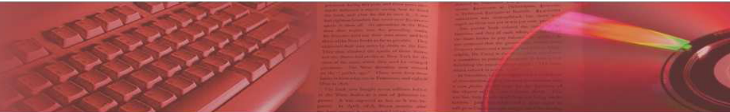
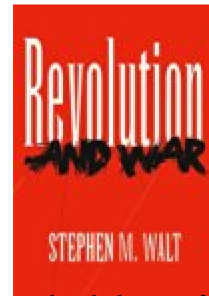


Stephen M. Walt. *Revolution and War.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. x + 365 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8297-7; $62.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3205-7.



Reviewed by Steven Jones (University of Charleston)
Published on H-Teachpol (April, 1998)

Stephen Walt's *Revolution and War* can be read on two levels: first, as a theoretical work which uses the problem of revolutions and war to expand and inform neorealist theories of international relations and/or second, as a substantive work which uses neorealist theory to expand our understanding of revolutionary states. Walt's book makes important contributions at both levels. At the theoretical level, he overcomes the limitations of neorealist theory by successfully incorporating unit-level analysis into an understanding of the systemic consequences of revolutions.[1] At the substantive level, he expands our understanding of revolutions by shifting our focus from the internal causes of revolutions to their international effects.

Walt's theoretical arguments are found in the first two chapters of the book. The problem which informs his theory is the extent to which revolutions increase the potential for war.[2] Walt argues that the neorealist response to that problem--that revolutions increase the potential for war to the degree to which they impact the system-wide balance of power--is incomplete. As Walt points out, "revolutions affect more than just the aggregate distribution of power. They also alter perceptions of intent and beliefs about the relative strength of offense and defense. Beliefs about the intentions of other states and their specific capacity to do harm will exert a powerful influence on the foreign policy of the revolutionary state, and the responses of other states will be similarly affected by their perceptions of the new regime. To understand the international consequences of revolutions, in short, we must move beyond the relatively spare world of neorealist theory and incorporate unit-level factors as well.

Walt's response to neorealism's theoretical limitations is to offer an alternative to neorealist balance-of-power theory, which he labels balance-of-threat theory. Like other realist theorists, Walt assumes that state behavior is based on the priority of security in an anarchic international system. However, whereas balance-of-power theory predicts that states will respond to any changes in the system-wide distribution of power, Walt argues that states respond to changes in the balance-of-power only when there is a perceived increase in threat from such changes. The balance of threat increases when: (a) there is a perceived increase in the aggregate power of one state relative to another or others, (b) the intent of a state is perceived to be hostile and aggressive, (c) there is a perceived shift from a defense-dominant military position to an offense-dominant position (pp. 18-19).

Using his balance-of-threat theory, Walt then develops a theoretical response to the question of how and under what conditions revolutions increase the potential for war. Walt argues that revolutions affect revolutionary states in four important areas which, in turn, affect their relations with other states. The combination of these effects is an increased probability for war. First, revolutions generally weaken the military capabilities of revolutionary states relative to other states. This weakened capability provides "windows of opportunity" for other states. Other states in the system might (a) exploit the weakened position of the revolutionary state to increase their own power or (b) support the revolutionary state to prevent states from pursuing option (a). Likewise, revolutionary states will be aware of their weakened position and will therefore perceive an increasingly threatening international environment (pp. 32-33).

Second, revolutions, by definition, bring to power new elites with radically different ideologies and prefer-

ences from those of the old elites. As a result, "States with close ties to the old regime will naturally view the revolution as potentially dangerous and its new initiatives as a threat to their own interests. For purely rational reasons, therefore, revolutionary states and foreign powers are likely to experience sharp conflicts of interest and to regard each other's intentions with suspicion" (p. 33).

Third, revolutions create "spirals of suspicion" whereby the revolutionary state and its potential adversaries are likely to engage in mirror image misperceptions of each other's intentions and actions (p. 33). [3] For example, revolutionary states often perceive other states as inherently hostile when: (a) those states are ideologically and politically opposed to the revolution, (b) the revolutionary state harbors resentments and suspicions against other states based on historical experiences, and/or (c) the revolutionary state purges experienced foreign policy bureaucrats and diplomats. Likewise, other states are likely to view the revolutionary state's defensive hostility, whether based on ideology or historical experience, as aggressive and threatening. Furthermore, other states are likely to feel threatened if the new, revolutionary elite exaggerates external threats to consolidate internal power (pp. 33-37).

Finally, revolutions increase the potential for war due to the uncertainties and misinformation that accompany a revolutionary change in regimes. When neither side is certain of the other's capabilities and intentions, both sides will feel vulnerable and threatened. Under these conditions, each side will be tempted to take an offense-dominant military posture rather than a defensive posture. Such a shift will in turn intensify each side's sense of vulnerability and threat (pp. 37-43).

Chapters three through six review seven historical cases in order to test Walt's theory. His cases include the French, Russian, Iranian, American, Mexican, Turkish and Chinese revolutions. These chapters will not offer anything new in terms of substantive history, but they will provide students with an exposure to elements of revolutionary history with which the may not be familiar: the effect of these revolutions on international security. These chapters also provide a good comparative cross-section of cases of revolutions that differed temporally, geographically, and ideologically.[4]

The major contribution that Walt's book makes is to expand the applications of neorealist theory. Neorealism, although a parsimonious theoretical approach, suffers from being too limited and deterministic in its analysis of international politics. By focusing solely on the balance of power among nation states, neorealism ignores many other important factors which contribute to instability in the international system, such as nationalism, transnational social movements, and the perceptions and misperceptions of national leaders. Walt's work admirably synthesizes factors typically ignored by neorealist theory while maintaining the theory's central focus on sources of stability and instability in the international system.

Another contribution that Walt's book makes is that it crosses the intra-disciplinary divide between international relations and comparative politics. The study of revolutions and revolutionary states has been a subtopic of comparative politics while the study of war and international security have been subtopics of international relations. Walt's book successfully bridges this subdisciplinary gap by applying historical-comparative, case-study analysis to expand our understanding of both revolutionary states and international security.

In spite of these contributions, there are some limitations to the book, although, in the final analysis, the strengths of the book far outweigh its limitations. One of the limitations of the work is that it is clearly geared to an audience that is already well-versed in international relations theory. Walt seems to take for granted that when he uses the word war, he means great power war. He also assumes that the readers are already familiar with realism, neorealism, and balance-of-power theory.

Another limitation is that, although balance-of-threat theory would appear to have very clear implications for analyzing the impact of ethnonationalist movements on international security, Walt devotes very limited space to exploring those implications. He does devote about five pages of discussion to the implications of the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, but his discussion could have easily been expanded to do a more contemporary analysis of ethnonationalism and its implications for international security. For example, balance-of-threat theory would seem to offer an explanation for why the great powers intervene in some civil wars (Bosnia) but not in others (Rwanda, Zaire).

A third limitation is that other than offering his balance-of-threat theory as an improvement on neorealist balance-of-power theory, Walt does not do much in the way of comparing his theory to competing theoretical frameworks. Likewise, Walt does not give much attention to the implications of post-modern social theories to his theory and analyses of revolutions. He does acknowledge that if the "end-of-history" view is correct,

then "(his) theory explains a phenomenon that may not trouble us any longer. It might be correct but irrelevant, and the lessons drawn from this study of little enduring value" (p. 350). He then goes on to dismiss the optimism of the "end-of-history" view. However, the "end of history" is not the only post-modern approach. Other approaches see the transition from modern to the post-modern as extremely volatile.[5] Had Walt provided a more detailed discussion of how his theory either contributes to or provides an alternative to post-modern social theories, he would have added to the important theoretical contribution his work makes.

The book has several pedagogical applications. It would make an important contribution to upper-division undergraduate courses and/or graduate seminars on revolutionary movements, international relations theory, and international security. I plan to use it for my course, "Resistance and Revolution." It would also be a good example of Imre Lakatos' description of how theories evolve; where neorealist balance-of-power theory provides the "hard core," Walt's balance-of-threat theory provides a new "research programme" around that hard core.[6] Thus, it would also be appropriate for graduate seminars on political theory and/or research methodology.

In conclusion, Stephen Walt's, *Revolution and War* makes important theoretical contributions to both international relations theory and international security studies. It also expands our understanding of the impact of revolutionary states by going beyond the study of the internal causes and consequences of revolutions to examining their impacts on international security. Furthermore, Walt's book is to be commended for his application of comparative history to the neorealist paradigm. It is an important work and has much to offer scholars and students alike.

Notes

[1]. The primary limitation of neorealism as a theoretical foundation for understanding international relations is that, in the desire for parsimony, it ignores the fact that, although the system-wide distribution of power constrains the behavior of nation states, intra- and inter-state behaviors affect the nature of the international system. For discussions on the limitations of neorealism see Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Alexander Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, 41 (3), Summer, 1987: 335-70; and David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealsim and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[2]. Although he never explicitly defines it as such, because Walt's analysis is informed by the neorealist school of international relations theory, "war," as he uses the term, means great-power war.

[3]. This portion of Walt's theoretical argument draws heavily from Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[4]. Indeed, Walt does an admirable job of applying Theda Skocpol's comparative-historical methodology to international relations theory. See Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Unfortunately, Walt does not acknowledge Skocpol's contribution to his methodological approach. For Walt's list of sources on case-study methodology, see *Revolutions and War*, n. 35, p. 15.

[5]. For more on post-modern social theories and social change see, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Symposium on Citizens, Protest, and Democracy*, Vol. 528 (July), 1993: entire volume; Steve Buechler, "Beyond Resource Mobilization? Emerging Trends in Social Movement Theory," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34 (2), 1993: 217-235; Roberta Garner, "Transnational Movements in Postmodern Societies," *Peace Review*, 6 (4), Winter, 1994: 427-433; Joel Handler, "Postmodernism, Protest and the New Social Movements," *Law and Society Review*, 26 (4), 1992: 697-731; Aldon D. Morris and Carol Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); and Andrew Ross, *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[6]. See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol

Citation: Steven Jones. Review of Walt, Stephen M., *Revolution and War*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1978

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.