Waltz, Kant and systemic approaches to international relations

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Abstract. This article compares Waltz and Kant as theorists who explicitly advocate a systemic approach to international relations. Waltz and Kant are compared with respect to their views on the nature of systemic approaches, the composition and dynamics of the international system, and the relationship between the international system and world society. It is argued that there are deep underlying similarities between their views on the nature of systemic approaches to international relations that may facilitate a much broader account of the international system. A final section examines the relevance of a Kantian view of the international system to the post-Cold War era by comparing its insights to those offered by neorealist and classical realist perspectives.

... the best way to understand the writings of philosophers is to seek out the questions they were attempting to answer.2

A comparison of how Waltz and Kant analyse international relations reveals some remarkable similarities in the way these theorists conceptualize the international system, but also some significant differences. The comparison should not be a source of surprise because both theorists favour a systemic mode of analysis, and Waltz has expressed interest in Kant’s thinking throughout his career. Yet the comparison is both unconventional and controversial. The comparison is unconventional because while it is generally acknowledged that Waltz has been responsible for delineating the prevailing conception of the international system, Kant’s views on the international system have not been explored to their full potential. The comparison is controversial because these thinkers are usually seen to represent radically different traditions. Martin Wight’s familiar taxonomy, for example, depicts Kant as the quintessential advocate of revolutionary transformation whereas Waltz represents an unambiguous defender of the status quo associated with political realism. Wight goes on to caution, however, that these traditions are not like ‘railroads tracks running parallel into infinity’; instead, they need to be seen as ‘streams with eddies and cross currents … (that) influence and cross fertilise one another’.3 Wade Huntley has recently recognized the need to compare Waltz and Kant as theorists of the international system, and this article seeks to extend his analysis.4

1 I would like to thank Molly Cochran, Michael Doyle, Antonio Franceschet, Kimberly Hutchings and Richard Little for their comments on drafts of this article, although any errors remain my own.
This article follows a four-tier structure. Firstly, Waltz and Kant are compared with respect to their views on the nature of systemic approaches to international relations, examining the logical underpinnings of systemic models. This is not an issue examined by Huntley. Secondly, Waltz and Kant are compared with respect to their views on the composition and dynamics of the international system and the potential for its transformation. This section clarifies and develops Huntley’s argument by suggesting that Kant provides a more differentiated account of system organization than Waltz. Thirdly, Waltz and Kant are compared with respect to their views on the relationship between the international system and world society. This section develops Huntley’s discussion by explicitly analysing the relationship between systemic and critical approaches to theorizing. A final section develops an alternative slant on Huntley’s ideas concerning the relevance of a Kantian view of the international system to the post-Cold War period by comparing it to neorealist and classical realist perspectives.

It is argued that Kant’s conception of the international system is more robust than Waltz’s, and might accommodate more effectively how the international system has been evolving since the end of the Cold War. Although Waltz shares Kant’s starting point, he fails to follow through the logic of his position as rigorously. As a result, Waltz has produced a much less interesting view of the international system, and has managed to institutionalize in the discipline a conception of the international system that is fraught with ambiguity. By examining Kant in conjunction with Waltz, it becomes possible to understand both the strengths of Kant’s position and the potential weaknesses of Waltz’s position.

The nature of systemic approaches to international relations

This section of the article analyses the theoretical basis of systemic approaches to international relations. It demonstrates that both Waltz and Kant make the argument that international relations needs to be examined from a systemic perspective, and that this reflects their common conception of theory.

Waltz’s views on the nature of systemic approaches to international relations emerge from his views on the nature of ‘theory’. According to Waltz, ‘reality emerges from our selection and organisation of materials that are available in infinite quantity’.5 This leads him to draw a crucially important distinction between laws and theories. He notes that ‘(t)heories are qualitatively different from laws. Laws identify invariant or probable associations. Theories show why those associations obtain’.6 Citing inspiration from Kant, Waltz goes on to argue that:

the leap (from law to theory) cannot be made by continuing to ask what is associated with what, but rather by trying to answer questions such as these: Why does this occur? How does that thing work? How does it all hang together? … A theory is (therefore) a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity’.7

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6 Ibid., p. 5.
7 Ibid., p. 8.
To illustrate his argument, Waltz gives an example drawn from classical physics. He notes that ‘(t)he formula for the acceleration of a freely falling body does not explain how the body falls. For the explanation one looks … to the whole Newtonian system. … Once the system is … grasped, the phenomena are explained’. In this way, Waltz argues that ‘theories … specify operations that can rightly be performed. … (T)heories indicate what is concerned with what and how the connection is made’.

Waltz uses his discussion of theory development to discuss the nature of systemic approaches to international relations. He argues that if a science of international relations is to be possible, it must first of all ‘choose an approach that is appropriate to the subject matter’. In the absence of the general recognition of this, Waltz is heavily critical of most approaches to analysing international relations because he sees them as pseudo-scientific. He argues that ‘(m)ost students of international politics … have been much concerned about methods and little concerned with the logic of their use’. Waltz himself thus gives close attention to the logical relationship between systemic approaches and the nature of the subject matter being dealt with by the field. The objection is often made of Waltz’s theory that it attempts to project the methods of the natural sciences directly onto the social world. Yet Waltz is not the unreformed positivist that his critics have accused him of being.

He argues that the complexity of human interaction is such that the methods of, say, classical physics are ultimately inapplicable to international relations. To adopt such an approach would, to Waltz, be both illogical and profoundly unscientific, because it fails to recognise the form of complexity embodied by the field of enquiry.

In the social sciences, the problem faced is identified by Waltz as the problem of ‘organised complexity’. Organized complexity is unlike the complexity of natural systems in that it is produced through the activities of free-willed individuals. Its existence ‘precludes the use of traditional modes of investigation’. Unlike the field of analysis studied by classical physics, international relations does not permit the examining of the attributes and interactions of two variables while others are kept constant. Similarly it does not permit the application of statistics in ways commonly used when the number of variables become very large. From this Waltz concludes that a ‘systemic’ approach is necessitated in order to validate the status of the study of international relations as a science. Given that Waltz has already argued that natural sciences ultimately explain with reference to a system, it is clear that he is not making the argument that a systemic approach is only applicable to the social world.

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8 Ibid., p. 9.
9 Ibid., p. 12.
10 Ibid., p. 13.
11 Ibid., p. 13.
14 Waltz, Theory Of International Politics, p. 12.
15 Ibid., p. 12.
17 Waltz, Theory Of International Politics, p. 12.
To Waltz, explanation necessarily takes a systemic form, whether it is in the natural or the social sciences. However, international relations must adopt different procedures for the accumulation of knowledge to a natural science because of fundamental differences in the nature of its subject matter. The logic of Waltz’s thought therefore suggests that only when the distinctive properties of the field of enquiry are diagnosed do social phenomena become possible objects of scientific enquiry.

Like Waltz, Kant’s views on the nature of systemic approaches emerge from his more general approach to theory. Kant is heavily critical of the inductivist approach to the accumulation of knowledge. Theory is not merely a collection of laws but provides a simplified picture of a bounded realm that may be conceived of in terms of a ‘system’. Kant criticizes an empiricist understanding of science arguing that no-one can pretend to be practically versed in a branch of knowledge and yet treat theory with scorn, without exposing the fact that he is an ignoramus in his subject. [Such a person] no doubt imagines that he can get further than he could through theory if he gropes around in experiments and experiences, without collecting certain general principles (which in fact amount to what we term theory) and without relating his activities to an internal whole (which if treated methodically we call a system).19

Also like Waltz, Kant uses this approach to theorizing to develop a systemic account of international relations. This is apparent in Kant’s theory of history, which he developed in order to support his ambitious normative claims about the desirability of working towards the achievement of a permanent world peace. Kant writes that:

A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind must be regarded as possible … (T)his idea may … serve as a guide to us in representing an otherwise planless aggregate of human actions as conforming, at least when considered as a whole, to a system.20

What Kant meant by this statement may be deduced from the logic of the overall analysis of international relations that he puts forward.

At the core of Kant’s thought on international relations is an attempt to formulate in terms of a ‘definite plan of nature a history of creatures who act without a definite plan of their own’.21 One interpretation understands Kant’s use of the term ‘plan of nature’ as a forerunner of contemporary attempts to identify on a scientific basis the mechanisms through which order is generated in international relations. This is unambiguously the view put forward by Waltz and more recently by Huntley.22 Other commentators have also put forward this interpretation.23 Kant is clear that his plan ‘has objective reality’24, and frequently draws parallels with

forms of explanation in the natural sciences to make this point. The idea of science was established in the intellectual circles of the Enlightenment with which Kant is firmly associated. Thus readers sensitive to historical context must take Kant’s use of naturalistic analogies with the utmost seriousness. Kant declares that ‘(h)istory … will on a large scale, … be able to discover a regular progression … (towards) the slow development of man’s original capacities’. ‘(T)his’, he believes, ‘should give us some guidance in explaining the thoroughly confused interplay of human affairs and in prophesying future political changes’. Kant’s attempt to develop a social science of international relations promises not only general explanations of behavioural regularities, but also predictive content.

However, Kant also argues that the plan of which he conceives will come about through the activities of free willed agents capable of moral autonomy and choice. Thus ‘Nature has willed that man … should not partake of any other happiness or perfection than that which he has procured for himself without instinct and by his own reason’. Superficially Kant appears contradictory, but closer examination reveals that his thinking is actually highly sophisticated. Kant uses his systemic approach to bring unity to apparently contradictory statements about the tension between free choice and structural constraint in the constitution of international orders. Kant expresses this view in the following way:

Since men neither pursue their aims purely by instinct, as the animals do, nor act in accordance with any integral or prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans, it would appear that no law governed history of mankind is possible. … The only way out for the philosopher, since he cannot assume that mankind follows any rational purpose of its own in its collective actions, is for him to attempt to discover a purpose in nature behind this senseless course of human events.

Thus the ability of human beings to act freely necessitates a search for a ‘purpose in nature’ behind the course of human affairs. Such an approach allows the philosopher to perceive a pattern or law of development in a species that does not behave in accordance with a prearranged design. Only by understanding history in these terms is it possible make sense of its otherwise confused course.

In contrast to most contemporary students of international relations, Kant considers the distinctive properties of his subject matter before attempting a scientific analysis. Indeed, Waltz admires Kant’s approach to theorizing about international relations. He observes Kant’s discussion of the way in which ‘because men behave neither like animals or like rational citizens, no regular systematic history of mankind appears to be possible’. From this starting point, Waltz traces Kant’s argument that something akin to Newton’s theory of gravitation may be possible for history. Although the mechanisms behind this process are invisible to the human eye, through abstraction the rules by which it operates may be discerned. Thus ‘(i)if we look at the world and see discrete events, we are overwhelmed by the chaos. … But if we look at the aggregate of events with a proper organising principle in our minds, we may see in the chaos, order; in the welter of events, a plan

26 Ibid., p. 41.
27 Ibid., p. 52.
28 Ibid., p. 43.
29 Ibid., pp. 41–2.
30 Waltz, ‘Kant, Liberalism and War’, p. 335.
of nature’. He then shows enthusiasm for Kant’s idea that international relations should be conceived of in terms of a system. The line through which Waltz traces his interest in Kant’s thought reinforces the argument that they both claim that a systemic approach is necessitated by the problem of organized complexity faced by International Relations as a social science.

Nevertheless, the two thinker’s approaches to international relations converge only at the most abstract level, namely in their identification of the reasons why a systemic approach is needed. As their analysis proceeds to more concrete issues, their views begin to diverge.

The composition and dynamics of the international system

This section compares how Waltz and Kant view the composition and dynamics of the international system. Although there are strong similarities between Waltz and Kant in terms of their understanding of the problems faced by International Relations as a social science, they differ in their assessments of the implications of organized complexity for the study of international relations.

For Waltz, organized complexity manifests itself in terms of the role of unintended consequences of interaction within the international system. As Waltz understands the problem, ‘human interaction generates organised complexity because social systems develop in ways which are often not fully comprehended by members of the system’. Waltz suggests that unintended consequences arise from the structure of anarchy. Under anarchy, the international system becomes a self-help one because ‘those who do not help themselves … will lay themselves open to danger. Fear of unwanted consequences therefore stimulates states to behave in ways that tend towards the creation of balances of power’. The balance of power may be seen as reflecting an ‘equilibrium’ in the distribution of capabilities among states. It is a structure existing externally to the actors, and which emerges unintentionally as a ‘constraining and dispensing force’ on units. Specifically, Waltz relies on a positional model of structure, focusing a unit’s position within a given arrangement of actors.

Due to his stress on unintended consequences, Waltz argues that ‘(i)n systems theory, structure is a generative notion’. There is therefore a strong dynamic quality to his understanding of international relations. Structure ‘acts as a selector’ by eliminating units failing to respond to the imperatives of the system. Waltz’s stress

31 Ibid., p. 335.
32 Ibid., p. 336 and p. 338.
33 Little, ‘International Relations and the Methodological Turn’, p. 472.
34 Waltz, Theory Of International Politics, ch. 6.
35 Ibid., p. 117.
36 Ibid., p. 121.
37 Ibid., p. 57.
39 Waltz, Theory Of International Politics, p. 72, emphasis added.
40 Ibid., p. 73.
on the generative properties of anarchy leads him to emphasize the ‘pervasive’ importance of *competition* and *socialization* within the international system.\textsuperscript{41} Waltz views these forces as operating through the system’s structural logic. States face incentives to emulate the practices of the most successful and so become ‘socialised’ to the international system. If they fail to do so, competition will tend to punish or eliminate them.\textsuperscript{42} This has internal and external consequences. Internally, states will adopt equivalent organizations. Externally, they will adopt structurally similar repertoires of behaviour. Competition and socialization therefore encourage the *homogenization* of units such that they are functionally alike, and promote the *convergence* of the international system around a balance of power. Waltz’s model therefore takes on a reproductive logic. It turns a methodological assumption about the role of unintended consequences into an ontological commitment to the constitution of an anarchic order.\textsuperscript{43}

Kant deals with organized complexity differently to Waltz. He writes that ‘Wars, … and unremitting military preparations … are the means by which nature drives nations to make initially imperfect attempts … to take the step … of abandoning a lawless state of savagery and entering a federation of peoples’.\textsuperscript{44} For Kant, structure is ‘both a constraining and dispensing force’ and a ‘force for … progress’.\textsuperscript{45} Kant posits what is today referred to as a *transformational model of structure* to deal with organized complexity. He views anarchy as a set of rules and resources recursively implicated in an ongoing process of historical development.\textsuperscript{46} Kant is not making a utopian statement about the potential to overcome the impact of structure under all circumstances. Kant accepts that unintended consequences of interaction play an important role in the international system. As Waltz observes, Kant envisages something akin to Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ at work in international relations.\textsuperscript{47} Kant writes that ‘entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends … they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature’.\textsuperscript{48} However, Kant’s transformational model brackets intended as well as unintended consequences. Kant envisages an open ended process in which anarchy, itself the unintended outcome of state action, is susceptible to deliberate change through the gradual extension of voluntary agency.\textsuperscript{49} Rather than making a naive assertion, Kant is making a claim about the *logical* status of human agency in social theory. In turn, this generates differences between his analysis and that proposed by Waltz. The two thinkers adopt different assessments of organized complexity. Kant’s argument is that if one accepts the distinctive nature of the subject matter is being dealt with by the social sciences (as Waltz does), it is illogical to deal with this

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 74.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 74–7.
\textsuperscript{44} Immanuel Kant, ‘An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, p. 47. 
\textsuperscript{45} Wade L. Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{47} Waltz, ‘Kant, Liberalism and War’, p. 336.
\textsuperscript{48} Immanuel Kant, ‘An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, p. 41.
through a positional model of structure. Thus, to Kant, the problem of organized complexity is deeper than Waltz anticipates.

It remains to identify the mechanisms capable of bringing about the transformation of the international system. Wade Huntley has recently contributed to an understanding of Kant’s views on these issues. Huntley accepts the now commonplace argument that Kant sees liberal states as tending to be more peaceful in their interrelations.\(^50\) However, an interpretation of Kant which focuses only on the domestic sources of the liberal peace ‘forecloses examination of anarchy’s role in the contemporary spread of liberalism and its link to the liberal peace’.\(^51\) Many sections of Kant’s writings appear not to rely on the benign tendencies of liberal states, but stress conflict as the source of the emergence of pacific relations. For example, Kant states that ‘Nature has … employed the unsociableness of men … as a means of arriving at a condition of calm and security through their inevitable antagonism’.\(^52\) Similarly, it is the ‘unsocial sociability of men’ which pushes forward a cycle of change towards a condition of Perpetual Peace.\(^53\) Thus the problem of peace could be resolved ‘even by a nation of devils’.\(^54\) Huntley argues that when Kant identifies the role of ‘nature’ in channelling human conflict, he should be understood as making arguments about the long-term effects of anarchy through competition and socialization in the international system. In this way, Kant’s thought may be understood in terms of neorealism’s systemic language.\(^55\)

The composition and dynamics of the international system can be expressed in terms of four logical possibilities: system reproduction through unintended consequences; system transformation through unintended consequences; system transformation through intended consequences; and system reproduction through intended consequences. The first of these possibilities represents an international system along the lines suggested by neorealism, whereby anarchy results in its simple reproduction. Units have limited discretionary power because regardless of their intentions outcomes will remain within limited ranges. The second possibility represents a system in which anarchy has generated unintended consequences that have encouraged transformation. For example, Kant identifies that liberal states will tend to outperform non-liberal states in long term competition. Similarly, liberal states’ self-restraint and capacity to be trusted casts a distinctive shadow of the future, thereby unwittingly socializing them to the liberal peace.\(^56\) This possibility allows Kant to strike the balance between the intended transformative and the

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\(^{51}\) Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 63. In an earlier comparison between Kant and neorealism, Sorensen proposed that there might be different types of anarchy, and that a ‘mature anarchy’ equates with Kant’s pacific union. He therefore arrives at the conclusion that ‘it is possible to accept Kant’s vision without rejecting the basic insights of neorealism. The distance between Kant’s idealism and neorealism is often overdrawn’. See Georg Sorensen, ‘Kant And Processes Of Democratisation: Consequences For Neorealist Thought’, *Journal Of Peace Research*, 29(1992), pp. 410–11 and p. 412. Huntley’s analysis moves a significant stage further than Sorensen’s by showing how the very mechanisms of competition and socialization under anarchy identified by neorealism can drive a long term process of transformation in the international system.

\(^{52}\) Kant, ‘An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, p. 47.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 44.

\(^{54}\) Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, p. 112.

\(^{55}\) Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 57.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., pp. 57–8.
unintended reproductive consequences of a reformative line of action in favour of the former.\footnote{Adapted from Bartelson, ‘The Trial of Judgement’, p. 259.} It is the third possibility, however, which offers the most distinctive element of a Kantian model. It stresses the importance of cultural change for the operation of competition and socialization. Kant suggests that ‘as culture grows, and men gradually move towards greater agreement over their principles, … (this leads to) mutual understanding and peace’.\footnote{Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, p. 114.} Cultural change involves conscious human agency and intentional choice, and as such is crucially important at the margins of development within the system.

The role of cultural change in Kant’s thought indicates that he adopts a more differentiated view of the international system than Waltz. Unlike Waltz, Kant suggests that an international system is not necessarily tightly defined and constituted through its structure.\footnote{Of course, Waltz accepts that unit level influences and interactions can affect international behaviour, and in this sense he cannot be said to entirely collapse the terms system and structure. However, he does confine these terms in as much as he argues that unit level factors do not affect outcomes systematically. For a more extensive discussion of the relationship between system and structure in neorealism, see Barry Buzan et al., The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism (New York: Colombia University Press, 1993).} By encouraging cultural change, competition and socialization have generative effects that foster transformation. Competition and socialization continuously shape and reshape the basic identity of the units populating the system, thereby promoting the liberal state form and the expansion of the democratic peace. Echoing Waltz’s terminology, Huntley refers to the transformative effects of competition and socialization as representing ‘Kant’s third image’.\footnote{Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’; see also Kenneth N. Waltz, Man, The State And War.} Yet whilst Huntley is right to identify that Kant adopts a systemic perspective, it is perhaps misleading to adopt terminology which suggests that Kant’s reasoning is entirely structural. Indeed, at times Huntley appears to recognize important differences between Waltz and Kant in terms of their conceptualization of system organization. He notes that current orthodoxy established by Waltz’s model holds that ‘structural change begins with a system’s units, and then unit-level and structural causes interact’. For Kant, these two levels of causation are always interacting, defining a process of evolutionary change that continues perpetually. … Kant’s thought bridges (conventionally accepted) levels of analysis in a manner that links structure and history’.\footnote{Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 59.}

Kant’s stress on cultural change allows him to identify the ways in which competition and socialization operate through recursivity effects within the international system.\footnote{The importance of recursivity effects for the constitution of the international system is identified by Alexander E. Wendt et al., ‘Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security’. In Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 53 and pp. 63–5.} Huntley notes that in Kant’s view the systemic forces of competition and socialization generate a strong, ‘dialectical “causal loop”’ of self-reinforcing positive feedback.\footnote{Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 59.} For Kant, therefore, ‘nature’ drives a cycle in which the benign tendencies of liberal states will gather momentum over time. He writes that if ‘one
... nation can form a republic ... this will provide a focal point for federal association among other states. These will join up with the first one ... and the whole will gradually spread further and further. The standard form of democratic peace theory associated with Doyle's reading of Kant is dyadic, postulating a relationship between two liberal democracies. Doyle has argued that it is strictly in this sense that the democratic peace has a systemic quality. Understood in these terms there is a 'separate peace' that only operates between formally liberal democratic states. However, Kant's feedback loop suggests a more holistic understanding of the systemic properties of the democratic peace. Once enough momentum has been developed, the democratic peace may begin to generate socialization effects that extend beyond the extant liberal core. States at the margins of cultural change are encouraged to adopt shifts in their political identity, a process that in turn reinforces the momentum within the system. A system constituted in such a manner increases the capacity for critical self-reflection and social learning by states. However, it also opens the possibility that states that persistently articulate a non-liberal, 'fundamentalist' identity will rekindle tendencies towards conflict. At this stage, system reproduction through intended consequences (the fourth possibility discussed above) becomes important. This represents the way in which, even when the long term effects of competition and socialization are well established, fundamentalist behaviour pushes the system back towards simple reproduction.

Kant's notion of equilibrium reinforces the above analysis. Kant notes that dynamics within the international system 'compel our species to discover a law of equilibrium to regulate the essentially healthy hostility which prevails among states'. Kant's dynamic conception of system organization indicates that he is not referring to a balance of power, as Waltz has contended. As Waltz recognizes, Kant 'ridicules the balance of power ... comparing it with “the house ... which was built by an architect so perfectly in accordance with all the laws of equilibrium that when a sparrow lighted upon it it immediately fell”'. Waltz uses Kant's criticism of the balance of power to argue that Kant 'has held out a hope for perpetual peace, which, upon closer scrutiny seems to disappear'. However, Waltz has understood Kant's use of the terms 'system' and 'equilibrium' through the prism of his own model. He fails to consider that Kant may have a more differentiated understanding

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64 Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', p. 104.
66 Ibid. pp. 277–84; see also Michael Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies And Foreign Affairs', Parts 1 and 2.
67 Doyle makes the argument that the very same norms and practices that underpin peaceful relations between liberal democracies can exacerbate conflicts between liberal and non-liberal states. See Doyle 'Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs', Part 2, especially pp. 324–25. However, the notion that the democratic peace may generate significant socialization effects once a critical mass of liberal democracies emerges in the international system requires that this view be modified, at least after a certain stage of development.
69 Kant, 'An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', p. 49.
70 Waltz, 'Kant, Liberalism and War', p. 338.
71 Ibid, p. 338; Kant, 'On the Common Saying 'This May Be True in Theory But Does Not Apply in Practice”; p.92; see also Andrew Hurrell 'Kant and the Kantian Paradigm in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 16 (1990), p. 189.
72 Waltz, 'Kant, Liberalism and War', p. 338.
of the international system, in which competition and socialization push it away from convergence around a structural equilibrium.

Instead of the balance of power, Kant’s equilibrium is one of a Pacific Federation of states. This would ‘differ from a peace treaty … in that the latter terminates one war, whereas the former would seek to end all wars for good’. That is to say, it would represent a sustainable equilibrium, rather than a transient or contingent one. Kant notes that

All wars are … so many attempts to bring about new relations between states and, by the destruction or at least the dismemberment of old entities, to create new ones … till finally, partly by an optimal internal arrangement … and partly by common external agreement …, a state of affairs is created which … can maintain itself automatically’.74

For Kant, a true equilibrium remains an ideal. Any individual state can only approximate the standards of behaviour required to achieve it.75 There is therefore no single point at which transformation is complete and becomes stable. Instead, Kant adopts a dynamic conception of equilibrium, and sees the system in continuous evolution. Transformation is viewed as an emergent property of the international system, acting on states regardless of their particular placement within it or their formal political status. Thus rather than a world divided into a zone of peace and a zone of war, Kant envisaged a gradual core-periphery continuum.76 Systemic forces operate on all states along this continuum, resulting in powerful homogenizing influences promoting convergence around the rule of law both within and between states.77

Kant’s approach provides a precedent for the attempt to provide a theory of international relations in which the relationship between historical development and cultural change is of core explanatory concern. Keohane has labelled perspectives that focus on these issues as ‘reflectivist’ because of their orientation towards human subjectivity.78 They are conventionally seen as problematic for approaches dealing with international politics in scientific terms. Yet Kant not only attempts to analyse such issues scientifically. He also moves beyond the recent claim made by Wendt that anarchy is potentially open to transformation through changes in the culture and identity of the international system’s constituent units.79 He does so by identifying on a systemic basis precise mechanisms through which anarchy may be transformed, and specifying a set of determinate historical and sociological dynamics that encourage the emergence and perpetuation of these tendencies. It is therefore Kant’s views on competition, socialization and equilibrium that allow him to link a transformational conception of structure to definite patterns of alignment and change within the international system.

73 Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, p. 104.
77 Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 57 and p. 59.
Overall, although Kant retains the modalities of system composition and dynamics suggested by Waltz, he understands competition, socialization and equilibrium in very different terms. As such, Kant is able to present a highly original characterization of the composition and dynamics of the international system. He does not collapse the terms system and structure, and offers a more differentiated view of the system organization than that offered by Waltz. In turn this leads Kant to develop a number of distinctive themes. He emphasizes the importance of cognitive human characteristics such as cultural perceptions, intentionality, social learning, and also the possibility of progressive historical change. A Kantian approach is therefore highly distinctive in its attempt to incorporate an analysis of the relationship between historical development and progressive shifts in state culture and identity into a systemic and explanatory framework.

The relationship between the international system and world society

Differences between Waltz and Kant in terms of their assessment of the problems faced by international relations as a social science also lead their views to diverge over the relationship between the international system and world society or world order. Again, these differences can be traced to their adoption of positional and transformational models of structure as means of dealing with organized complexity.

Waltz’s positional model leads him to define the international system in state-centred terms. States’ capabilities relative to others marks off international relations as a distinct domain. Cox draws a useful distinction between Waltz’s ‘problem solving theory’ and his own ‘critical theory’. Problem solving theory ‘takes the world with its prevailing social and power relationships … as the given framework for action’. By contrast, critical theory directs attention ‘towards an appraisal of the very framework for action … which problem solving theory accepts as its parameters’. Critical theory adopts what Cox refers to as a ‘world orders perspective’, which focuses on shifting configurations of transnational socioeconomic forces. Such a perspective, Cox argues, necessarily runs counter to systemic theorizing. Critical theory ‘knows the task of theorizing can never be finished in an enclosed system’. Waltz responds that although he has no quarrel with Cox’s search for counter structures, the possibility of their realization ‘will vary not only with changing production processes and social forces … but also with distributions of capability across states’. Critical theorists ‘would transcend the world as it is; meanwhile we have to live in it’.

A Kantian perspective suggests that there are logical flaws on both sides of this debate. It is widely accepted that Kant sees his writings on politics as part of his broader critical philosophy. Certainly, Kant allocates an important role for world

80 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 79.
81 Cox ‘Social Forces, States And World Orders’, p. 208.
82 Ibid., p. 218.
83 Ibid., p. 217.
society in bringing about progressive historical development. This is particularly
evident in Kant’s third definitive article of perpetual peace, providing for the right to
universal hospitality. This establishes the basis for transnational interdependence
to develop, offering material incentives for the achievement of world peace. Other
aspects of Kant’s writings, however, point to a more statist understanding of his
thought. Hinsley points out that universal hospitality implies a limit to overseas
conquest. It therefore reinforces the rights of the state. He also identifies that Kant’s
foedus pacificum is derived from the Latin term foedus, meaning treaty. It therefore
implies an international society based on separate states. Recent commentators
have highlighted the apparently paradoxical character of Kant’s writings on the role
of the state in international politics. Hurrell concludes by suggesting that although
the tension remains unresolved, Kant’s achievement ‘rests on his attempt to come to
terms with both the deep rootedness and benefits of statism … and the increasing
moral and practical ends of cosmopolitanism on the other’.

One way of moving beyond the apparent tensions in Kant’s thinking is to propose
that he perceived a logical connection between interstate dynamics and the role of
cosmopolitan social forces. A systemic approach presupposes a transformational
model of structure that recognizes the historical contingency of any given
international order. In this view, the rules and resources of anarchy are recurrently
drawn into the development of world society. As discussed, in a transformational
model of structure social systems are viewed as intrinsically open, and reproduce
only in terms of an ongoing process of development. From a Kantian perspective,
therefore, both Waltz and Cox are wrong to draw a sharp dichotomy between
systemic and critical approaches to theorizing. Rather, there is a necessary con-
nection between these perspectives. At least one contemporary theorist has arrived
at similar conclusions, albeit by a more eclectic route. Buzan proposes that rather
than being opposites, the international system and world society may have a
symbiotic relationship. Certain levels of development in world society can be a
prerequisite to the emergence of an international system of like units. In turn, this
helps set in motion a developmental shift from immature to mature anarchy. This
relationship may also work the other way around. Thus the international system’s
tendency to produce homogenization provides a stable political framework within
which world society can flourish. Under these circumstances, the tendency of
‘socialisation and competition under anarchy to force the development of like units
… identifies the logic by which the natural dynamics of … (the international system)
creates the conditions for a basic … international society to develop’. By
suggesting that the international system necessarily develops in tandem with a
broader configuration of world society, Buzan echoes the logic of Kant’s position.

Kant also deploys arguments linking change in the international system and world
society under particular historical conditions. Kant emphasizes the emancipatory

87 Hinsley, Power and the Pursuit of Peace, p. 66; see also Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical
Sketch’, p. 104.
88 Hurrell, ‘Kant and the Kantian Paradigm in International Relations’; Bartelson, ‘The Trial of
Judgement’.
89 Hurrell, ‘Kant and the Kantian Paradigm in International Relations’, p. 204.
90 Barry Buzan, ‘From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime
91 Ibid., p. 346.
potential of modernity, noting that ‘enlightenment … must gradually spread upwards … and even influence the principles of government’.\textsuperscript{92} If structure is viewed as an arrangement of actors, the historical context within which units operate is not relevant to patterns of development. By contrast, if it is viewed transformationally, then the social, economic and political characteristics of the units become important for the trajectory produced through structural logic. Kant identified that internal freedom was an important long-term prerequisite of state performance. Kant put forward the argument that ‘the strength … of a state depended on the economic condition and general liberty of its subjects. … Thus (the state) … will be compelled to grant greater freedoms, thereby hastening the general process of liberalisation’.\textsuperscript{93} Kant’s position anticipates Moravcsik’s suggestion that liberalism establishes a ‘direct causal link between economic, political and social change and state behaviour. … Over the modern period the principles of international order have been … increasingly tied to factors directly drawn from … liberal theory’ in the form of domestic values, commercial interests and political institutions compatible with liberal preferences.\textsuperscript{94}

Overall, Kant makes two suggestions about the relationship between the international system and world society. Firstly, Kant suggests that these two perspectives on international relations are in no way incompatible. Indeed, there is a necessary and logical connection between systemic and critical approaches. Secondly, Kant recognizes the emancipatory potential of modernity. Kant identifies a linkage between internal restructuring in state-society relations and competition and socialization in the international system. He postulates that these dynamics will interact, providing ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ pressures pushing towards the achievement of Perpetual Peace.

**Relevance to the post-Cold War period**

This final section examines the relevance of Kant’s approach to the international system, with reference to the post-Cold War period. The discussion is framed around an assessment of three theoretical responses to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a post-Cold War international order: the neorealist response; the classical realist response; and the Kantian response.

Waltz uses his model to predict the re-emergence of a traditional multipolar balance of power system in the wake of the collapse of bipolarity. The international system’s anti-hegemonial character will lead to the rise of a number of new powers, these being explicitly identified as Germany or a West European State, Japan and China.\textsuperscript{95} Importantly, however, Waltz acknowledges that his systemic approach must accept important limitations. Firstly, because Waltz argues that systems change

\textsuperscript{92} Kant, ‘An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{93} F. Parkinson, ‘The Philosophy of International Relations: A Study in the History of Thought’, (London: Sage, 1977), p. 67; see also the quotation from Kant provided by the author.
originates at the unit level, ‘neorealism addresses only the consequences, not the causes of the end of the Cold War’. This one of the most significant occurrences in international affairs in the last fifty years—the collapse of the Soviet Union—cannot be explained by neorealist analysis. Secondly, neorealist analysis is ambiguous about the extent to which structure will determine international outcomes in the post-Cold War period. Waltz insists that neorealism provides a theory of international politics that operates at a structural level, rather than as a theory of foreign policy offering determinate predictions about the behaviour of units. Yet, as Elman has noted, ‘refraining from making (foreign policy) … predictions would diminish neorealism’s usefulness considerably’. Waltz responds that international theory can explain states’ behaviour only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states. The key question therefore becomes to explain the variation in the influence of structure upon outcomes over time.

Indeed, many realists have expressed unease at Waltz’s apparent willingness to sacrifice practical insight for theoretical elegance, and favour a return to classical realism. Classical realism analyses international conflict in terms of individual states and statesmen and how they perceive the world, rather than in terms of the tendencies of an anarchic structure. It does not aim at providing generalizable explanations through systemic analysis, but rather to offer a viable interpretative framework to guide policy choice and action. During the Cold War, it was possible for realists to downplay the significance of the distinction between classical and neo-realists. Gilpin has argued that it is possible to identify realists ‘on both sides of the traditionalist/scientific fence, and indeed some versatile ones jump back and forth’. However, it not as clear that classical and neorealist arguments can be considered mutually reinforcing in the current context. In discussing the significance of the Soviet collapse for realist theory, Wohlforth writes that ‘(a)s critics of realism rightly note, the events of the last half-decade highlight the indeterminacy of realist predictions about state behaviour’. A move from a systemic to a reductionist mode of analysis by realist scholars is required in the post-Cold War era. Thus ‘a causal analysis of power is necessary to enrich (some might say weaken) realism in order to save it. … Many realists escape damage from the post-1989 transformation by ducking out of the line of fire. But if they want to account for specific episodes they must take a perceptual approach to power. ‘Power’ explains ‘change’ only if it is viewed phenomenologically’. Another major analyst has drawn on the insights of classical realism to account for the apparent absence of great power security balancing against the US since the end of the Cold War. Through skilful diplomacy and strategies of engagement and reassurance, the US has not been perceived as

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96 Ibid., p. 49; Wade L. Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 67.
100 Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neorealism’.
103 Ibid., p. 39.
threatening to potential rivals. The revival of classical realist approaches enables realism to provide a more determinate account of major developments and tendencies. However, by retreating from structural explanation it loses the ability to generalize traditionally associated with systemic theory.

A third possible future for International Relations theory is to resurrect Kant’s understanding of the dynamics of the international system. This offers a comprehensive approach to accounting for both transformational processes within the international system and how these affect states, and transformational processes within states and how these affect the international system. It therefore promises to provide the explanatory advantages associated with systemic methodologies, whilst also retaining the potential to act as a viable interpretative framework for informing the practice of statecraft.

In terms of its explanatory ability, a liberal model along the lines Kant suggested is potentially powerful because it offers an account of how patterns of socialization within the international system might vary historically. It therefore promises to generate a less ambiguous and more encompassing overall research programme than that provided by neorealism. The account of variation in socialization that follows from Kant’s view of systemic dynamics may be described as follows. In its early stages of development, the international system will operate within the ranges predicted by neorealism. The distribution of material capabilities will be the dominant factor motivating state behaviour, and institutional density will remain limited. The system will tend to be characterized by regular wars and the recurrent formation of balances of power. Institutional density will rise as the effects of competition and socialization gradually become entrenched and there is cultural change within the system. The effects of material structure will become increasingly contingent on the identities of units within the system. It is possible to suggest a simple modification to the basic liberal model that could incorporate some of the insights offered by the institutionalist perspective. Under this scenario, certain levels of interdependence and homogenization are considered a prerequisite to the emergence of a stable core of liberal democratic states. Until this stage, institutional density remains within the relatively narrow ranges of co-operation predicted by institutionalist theory, and the practice of specific reciprocity predominates. Once this point of criticality has been reached, then the socialization effects generated by the core can begin to operate effectively. As a result, institutional density will rise more rapidly. Trust based on a collective identity and the diffuse practice of

106 Rather than focusing on socialization dynamics and the role of cultural change in the international system, institutionalist theory focuses on the way in which the norms and principles embodied by international institutions can facilitate co-operation between self-interested states. It holds that international regimes can make diplomacy more efficient, provide information, shape states’ expectations of the future, and reduce uncertainty in the international system. Institutionalism predicts the institutionalization of the international system around the practice of specific reciprocity in situations in which patterns of interdependence between states are well developed and evenly distributed. For the most influential statements of the institutionalist perspective see Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony: Co-operation and Discord in the World Political Economy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Stephen D. Krasner (ed.), International Regimes (London: Cornell University Press, 1983).
reciprocity will then emerge as the modal form of co-operation within the system. The overall trend produced is strikingly reminiscent of Kant’s prediction that ‘we may hope that the periods within which equal amounts of progress are made will become progressively shorter’ as the international system matures.\textsuperscript{107}

Whilst it suggests a general historical theory of state behaviour, Kant’s account of the international system is particularly relevant to the post Cold War period. Firstly, it could plausibly suggest that the collapse of the Soviet Union which brought the ‘Cold War’ to an end in 1991 was not only a cause of system change but was itself \textit{symptomatic} of general historical trends in international politics. This development may be viewed as reflecting the long term effects of competition and socialization within the international system. The rigidity of Soviet communism simply proved unable to keep pace with the more adaptable liberal states of the West. This was reinforced by the impact of globalization at the level of world society. As state-society relations became more pluralistic, totalitarian systems of control proved vulnerable. Whilst these developments surprised contemporary commentators, they fall squarely within Kant’s predictions about the fate of highly illiberal political regimes. Thus, as Huntley identifies, ‘the demise of Soviet Style communism is clearly consistent with the long term patterns of change in international politics given in Kant’s approach’.\textsuperscript{108}

Secondly, a Kantian model of the international system differs radically from neorealism in terms of its \textit{predictive} content. As Huntley proposes, ‘(n)eorealist and Kantian analyses offer strikingly opposed prospects for developments in world politics in the wake of the Cold War’s end’. Specifically, ‘Kantian analysis predicts a form of ‘bandwagoning’ behaviour and co-operative great-power order in stark contrast to the balancing behaviour and balance of power configuration depicted by neorealism’.\textsuperscript{109} With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is plausible to hypothesize that the international system is now overwhelmingly dominated by a stable core of liberal democratic states for the first time in world history.\textsuperscript{110} In terms of the modified liberal model discussed above, the international system has reached the point at which a critical mass of liberal democratic states emerges at a global level. The structure of interaction within the system alters, and consequently the liberal peace replaces the balance of power as the dominant emergent property of the international system. After this stage, the socialization effects generated by the liberal peace begin to operate with full force.

Under these conditions, a dramatic increase in the institutional density of the international system would be expected. The system would converge around the norms of a security community founded on mutual self-restraint and the diffuse practice of reciprocity. Cultural change on behalf of units within the system will

\textsuperscript{107} Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, p. 130. The ability of a Kantian model to offer an account of variation in socialization within the international system is made all the more interesting by the call made by Waltz himself for ‘a single theory capable of explaining the behaviour of states, their interactions, and international outcomes’. As has been suggested, Waltz interprets Kant’s insights though his own neorealist framework, and therefore fails to credit Kant with making an early attempt at precisely such a general theoretical synthesis. Thus despite being familiar with Kant’s writings, Waltz argues that ‘unfortunately, no one has even suggested how such a grand theory can be constructed, let alone developed one’. See Waltz, ‘International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy’, p. 57.


\textsuperscript{109} Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 70.

\textsuperscript{110} This claim holds even if Russia itself has not yet become a mature liberal democratic republic.
become pervasive as the socialization effects generated by the core consolidate. As Huntley identifies, inasmuch as it relies on the unique and powerful systemic dynamic of socialization towards the liberal state form, Kant’s ‘analysis offers grounds deeper than domestic-level particulars and institutional inertia for anticipating … (an) alternative future’ to that envisaged by neorealism.111 Of course, it remains to assess these radical predictions about the trajectory of international change. Indeed, the emerging international order presents something approximating to a ‘real world laboratory’ for testing the opposing predictions of Kantian and neorealist perspectives.112 Such a task is beyond the scope of the present article. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that a Kantian approach to the international system retains two potential advantages over neorealism. Firstly, it opens up the possibility of providing an account of the collapse of the Soviet Union as an integral part of systemic theorizing. Secondly, it retains neorealism’s ability to make generalizable predictive statements about overall patterns of change taking place in the international system. A Kantian model offers a distinctive potential to subsume the insights of neorealism within a more comprehensive account of unit-structure interaction, and a broader analysis of the historical development of international relations. In turn this indicates possible ways in which the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a stable core of liberal democratic states may have more profound implications for the overall trajectory development within the international system than many have anticipated.

As well as promising general explanations of international behaviour and outcomes, a Kantian approach to the international system may also retain an ability to provide an interpretative guide to practical choice and action for policymakers. As with Kant’s social science of international relations, the insights he offers in this regard are potentially generalizable across history.113 However, once again they are particularly relevant to the emerging international order. A Kantian model posits the idea that systemic dynamics are pushing towards the transformation of the international system.114 This may have sensitized policymakers to the possibility that the Soviet system was to prove less durable and more amenable to change than most suspected was possible. Equally salient is Kant’s focus on the importance of the cultural and diplomatic identity espoused by states for the determination of outcomes within the post-Cold War period. Under these conditions, anarchy will very much be ‘what states make of it’.115 The choices made by individual units about the exercise of self-restraint in their diplomatic relationships will be critical for determining overall patterns of conflict and co-operation in world politics. These choices will be particularly important at the margins of cultural change within the system, where the socialization effects generated by the democratic peace will be felt most strongly. If actors become cognisant of their capacity for engaging in cultural change, there will be great scope for social learning within the international system. Yet such a view of the post-Cold War international system is also tinged by a note of caution. In particular, it opens up the danger of conflicts sparked by fundamentalist loyalties. This highlights the moral and practical importance of states’ political

111 Huntley, ‘Kant’s Third Image’, p. 70.
112 Ibid., p. 72.
113 Linklater, ‘The Problem of Community in International Relations Theory’, p. 150.
choices, and as such promises the interpretative insight and ability to inform statecraft traditionally associated with a classical realist approach. Moreover, unlike classical realism, this insight would not be achieved by sacrificing the explanatory elegance offered by systemic theorizing. In the post Cold War period, the Kantian view that the Enlightenment offered by social scientific explanation is a necessary complement to policy choice and action may take on renewed historical significance.

Conclusions

This article has compared the way in which Waltz and Kant seek to analyse international relations. It has suggested that deep similarities underlie the two thinkers’ views on the nature of systemic approaches to the field. Exposing these similarities facilitates a much broader view on how the international system is conceived and defined which may be of particular relevance in the post-Cold War period.

Although Waltz and Kant agree that a systemic approach is needed to conceptualize international relations, they reach very different conclusions about the nature of the international system. Waltz stresses the need for the construction of a logically rigorous model of international politics, and others too have extolled the virtues of his ‘logically coherent’ analysis. However, Kant’s thought provides strong reasons to question the logical validity of Waltz’s model. In turn this has helped to identify the distinctiveness of Kant’s views on systemic approaches, and the unique place Kant’s attempt to delineate a political science of international relations has in the history of political thought.

In particular, Kant’s approach provides strong grounds for scrutinizing more closely the coherence of Waltz’s thought in two areas. Firstly, unlike Waltz, Kant suggests that the complexity generated by human interaction necessitates a transformational model of structure. This leads Kant to adopt a more differentiated notion of the organization of the international system than contemporary approaches allow for, enabling him to provide a theory of international relations which is able to account for the relationship between cultural change and progressive historical development. Secondly, Kant suggests that a focus on the international system complements rather than contradicts a broader focus on world society. As a result Kant, unlike Waltz, develops a view of the international system which fits comfortably within both liberal and critical approaches to international relations. Together these points suggest that it is possible that the systemic mode of theorizing may be much richer than previously thought, and furthermore that it may not have the necessary connection with the realist tradition which is often assumed. In each of these controversial areas of debate, Kant provides a very strong precedent for what are generally regarded as extremely radical claims about the nature and constitution of the international system. In turn, this reveals that Kant’s political writings still contain considerable untapped potential, and may open up important new arenas for future research within the discipline. These include research into the notion that the liberal peace may generate significant socialization effects, and into

the precise developmental sequence linking change in the international system and in world society.

The final section suggested that Kant's thought opens up the possibility of revitalizing systemic approaches to international relations for the post-Cold War period. In this context it is interesting to note that one of the common criticisms of Waltz's systemic approach was that it strongly reflected the most salient features of the Cold War order in which it was developed. Cox has noted that '(t)here is an unmistakably Panglossian quality to a theory published in the late 1970s which concludes that a bipolar system is the best of all possible worlds. The historical moment has left its indelible mark upon ... (Waltz's) purportedly universalist science',\(^1\)\(^{17}\) Today, a more fluid international environment, the salient feature of which is change rather than continuity, has superseded Cold War bipolarity. The social context in which Waltz's theory was developed has dramatically altered, and it would be remarkable if problems with Waltz's own understanding of the international system were not to prove apparent. Yet it is surely the hallmark of sophisticated theory that it is able, to some extent, to transcend its own perspective on the world in which it is developed. Whilst the relevance of the particular understanding of the international system developed by Waltz may be in decline, the more enduring issues about the nature of systemic approaches to international relations which originally inspired Waltz's work are probably more relevant than ever before. This article has suggested that a re-examination of Waltz's basic pre-suppositions may provide a useful bridge between his own thought and the idea of an international system developed by Kant over two hundred years ago. By building on the underlying similarities between the work of these philosophers, the idea of an international system may prove of more enduring historical value to both theorists and practitioners of international relations than many might have suspected would be possible. Focusing on the questions Kant and Waltz were asking, rather than on the particular answers they gave, may provide a means of moving beyond the continuing ambiguities in both their writings.

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