

# The principles of liberal idealism and realism



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

For the purpose of this essay, my discussions will be narrowed down to the theory of Realism and would reflect on my knowledge of the topic before the seminar, key issues raised, what I learnt during the seminar and how it impacted on my understanding, I would also discuss what I did thereafter with my knowledge of the topic in terms of further research.

I had just the basic knowledge about the concept of Realism before attending the aforementioned seminar which is that power is of primary importance to the realist. Also, in international relations, states are primarily motivated to obtain power and security because of anarchy on the world stage. The 1963 version of the movie *Lord of the Flies* which we watched in a previous class also went a long way to aid my understanding of the themes of power and security in the realist school of thought. In the movie *Lord of the Flies*, elements of realism were highlighted, there was a high regard for the values of national security and state survival which was eminent in the character of Jack who formed his own gang of hunters and claimed to provide security from the beast and food for all those who followed his leadership. Also, the conviction that international relations are conflictual and that these conflicts are ultimately resolved by war. This can be linked to the character of Jack who had constant disagreements with Ralph of which he was always ready to go to war. I learnt from the movie that laws and rules are necessary to keep the darker side of human nature in check. When all elements of civilization disappeared from the island, the boys revert to a more primitive part of their nature; savages and anarchy replaced democracy.

During the course of the seminar, ten assumptions of the principles of realism were discussed based on Kegley (1995) who asserted that people are sinful and wicked by nature and the likelihood of eliminating the instinct for power is rather utopian. Key issues were raised and discussed from different perspectives, but something of particular interest to me was the way power was viewed by some of my peers as not just the ability to dominate others or as a state having international influence or military strength on the world stage and not even in financial terms. Power was viewed in ideas as well; an ideology is even more powerful than money or any other material thing. This is interesting because the realist has this hierarchy of power capabilities and military strength is its most obvious way of enforcing power, the realist would relegate ideas to low politics. This point was challenged during the discussion by a fellow student who stated that the realist belief of power superseding an ideology had changed after the Second World War and that ideology had been placed on a much higher level than power. But that was the same thing that was said in the height of the cold war, the fight was a clash of an ideology and this clash was combated through guns, tanks and bombs. A good question raised was that are the guns, tanks and bombs a means to an end or are they a means in itself? That is to say are these weapons complementing an ideology? Or will ideas be smashed by guns, tanks and bombs. Personally i think on the long run, an ideology will definitely survive any form of weapon because it is the way of life of a people but if there is an uprising, weapons can be used to subdue but not necessarily causing deaths or more chaos. However, this was not the case in China during the Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 1989, where students and intellectuals led series of demonstrations in and near

Tiananmen Square in Beijing beginning on 14 April, 1989. For more than six weeks, millions of students gathered at Tiananmen Square to protest against the government's authoritarianism and called for economic change and democratic reform. On the night of June 4 1989, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) tanks rolled into the centre of Beijing and killed hundreds of students, intellectuals, supporters and bystanders (Shirk, 2007).

Another interesting issue raised was one very good argument in the heart of the cold war which is that would Washington sacrifice New York in order to save London? Meaning that if there was a nuclear attack, would Washington realise that our duty is to save our ally before we save ourselves. In answering this question, a state thinks of its self and its benefits first, it has to be calculating, Washington will never sacrifice New York to save London or any other ally. Also when it comes to power, a state has its interest at heart; looking at the China, United States, Taiwan relationship, America stood in there as an intermediary force also putting into consideration what its losses would be if it takes any rash decisions, which shows that a state considers its benefits first and is always calculating. The US cannot pick fights with China despite its constant human rights abuses because China is " the big boy on the playground". Another issue discussed was that of national interest, the realist defines national interest as the acquisition of power (Kegley, 1995). We live in this atmosphere of national interest. It was in the US national interest to invade Iraq and go into Afghanistan; i presume it was in the national interest to get out of Iraq. A state needs to acquire power as much as possible if not, another state would and this then becomes a threat. According to Machiavelli, the fundamental responsibility of states people is

to advance and defend the national interest. For Machiavelli, if the state is not strong, it will be a standing invitation for others to prey upon it (Donnelly, 2000). At the end of the seminar, we agreed that power cannot be eradicated instead; means and mechanisms to restrict and control it should be in place.

The seminar impacted on my understanding of the concepts and principles of realism to a large extent especially the discussions on ideology of which i concluded that everyone is free to have an ideology, something they believe in. But the question remains: what do you do with your ideology? Is it used in a positive or negative way? Leaders since the Roman Empire have used ideology to instil amongst the masses a common consciousness, to help safeguard or tear down political communities and to equally conquer or repel alternative ideologies. An ideology can also be used to commit terrorism all over the world for example, Islamic extremists or radicals and 9/11. Hybel (2009) argues that world actors for centuries have aspired to propagate a structure of meaning through the world arena that reflected their own system of beliefs, ideas and values which would effectively protect and promote their material interest, believing their system to be superior to all others and such they felt morally obliged to spread it. Hybel states that radical Islamism is driven by the same set of goals. When these plethoras of ideas conflict or compete, war becomes almost inevitable.

After the seminar, i carried out more research to aid the knowledge gained, i applied the concept of the realist quest for power to real life situation in international relations and theoretical approaches matched with applied analyses on events. Great powers all over the world are constantly

competing for influence, international competition between the United States, china, Russia, Europe, Iran, India and Japan raises threats of regional conflicts. I was able to understand why the United State was an ambitious superpower. Kagan (2008) argues that America's technical advances in weaponry far outstripped the rest of the world and placed the US in a special category of military superpower. As a matter of global strategy, they have preferred a preponderance of power to a balance of power with other nations, insisting on preserving and if possible extending regional predominance in the Middle east, East Asia, The Western Hemisphere: until recently Europe and Central Asia. According to Chomsky (2003), The United States has been pursuing a grand imperial strategy aimed at staking out the globe. They are willing to dominate (as in the Cuban missiles Crisis) no matter how high the stakes. The Bush administration in September 2002 announced its National Security strategy which declared the right to resort to force to eliminate any perceived challenge to US global hegemony, which is to be permanent. China is another (emerging) superpower and a force to be reckoned with on the world stage. Sixty years ago, China was torn by domestic conflicts, invaded, vulnerable, isolated and poor. Today, it is an economic giant with its economy racing to become the largest in the world and its military power growing steadily. No other nation has moved faster from weakness to strength (Kagan, 2008).

In conclusion, the seminar opened my understanding to a plethora of ideas and concepts i hitherto had little knowledge of and was able to make sense of the link between the theoretical approaches of international relations and

real life situations present in the world today as well as to professionally analyse international events.