

Book Review: Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics by Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell

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Neoclassical realism can ‘unleash the full explanatory power of realism’, according to Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, who argue that their comprehensive research programme addresses all the potential shortcomings of this theory that have been levelled by critics since its emergence in 1998. Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics is a very thorough introduction to neoclassical realist theory that will be best suited to a specialist IR audience, writes Marion Messmer.

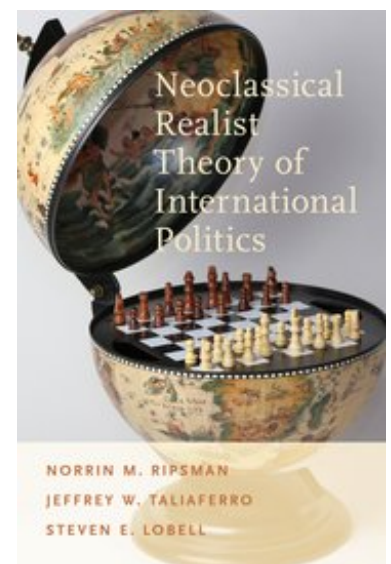
Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics. Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell. Oxford University Press. 2016.

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Neoclassical realism is a relatively recent concept in international relations, only going back to a 1998 article in *World Politics*. Gideon Rose coined the term in order to synthesise the work of four scholars that he was reviewing: Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller and William Curti Wohlforth. They had blended traditional structural realism (how states behave within an anarchical international system) with classical realist assumptions (about state-society relationships) in order to explain state behaviour more accurately. The authors of this volume, Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, met during the early years of the emergence of neoclassical realism, as they all felt strongly that it had the potential to add much explanatory power to existing realist theories. After being introduced at a conference, this led to their first joint publication in 2009, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*.

In their most recent book, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, the authors show how their thinking on neoclassical realist theory has evolved over the past decade. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell’s main argument is that neoclassical realism has grown beyond being a single theory; their contribution to the field summarises the different strands of neoclassical realist theory that have emerged over time and extends them into a comprehensive research programme. This includes collecting several, sometimes competing, hypotheses and theories as well as proposing a suggested ideal type of methodology and research methods most suited to neoclassical realism.

Neoclassical Realist Theory is a very thorough book. Over the course of seven chapters, the authors dissect neorealist theory into its components and then give a guide to fellow researchers on how to reassemble and adapt the theory for different research projects. Chapter One presents a comprehensive literature review of structural realism, classical realism and other works of neoclassical realism, discussing other scholars’ contributions as well as pointing out gaps in their argumentation or in the field of the literature overall. The authors’ main conclusion is that neoclassical realist theory is stuck in what they call ‘Type I’ or ‘Type II’ literature: Type I focuses on explaining anomalous cases, whereas Type II uses neoclassical realist theory as a theoretical approach to the study of foreign policy. Both have their uses, but the authors are aiming for a ‘Type III’, which is a theory of international politics



rather than simply a study of foreign policymaking. The discussion of the past realist literature is useful, as it not only gives a good overview of how the field has changed over the past six decades, but also adds to the reader's understanding of how the authors see their contribution. It shows the ambitious scope of the book and the authors' research agenda to expand neoclassical realism and make it more useful for scholars and practitioners alike.



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In Chapters Two, Three and Four, the authors discuss in great detail the independent variable, intervening variables and dependent variables in neoclassical realism, and what they add respectively. These chapters are highly informative for fellow scholars, especially for those who have an interest in using a realist approach in their own work as the authors are very meticulous in spelling out the importance of each variable and how they interact. These chapters, as well as the in-depth methodology chapter, show that the audience most likely to benefit from this book are academics who use realist theory.

Thanks to the extensive methodology chapter, *Neoclassical Realist Theory* might also be especially useful to graduate students of international relations who are in the process of putting together a dissertation proposal, or who are in the early stages of their dissertation. Chapter Five is explicitly organised to give a 'how-to' on undertaking a research project from start to finish: it covers identifying a suitable research question; explains why the authors believe that qualitative research methods are more suitable to neoclassical realist projects than quantitative methods; helps with finding an appropriate unit of analysis; and discusses historiography and process tracing as very concrete methods of case study analysis. This makes this chapter almost twice the length of the other chapters, but adds much practical utility to the book: it is here that it becomes clear how seriously the authors take their pledge to deliver a comprehensive research programme for international politics. A graduate student in the process of preparing a dissertation project in international relations will find helpful guidelines in this chapter, regardless of the stage of their preparations.

Neoclassical Realist Theory is a useful text even for those who have an interest in pursuing a postgraduate education in international relations but have no idea what they would like their project to be about. Chapters Six and Seven show which longstanding theoretical debates in realism that the authors believe can be resolved by following a neorealist research programme, as well as which specific gaps in the literature can be filled. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell state that the greatest strength of their research programme is to bridge the gap between theories of

international politics and of foreign policy, as the two cross-influence one another and are difficult to separate (161). This creates an opportunity for new scholars to build on their work and test some of their proposed hypotheses, or to develop some of the proposed theories further.

In *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations*, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell fulfil their aim of developing a comprehensive neoclassical realist research programme. They further bridge the unhelpful divide between foreign policy analysis and 'grand' international relations theory-building through their thorough discussion of possible variables in neoclassical realist research design. This book paves the way for young scholars to add their own contributions by comprehensively summarising the state of the field and showing in which directions there exists room for growth.

Marion Messmer is a PhD student in War Studies at King's College London. Her own research focuses on the question of to what extent intervenors can mitigate existing security dilemmas.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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