

# Are states the only relevant conceptual actors in world politics?

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



This research paper intends to question whether states are the only relevant conceptual actors in world politics by analysing realist and liberal accounts of international relations theory. It also seeks to argue that globalisation has heightened the relevancy of non-state actors within international relations discourse, arguing that the role of non-state actors must be taken more seriously by scholars. It will argue that there are many non-state actors that are relevant conceptual actors in world politics and that state-centric approaches are insufficient for gaining more nuanced analyses of world politics.

## **Introduction**

There are numerous ways to approach this central research question but fundamentally there is a need to analyse realist and liberal accounts of international relations theory. There are of course many examples of non-state actors that are relevant in international relations. These are international organisations like the United Nations, regional institutions like the European Union, transnational corporations like Starbucks and international non-governmental organisations like Oxfam. Terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda, and drug and human traffickers are also transnational in nature and are relevant conceptual actors in world politics. It is important to remember that the big contemporary challenges that face states are not limited to them; but require at the least some form of integration and cooperation, for example, trans-boundary haze pollution across the Indonesian archipelago, Malaysia and Singapore requires responses and problem solving mechanisms across all three countries.

## **Globalisation**

Inter-state relations have traditionally been at the heart of international relations analysis. However, it will be argued that there has been increasing relevancy of other actors in world politics during the second half of the twentieth century. This research paper will argue that this relevancy has been heightened in many ways by what has been termed the third wave of globalisation since the 1980s. Within an era of globalisation it is essential to understand the importance of the role of transnational corporations (instantly synonymous with global brands like Starbucks).

Globalisation has been defined as ' the intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1990: 64). Economic globalisation in the form of free trade has meant that transnational corporations have flourished and profited from unregulated markets (arguably at the expense of the global south). Within the liberal-pluralist paradigm globalisation has been characterised by increasing interdependence; a characterisation, it has been argued, that realists are ill-equipped to deal with. This sentiment has been reinforced by Mansbach and Vasquez, who have argued that realism has supplied ' a narrow and incomplete description and explanation of world affairs' (Mansbach and Vasquez 1981: 6).

## **Realism**

Classical realism is the oldest theory of international relations, and one that has subsequently dominated international relations analysis. It has been suggested that ' rationality and state-centrism are frequently identified as

core realist premises' (Donnelly 2009: 32). The realist understanding of world politics assumes, in the tradition of Machiavelli and Hobbes, that men are by nature egotistical and act selfishly. The personification of states, coupled with the notion that international society is anarchic (as there is no central authority in the form of a world government) has meant the assertion that states act primarily in their own self-interest has dominated our understanding of world politics. It has been noted that 'the pursuit of hegemony and world conquest by Nazism had put into question the effectiveness of international institutions and stressed the role of power in world politics' (Geeraerts: 2009). It was ultimately a rejection of liberal institutionalism that popularised realism within the field of international relations. Young has argued that realism is founded on 'essentially homogenous political systems with regard to type of actor' (Young 1972: 126). Realists

essentially see international organisations as instruments of states. The United Nations, for example, is only a sum of its parts and is not above states; but is in essence a club of states unable to stop powerful actor's interests. International law, for example, did very little in deterring Tony Blair from invading Iraq.

### **Liberalism**

Of course membership of international society is not optional, as 'states cannot alter their geographic location; territories cannot be made to go away' (Knutsen 1997: 3), and although there is no world government; liberal institutionalists have argued that 'cooperation between states can be organized and formalized in institutions' (Burchill 2009: 66). Liberal

institutionalists have advocated that ' conflict between states would be reduced by creating a common interest in trade and economic collaboration among members of the same geographical region' (Burchill 2009: 66). A prominent example of this can be seen in the establishment of the European Union. This post second world war project can therefore be conceptualised as the desire to end conflict through political and economic integration. Although not a unified school of thought the pluralist conception of international relations provided an alternative approach to state-centrism. Keohane and Nye concluded that ' the state is not necessarily the only important actor in world politics nor the gatekeeper between intra-societal and extra-societal flows of actions' (Geeraerts: 2009). Liberalism has essentially argued that statecentric approaches are ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of world politics.

## **Conclusion**

Historically international relations as an academic discipline has been concerned with inter-state relations. However, contemporary international relations discourse has become increasingly aware of the prevalence and importance of non-state actors in world politics. ' The rise of these transnationally organised non-state actors and their growing involvement in world politics challenge the assumptions of traditional approaches to international relations which assume that states are the only important units of the international system' (Geeraerts: 2009). This of course is not to suggest that states are no longer important or useful in international relations analyses but increasingly other actors need to be understood to

provide more nuanced analyses. It has been argued that 'the world polity is in the process of self-transformation – out of the traditional nation-state system and into a system more congruent with the contemporary global polyarchy' (Brown 1995: 268). The world is changing and international relations must be equipped to understand the nature of these changes. The evolution of non-state actors has demonstrated the need for international relations to take these actors seriously – otherwise it will be ill-equipped to provide nuanced analyses of world politics.

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