

How realistic is the
realist tradition?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

How realistic is the realist tradition? By Dan Andrei Dumitru Realism as a tradition of thought in political theory has been a perennial approach and it can be traced back for more than two millennia. However, as Donnelly (2000, p1) remarks, “ the link between realism and international theory is especially strong in the twentieth century”, being a dominant theory before and after the second World War and then declining after the end of the Cold War.

Furthermore, as he points out, realism is not a fixed theory but rather a “ general orientation” bounded by “ a set of recurrent concerns and conclusions” (p1). In order to properly grasp what could be understood by a so-called realist tradition, it is essential that we first pay attention to classical political writers that have been associated with realist idea as this will give us a better comprehension of how the world is seen through the Realist prism. Afterwards, we will briefly look at self-declared 20th century realists and try to assess the relevance of this theory in the post cold-war era.

In ancient political thought realist ideas can be found in the writings of a number of authors, both in western and oriental political thought, most notably the Greek historian Thucydides, the Chinese military general Sun Tzu and Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), the adviser of the first Maurya emperor. The Melian dialogue is arguably the most relevant passage of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian war for understanding realist international politics. The powerful city of Athens attacks the small colony of Melos that was allied with Sparta.

The Melians argue that it is unjust as they have not been hostile to Athens. The Athenians reply that ‘ the standard of justice depends on the equality of

power to compel' and ' the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' (Thucydides, 1972, 406). We can thus see how power is a cardinal factor in the realist conception. Similarly, Sun Tzu believed war to be " of vital importance to the state" leading " either to safety or to ruin" emphasising therefore the importance of power for states.

Finally, Kautilya also pays particular attention to power in his book *Arthashastra*, understanding it as the ability ' to control not only outward behavior, but also the thoughts of one's subjects and enemies' (Boesche, 2003). He believes that relations between states are inherently characterized by " dissension and force" (Kautilya, cited in Boesche, 2003) and that states will always be primarily concerned with the ideas of power and self interest, this leaving no room for ethics in international relations. (Boesche, 2003).

This tradition of thinking about the world is continued in the medieval period by writers such as Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, their works, namely *Il principe* and *Leviathan*, being probably the most influential realist writings in the 16th and 17th century. The Hobbesian view on human nature is bleak: a permanent state of war where the life of the individual is ' solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes, 1997, p 100), this being caused by factors such as anarchy, understood as a lack of government, and the selfishness of human beings (Donnelly, 2005).

While the problem of the state of war is solved at national level by a central authority that regulates human behaviour, what Hobbes called a " Leviathan", the international system remains anarchic and we can notice a '

restriction of the exercise of the right of war to relations between groups' (Forsyth, 2008). It has been suggested (Donnelly, 2005) that this theory should be seen only as a hypothetical view of the world that, although it will never be found in a pure form in reality.

However, it is valuable because it describes the main 'forces that typically control behaviour' (Donnelly, 2005, p 33). Consonantly, Machiavelli's *The Prince* presents an amoral approach to politics, considering that in order to have ethics certain conditions are required (Steans, Pettiford and Diez, 2005) and therefore 'a prince cannot observe all those things for which men are considered good' (Machiavelli, 1948, p59-60). According to Donnelly (2000, p24), 'among realists of an earlier century, perhaps none stands out more prominently than Niccolò Machiavelli'.

Due to his opinion regarding human nature, Machiavelli emphasises the need for power and security, which are, in his view, much more important than law as "good laws" follow "good arms" (Machiavelli, cited in Donnelly, 2000). Machiavelli also focused on the state and what was required for its stability, including relations with other states (Berridge, 2001). While he considered strength to be the essential element in relation with other states, we can also notice the idea that 'states did not always have sufficient military strength to achieve their aims, and it was out of this necessity that diplomacy was born' (Berridge, 2001).

While we can find realist elements in the writings of the aforementioned thinkers, it was not until the 20th century that realism became popular as a theory of international relations. Realism was a response to what realist

thinkers called idealism, this way of thinking being characteristic to writers in the inter-war period (1919 – 1939). In the view of the realist thinkers, idealists committed a number of fatal flaws in their approach to the international system, neglecting the importance of power and being too optimistic about the rationality and possible common interests of states (Dunne, Schmit, 2008).

The inapplicability of idealism was proven by the outbreak of the Second World War, this leading to a soar in the popularity of realism, which became the dominant theory, having renowned exponents such as Hans Morgenthau or Kenneth Waltz. For Morgenthau, it is human nature that creates the laws governing the international system and states seek power because this is an inherent feature of human behaviour (Dunne, Schmit).

This position has also been called ‘biological realism’ (Donnelly, 2005), emphasising the idea that it is innate human impulses that shape relations between states. He explains ‘politics according to the concept of interest defined in terms of power’ (Gillman, 1988) and considers that ‘survival is the irreducible interest of every state’ (Gillman, 1988). On the other hand, Waltz espouses structural realism, arguing that it is the anarchy of the international system, i. e. the lack of central government, that causes the competition between states and, due to the fact that states are concerned with their own security, rather than with a general greed for power, a balance of power will eventually be achieved, the most stable system being a bi-polar one. (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008). The concept of the balance of power is found in most realist writings and can be understood as the alliance of

weaker states against a hegemonic state that threatens their survival, thus leading to equilibrium in the system (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008).

Other realists have views that resemble to some extent those of Waltz or Morgenthau but not fully. For example, Keohane (1986, cited in Donnelly, 2000, p7) believes states to be the central actors in international relations, acting in a rational way in order to accomplish their own interest which is understood in terms of power. Another very important realist writer, E. H. Carr, points out that ' politics are not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics' (Carr, 1946: 63-64, cited in Donnelly, 2000, 8) and that history can be understood but not predicted as theory is created empirically and does not have the ability to shape practice. Thus, it is obvious that perfect consensus is not reached between leading realist theorist this leading to a fragmentation of realism into different groups. However, despite these differences, they all agree that power and competition are ubiquitous in the international system. (Dunne, Schmidth). As we can observe, Realism is a broad perspective that has been a recurring motive in the history of political thought and it is extremely difficult to confine within certain limits.

However, Dunne and Schmidt (2008) argue that every realist subscribes to ' the three Ss' namely the ideas of statism, survival and self-help. Therefore, we can consider states the main actors in the international system. The most important characteristic of the state is that of sovereignty both internally and externally. As mentioned above, the state of war transcends from within the group to the international system as there is no central authority to regulate state how states act in relation to one another.

Then, states seek to gain power, as their main goal is to survive and, according to the principle of self-help, it cannot rely on other states for assistance. Numerous critics of Realism have been made, especially after its inability to predict the end of the Cold War. According to realist principles this should not have happened and, the theory is being further contested as there was no obvious immediate counter-balance to the new hegemonic power, The United States. As a result, Realism declined in popularity and was no longer the dominant theory in International Relations.

Secondly, it has been argued by Dunne and Schmitter (2008, p101) that Realism has been ‘ purchased as a discounted price because its currency, power, has remained under-theorized and inconsistently used’ and that it focuses exclusively on state power while, in contemporary international politics, states seem to no longer be the sole actors on the international stage as we witness the rise in importance of non-governmental organisations or multi-national corporations as well as the appearance of terrorist networks that have a global reach Finally, it can be noted that realism is merely an oversimplified model of what outcomes would occur under certain conditions. A grave mistake is made by realists when they present ‘ simplified theoretical ideal-types’ as ‘ categorical empirical claims’ (Donnelly, 2005, pp52-53). As Donnelly argues, Realism fails to explain the majority of International relations and it is only a valuable insight. Therefore, the realist theory is actually not that connected with the real world. This does not mean that it is not a valuable instrument to understand certain aspects of international systems and certain patterns of behaviour. However, ‘ if it is

our only tool – or even our primary tool – we will be woefully unequipped for our analytical tasks’ (Donnelly, 2005, p54).

In conclusion, the realist tradition could be understood as a plurality of perspective on human nature characterized by egoism and the desire for power that, manifested in an anarchical system, has grim consequences. Realist principles have been heavily contested, especially after the end of the Cold War as it failed to predict this event and it seems that it is unable to account for recent transformations of the international system. However, it is likely that Realism will still remain a valuable tool of analysis and its supporters will claim that although we can witness certain political changes, the world will still follow the realist logic (Dunne and Schmidt).

Notwithstanding that argument, the realist tradition gives us only a hypothetical model of the world, omitting numerous features that shape human actions and, for that reason, we can consider that it is by no means an accurate account of how real world actually works. Bibliography Berridge, G. R. , 2001. Machiavelli: human nature, good faith and diplomacy. *Review of international studies*, 27, 539-556. Available through University of St Andrews library. [Accessed 27. 10. 2011] Boesche, R. , 2003. Kautilya's Arthasastra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India. *The Journal of Military History* 67. 1, pp. 9-37. Donnelly, J. , 2000. *Realism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Donnelly, J. , 2005. *Realism*. In: Burchill, S. et al, 2005.

Theories of International relations 3rd edition. [e-book], Palgrave Macmillan. Available through: University of St Andrews library website <http://www>.

<https://assignbuster.com/how-realistic-is-the-realist-tradition/>

library. st-andrews. ac. uk [Accessed 26. 10. 2011] Dunne, T. , Schmidt, B. , C. In: Bayles, J. , Smith, S. , Owens, P. , 2008. The globalization of world politics. An introduction to international relations 4th edition. New York: Oxford University Press. Forsyth, M. , 2008. Thomas Hobbes and the external relations of states. In: Sloamp, G. ed. , 2008. Thomas Hobbes. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. Gillman, P. , 1988. Hans J. Morgenthau and the legacy of political realism. *Review of international studies*, 14, 247-266.

Available through the University of St Andrews library. [Accessed 28. 10. 2011] Hobbes, T. , 1997. *Leviathan, or, The matter, forme and power of a commonwealth ecclesiasticall* . Edited by Michael Oakeshott. New York: Touchstone. Machiavelli, N. , 1961. *The Prince*. Translated by Bull, G. , Harmondsworth: Penguin. Steans, J. , Pettiford, L. and Diez, T. , 2005. *Introduction to international relations: perspectives and themes*. Harlow: Pearson Prentice Hall. Sun Tzu, *The art of war*, translated by Lionel Giles. Available online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html> [Accessed 27. 10. 2011]. Thucydides, 1972. *History of the Peloponnesian war*. Translated by R. Warner. London: Penguin