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**Burcu SARI KARADEMİR**

Dr., Adjunct Faculty Member, Bilkent University, Department of International Relations & TED University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ankara

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**E-mail: uidergisi@gmail.com**

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# A Conceptual History: Historical Sociological Analysis of Unipolarity in Structural Realist Literature

**Burcu SARI KARADEMİR**

*Dr., Adjunct Faculty Member, Bilkent University, Department of International Relations & TED University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ankara  
E-Mail: sburcu@bilkent.edu.tr; burcu.sari@tedu.edu.tr  
Orcid: 0000-0003-4992-2690*

## Abstract

Unipolarity has been taken for granted and remains unquestioned in the International Relations literature. This article provides the conceptual history of unipolarity by bringing an immanent critique. It shows the evolution of unipolarity literature in the absence of counterbalancing in four stages. It focuses on the use of history in structural realism and brings a historical sociological perspective to the literature to show how tempocentric theorizing impaired the understanding of unipolarity as a distinct structure. The article concludes by underlying the importance of noticing the cost of reification of concepts for theorizing and by highlighting that unipolarity is still understudied both theoretically and methodologically.

**Keywords:** Post-Cold War Period, Change, Balance of Power, Hard Balancing, Soft Balancing

## Bir Kavramsal Tarih: Yapısal Gerçekçi Literatürde Tek Kutupluluğun Tarihsel Sosyolojik Analizi

### Özet

Tek kutupluluk kavramı Uluslararası İlişkiler literatüründe verili kabul edildiğinden sorgulanmamıştır. Makale, içeriden eleştiri getirerek tek kutupluluğun kavramsal tarihini sunmakta ve dengelemenin yokluğunda gelişen tek kutupluluk literatürünün evrimini dört aşamada göstermektedir. Makale, tarihsel sosyolojik perspektife dayanarak yapısal gerçekçi teorinin temposentrizminin tek kutupluluğun kendine has bir yapı olarak tanımlanmasını nasıl geciktirdiğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, makale verili kabul edilen ve sorgulanmayan kavramların kuramsallaştırmayı durdurduğunun altını çizmekte ve tek kutupluluğun hem teorik hem de metodolojik olarak yeterince çalışılmamış olduğuna dikkat çekmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Dönem, Değişim, Güçler Dengesi, Sert Dengeleme, Yumuşak Dengeleme

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## Introduction

Concepts with certain ontological, epistemological, and methodological truth-claims are the building blocks upon which theories are built.<sup>1</sup> Observation that makes theorizing possible depends on concepts of a theory, which are co-constitutive of theories as means and ends.<sup>2</sup> They enable the operationalization of theories. Concepts are crucial as researchers keep returning to the initial concepts “which define which fact is a fact” while theorizing and making analysis.<sup>3</sup> Scholars are expected to reflect on their concepts as they make their concept-driven observations. Reflecting on concepts helps scholars to understand whether there is a need for updating their concepts and theories. Scholars, however, often tend to take the particularistic concepts of their respective camps for granted.<sup>4</sup> They may fail to realize that their concepts do not fit the new social reality and that their theories need updates. It is, therefore, important to remember that concepts do not speak for themselves and have a history and to understand their ongoing history is not just a means but also an end of theorizing itself.<sup>5</sup> The study builds on the idea that there is a need for reflection and observation on the very categories taken for granted in existing knowledge so that they are not reified across time, whatever cyclical vision of history underpins them.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it aims to address that failures in reflecting on the given concepts of a theory historically prevent developing, validating, and adopting new ideas, and hence impair the process of theorizing.<sup>7</sup>

The article argues that the concept of unipolarity presents such a case for structural realism (SR) and International Relations (IR) theory. It highlights that unipolarity has been a taken-for-granted concept such that it has not been reflected upon and theorized as a distinct structural configuration until 2009.<sup>8</sup> To show how unipolarity literature evolved in structural realist literature, the study mainly presents a chronological and thematic review of the literature on unipolarity and balancing, starting from the onset of the post-Cold War era to the recognition of unipolarity as a distinct structure in 2009. Additionally, it covers two subsequent books entitled *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory and Its Implications*<sup>9</sup> and *Theory of Unipolar Politics*<sup>10</sup> as both specifically aimed at theorizing unipolarity based on SR. Rather than judging structural realists for their predictive failures,<sup>11</sup> the article presents

- 1 Stefano Guzzini, “The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No 3, 2013, p. 537; Srdjan Vucetic, “Genealogy as a Research Tool in International Relations”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No 3, 2011, p. 1295-1312.
- 2 Christian Reus-Smit, “Theory, History, and Great Transformations”, *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No.3, 2016, p. 433; Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Colin Wight, “The End of International Relations Theory?”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.19, No 3, 2013, p. 415.
- 3 Stefano. Guzzini, “A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No 2, 2000, p. 147-157; Guzzini, “The Ends of International Relations Theory ...”, p. 537.
- 4 Christine Sylvester “Experiencing the End and Afterlives of International Relations/Theory”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No 3, 2013, p. 614.
- 5 Guzzini, “The Ends of International Relations Theory ...”, p. 536.
- 6 Ibid, p. 537.
- 7 On conceptual history See, Gencer Özcan, “From Politics to International Relations: A Conceptual History of the International Relations Discipline in Turkey”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No 66, 2020, p. 1-19.
- 8 John Ikenberry et al., “Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences”, *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p. 1-27.
- 9 Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory and Its Implications*, New York, NY, Routledge, 2010.
- 10 Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- 11 Christopher Fettweis, “Evaluating IR’s Crystal Balls: How Predictions of the Future Have Withstood Fourteen Years of Unipolarity”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 6, No 1, 2004, p. 79-104.

an immanent critique,<sup>12</sup> or critique from within, to evaluate SR on its own terms and uses an historical sociological approach (HSA) to show that it is the tempocentric use of history<sup>13</sup> in SR that led to the late recognition of unipolarity as a distinct structure.

The article divides the evolution of the unipolarity literature into four stages by looking at structural realists' responses to the observation of the absence of balancing while expecting recurrent counterbalancing. It defines the four stages as such: (i) denial of unipolarity due to tempocentrism of the balance of power theory (BoP) and the early predictions of multipolarity, (ii) acceptance of unipolarity with slightly relaxed tempocentrism and leaning toward the balance of threat theory (BoT) with a focus on its stability and durability, (iii) the 'great puzzle' and soft balancing (SB) as a middle ground argument to keep the relevance of the BoP and BoT theories, and (iv) recognition of the unipolarity as a distinct structural condition and the start of another cycle of tempocentric theorizing on unipolarity. This analysis reveals that it was the use of the historically contingent variables that enabled the recognition of unipolarity.<sup>14</sup> The article points out that the reification of concepts encumbers theorizing and the conceptual history of unipolarity enables us to see that unipolarity is equated with "U.S. unipolarity" and it is not studied on its own merits as a distinct structure. Despite the abundance of studies on U.S. unipolarity, the concept itself is understudied both theoretically and methodologically. Therefore, the article underpins that unipolarity and U.S. unipolarity should be considered as two distinct yet interdependent research agendas for IR scholarship.

## **Historical Sociological Approach: Tempocentric Use of History and Unipolarity**

Structural realists were criticized for missing the end of the Cold War and for the defects in their "crystal balls"<sup>15</sup> in identifying the change in the system. The critiques argued that the theory's incapacity to understand change stemmed from ignoring the unit-level factors to refrain from reductionism.<sup>16</sup> However, in social sciences, change may emanate from multiple causes and can have unit-level and system-level causes.<sup>17</sup> The failures of prediction are, therefore, the most tolerable kinds of failures.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the failure to define structural change even after it happened is a more fundamental flaw to ponder. Structural realists, who failed to define unipolarity as a distinct configuration of power, were not criticized for their failure in the conceptualization of polarity and theorizing. The failure did not even receive immediate attention from structural realists who rushed to attest to the theory's strengths and relevance.<sup>19</sup>

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- 12 Pinar Bilgin, "Critical Theory", Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 96.
- 13 John Hobson, "What's at Stake in 'Bringing Historical Sociology Back into International Relations'? Transcending 'Chronofetishism' and 'Tempocentrism' in International Relations", Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.), *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 10.
- 14 On appropriation of social variables See, Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?", *International Security*, Vol. 24, No 2, 1999, p. 5-55.
- 15 Fettweis, "Evaluating IR's Crystal Balls ...", p. 80-85.
- 16 Ted Hopf and John Lewis Gaddis, "Getting the End of the Cold War Wrong", *International Security*, Vol. 18, No 2, 1993, p. 202-210.
- 17 Robert Jervis, "The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?" *International Security*, Vol. 16, No 3, 1991, 39-45; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 152-156.
- 18 Jervis, "The Future of World Politics ...", p. 40; Jervis, "Realism in the Study of World Politics", p. 971-991.
- 19 See William Wohlforth, "Reality Check: Revising Theories of International Politics in Response to the End of the Cold War", *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No 4, 1998, p. 650-680; Randall Schweller and William Wohlforth, "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War", *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No 3, 2000, p. 60-107.

The Hegelian concept of immanent critique helps researchers judge a theory by its own standards and focus on where the theory's proponents claim superiority over its alternatives.<sup>20</sup> Also, the immanent critique allows for asking the fundamental question of whether structural realists were able to define "changes in the system"<sup>21</sup> by looking at the alterations in the distribution of power. For this reason, to restate Pinar Bilgin, the study brings an immanent critique to the study of unipolarity and aims at providing an understanding of the limitations of SR in fulfilling its own standards by revealing its inconsistencies, shortcomings, and missing parts in general and its approach to unipolarity in particular.<sup>22</sup>

Historical sociological approach (HSA) enables critique from within by drawing attention to the use of history in structural realist theorizing. According to Stephen Hobden, HSA aims to open a dialogue between historical sociology and different schools for developing an empirically aware, theoretically rigorous, and methodologically diligent research agenda.<sup>23</sup> HSA does not require scholars to abandon their traditionally preferred topics like hegemony, polarity, and balance of power or make their accumulated knowledge obsolete or irrelevant in any way.<sup>24</sup> It promises a means for covering the nuance, subtleties, and complexities of world politics; it does not impair the goal of finding meaningful causal flows, patterns, and trends.<sup>25</sup> HSA maintains that the study of the IR "in" history rather than "outside" of history enriches theoretical understanding by giving depth to different theories and their concepts.<sup>26</sup> Barry Buzan and George Lawson also point out the significance of history for theorizing by stating that "theories are assessed and reassessed, made and remade through ongoing encounters with history."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan highlight, bringing theory and history together in a more systematic helps to reconsider the artificial division of labor between the theory-building IR scholars and historians.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, failures to evaluate the implications of encounters with history lead scholars to be trapped in ahistorical theorizing, and miss the chance to test, assess, and refine their theories and key concepts.

HSA points out two types of ahistoricism dominant in IR.<sup>29</sup> The first is chronofetishism, which is defined as the sealing of the present such that it appears as an autonomous, natural, and immutable

20 Bilgin, "Critical Theory", p. 96.

21 Italics in the original. Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism After the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 25, No 1, 2000, p. 5.

22 Bilgin, "Critical Theory", p. 96.

23 Stephen Hobden, "Historical Sociology: Back to the Future of International Relations", Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.), *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 42-45.

24 Hobson and Hobden, "On the Road Towards an Historicised World Sociology", Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.), *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.275.

25 George Lawson, "The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations," *International Studies Review*, Vol.8, No 3, 2006, p. 416; Hobden, "Historical Sociology: Back to the Future ...", p. 58-59.

26 Lawson, "The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations", p. 416; Barry Buzan, and George Lawson, "Theory, History, and the Global Transformation", *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No 3, 2016, p. 503; Justin Rosenberg, "The International Imagination: IR Theory and 'Classic Social Analysis'", *Millennium*, Vol. 23, No 1, 1994, p. 85-108; Faruk Yalvaç, "Tarihsel Sosyoloji ve Uluslararası İlişkiler: Jeopolitik, Kapitalizm ve Devletler Sistemi", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 10, No 38, 2013, p.7; Fulya Özkan, "Uluslararası İlişkilere Disiplinlerarası Yaklaşım: Tarih ve Teori Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No 61, 2019, p. 16.

27 Buzan and Lawson, "Theory, History, and the Global Transformation", p. 509.

28 Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 17, No 3, 2017, p. 351.

29 Hobson, "What's at Stake", p. 7; Faruk Yalvaç, "Uluslararası İlişkiler Kuramında Anarşi Söylemi", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 8, No 29, 2011, p. 73-74.

entity.<sup>30</sup> The second is tempocentrism, which is defined as a methodology in which theorists look at history with a chronofetishist lens and project the chronofetishized present backward through time for smoothing irregularities and obscuring differences between historical periods and state systems.<sup>31</sup> By doing so, theorists are able to study IR as homologous, which makes their theories transhistorical.<sup>32</sup> As its critics state, structural realists use history “as a field of data to be mined, for cases to be shoehorned in the pursuit of grand-theory building and for evidence of the cycles of history that realists used to mark historical time.”<sup>33</sup> The purposes of this positivist “history-as-a-dataset”<sup>34</sup> approach or “history without historicism”<sup>35</sup> are practical, for example drawing lessons from the past and making predictions and universal propositions.<sup>36</sup> However, it creates blindness to curtail the possibility of refining the theory and its key concepts.

Additionally, such an approach impairs the historical view, as it allows us to define systemic change only in terms of a ‘breakpoint’ or a radical discontinuity that is starkly different from the previous order.<sup>37</sup> This view of history prevents the recognition of processual change<sup>38</sup> and the uniqueness of the present structure, as it simultaneously obscures some of its fundamental and/or constitutive features.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Joseph MacKay and Christopher LaRoche argue that historical-theoretical commitments permit and constrain the conclusions that IR theorists draw about the past and shape the link between the present and the future.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, Hobson asserts that the tempocentric view does “not only disservice to the past, but, more importantly, does serious injustice to understanding the present” as the construction of transhistorical states system fails theorists to “recognize the uniqueness of the present system and simultaneously obscures some of its most fundamental or constitutive features.”<sup>41</sup>

Tempocentric ahistoricism is exemplified by structural realists’ depiction of history as repetition; as such, nothing ever changes because of the timeless presence of anarchy and the isomorphic cycle of great power politics.<sup>42</sup> Due to tempocentric logic, they argue that all historical actors and systems are homologous and expect that the balance of power will recur under anarchy.<sup>43</sup> Such a claim, naturally, makes structural change obscured, by closing off the possibility of understanding alternative pasts,

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30 Hobson, “What’s at Stake”, p. 9.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Michael Barnett, “Historical Sociology and Constructivism: An Estranged Past, A Federated Future?”, Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.), *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 100; Özkan, “Uluslararası İlişkilere Disiplinlerarası Yaklaşım: Tarih ve Teori Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme”, p. 6.

34 Ibid.

35 John M. Hobson and George Lawson, “What is History in International Relations?”, *Millennium*, Vol. 37, No 2, 2008, p. 423.

36 Hobson, “What’s at Stake...”, p. 9.

37 Andrew Phillips, “The Global Transformation, Multiple Early Modernities and International Systems Change”, *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No 3, 2016, p. 481.

38 Christian Reus-Smit, “Theory, History, and Great Transformations”, *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No 3, 2016, p. 425-428.

39 Hobson, “What’s at Stake...”, p. 6.

40 Joseph Mackay, and Christopher David LaRoche, “The Conduct of History in International Relations: Rethinking Philosophy of History in IR Theory”, *International Theory*, Vol. 9, No 2, 2017, p. 205-216.

41 Hobson, “What’s at Stake...”, p. 10.

42 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 1979; Barry Buzan, “The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?”, Stephen Smith et al. (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 47-65.

43 Hobson, “What’s at Stake...”, p. 10.; Mackay and Laroche, “The Conduct of History in International Relations...”, p. 206-209.

presents, and futures.<sup>44</sup> However, as Faruk Yalvaç argues, HSA helps us to reveal the spatial and temporal uniqueness of the current system and its difference from the previous ones by situating the current system in a certain social space and time period.<sup>45</sup>

The evolution of the unipolarity literature exemplifies how tempocentric view to history led to the expectations of multipolarity as a familiar past but unipolarity as a historical rupture to be smoothed, which caused injustice to understand its distinctiveness. Structural realists' tempocentric approach to history that reified the then-present post-Cold war structure and extrapolated it back in time to render all history amenable to the universalist, path-dependent, and cyclical analysis characterized by the balance of power<sup>46</sup> has brought its own embedded costs, such as missing issues of the contingency, unintended consequences, particularity, and contextuality of unipolarity.<sup>47</sup> One of the most significant implications of the tempocentric use of history has been the conflation of unipolarity as a general systemic condition with U.S. unipolarity, which is a contingency that needs to be analyzed on its own merits. The following section illustrates how structural realists' tempocentric theorizing affected the assessment, definition, and recognition of unipolarity, in four stages.

## The Evolution of the Structural Realist Literature

### ***The First Stage: Denying Unipolarity with Tempocentric Expectations of Balancing***

Unipolarity as a term was first used in Charles Krauthammer's article published in *Foreign Policy* in 1990. In his discussion of the post-Cold War structure, Krauthammer stated that the structure was unipolar and the United States with its preeminence based on military, diplomatic, political, and economic power was the single pole of the world.<sup>48</sup> In this article, he defined unipolarity as a "moment" under U.S. leadership for "the foreseeable future"<sup>49</sup> and provided alternative U.S. grand strategies for extending it. Despite the early use of unipolarity, scholarly articles evaluating the post-Cold War era projected the resurgence of multipolarity or bipolarity rather than discussing unipolarity. There is no mention of unipolarity even as a term or discussion of hegemony in the early articles of the post-Cold War structure. For instance, in his work entitled "Back to the Future,"<sup>50</sup> John Mearsheimer argued that multipolarity would replace bipolarity and Europe would be more prone to conflict without the superpowers.

Similarly, Kenneth Waltz, in his article entitled "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," argued that international order still operated within the same fundamental power patterns.<sup>51</sup> To him, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was another example of the recurrent rise and fall of great powers in

44 Rob J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

45 Yalvaç, "Uluslararası İlişkiler Kuramında Anarşi Söylemi", p. 75.

46 Hobson, "What's at Stake...", p. 9-12.

47 John Hobson, "What's at Stake ...", p. 9-12. On ahistoricism of structural realism also See John Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge", *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No 4, 1998, p. 855-885.; Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism", *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1984, p. 289.

48 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, 1990, p. 24.

49 Ibid, p. 29.

50 John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 15, No 1, 1990, p. 5-56.

51 Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics", *International Security*, Vol. 18, No 2, 1993, p. 44-79.

modern history.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he argued that Russia's decline did not dramatically change the structure, as bipolarity endured in an "altered state".<sup>53</sup> Rather than using the term unipolarity, Waltz preferred to use "unchecked U.S. power" and maintained that it would be balanced since the balance of power was not a particular or an "ephemeral condition" but a law-like and recurring condition of international politics.<sup>54</sup> Due to this recurrent conception of history, Waltz predicted that other states, either alone or in concert, would soon act and eventually bring U.S. power back into balance.<sup>55</sup> In Mackay and Laroche's words, Waltz only assumed recurring patterns and "black-boxed" history rather than demonstrating dynamic processes that would enable the viewing of the contingency of unipolarity.<sup>56</sup>

### ***The Second Stage: Accepting Unipolarity and Discussing Its Stability and Durability***

In this phase, structural realists openly accepted that the international structure was unipolar but expected its near end due to the recurrent logic of balancing. For instance, Christopher Layne argued that unipolarity was an "illusion" that would end with the rise of new great powers.<sup>57</sup> Layne has argued that the unipolar moment was just a "geopolitical interlude" that would give way to "multipolarity between 2000-2010," as history repeated itself.<sup>58</sup> He argued that unipolar systems contained the seeds of their own destruction because the hegemon's preponderant power created conditions for the emergence of new great powers that would challenge the most powerful state's preeminence.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in his article entitled "Structural Realism After the Cold War," Waltz stated that "multipolarity is developing before our eyes: to all but the myopic, it can already be seen on the horizon."<sup>61</sup> Even though Waltz accepted unipolarity as a new structure in this article, he reiterated the timeless propositions of his theory on the recurrence of the balance of power<sup>62</sup> and concluded that "in the light of structural theory, unipolarity appears as the least durable of international configurations" and balancing would take place, if "not today but tomorrow."<sup>63</sup>

On the other side, structural realists using the balance of threat theory started to discuss unipolarity as a distinct distribution of power with its implications and focused on its stability and durability. BoT scholars differed in their argument that unipolarity could be a durable structure if the United States was not perceived as a threat. Mastanduno's article, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment," stated that the United States could free itself from recurring balancing and prolong the "unipolar moment" by changing others' threat perceptions.<sup>64</sup> This prediction relied on problematizing

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52 Ibid, p. 44.

53 Ibid, p. 52.

54 Ibid, p. 53.

55 Ibid.

56 Mackay and Laroche, "The Conduct of History ...", p. 219.

57 Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise", *International Security*, Vol. 17, No 4, 1993, p. 6-7.

58 Ibid, p. 7.

59 Ibid, p. 12-13.

60 Ibid, p. 7.

61 Kenneth Waltz, "Evaluating Theories", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No 4, 1997, p. 915.

62 Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism After the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 25 No 1, 2000, p. 27.

63 Ibid.

64 Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 21, No 4, 1997, p. 60.



structural realists' recurring view of history and accepting the distinctiveness of unipolarity stemming from the U.S. identity.

Similarly, Wohlforth challenged "the emerging conventional wisdom" that considered the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity as inevitable.<sup>65</sup> He centered his analysis on the stability of unipolarity and the merits of U.S. unipolarity. Referring to Waltz's "smaller is better"<sup>66</sup> logic, Wohlforth argued that the "single-pole minimizing uncertainty" was the best.<sup>67</sup> His argument that unipolarity "is the least war-prone of all structures"<sup>68</sup> directly challenged Waltz's recurring logic,<sup>69</sup> which defined unipolarity as the least stable of all structures. Wohlforth also criticized those scholars, whom he found in a rush to declare the demise of the United States, for conflating "power trends" with existing relationships.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the conflation was the logical outcome of structural realists' recurring view of history. It was Wohlforth who started to think 'in' history without making an explicit historical turn in his theorizing.

### ***The Third Stage: The Great Puzzle and the Soft Balancing with Tacit Historical Sociological Turn***

Soft balancing discussions began in 2005. The need for new conceptualization triggered the great puzzle on the side of BoP and BoT in the absence of counterbalancing against the United States, especially after the war on Iraq in 2003. Both theories' timeless expectations based on power and threat failed to explain the conditions of 2005 and "why the world is not pushing back."<sup>71</sup> In other words, the absence of balancing put the theory to a test due to its view of history. The SB scholars presented a middle ground to the puzzle by reconceptualizing and broadening the concepts of balancing and threat.<sup>72</sup> By doing so, they also joined the *Second Stage* scholars' move, which inadvertently challenged structural realists' timeless expectations of balancing against U.S. unipolarity. To solve the great puzzle, the SB scholars built their arguments on an unacknowledged view of history, that is defined by practice, process, and politics under U.S. unipolarity. The SB literature accounted for the absence of balancing by recognizing the historical contingency, which has enabled redefining types of threats, focusing on the threat perceptions of great powers, and noticing the importance of the identity of the unipole.

Rather than having a theoretical discussion on the distinctiveness of unipolarity, SB literature questioned the possibility of balancing under U.S. unipolarity without diverging from the basic assumptions of structural realism.<sup>73</sup> Unipolarity was considered "a balance of power system"<sup>74</sup> in

65 William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security*, Vol. 24, No 1, 1999, p. 6.

66 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 134.

67 Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", p. 25.

68 Ibid, p. 24.

69 Waltz, "Evaluating Theories", p. 915.

70 Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", p. 37.

71 Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back", *International Security*, Vol. 30, No 1, 2005, p. 109-110; T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy", *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2005, p. 47.

72 Paul, T.V. et al., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford, University Press, 2004, p.13-17; Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age ...", p. 46-71; Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States", *International Security*, Vol. 30 No 1, 2005, p.7-45.

73 Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age ...", p. 46-71; Pape, "Soft Balancing Against ...", p. 7-45.

74 Pape, "Soft Balancing Against ...", p. 11.

which the unipole was still subject to balancing by most, if not all, of the second rank powers acting in concert.<sup>75</sup> The SB argumentations leaned more toward the BoT theory as unipolarity was described as a structure, that was defined by the power, in which states balanced against threats and aggressive intentions of the revisionist state.<sup>76</sup> It was concurred that, despite the U.S. primacy, hard balancing was not an attractive option because the secondary states did not have “fear of losing their sovereignty and existential security”, which were the necessary conditions for hard balancing.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, in the absence of “direct,” “intentional,” and “existential threats,”<sup>78</sup> SB strategies were more attractive as they provided a chance to escape from the United States’ focused enmity and punishment.<sup>79</sup> The middle ground was enabled by time-bound theorizing, which allowed for the reconceptualization of balancing and broadening the definition of threat with nuanced categorizations to explain the absence of counterbalancing against U.S. unipolarity.

### ***The Fourth Stage: Recognizing Distinctiveness of Unipolarity and the Beginning of Another Cycle of Tempocentric Theorizing***

The prolonged absence of balancing continued to pose a challenge to the prominence of BoP in the discipline. *The Balance of Power in World History* put BoP to a test for its transhistorical claims.<sup>80</sup> It concluded that, historically, it was neither BoP nor the hegemony that was dominant, international systems showed roughly equal distribution in transhistorical analysis, and “unipolarity is a normal circumstance in world history.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, it was not defined as a historical rupture to be smoothed. Similarly, *World Out of Balance* argued that none of the conventional IR theories were able to understand the implications of the unipolar distribution of power as they are “artifacts of scholarship of previous eras.”<sup>82</sup> The book held that it was the concentration of power beyond a ‘threshold’ that invalidated the previous ways of constraint, such as the balance of power, multilateral institutions, and legitimacy, and rendered them largely inoperative. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth refused the inevitability of balancing and criticized the pieces of advice given to the U.S. on self-restraining policies due to the “mistaken belief in the salience of systemic constraints.”<sup>83</sup> For that matter, they underlined the need for understanding the different workings of unipolarity.<sup>84</sup> As Voeten’s critique from within suggests, Wohlforth and Brooks successfully established unipolarity as a distinct structure but they did not show how ‘unipolarity politics as usual’ functioned.<sup>85</sup> However, they opened a new theoretical conversation, especially for IR scholars in the United States.

Two decades after the advent of U.S. unipolarity, a group of prominent scholars defined unipolarity as a distinct structure and examined its nature and implications in a special issue of *World*

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75 Ibid, p.13.

76 Ibid, p.17.

77 Ibid, p. 47.

78 Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age ...”, p. 46-71; Pape, “Soft Balancing Against ...”, p. 14.

79 Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age ...”, p. 47.

80 Stuart Kaufman et al., *The Balance of Power in World History*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 5.

81 Ibid, p. 20.

82 Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and The Challenge of American Primacy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 217.

83 Ibid, p. 208.

84 Ibid, p. 218.

85 Erik Voeten, “Unipolar Politics as Usual”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No 2, 2011, p. 122.

*Politics* in 2009.<sup>86</sup> In this special issue, the term unipolarity was defined as a system in which the structure was characterized by only one state meeting the criteria of being a pole, that is commanding a large share of resources and excelling above others' capabilities.<sup>87</sup> Having agreed on the definition, the articles questioned in what ways unipolarity affected IR and which different outcomes it produced from those of bipolarity or multipolarity. They focused on questioning the conventional views about the impact of international structure on states' behavior and the relevance of traditional ideas for understanding unipolarity.<sup>88</sup> To reiterate, their research centered on the questions of whether and in what ways unipolarity might influence the patterns of international politics to create outcomes that were different from the ones that would be expected under bipolarity or multipolarity.<sup>89</sup> In other words, they founded their research agenda upon understanding what was left off to the then present history from what they had considered as timeless.

These scholars concurred that unipolarity was a distinct structure and would have idiosyncratic implications on the unipolar state, the secondary powers, and the workings of the international system. On the question of how the unipole would behave under anarchy, they agreed that it would be least affected by structural constraints and have greater freedom of action.<sup>90</sup> This implied that the timeless logic of anarchy would not apply to the unipole and restrain its policies as much as it constrained others. For instance, Snyder et al. argued that its power gave it a "free-hand abroad" to manage and shape the international system in line with its own preferences.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Jervis argued that the leading state would have powerful structural incentives for revisionist policies, such as restructuring the world based on regime types.<sup>92</sup>

On discussions of the behavior of secondary powers, the transhistorical logic of BoP was challenged as these scholars accepted that secondary states might not act in line with the expectations based on BoP under unipolarity.<sup>93</sup> For instance, Brooks and Wohlforth maintained that, once a state established unipolarity and passed a "threshold" reversing the effect of increasing power, the counterbalancing dynamics would be less likely and thus less constraining.<sup>94</sup> Contrariwise, based on the distribution of power analysis, Posen defined unipolarity as a "self-abrasive" structure and predicted an incremental shift from unipolarity to multipolarity.<sup>95</sup> Still, as it would be seen in the Third

86 Ikenberry et al., "Introduction ...", p.1-27; William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2009, p. 28-57; Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p. 58-85; Stephen Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p. 86-120; Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p.121-154; Jack Snyder et al., "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p. 155-187; Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No 1, 2009, p. 188-231.

87 Ikenberry et al., "Introduction ...", p. 4-10. Also See Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony", *International Security*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2003, p. 5-46.

88 Ikenberry et al., "Introduction ...", p. 27.

89 Ibid, p. 3.

90 Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", p. 87; Snyder et al., "Free Hand Abroad, Divide ...", p. 155; Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", p. 194.

91 Snyder et al., "Free Hand Abroad, Divide ...", p. 155.

92 Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", p. 204-206.

93 Ikenberry et al., "Introduction ...", p. 2.; Snyder et al., "Free Hand Abroad, Divide ...", p. 162.; Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", p. 195; Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", p. 94.

94 Brooks, and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance ...*, p. 23; Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World", p. 87-92.

95 Barry Posen, "From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Transition in Sight?", John Ikenberry et al. (ed.), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 317.

Stage, some argued that balancing under unipolarity was expected to arise in the context of the use, threat, and fear of force by the unipole.<sup>96</sup> It is suggested that BoT would largely remain operative under unipolarity and that balancing against the unipole might be expected if members of the countervailing coalition were “clearly” and “equally” threatened by the unipole and perceive an “imminent,” “direct,” “overt,” or “existential threat” from it.<sup>97</sup> As in the Third Stage, the concept of threat is relaxed to keep the relevance of BoT in the face of the absence of balancing under U.S. unipolarity.

Additionally, secondary powers’ incentives to balance against the United States were also challenged on the basis that they did not fear invasion or intervention in their sovereignty under the current unipolarity.<sup>98</sup> For instance, Jervis argued that the factors like the dominance of liberal norms and the security community among the leading states, except for Russia and China, decreased the prospects of forming a counterbalancing coalition against the United States.<sup>99</sup> Like Walt, Jervis also accepted the altered nature of balancing and the attractiveness of SB strategies under unipolarity.<sup>100</sup> Both used BoT arguments rather than the conventional structural realist thinking as its timeless assumptions regarding the behaviors of great powers under anarchy did not apply to the unipolarity.

Subsequently, there have been two significant endeavors to theorize unipolarity, where the continued tempocentrism with the inadvertent appropriation of social variables can be identified. The first book is Birthe Hansen’s *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory and Its Implications*.<sup>101</sup> Even though the theory is based on neorealism, it deviates from “the mother theory” as it uses “extra-neorealist conceptual insights to describe the world order dimensions” merely for “descriptive purpose” without interfering with the theoretical logic.<sup>102</sup> The explanatory power of Hansen’s theory rested on time-bound extra-neorealist conceptual insights such as the world order, socialization, and the role of leadership rather than timeless neorealist variables such as the preponderance of power and the balance of power to explain U.S. unipolarity.

Similarly, Nuno Monterio’s *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, inspired by Waltz’s book *Theory of International Politics*, focused on explaining the uniqueness and political significance of unipolarity and providing guidance for U.S. unipolarity.<sup>103</sup> Monterio argued that the unique historical situation of the post-Cold War made the study of unipolarity an unattractive topic, one that could be criticized for failing to fulfill the scientific standards in identifying the causal mechanisms of IR theories as a single case.<sup>104</sup> However, Ikenberry et al. argued that the absence of “multiple historical cases for systematic comparisons” did not create the main obstacle against the theorization of unipolarity.<sup>105</sup> If it had been the case, there should not have been an interest in the study of bipolarity, which was also a unique historical situation in world politics. As the evolution of the concept illustrated, structural realists were not able to define unipolarity empirically and theoretically due to their tempocentric use of history. Despite Monterio’s contributions to

96 Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World”, p. 87; Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective”, p. 207.

97 Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World”, p. 87, 95, 115.

98 Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World”, p. 103; Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective”, p. 201.

99 Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective”, p. 201.

100 Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World”, p. 87-103-106; Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective”, p. 208.

101 Hansen, *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory ...*, p. 1-23.

102 Ibid, p. 20.

103 Monterio, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, p. 18-19, 70.

104 Monterio, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, p. 19.

105 Ikenberry et al., “Introduction: ...”, p. 25.

the literature in explaining the uniqueness of U.S. unipolarity and providing grand strategic options to the United States,<sup>106</sup> his *Theory of Unipolar Politics* supplemented the existing structural realist literature rather than providing a new theory or a methodology for the study the unipolarity.

Consequently, the focus of the *Fourth Stage* has been recognizing the uniqueness of unipolarity and theory-building without focusing on the methodological discussion of how to study unipolarity. The methodological question has received scant attention. Jervis asked significant methodological questions implying the importance of history and the level of analysis. Even though he did not himself attempt to reply to these questions, Jervis asked that “How might the system function if the unipole were Nazi Germany, Stalin’s USSR (or Brezhnev’s), or a traditional autocracy? Or if it were the United States in a different era?”<sup>107</sup> These questions underpin the significance of the historical, sociologically informed analysis of unipolarity as it will enable us to distinguish what is general to unipolarity from what is emanating from a particular unipolar state.

HSA enables scholars to consider different levels of analysis and analyze the implications of the interactions of these levels under unipolarity. It permits researchers to contextualize the distribution of power, understand the social structure of unipolarity, and study the unipole’s identity and its leadership. Without an historical, sociologically contextualized definition of unipolarity, unipolarity is an “overvalued concept” that does not perform the task of “the kingmaker of causation” and will only work synthetically with other causes.<sup>108</sup> Even though Legro proposed conjunctural analysis in a dual structure of power and ideas at domestic and international levels for the study of unipolarity, he considered such a need for conjunctural study of unipolarity with other key variables at play a weakness.<sup>109</sup> However, from the historical sociological perspective, it is not a weakness. On the contrary, it is the requirement of historical, sociologically designed research that looks at identities, practices, processes, and contingencies. In fact, it is the tempocentric view of history that led Legro to consider conjunctural analysis a weakness. In the end, even though unipolarity is accepted as a unique structure, it still needs a comprehensive theoretical and methodological discussion.

## Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of reflecting upon key concepts to understand whether there is a need for revisiting and redefining them, and thus refining the theory. Since unipolarity emerged as a key concept in the SR literature during the post-Cold War era, the study provided a critique from within to understand the late recognition of unipolarity as a distinct structure. By using HSA to problematize ahistoricized theorizing and given assumptions and concepts,<sup>110</sup> it showed how the tempocentric view of history based on the recurrent formation of the balance of power hindered unipolarity as a distinct structure with different implications. Historicizing the use of unipolarity in the SR literature, the article demonstrated that the evolution of unipolarity was shaped by the absence of balancing under U.S. unipolarity and that SR scholars had to relax the theory’s assumptions by appropriating

<sup>106</sup> Monterio, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, p.70.

<sup>107</sup> Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective”, p.188.

<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Legro, “Sell Unipolarity? The Future of an Overvalued Concept”, John Ikenberry et al. (ed.), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 341, 344, 358.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 359.

<sup>110</sup> Hobson and Hobden, “On the Road Towards an Ahistoricised World Sociology”, p. 266-268

social variables such as identity, threat perception, and security community to respond to the absence of balancing against U.S. unipolarity. In this regard, the late recognition of unipolarity was enabled by the inadvertent historical turn in the SR literature. Additionally, the study shows that despite the abundance of studies on unipolarity, it is still under-studied both theoretically and methodologically. The existing literature conflates unipolarity with U.S. unipolarity due to tempocentric theorizing. For further research, HSA enables IR scholars to have two separate yet interrelated research agendas: one to contemplate unipolarity as a theoretical abstraction and another to think of unipolarity as then-current history identified by the characteristics of the then-preponderant power.

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