

Argumentative essay on political science

Countries, United States



In What Ways Can a Classical Realist Be Critical of Waltz's Neorealism?

The international political playing field has long been rife with commentary and criticism: the sheer nature of every country being independent of others in their politics but are still wholly dependent on others for their security (war and economy are but two factors reliant on other nations). Classical realism and Waltz's Neorealism are two such theories which comment on international relations and attempt to explain the behaviour of individual states within the global perspective. Both relate directly to the Realism Movement, which dictates having a realistic approach which prioritizes the national interest over ideology and moral concerns (Moseley). Political realism grew in influence from around 5th Century AD and “ has been a reliable tool for chronicling and predicting international relations from that point on.” (Singrdave) Obviously, a theory of that age can sometimes become slightly outmoded; the world in 2011 is a significantly altered place: today, the Internet, cheap and easy air travel, capitalist development and ‘ special friendships’ between two nations (for example, Britain and America’s relationship under the leadership of George Bush and Tony Blair in conjunction with the Iraq war) are all factors that attribute to globalization, (Scholte 90) and therefore, a change in the political realism heartbeat.

The general opinion is that neorealism, while not without fault, is a more modern approach to analysing international politics: in a day and age where we are allegedly ‘ open books’ for the rest of the world to see, with regard to our technology and military advances, a theory that is a response to globalization and modern attitudes, is a theory which holds more sway. The

purpose of this essay is to attempt to discuss why classical realists would disagree with this view of neorealism through discussion and analysis of recent political events and their effect on the world stage.

Before continuing, it is crucial to first give detailed definitions of these terms, in order to fully clarify their meaning and their interaction with one another.

The paradigm, 'classical realism', relates directly to political theory which discusses the idea that power is, in theory, the "primary end of political action, whether in the domestic or international arena." (Moseley) It places more emphasis on realistic attitudes as opposed to morally-driven decisions, with which classical realism holds a large amount of scepticism. (Forde 62)

Therefore, classical realism refers explicitly to the actions, carried out by political bodies or governments, that best represent their country's interests in matters of security, economy and any other matter concerned with the international scene.

However, 'neorealism' argues that international conflict is based on anarchy in as much as, there is no central governing body for international relations.

Neorealism also discounts classical realism's idea that 'power' (relating directly to military power, economy and technology) is what influences state action, and instead inverts that theory by saying that states' behaviours is based more on their international standing and the perception of their power, held by other states. (Khan Ammar Ali Khan) Neorealism takes the idea of globalization and reduces countries down to children in a playground; all trying to prove that their conker is the strongest and can beat everyone else's.

'Globalization' is a term which has been used through the last half of a century to describe the world's apparent decrease in size. In a speech to the people of Moscow, concerning the Communist 'putschists': Boris Yeltsin, unable to use Communist-controlled Soviet Radio, utilised a CNN satellite to get his message out to the people. This act demonstrated how nations are closer together than ever before: it was globalization, in action. (Beck 17)

Globalization is the bringing together of resources from various nations, on an international scale; ranging from using Russian president's using American satellites to being able to buy Australian candy online, in Britain: globalization is a unifying event which blurs the boundaries of one nation with another. Globalization has called into question the classical realist theory of international politics and brought about updated theories such as neorealism, which, more accurately, addresses the interaction between nations on the global scale. It also draws attention to the fact that there is no over-seeing body which controls (or could ever control without any bias) the actions and behaviour of nations. The United Nations, formed after World War Two to help manage war-burgeoning situations, has 192 state members whereas there are 195 recognized states in the world. Their ability to control world events is limited anyway, as proven by their inability to stop the recent war in Afghanistan.

A major criticism that classical realism can make of neorealism is that Waltz makes an argument for structural realism by discussing the concept of power in an anti-reductionist way: to Waltz, "Political morality... is, by his definition, reductionism." (Barkin 87) His idea that there is no over-arching

body of control for international relations is demonstrated by the United Nation's inability to change the opinion of the U. S. and the U. K. to go into Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Their political morality were clearly staged as being saviours of the Iraqi people, but there is inconclusive evidence of there ever having been weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but plenty of evidence ascertaining that there is, in fact, a lot of oil. (Paterson) Waltz states that the amount of political morality is severely juxtaposed to the amount of political greed demonstrated by a large number of governments across the world. This is demonstrable through various wars and the events that happened under that heading: for example, the Nazi theft of Jewish gold during World War Two (Asp52). Their war was, initially, connected to the expansion of Germany and its economy but the individual theft of another person's property does not aid that effort.

It does, however, show a lack of political morality in the landscape of war and verifies Waltz's statement. A classical realist would argue that the Nazis were simply acting within a war landscape, and those individual soldiers are unlikely to be bad people. Waltz discussed the idea of a 'balance of power' which has caused there to be a large amount of research to take place as a result; this research often discusses the ideas of 'band-wagoning', 'chain-ganging' and 'buck-passing.' (Vasquez 5)

Neorealism has a distinct lack of inclusion with regard to domestic policies. In part, it emerged as a response to the aforementioned globalization, interdependence of states and the renewal of the Cold War. However, as a result of not taking domestic policy into account, it failed to predict the end

of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Mansour) Today's international treaties employ a requirement to be open about the development of technology, specifically nuclear weapons. A classical realist would argue that nations are open about their technological advancements but a neorealist would argue that the nation would present one view for the public and that an entirely different one would exist in the privacy of their domestic state. One critical note about this, which undoubtedly certain classical realists would agree with, is the pessimistic nature of neorealism on the whole, but particularly its distrust in governments. However, the ambiguity surrounding North Korea's nuclear status is an un-wavering instance of how neorealism may, sadly, have a good point. However, all realists agree that the impetus needs to be placed on the nation-state's power being maintained as no nation will give up that power to an external international relations body, as demonstrated by North Korea being extremely secretive about their nuclear program.

A major basis for neorealism is the idea that states are constantly apprehensive about the threat to their power and that this, in part, fuels their actions on the international stage. However, the 'anarchy' that Waltz refers to does not directly mean that there will be inter-state conflict, and so this apprehensive feeling of potential threats, is largely unfounded. Classical realism takes the view that states act on a domestic basis but that does not imply their ruthlessness when considering other nations. Neorealism is like classical realism's cynical and sceptical young brother and as such, classical realism will never fully accept neorealist theory. The heavy emphasis in neorealism is placed on nations acting in response to a structure: if

something is unfair then they will react. However, this does seem like a very puerile argument since, presumably, the majority of world leaders are a lot more mature and well-versed in diplomacy for that. History does, sadly, prove that wrong though: World War One happened as a result of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq happened as a direct result of George Bush's 'War on Terror' following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers. Retaliation is a very human trait.

Having defined the important terms, it seems that classical realism and neorealism while both children of the grander 'realism'; have a number of significant differences. The main conflict, as discussed, is their opposing views on the role of power in the decision-making process: classical realists believe that nations act to preserve their power, whilst neorealism says that power is 'result' of an action. Neorealism's view is reflected in acts of war such as the German plan for expansion which resulted in World War Two; but classical realism reflects a nation's reaction being as a response to a threat such as the American war in Afghanistan as a response to Al Qaeda's 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. From this point of view, the two theories both hold equal pegging but it is neorealism's total disregard of ideology that sticks in the metaphorical political throat of classical realism.

Having discussed neorealism's pessimistic attitude towards domestic attitudes towards international relations; assuming that nations are more likely to keep a secret and protect themselves rather than be open and friendly towards others, as classical realism states. This pessimism is echoed

in neorealism's attitude towards most policy: it is based around the potential for there to be conflict and this apprehension is a theme infused through its theoretical writing. Classical realism has a much more optimistic streak which says that this pre-conceived, aggressive notion of constantly having your guard up is an excuse to further the feeling of anarchy, rather than attempting to subdue it. Ultimately, neorealism is a response to the developing international landscape and offers an update to classical realism, and it is not without thought: Waltz himself is open to the fact that other theories will eventually come along and fill in the gaps his theory has. Until this happens, classical realism will undoubtedly be held in high esteem, even if neorealism is already considered the most up to date theory relating to international politics.

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