as conflict and cooperation, not to mention the transformation of the international system. Structuralism, a 'Parsonian nightmare', has haunted social sciences and IR for too long,¹⁰⁹ and it is time to end our affair with it.

Parting way with structuralism will demand more effort from students of international politics at the meta-theoretical and the empirical level. Rather than pretending that we can merely understand the big things of international politics through structure, as Waltz and his structuralism followers or opponents have believed, we have to admit that understanding international politics through a systemic approach requires us to delineate the international system with more parameters and indicators, as the preceding discussion has emphasised. As such, understanding the operation of an international system becomes a more arduous task. Yet, this is a task that students of international politics cannot shy away from.

Indeed, adopting a more systemic approach to international politics points to more productive venues of research and promises greater intellectual and practical

107 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*; see also Jervis, *System Effects*.

108 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 231–2. See also Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*; Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. Waltz, of course, later on admitted that structure can only 'shape and constrain'. See Waltz, 'Reply to My Critics', pp. 343–4.

109 I thank Dwayne Woods for coining the colourful phrase, 'Parsonian nightmare'.

payoffs. In addition to a better understanding of the transformation of international system noted above, a more systemic approach to international politics also points to a more systematic understanding of how the international system actually affects states' ideas and behaviour.¹¹⁰ As a result, we not only arrive at a more sophisticated explanation of states' ideas and behaviour but can also design better policies when dealing with other states based on our better understanding. This article has provided part of the groundwork.

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110 Tang, 'The Reaches of the International System'.