

# Introduction to is realism realistic politics essay



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International Relations Theory is a complex web of interrelated ideas that seek to explain, analyse and predict international affairs. These ideas, from different scholars and different contexts, may sometimes seem conflicting and incoherent. It becomes one of the tasks of international relations scholars, therefore, to take apart such ideas and theories to effectively understand them, critically analyse them and having done so, improve on them to further our understanding of International Relations and world affairs as a whole. A brief definition of realism is that it is label given to a particular set of assumptions about International Relations which emphasize the importance of states motivated by national interest and driven by power. It is impossible to view realism as a single, coherent theory, as within it exists several strands of thought, however, realism can be seen as a paradigm, the source from which each strand develops its own unique viewpoint. Wohlforth (2008, p. 131) wittingly expresses the significance of realism in International Relations by stating that, " it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the academic study of International Relations is a debate about realism". He is right to say that it is an exaggeration; however he emphasizes the point that realism is a crucial and integral part of international relations and that any attempt at understanding international relations without understanding realism is pointless. In this essay, I first attempt to give a clear account of realism by explaining its origins, identifying its assumptions and themes and highlighting the various nuances that exist within it. In the second part, I explore some alternatives to the realist worldview and finally, question whether realism is actually realistic.

To begin with, any inquiry into the effectiveness of realism must by necessity, commence with a thorough understanding of realism itself. The term “realism” was coined by E. H. Carr in the 1930s as a critique to the dominant worldview at the time which supported pacifism and which Carr dubbed as “idealistic” or, “idealism” (Steans & Pettiford, 2005, p. 51). In his book, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (1946), Carr argued that idealistic assumptions about the peaceful nature of men, underlying harmony of interests and the utility of international institutions in preventing international conflict were flawed and had failed with the outbreak of war, setting the stage for subsequent realist scholars. It is from this point that realist assumptions in International Relations was begun to be developed, although it is generally agreed that the roots of realist thought can be traced much further to over 2500 years ago, and realists often cite scholars such as Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Thomas Hobbes and Nicolo Machiavelli to emphasize this point (Steans & Pettiford, 2005, p. 52).

Realist thought, although diverse, is bound by a few “general assumptions” which all realists tend to agree on. First among these is the concept of “statism,” that is, the assumption that states are central and are the most important actors in International Relations. Steans and Pettiford (2005, p. 54) explain that the two critical aspects of statism are “sovereignty,” or the ability of states to make final decisions about their internal affairs and “national interest,” which refers to the idea that states have a unitary, coherent objective and that they “conduct foreign policy to achieve this.” The second realist assumption is what Wohlforth (2008, p. 133) refers to as “egoism,” or the idea that in a political context, states are driven by self-

interest. Third, realism assumes that international relations occur in an anarchic context, that is, a world system devoid of any supranational authority with the power to police states' behaviour. Finally, realists conclude that the combination of a state-centric, egoist, anarchic world makes international relations inevitably a game of power politics (Wohlforth, 2008, p. 133) . Realists emphasize the absolute importance of power in politics and the application of realist principles by statesmen reflect accurately the Bismarckian term “ realpolitik,” the readiness to use force where and when necessary.

Power is so central a theme in realism that it is difficult to conceive of the theory without it, and every aspect of realism is saturated with obsessions about the concept of power. For this reason, it is necessary to put forth a clear, definitive explanation of what power is. Goldstein and Pevehouse (2006, p. 57) describe power as a capability, that is, specific characteristics or possessions of states that give them the ability or potential to influence others. These power capabilities may be material, such as tanks and guns, or nonmaterial, such as charisma or legitimacy. For realists, material power is prime and nonmaterial power is only relevant to the extent which it can be converted to material capabilities (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006, p. 58). Realists conceptualize power like Mao Zedong, who said, “ All power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

Realists may agree on these general assumptions, but from this point, many of its scholars have divergent views. Realism can be seen as having evolved, with its fathers who were classical realists such as Neibuhr, Carr and Morgenthau, to the present day, post-cold war offensive realists such as <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-is-realism-realistic-politics-essay/>

Mearsheimer (Wohlforth, 2008, p. 132). In sum, classical realism is generally associated with scholarly work of the interwar and early cold war period before the development of neorealism in the 1980s (Wohlforth, 2008, p. 136). It is generally seen as disproven, due to the fact that a lot of its parameters are vague and because it considered “ non-scientific”. This assumption of the primacy of power in an anarchic context, together with the fact that states are egoistic, causes the central themes of realism to focus on security affairs. States are forced to ensure their survival and security by building up their power capabilities in a self-help world. Guzzini (1998, p. 35) describes Morgenthau’s argument of the security dilemma, stating that, ‘... one actor’s quest for security through power accumulation cannot but exacerbate the feelings of insecurity of another actor, who in turn, will respond by accumulating power.’ This is a vicious cycle which, for realists, is constant in so far as anarchy exists. Therefore, they look for ways in which stability can be maintained in the international system and argue that states can ameliorate the situation by a system of a balance of power, attributed to Hans Morgenthau, that explains the concept of using the power of a state or group of states to balance the power of another state or groups of states (Keohane, 1986, p. 15).

Neorealism, or structural realism, is a refined form of realism. It is a systemic theory that seeks to explain international events in the context of both units, such as states, and the structure of the system in which units interact. It argues that classical realism does not take into account the pressures exerted on states by the system and how these pressures influence state behaviour. Waltz (1986, p. 95) explains the basis of structural realism by

describing scholars who, “conceive of a system as being the product of its interacting parts, but...fail to consider whether anything at the systems level affects those parts.” Thus, neorealists give us another mechanism through which states are able to maintain stability is through what is referred to as power distributions, or Waltz’s distribution of capabilities (Political Structures, 1986, p. 92). This refers to the ways in which power is concentrated in the international system; unipolar, or having one center of power, bipolar, having two centers of power or multipolar, in which there are more than two or three centers of power, and how this distribution of capabilities affects states’ behaviour. Neorealism has also developed the Hegemonic Stability Theory, which Keohane explains; ‘hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country, are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes, whose rules are precise and well-obeyed’ (Cox, 1986, p. 222). It refers to the idea that a state with a preponderance of power in the international system relative to other states has the power to impose its values and norms in institutions and regimes, creating rules which other states obey. It also argues that as the hegemon’s power wanes, the regimes and institutions also decline, leading to periods of instability.

Another theme in neorealist thought has to do with a concept which is borrowed from economics, and which uses calculations or “matrixes” that are applied to situations in world affairs called “games” in order to maximize gains, called “payoffs”. Neorealists use game theory to calculate states’ relative gains in political economy. For them, gains in transactions only matter relative to gains made by other states. This contrasts sharply with the neoliberal focus on maximizing absolute gains, that is, the total gains made at the end of a transaction. Two notable offshoots of neorealism are

defensive realism, which holds that even in an anarchic world, under certain conditions and due to the nature of the international system, states' safety is guaranteed, and offensive realism, which holds that an anarchic world has a conflict-generating structure which prevents states from ever being confident of their security (Wohlforth, 2008, p. 139).

Alternatives to realism are as numerous as diversities within realism itself. Traditionally, the liberal school of thought has been realism's strongest opponent. It criticizes realism on its four basic assumptions. First of all, liberals challenge the state-centric realist assumption. They agree that states are the most important actors on the international stage, but argue that other non state actors also wield considerable influence, such as international organizations, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations. Realists, they argue, do not account for this influence in their calculations. Secondly, although liberals agree that anarchy exists, they dispute realist claims as to the degree to which the existence of anarchy hinders cooperation. Liberals agree that states might be self-interested, but for liberals, states can be made to see that cooperation in the long run better serves their interest than conflict in the short term. Finally, liberals challenge the realist obsession with the concept of power. They argue that realists emphasize on material power while ignoring the non-tangible power of ideas. An interesting product of liberal thinking is the neoliberal institutionalism, critical in economical affairs, which focuses on maximizing long term mutual gains and reducing conflict through institutions (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006, p. 101). Neoliberals accept a lot of the realist

assumptions, but still argue that cooperation is both possible and desirable focusing on regimes and collective security.

Non-traditional alternatives to realism include feminism, which claims that realist assumptions about the universe tend to be assumptions about males, excluding the female ways of interaction, and constructivism, which focuses on the processes of socialization (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006, p. 118). Constructivists argue that realists tend to take artificial productions as absolute truths, constructing their own reality. Postmodernists focus on language and discourse, and criticise realism on the basis of its words and arguments (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006, p. 122).

Personally, I criticise realism on three points. First of all, as the world changes, realist assumptions and theory tend to be proven more and more obsolete. I agree that they have the power to describe certain situations in certain contexts, but I disagree strongly that the realist perspective has the timeless ability to explain world events. The fall of the Berlin wall was one reminder of that, and an ever changing transnational world, Keohane's "complex interdependence," that places greater emphasis on mutual gains and collective will and action is another constant reminder. The all important "state" actor proved elusive when the United States went in search of 9/11 terrorist attackers, and the continuing, if relative, success of NATO, IMF, UN and other international organizations in the face of the decline of the US's hegemony rather debunks the neorealist Hegemonic Stability Theory. As Keohane (Keohane, 1986, p. 159) puts it, "Realism is particularly weak in accounting for change, especially where the sources of that change lie in the world of political economy or in the domestic structures of states."

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Secondly, it seems to me that realists tend to be guilty of creating a reality from their theory rather than seeking to explain reality through realism. This can be seen through a quick look at US foreign policy, which tends to be hawkish and aggressive during republican administrations, who tend to be realist in their thought and dovish and cooperative during democratic administrations, who tend to be more liberal in their thinking. This proves that cooperation is certainly possible, what is lacking is the will. Finally I agree with the liberal critique of realist emphasis on material power. I think that in reality, power is volatile and one cannot simply define it in terms of military capabilities. Realists' account of power fail to explain numerous historical events in which coercive power failed, such as the French revolution, US-Vietnam War, the Arab Spring etc. To me, realism is useful for leaders when considering certain elements of state security. It might also be a useful wartime tool. But to raise it unto a pedestal as an overarching, all encompassing theory that can effectively explain international relations and predict states' behaviour, which is what it seeks to do, is simply unrealistic.