

Comments on R. Harrison Wagner's *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics*

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I have long thought that Harrison Wagner's work was significantly underappreciated. To give one example, in 1993 Wagner published 'What Was Bipolarity?' in *International Organization*, which seemed to me to provide an important set of criticisms of common realist arguments about the distribution of power and international relations, as well as a fascinating positive argument about how to think theoretically about the international politics of the Cold War era. I thought that self-described realists would feel compelled to engage Wagner's argument that no one has stated how one can distinguish bipolarity from multipolarity, and that the standard formulation misunderstands what was consequential about the international distribution of power after the World War II. I was completely wrong. Self-described realists have proceeded to engage in a long discussion of the consequences of 'unipolarity' (a newly discovered distribution of power that was not only never imagined by Waltz (1979) but arguably is inconceivable from his point of view) with scarcely any reference to Wagner's article and no engagement of its arguments.

I worry that Wagner's (2007) excellent book, *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics*, may be similarly underappreciated, for two sets of reasons. The first concerns what might be called the rhetorical economy of the International Relations (IR) subfield in the United States, which has been structured as a contest among competing 'isms'. As Wagner says, 'although the brands [Isms] are ostensibly in conflict with each other, they all actually give indirect support to each other' because the rhetorical competition leaves people with the impression that each 'ism' must have something to it. 'A recognition that they all shared the same flaw [of not providing valid arguments for their major claims] would

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mean that they would all have to go out of business, and better answers to the questions being debated might not lead to an easily marketable new brand. Instead, each is given credibility by its criticisms of the others, and a never-ending debate among the competing brands comes to define what the field is' (Wagner, 2007: 48).

In this debate everyone calls for more empirical testing, even the increasing numbers who are skeptical of the 'isms' racket. But as Wagner observes, 'Empirical evidence cannot confirm or disconfirm an explanation if the evidence is not actually implied by the explanation' (2007:37). So Wagner's arguments may also be uncomfortable for scholars who hope that new data sets and clever empirical research designs will allow us to make progress on theory.

The second set of reasons I have for worrying that *War and the State* will be underappreciated concerns not the field, but Wagner's own arguments and his presentation of them. In brief, while the argument of the first chapter of the book is clear and important (in my view anyway), it is not so clear what the core question is in the subsequent chapters, or what Wagner's answer is. In what follows, I will first summarize what I think is the clear and important negative case developed in the first chapter, and then present what I consider to be the main question and the answer that Wagner develops in the rest of the book.

In the first chapter, Wagner discusses how, particularly since Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979), IR theorists have purported to derive a set of non-obvious implications about international politics from primitive assumptions about states and the anarchical environment in which they interact. Wagner argues that essentially all of the major claims advanced by various brands of realists, and also by their critics in rival 'isms', are *invalid*. That is, the conclusions do not follow from the premises. Wagner documents the remarkable indifference to this problem in the field, or inability to see it, and notes that empirical work cannot help us decide between theories if the theories are invalid in this sense.¹

Wagner shows the invalidity (or in some cases, absence) of arguments for the following major claims advanced by 'structural realists' in their various forms:

- (1) The claim that we should expect states in anarchy to be aggressive and to try to expand their territory if they can.
- (2) The claim that in anarchical settings populated by units that wish to survive, we should expect the recurrent formation of balances of power.

¹ I note that although Wagner does not cite his work, Charles Glaser (1995) is one of the few self-described realists to see and attempt to remedy the 'conclusions don't follow' problem of structural realism (see also Glaser, 1997; Glaser and Kaufmann, 1998).

- (3) The claim that bipolarity lowers the probability of great power war.
- (4) A variety of other claims about what different distributions of power characterized as ‘polarities’ imply for the risk of interstate war.
- (5) The claim that we should expect wars to continue to be a major problem as long as the international system is anarchical, regardless of the nature of states’ domestic political regimes, or levels of international trade, or the presence of international institutions.
- (6) The claim that the security dilemma explains why there will sometimes be wars in an anarchical setting.
- (7) The claim that changes in the offense–defense balance in favor of offense increase the odds of interstate war.

It is important to understand that one cannot shrug off Wagner’s point here by saying something like ‘Well, maybe so, but as an empirical matter balances of power do tend to form,’ or ‘the evidence indicates that states are fundamentally aggressive,’ or the like. Even if it happened that some empirical facts accord with the realists’ claims listed above, if the theoretical arguments for the claims are not valid in the sense that the claims do not follow from reasonable premises, then the realist ‘theory’ in question has not explained the facts.

For a couple of the claims listed above, I think one could make a better case for there being a valid argument connecting plausible realist premises to the conclusion. For example, I expect that Wagner would agree that it is possible to write down a model (an argument in which it is clear what the premises are and what follows from them) in which two states are more likely to go to war when the offense–defense balance favors the offense, or in which a three-state system will be stable because each expects balancing should it attack another.² What do we do, then, when we have valid arguments leading to contradictory conclusions, as is possible in both of these cases? Would Wagner say that it becomes a problem of deciding which set of premises are more empirically accurate or common? That we have made progress because we now have reasons for expecting X if premises A, B, and C apply, but Y if premises A, B, and D are more accurate? Or must we then consider a more complicated model/argument with less restrictive premises, in which case the analysis may become impossible and we won’t be able to get any determinate

² For the former claim, Powell (1993) and Powell (1999: Ch. 3) provide good examples. For the latter, I do not know of a non-cooperative game-theoretical model with this result, but I expect that it can emerge naturally if one of the premises is that coalitions must divide up the resources of a defeated state in proportion to the relative strength of the coalition members.

conclusions at all? It seems to me that all three responses can be tenable, but I am interested in Wagner's view.³

Although one can read Wagner's core point about the state of IR theory in Chapter 1 as extremely depressing, I think there is a more optimistic interpretation: the field remains wide open for foundational work on central questions!

Wagner tries to make a start on these questions in the rest of the book. What are they, and how should they be posed? Throughout the book Wagner shifts between several distinct though closely related formulations, which unfortunately make it less clear what he is trying to do overall than it might be.⁴

For what it may be worth, by my reading his core question is this: Does anarchy, in the sense of no world government, imply that interstate relations must be tragic (or highly inefficient in the economists' sense) and, in particular, plagued by interstate war? I believe that Wagner's answer, briefly put, is 'probably not'.

I would summarize Wagner's arguments and the main points behind this answer as follows.

(1) War does not require states. It just requires groups organized to use violence, and of course this can happen within political communities as well as between them.

(2) The European states system is itself an institutional solution that Wagner (and others) argues evolved in part as a response to the problem of organized violence among pre-state specialists in violence. The violence was among leading families, often described by Wagner as 'economic predators,'

³ Powell's (1999: Ch. 1) discussion of Myerson's (1992) idea of a 'modeling dialogue' is useful on this issue.

⁴ Here are formulations of main or central questions that I flagged: What is the relation between government and war? Is a world of sovereign states doomed to war or not? (Wagner, 2007: 51–52) Must people now living in the 'state of nature' (in 'failed states') follow the same long and violent path out of it that Europeans did? (Wagner, 2007: 76) What is 'the relation between political institutions and organized violence,' which is 'the central problem of our time'? (Wagner, 2007: 35) 'If a League of Nations was a utopian scheme for reducing the number of violent conflicts [i.e. it was not incentive compatible], what would be realistic?' (Wagner, 2007: 60) What is the connection 'between a commonwealth (or hierarchy) and peace, or between the state of nature (or anarchy) and war'? (Wagner, 2007: 81) When or under what conditions is anarchy among states a better or worse solution to the problem of organized violence than hierarchy? (Wagner, 2007: 103) Why couldn't it be that the state system, understood as a set of agreements among economic predators, would be permanent and peaceful (why can't the terms of the agreements be renegotiated peacefully)? (Wagner, 2007: 115) Does peace require some sort of '-archy' or could it be achieved instead by a decentralized institutional structure [such as a states system]? (Wagner, 2007: 123) Is a 'peaceful global order' possible? (Wagner, 2007: 126) How costly must interstate bargaining be (vs. the same within states)? (Wagner, 2007: 174)

who operated both within and between the boundaries that came to separate modern states. Put differently, the anarchical states system and the boundaries that divide states are themselves a *peace agreement* among organizations with the capacity for violence. These organizations agree, most of the time, not to contest these boundaries, and after major wars they have often literally constructed states and the lines between them in peace conferences.

(3) As Wagner puts it, ‘the modern state is as much a product of agreements among states as it is of agreements between governments and the populations they govern. When states use force to renegotiate a previous peace settlement they appear to be the source of the problem, but when a new agreement is negotiated, they re-emerge as part of the solution. And no valid argument has been given which shows that they could not be part of a long-lasting peace settlement’ (2007: 125).

(4) The structural realist approach, Wagner notes, is based on posing a very sharp dichotomy between anarchical and hierarchical systems.⁵ The arguments are claimed to apply not just for a states system but for any organization (or individuals) that wish to survive, interacting without a common power over them.

Wagner thinks that we cannot answer the abovementioned core questions if we take this approach (or Wendt’s constructivism for that matter) of positing the ‘units’ as exogenously given and then looking for common properties of anarchic systems. The right ‘primitives’ to start from are not states, Wagner believes, but small groups or organizations that specialize in violence and predation. By the time we get to states, we are already talking about a specific, complicated, decentralized institutional response to problems of organized violence that afflicted Europe in the time of princes and barons. In addition, he asks, if the organizations that specialize in violence can reach the peace agreement, that is, the state system, then why should we expect that interstate relations would necessarily be terrible? If an interstate system is a peace agreement of sorts, why should we expect it to be plagued by interstate war?

Wagner gives a nice illustration of this puzzle, or paradox, in a brief discussion of some self-described realists’ analysis of the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia (2007: 34–35). John Mearsheimer agreed with Barry Posen that the cause was the collapse of the Communist government, and thus the onset of anarchy, which Mearsheimer (2001) also maintains is the source of ‘the tragedy of great power politics’. Yet Mearsheimer’s

⁵ One reason for the sharp dichotomy was Waltz’s concern to stake out the autonomy of a field of IR, which was more in question then than now.

recommendation for solving the problem was not to recreate a Yugoslav government, but to create ... anarchy! That is, he thought that the best solution was to divide Bosnia into independent states with no higher power over them. If the consequences of anarchy for interstate relations are so dire, particularly regarding war, how can interstate anarchy be a solution to a problem of war?

Hence, even self-described realists seem to allow that interstate anarchy can be a cure for the disease of war among organizations that are not (or that do not get called) states. The question then becomes: What reasons do we have for thinking that the cure might be worse than the disease, or even that the cure must entail significant costs from fighting between states?

(5) To answer this question we need a theory of why wars occur. Here, Wagner argues that neither structural realists and their critics, nor early modern political philosophers with the notable exception of Clausewitz, have provided valid explanations. Chapters 4 and 5 synthesize and extend his take on recent work on bargaining and war, to which he has been a major contributor. I have some minor issues here, and will note two in passing. First, I think that Wagner's view that many or most wars are well explained by state leaders having overoptimistic beliefs about their odds of winning due to bounded rationality has trouble in explaining pre-war bargaining and why wars start when they do.⁶ Second, while Wagner has probably tried more than anyone to construct valid theoretical arguments about the stability and war-proneness of systems with more than two states, the problem is extremely complicated even with a lot of simplifying assumptions. More formalization might be helpful for clarifying Wagner's arguments on this subject.

With respect to the question of what causes interstate wars, Wagner ends up arguing that exogenous changes in the distribution of power (or preferences over territory vs. fighting costs as well?) lead to attempts to renegotiate the existing territorial status quo between particular states. The renegotiation process may become violent, involving war, when the states happen to be overoptimistic about their military odds (or some change has made them so?), or when certain commitment problems favor preventive war.⁷ Neither observable measures of the distribution of power, nor the offense–defense balance, should be expected to

⁶ I consider some other advantages and disadvantages of the inconsistent beliefs and discuss alternatives to it in Fearon (2008).

⁷ Or maybe preemptive war – attack undertaken in the expectation of imminent attack by an adversary – but Wagner is more skeptical, for good reasons. Preventive war is war undertaken to prevent a change in the distribution of military power that would occur in the absence of war.

be systematically or necessarily related to the incidence of war. Wagner does seem to think, however, that war would be less of a problem in a world of democracies, possibly because democracies would be less interested in territorial predation.⁸

(6) What does this imply about the big question concerning whether interstate anarchy will necessarily be a terrible, tragic thing? Here I am not sure what Wagner thinks. The book's concluding chapter, Chapter 7, seems to trail off with the observation that the problems being considered are complicated and valid arguments are hard to construct, rather than a clear statement on what I have taken, perhaps wrongly, as the main question.

Nonetheless, Wagner develops two arguments that may speak to the question of whether, in light of his conclusions about the causes of war, we should think that war must terminally plague interstate anarchy and that anarchy is worse than hierarchy. First, in a couple of places Wagner gives reasons to think that the absence of a third-party enforcement at the level of states (vs., implicitly, a powerful world government) might make war *less* rather than more likely than it would otherwise be. This is a surprising and interesting claim. If correct it might raise further doubt about whether anarchy is necessarily worse than hierarchy. Second, Wagner observes several times that within states there is no higher power that can enforce agreements between the government and its citizens, which implies that some of the causes of interstate war he has discussed may also be operative within states.

Wagner gives two main instances of the first possibility.

First, if two states cannot enforce an agreement between them about how to divide up a third after attacking and defeating it, then predation becomes more risky for them, or is positively bad for the weaker of the two. This would be a source of 'system stability'. It could also mean that the inability to enforce agreements was reducing the frequency of war from what it would otherwise be. But this is not completely clear because better enforcement capacity might also reduce the likelihood of war between the coalition and the first state to begin with. A more developed model would be useful.

Second, if states cannot commit to the terms of a negotiated settlement in the midst of a war, then they must fight till one side is disarmed. This would be costlier and riskier than if they expect that a negotiated

⁸ He says that 'there is good reason to think that eliminating the incentives for [territorial] predation [which he seems to think democracy might help with] would reduce the incidence of interstate wars' (Wagner, 2007: 201).

settlement might be feasible, so the absence of outside enforcement could make war less likely to occur, although more severe if it occurs.

Since one would think that adding the ability to write enforceable contracts should always make the parties at least as well off in any strategic setting, this observation has some initial surprise value. But we need a more developed model/argument to really assess the claim. For example, in a model in which inefficient civil or interstate war is completely driven by a commitment problem (e.g. Fearon, 1995, 2004; Powell, 2004, 2006), then, of course, allowing for a third-party enforcement can eliminate war. To assess Wagner's argument properly, a bargaining model with both commitment problems concerning settlements and private information or irrational overoptimism is required. The model in Fearon (2008) has these features (i.e. private information about relative power, and any negotiated settlement must be self-enforcing). As it turns out, Wagner's conjecture can, but need not, hold there. For some, but not for all, parameter values it can be true that war is more likely if states can commit to the terms of a negotiated settlement than if they cannot. In terms of welfare, however, in that model, the states (or the government and rebel group) are unambiguously better off, on net, if commitment to negotiated settlements is possible. Without commitment war always lasts at least long or longer, and has greater odds of total defeat of one side. Thus, at least in that setting the surprising feature of Wagner's suggestion does not hold – absence of a third-party enforcement between states or groups does make them worse off, even if it could be that short wars would be more frequent if external enforcement were possible.⁹

The other point that Wagner makes, which links his analysis of causes of war to his larger question about the possibility of a peaceful global order, is the observation that agreements between a government and the population it governs are agreements between parties without a common power over them. Many have argued on this basis (e.g. John Locke) that any non-despotic system of government must therefore depend on an implicit threat of rebellion or unrest by the population. If so, then almost all of the arguments that Wagner developed on the causes of war in the interstate setting apply within states as well. We could then argue for the subversive proposition that 'in the anarchy of domestic politics, there will always be a probability of civil war'.

⁹ These conclusions come from analysis of the model in that paper when one fixes the time between bargaining offers. As shown there, if the time between offers can be very short, then 'war' barely occurs at all unless commitment to negotiated settlements is problematic. How these issues would play out in a model in which states believe that the other side is misunderstanding the military situation (e.g. Smith and Stam, 2004), as opposed to having private information, is unclear.

In support of this point, there are now a number of models of civil war and revolution in which these occur due to shocks to the relative power of government, and the inability of governments to commit to implement certain agreements once the threat of rebellion has diminished (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001; Fearon, 2004; see also Walter, 2002 on mutual disarmament as an obstacle to ending a civil war). In other words, the mechanisms are essentially the same as for preventive wars between states. Wagner's idea about a commitment technology making negotiated settlements and thus short wars easier has an interesting further implication: If territorial divisions between armies are more readily self-enforcing than are power-sharing agreements over a central government, then we might expect interstate conflicts to be shorter and less deadly on average than civil wars (and this is the case, empirically). In fact, these are exactly the sorts of advantages that might lead one to support the partition of Bosnia in 1995. They also support Wagner's claim that interstate anarchy need not be such a bad thing, all things considered.

IR theory has been in something of a rut in recent years. The first chapter of *War and the State* documents this and provides, in my view, a compelling diagnosis of one of the main reasons. Regarding the rest of the book, while structural realism's anarchy/hierarchy dichotomy has often been criticized in abstract terms, Wagner's more concrete deconstruction of it is productive in terms of suggesting how to move forward. Both realists and their critics accept that there are major welfare costs associated with a states system. But what exactly are these and how large are they? What would be optimal, what would be practicable, and what is likely to occur regarding the organization of political jurisdictions (e.g. states, international institutions and agreements, *de facto* protectorates, different jurisdictions for different issue areas)? What is similar and what is different about civil and interstate war, and how are they related? What are the implications for current debates about 'state failure' of Wagner's observation that historically state building has necessarily involved interstate agreements?

Charles Tilly's famous comment that 'war made the state and the state made war' is usually interpreted to be summarizing a dynamic process wherein military competition led European kings to develop the structures and capabilities of the modern state. In *War and the State*, Wagner argues that modern states were and are created internationally (so to speak), not just as a domestic response to an inter-monarch arms race, but as the product of agreements aimed at avoiding war both at home and abroad. These are not simply metaphorical or 'intersubjective' agreements that 'constitute sovereignty' as an idea, but practical agreements and conventions that emerge out of bargaining and bloody conflict between

organizations that specialize in violence. This strikes me as a productive way to move beyond the limitations of the sharp anarchy/hierarchy dichotomy of structural realism – which still structures the division of labor in our field – and to pose, or put into a useful context, many of the central normative questions of contemporary international relations.

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