Theoretical systems and political realities: a review of Morton A. Kaplan, *System and process in international politics*

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This is an important book for the trail which it breaks rather than for the goal at which it arrives (1). There has been increasing dissatisfaction among students of international relations with the paucity of theoretical models. The study of international relations has been dominated, for the most part, by men raised in the tradition of diplomatic history and belles-lettres. Such work is necessary and has an important place, but there is widespread feeling that it is not enough—that there is need for more theory, more model-building, more quantification, more integrated study drawing on the resources of all the sciences of life, man, and society. This *Journal* is itself an expression of this feeling of "not enough" and of the search for "more." It is with a real feeling of excitement, therefore, that I approach Dr. Kaplan's work, and a good deal of the excitement remains even after finishing it. It represents a courageous attempt to build theoretical systems in international politics, using mainly the tools of social theory. The tools may not seem adequate, and the building may be crude (and it is certainly dark inside!), but at least a beginning has been made. It seems to me the most important attempt to date to build theoretical structures in this field.

The work opens with a brief—perhaps too brief—discussion of the nature of social systems, which, I suspect, owes a good deal, though perhaps at second hand, to Talcott Parsons and, at perhaps an even greater remove, to Norbert Wiener. There is an acknowledged debt to W. R. Ashby. Chapter ii then plunges into the main thesis, which is the setting-up of six models of international systems. The first is the "balance-of-power" system, which corresponds roughly to that which prevailed in the Western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is characterized by a small group—six or seven seems a typical number—of "national actors" or national states, of roughly equal size and strength. Their relations are governed by certain "essential rules," such as "stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential national actor" or "act to constrain actors who subscribe to supranational organizing principles" (p. 23). It is not explained how these essential rules come to be accepted or how an actor becomes "essential" (Poland in the eighteenth century clearly did not make the club), but the neglect of these second-order or dynamic considerations may be justified at this stage.

The second model is the "loose bipolar system," which corresponds roughly to what we have today, in which two of the national actors have risen to a much greater size and power than the others, which tend therefore to group around the two major actors in loose blocs. The third model is the "tight bipolar system," in which the neutrals disappear and the system reduces virtually to two power blocs. The fourth model is that of the "universal international system," in which the "Universal Actor" (e.g., the United Nations) is sufficiently powerful to prevent war among the national actors but in which the national actors retain their individuality and still jockey for power and position within the framework of the Universal Actor. The fifth model is that of the "hierarchical international system," in which the Universal Actor virtually absorbs all the others, and only one nation is left in the world. The first five systems stand somewhat in a progression, in that a tendency might be postulated to pass from one to five through the others in succession. The sixth system stands somewhat apart: it is called the "unit veto system," in which weapons exist of such character that *any* actor, no matter how small and weak, can destroy any other before being destroyed itself. The formulation of this system was clearly inspired by the horrible prospect of H-bombs in the possession of even the smallest nations. It might be mentioned in passing that, even though such a system has never existed in international relations, the widespread possession of the Colt revolver (the "equalizer") in the brief, balmy days of the Wild West apparently produced a system something like this in interpersonal relations.

An economist is irresistibly reminded by this classification of possible states of the international system of the "states of the market," ranging from perfect competition (a balance-of-power system with *many* actors) through monopolistic competition (balance of power with few actors) to oligopoly (loose bipolar) to duopoly (tight bipolar) to cartelization (universal international) to monopoly (hierarchical international). There seems to be no economic analogue, thank heaven, for the unit veto system, except perhaps completely perfect oligopoly where any firm can take away the market of any other completely by the slightest shading of its price! Kaplan's categories are not so clear as those of the economists; nevertheless, they mark an important step toward a general theory of international systems. This is more than giving fancy names to familiar things. By formalizing the models it may be possible to move from the study of the actual, to which the historian is confined, out toward the study of the *possible*. This is always the greatest task of theory: to study what is not yet, but what might be; it is the study of the not yet in the physical sciences which gave us the airplane and the bomb, and we must likewise study the not yet in poiltical science if these instruments of the scientific imagination are to be harnessed for man's good.

Having categorized the possible systems, the next step (chap. iii) is to categorize the potential actors. Kaplan does this according to a fourfold classification. An actor may be directive or non-directive, and each of these in turn may be either system-dominant or subsystem-dominant. The directive–non-directive polarity seems to be identical with the familiar authoritarian-democratic dichotomy. A nation is system-dominant if its culture is uniform and power is widely distributed or wielded under strong consensus. It is subsystem-dominant if its policies are determined by a small group within the nation without much regard for public opinion outside the group. Thus Spain is a type of directive, system-dominant nation; Russia of a directive, subsystem-dominant; Britain of the non-directive, subsystem-dominant. These categorizations are, of course, only approximate, as one seldom, if ever, gets a pure example of a type. Kaplan then proceeds to develop the probable character of his six systems under the four different types of actors and under five different "patterns of choice." These five are (i) the "organizational focus of decisions," which seems to mean the choice of instruments of policy; (ii) the allocation of rewards, both inside and outside the national actor; (iii) alignment preferences (whom do you like or dislike); (iv) willingness (or not) to play the current game, or to try to change the system; and (v) adaptivity, that is, flexibility or rigidity. It is clear that we have here a fine set of pigeonholes (6 × 5 × 4, or 120 *in toto*), and, while Dr. Kaplan does not attempt to fill them all, the reader may be pardoned if occasionally he wonders which box he happens to be living in. Still pigeonholes are not entirely for the birds; they are an essential feature of a developing science, and an economist especially should be careful about throwing stones at empty boxes. Just to add to the boxes, there is a discussion somewhere along the line of "bloc actors" like NATO, which are not quite national and not quite universal and present a curious piece of political natural history.

From the systems of Part I we now pass to the processes of Part II. The distinction in this work between a system and a process is somewhat confusing. One usually thinks of a process as something that happens to, or in, a system—that is, if one wants to make this distinction at all. Kaplan, however, seems to mean by process—at least this is the subject of Part II—the *internal* system of the national actor. My objection is only a terminological one: it is entirely proper, after one has discussed the interaction of national actors in an internation system to go on to specify in more detail why they act as they do. Since a national actor consists of a lot of *people* in *roles* tied together with tight or loose *communications,* it is clear that the action of the national actor depends on the *interaction* of the people who compose it, and the action of people depends on their values and images and on the regulatory or homeostatic processes by which they try to mold the world closer to their heart's desire. Kaplan's Part II is certainly the most difficult to read—it will, I fear, be almost completely unintelligible to those who have not done a good deal of previous reading and thinking on these matters. It is poorly organized; there are many forward references and too many backward references to things which the reader finds hard to keep in mind. Nevertheless, it is struggling with important topics. There is too much tendency in writing on international relations to personify nations as simple, homogeneous, consistent units of behavior. For some purposes of discourse this may be legitimate, but one should never lose sight of the immense complexity of social organization. Kaplan in effect lifts the lid off the smooth capsule of the nation and reveals the pullulating mass of interacting roles, people, and communications that lie within. Furthermore, he sees the nation as a cross-section of role relationships which unite the whole world in its mesh. To revert again to an economic analogy, just as what we call "international trade" is that segment of the total volume of personal economic transactions that happens to cross national boundaries, so "international relations" consists of that segment of the total volume of social transactions of all kinds which happens to cross national boundaries. In the moment of stating this view, of course, one has to modify it substantially; the existence of national boundaries itself profoundly modifies both the flows of trade and the volume of all social transactions. But at least one must get away from the absurd Cloud-Cuckoo-Land of popular discourse, where large divine entities called "America," "France," or "Russia" act out shadow plays of love and hatred, greed and power.

In chapter v Kaplan proposes nine "Hypotheses" regarding what he calls the "integrative and disintegrative process." These are not hypotheses in the narrow sense of empirically testable propositions but rather are propositions of intrinsic plausibility related to role-formation, the range of the field of choice, the insulation of roles from possibly relevant information, the sources of rigidity and legitimacy, the tolerance of deviations, the conflict of loyalties, and the sources of aggressiveness. The hypotheses are not arranged in any very clearly perceptible order or system, and many of them seem to overlap. In spite of the confusion and obscurity of this chapter, however, one has the impression that the author is at least confused and obscure *about* something and that, if some order and clarity could be brought into the presentation, some important insights would emerge. The confusion of style unfortunately carries over into chapter vi, where an attempt is made to apply these insights—not wholly without success—to actual international situations. Here not only are the back-references to the hypotheses of the previous chapter hard to follow, but several new hypotheses are sneaked into the argument without even telling the reader. An instance of this is the very interesting hypothesis on page 136 regarding the extreme difficulties of the perceptual process in international relations, resulting from the inadequacy of the typology: information is crammed into too few boxes because of the inadequacy of existing methods of abstraction and classification.

In spite of the difficulty of these chapters, the patient reader should emerge with some important ideas. One is the notion of the "metatask"—the task of redefining tasks, or the role of role-creation. Where an organization is under great pressure, all its energies will be devoted to its tasks, and none to metatasks; it will be enormously busy doing what it sets out to do, without having time to inquire whether what it is setting out to do is the right or the sensible thing to do. The survival of an organization depends, therefore, not only on its efficiency in performing the tasks which it sets itself but also on its ability to reassess, in the light of some larger values, the tasks themselves. The nation which is hell-bent on winning a war might even find it worth while to have at least some people who ask whether the war is worth winning. Another important notion is that of *insulation.* This is the knife that carves out segments of the intolerable network of potential communications, partly in order that the information input and output will not exceed the capacity of the persons who occupy the roles. It is insulation that carves a nation (or a gang!) out of the meshed tissue of social relationships; there are gains here in limiting the relationships to what people can "take"—the capacity of the person for understanding, love, sympathy, etc., being very limited—but there are severe losses in cutting off information which may be necessary for survival. Another interesting set of concepts centers around the notion of legitimacy, or habit, or acceptance. Still another important concept is that of the multiple role—the person occupying several different roles. It is clear that we are dealing here with the raw material of very important social theory, highly relevant to the study of international relations. I must confess, however, that it impresses me as being not much more than raw material, and much work needs to be done in shaping it up.

Part III is headed "On Values" and has two chapters: one a general discussion of the realm of values, for some strange reason relegated to an appendix; the other headed "The National Interest and Other Interests." The link with the preceding part is not perhaps made as clear as it should be, but it is nevertheless there: the underlying theory of behavior is the theory of homeostasis, which interprets behavior as action directed toward closing a perceived gap between a "real" and an "ideal" value of some variable. Any theory of behavior must therefore include a discussion of the ideal, divergences from which are perceived as cues for action. Any adequate social theory must therefore include a study of the dynamics of value formation. I am not sure that Kaplan gets very far with this, but at least he sees the problem. His failure to go very far with the analysis, however, makes the chapter on the national interest, in spite of some very interesting insights, seem a little sketchy. The basic concept is that interest is what important people think it is, even though what they think is by no means arbitary. The chapter is an excellent veiled attack on what might be called the "naïve tough" school of international relations theorists who assume that the national interest is some non-subjective, easily definable, and generally agreed-upon objective.

The fourth major section of the book is headed "On Strategy" and consists of an attempt to apply the theory of games to international systems. This section is disappointing. The exposition of the theory of games is too elementary for the initiated and too difficult for the neophyte. The applications are not uninteresting and are perhaps less obvious to those unfamiliar with game theory. The notion of a game matrix as a device for setting out the problem of decision-making under uncertainty is a very useful one; whether the actual propositions of the Von Neumann game theory are equally useful is open to doubt. The main difficulty is that game theory has for the most part been confined to the discussion of zero-sum games, in which one party gains what another loses. These are actually very rare in social life, and positive- (or negative-) sum games raise a set of problems involving threats, promises, commitments, lies, bluffs, and so on, which are highly relevant to international and, indeed, to all social relations. Thus one has a feeling that these chapters are a little premature—that recent developments in game theory (for instance, those developed by T. C. Schelling in the last issue of this *Journal* [2]) make these chapters somewhat obsolete. It may be distressing for an author to find his work obsolescent almost before it is published, but this augurs well for the progress of science!

There is one major gap in the general discussion which is almost immediately apparent to an economist. There is no discussion anywhere of the forces which determine the *scale* of the nation. This is a serious omission from the point of view of the completeness of the system—indeed, it should be the cornerstone of the whole edifice—and it is very odd to find it so completely neglected. More than any other factor it is the forces which determine the optimum scale of the nation that determine the nature of the international system. There is again a close parallel with economics. If, because of internal limitations of some kind, the optimum scale of the firm is small relative to the market, we are likely to come close to perfect competition. If these internal limitations are relaxed, the larger firms gobble up the smaller until market limitations come into play, and we have monopolistic competition. At still larger size we get oligopoly, or even duopoly, and at still larger sizes, monopoly. Similarly in the international system, if the diseconomies of scale of the national unit set in at fairly small sizes, we are likely to have a balance-of-power system with several smallish nations. If these limits are pushed back, the average size of the nation will grow until we get loose bipolar, then perhaps tight bipolar systems (duopoly), and, finally, the one-nation world (monopoly). These diseconomies of scale are closely related to the role and communication processes in society; on the whole, the disadvantages of large scale are mostly due to breakdowns in communication, and any improvement in communications therefore pushes back the scale barrier and enables larger organizations to function. The world crisis today is precisely a crisis of scale: the revolution in communication and organization has been increasing the optimum size of the state, and the reduction in the costs of transporting destruction has been increasing the intensity of competition between states and decreasing their viability. We may now have reached the point where only a world state is viable, and we are witnessing the painful death agonies of the first four of Kaplan's international systems. If this theory of scale had been explicitly included in Kaplan's system, it would have integrated and related all its rather scattered parts.

By this time my reader will hardly have failed to gather that I think this an important book. He may also have surmised that I think it a rather bad book. It reads like a first draft. It is couched for the most part in language that is pompously academic and devoid of grace. It would, I suspect, have been enormously improved if the author had sat down and rewritten it almost in its entirety and if the publisher (as a metatask) had insisted on his doing this. It is perhaps pardonable that a young man filled with important ideas should want to rush into print. I feel that the crime is all the more pardonable in that I have committed it frequently myself. Nevertheless, it remains a crime, and a serious one. The book will not receive the attention it deserves or get the readers who really need it, because of this inattention to style, arrangement, and completeness of argument. This would not matter if the content were unimportant. The content of this work, however, is of the highest importance. It represents perhaps the first systematic, integrated attempt at a theory of international relations. It gives us a useful frame not only in which international history can be studied but also in which future developments may be appraised. It points, like all good theory, from the actual toward the potential. And it may help to liberate us from bondage, in Kaplan's own words, "either to a moralism which undercuts itself by denigrating the means necessary for maintaining values or to an opportunism which continually degrades the values of the political and social system in the guise of defense of the system." For the importance of its content, therefore, I recommend it heartily to all my readers, in the hope that one of them—or perhaps Dr. Kaplan himself—will one day soon use this material in writing the definitive work for which we all wait.

REFERENCES

1. Kaplan, Morton A. *System and Process in International Politics.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957.
2. Schelling, Thomas C. "Prospectus for a Reorientation of Game Theory," this *Journal,* Vol. II, No. 3 (1958).