

Realism vs liberalism and issues in world politics politics essay



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The behavior and the different relations between states have always been difficult to grasp, understand, and to explain. Looking back at the historical events and comparing them to the current international issues, there are many parallels to be noted as well as many contradictions in the ever changing global arena. Due to the complexity of the world, there have been many attempts at creating a system to be able to explain the way the international relations unfold and function. Many theories have been produced, many have failed and a few have been proven to be the closest to the truth. This paper will discuss the two most predominant theoretical systems currently existent – realism and liberalism. It will further compare the two schools of thought, examining the gaps and the advantages of each one looking back at historical events, including the two World Wars and the Cold War, and the current global environment.

In order to better examine each theory and to apply it to the past or current events, one must first understand the essential background and arguments behind each theory.

Classical realism took place at a very dark time in Europe. Inter state conflicts were occurring on regular basis, poverty was seen everywhere, there was little hope for the future and essentially violence was always a logical step in order to fulfill one's goal – whether it being an individualistic goal or that of the state. Philosophers such as Machiavelli and

Hobbes painted a dark, pessimistic picture of the world with almost no hope for a peaceful future. While the two scholars lived in different times and in different places of Europe both have rationalized in a similar manner. Just

like other realists, they saw human nature as being essentially evil and selfish, they believed that military readiness at all times was essential, and that peaceful cooperation between states was only possible through the balance of power on the global scale.

Through great minds such as Machiavelli and Hobbes came many followers supporting similar ideas and what is known now as realism was created. The key elements behind this particular theoretical system lie in the belief in anarchy, evil human nature, military power and the importance and the power of a state. It is a theory based on the assumptions that the behavior between states is selfish and relies on a self-help system, thus you cannot hope for a mutual cooperation and must only help yourself. It states that countries just look out for their own interests, which makes the state the most important actor or the ultimate power for this theory. Also it is essential for states to be prepared for any conflict or war, thus military power of the state is also one of the main goals, even more important than economic power. Realism looks at the world power as an anarchist and believes in relative gains, meaning some participant benefit more than others. In other words, a realist will not settle for an exchange or a relationship in which the other participant will gain more due to the fact that it inevitably puts the state in a weak and risky position. Thus, the core points of concentration of realism are the anarchical state of the world, the brutality of human nature, and the importance of power of the state. In other words, realists do not look to change the world, they believe in seeing the world for what it is and working with it to create the best possible outcome to fulfill self-benefiting interests.

Liberalism, on the other hand, paints a completely different outlook on the world. It looks down on the pessimistic ways of the realists and argues for the possibility of a brighter future and more peaceful world. Classical liberalism took place during the age of Enlightenment where the dark years of Europe were hoped to be put behind. The pioneers of liberalism, such as Rousseau and Kant, refused to believe that human nature was evil. Instead, they argued that it is in the nature of human beings to be cooperative and to be able to achieve solutions in a negotiating peaceful manner[1]. Thus, war was not the next logical step to a conflict or disagreement; it was only a matter of providing the proper tools for the individuals and states to be able to come to a peaceful, mutually benefitting resolution to any conflicting situation. It is a theory based on the assumption that countries believe in progress and sets not only states, but also the individuals and international institutions as the most valuable actors in international relations. This theory believes in the cooperation and unity of human kind, and thus is extremely against military power. Instead, liberalism strongly believes in international institutions and institutionalized peace in the world. In other words, liberals are very optimistic and believe that the use of military power is never justified. Also, this theory believes in absolute gains, meaning all participants become better off. Liberals state that there is no reason why a state or an individual should not engage in a relationship or an exchange in which the other party will benefit more, due to the fact that both participants will be at an absolute gain. Further, liberals, unlike realists, do not support the idea of zero-sum game. In a conflicting situation, no party needs to be at a complete loss; the conflict could be resolved within a judicial way in which both parties could reach an agreement to benefit each other.[2]

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As mentioned previously, liberalism highly believes in cooperation with collective gains. This idea is followed by the belief in strong international institutions to provide not only conflict resolutions tools for the states, but also to create a complex international interdependence, which creates a strong global bond and further ensures international peace. Due to the fact that liberals put such importance on international institutions, the roles of the state could be seen as less when compared to the realists' view. Through the importance of institutions, the transnational bonds and dependence is created, which is also highly important to the liberal school of thought.[3]

While realists believe that the approach to peace should be done through the balance of power and military readiness and strength, liberals have a complete opposite point of view. The amount of power and military control that the state achieves will not bring global or state peace. Rather, the liberals propose peace through democratization, in which citizens are given individual freedom and the right to have a say in the state's actions; and through the establishment of international law, which would be enforced through the international institutions and organization[4].

Another approach to peace that the liberals suggest is through the opening of the markets and the promotion of free international trade. One of the first advocates for this idea was the philosopher and economist Adam Smith. He stated that if markets are left untouched by the state, the "invisible hand" of the economy would guide them to the most productive and beneficial outcome. The term he used was "laissez-faire", which essentially means to leave the market untouched to function on its own[5]. Through this powerful

idea years later the new version of liberalism was created, called the neo-
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liberalism. These particular liberals still held the same core beliefs as the classical liberals, however with a much stronger concentration on the international economy with a much weaker role of the states[6].

Based on these two brief definitions, it is observed how much both theories contradict each other, in other words, liberalism and realism have very different approaches to explaining and understanding the world and the way it functions. However, both theories have proven their points of view along the years with critical events that have already occurred in the past and that have drastically changed the world's history. Both theories have gaps and advantages to fulfill each other's gaps. Realism fails to explain the diminishing importance of the transnational connections, a world that is slowly becoming borderless. In addition, until the creating of neo-realism, realists did not give much importance or explanation to the ever growing number of international institutions and organizations. Liberals on the other hand do provide a strong explanation of the factors mentioned above; however fail to explain the occurrence of so many conflicts, even with peace making international organizations in place; nor are they able to explain the rise of poverty and the great inequality in the world. Both theories provide strong points of view and the next portion of this paper will look how both theories thrive in the explanation of historical and current events or drastically fail giving in to the opposing theoretical system.

Prior to discussing which theory best describes and explains the period of Cold War, it is crucial to comprehend the events leading up to the situation which made the Cold War possible. Thus, the two World Wars must be looked

at through both theoretical systems in order to conclude which theory was most prominent at the time.

The devastation produced by World War I was evident to the entire world and left a horrific picture behind. It started when the Archduke Ferdinand from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist seeking to free his ethnic group from the Austrian rule[7].

However, this death was really just the excuse for many political conflicts and hostilities between states going on at the time to unfold. These conflicts lead to a disastrous view of Europe, where more than ten million soldiers lost their lives and three big empires collapsed. As well as the rise of the Soviet Union and the formation of the League of Nations were also the consequences of this war, which completely changed the face of Europe and the world.

World War I was the perfect event for the realists to prove their assumptions of the world's behavior. Germany, one of the most preponderant states at the time, strived for the success that England achieved with the Industrial Revolution. This led Germany to look for more power trying to expand their territory and becoming more predominant on the global scale. In other words, Germany was only serving its own national interest, rather than global, using military power without thinking of the consequences that this could bring to others or how would others be affected. This perfectly supports the realist theory. Also, realists' defensive arguments evidence that the cult of offensive school, interpretations of the World War I origins, is wrong because World War I was not an effect of a defensive attack, since

Germans understood the tactical advantages of the strategic defense level
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and they already expected a long war. In other words, Germans went to World War I with eyes wide open[8].

For liberals, on the other hand, World War I was just “ the war to end all wars”. U. S. President Woodrow Wilson was also convinced that another devastating war could occur if the states recommence practicing power politics, thus liberals tried to reform the global system by taking several actions. One of the actions was to create global institutions in order to contain the raw struggle for power. At the end of World War I, the League of Nations was created, which was the incarnation of this part of the liberal thought[9]. However, the liberal thought collapsed and the realist assumptions rose once again when World War II erupted.

When World War II initiated it gave the opportunity to the realists to prove that war is inevitable and that human nature is evil and violent. After World War I, the Germans were forced to look for an exit of the severe situation, probably the worst situation ever, which they were facing due to the consequences that this war brought upon them. After the First World War, most European states blamed Germany for all the disaster caused in Europe and thus they humiliated Germany under the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 promoted international laws, international institutions such as the League of Nations, and fairness to all the damaged countries emphasizing stability and cooperation, which seemed to be an ideal move for the liberal thought. However, once this treaty implemented, the outcome of the behavior of the states turned out to actually prove the realist school of thought yet again. Thus, in theory this was a liberal movement, but in practice it turned out to be realist due to that everyone was actually just <https://assignbuster.com/realism-vs-liberalism-and-issues-in-world-politics-politics-essay/>

looking for their own interest and using this as an excuse to obtain benefits for their own, for example, the division of Europe. Once again, it was a state against another state fighting for the most gains in order to be at the top of the anarchical international system.

The Cold War was the transition of power of the two global powers at the end of World War II, United States of America and the Soviet Union[10]. The Cold War was an event where both states fight to have the best power ratio of military capabilities without ending in a disastrous scenario such as what happened in the first and second world wars, where millions of lives were lost and cities were devastated. However, this war could had have ended in the worst scenario that the world would have ever experienced, due to that technology and military research were at the peak of world's history and also these two had exponentially raised due to the previous wars. In addition, not only Europe would have been involved in this war, since this war not only consisted of having the most military power, but also the most networking or the relationships with other countries[11]. In other words, if one country would have attack the other, then they would had been attacking the allied countries as well, which at the time not only involved European countries and strong Asian countries, but world wide. This war was also a fight between liberalism and realism, due to that all the disputes between both countries were fought with the intervention of international politics and international institutions, but at the same time each country was also preparing for war by the development and research of new military weapons. However, this was a silent war since none of both states ever openly announced that the actions were taken in order to take precautions of the

rival country's actions. Nevertheless, the world knew what was going on. This war was an event that raised several critiques against the liberal thought, since the military concerns of both of these states, the will of the global power and the hostility shown between each other, were all clear signs of a third world war. There was no reason to doubt it, since history was being repeated. As the League of Nations was created by the liberals in attempt to avoid another world war, Germany was gaining enough power in its realist way, overpowering any international institutions to start another world war. This time, following the disastrous events of WWII, another attempt by the liberals was made in creating the United Nations and yet again the two hostile blocs – the Soviet Union and the United States were able to overpower the newly established international institution and started their own silent war recreating an anarchical global environment. Therefore, there was no reason why a war could not occur, if this previous event proved that no matter what actions taken, a state could do what ever it wished. In other words, the United States of America or the Soviet Union could have easily gone over the United Nations' decisions, since there was no other state with the military and economic capacity that could overpower their wishes[12]. Thus, the realist assumptions of the world proved itself to be true.

The liberals, of course, would argue that due to the existence of such institutions as the United Nations an actual war never occurred on the soil of either one of superpowers. In the liberal point of view, the UN was definitely a factor in avoiding the war. This was not known for a fact until the end of the Cold War in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. At this point, the global arena proved that peace could be achieved by international

negotiations, international institutions regulating the disputes and most importantly making rational decisions. The world proved that human nature is not totally evil or violent and that there still exists some hope for the world to prove that liberal assumptions of the international relations are not entirely wrong. It is evident that the realist assumptions and predictions were predominant even throughout the Cold War, but it was also clear that the liberals had a point – there was room for progress.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War began to reshape international politics and relations. While through the century realism seemed to have been in the lead in its explanations and descriptions of the structure of the world, the global environment all of a sudden began to drastically change and liberalism began to make sense yet again[13].

There are still many controversies about which theoretical system best describes the contemporary global politics and interstate relations. While realism was clearly much more accurate in the descriptions of the world throughout most of the 20th century, this paper will argue that liberalism is much more precise in the explanations and its understanding of the world when it comes to current issues.

The first aspect that should be noted is the vast amount of international organizations and institutions that is currently existent and is constantly on the rise. These organizations vary from international humanitarian aid (ex. World Vision), to peace keeping and conflict resolution (ex. United Nations), to regulations of international trade (ex. WTO), and many more. These are a perfect example of transnational unifications, which are absolutely

borderless and are extremely powerful on the global arena. Thus, the belief of realism that the state is the most important actor in the global system is disproven. There are other actors, that are equally, if not more important than the role of the state. These organizations believe in progress and in making a difference in the world, therefore human nature is not necessarily evil. In fact, there are more and more individuals that come together and dedicate their lives in order to help others.

Another interesting phenomenon which has been happening is the decline of interstate conflicts but an outburst of intrastate conflicts. While these conflicts do prove that human beings are still capable of horrific crimes, it also proves that the state is no longer a central factor. These are groups of individuals that are bound by religion, society, a common goal or something other than being a part of the same state. Further in these cases, the state itself cannot control what is happening in its own country. Such conflicts still exist and especially were numerous in the 1990's; such as the genocide in Rwanda, Somalia or the horrific process of the collapse of former Yugoslavia[14]. These conflicts bring another interesting factor – the organizations and the individuals from all over the world, which come together to help the war-torn place; starting from conflict resolution, to peace keeping, to after the conflict humanitarian and developmental aid. These individuals not only dedicate their lives to such careers, but in most cases risk losing their own lives. This is a further proof that while global peace is not achieved, human nature is not evil in most cases. Thus, progress is not only possible, but also extremely achievable.

Democracy is another aspect that liberals strongly promote. In the past two decades more and more states have been trying to implement democratic ways of governing their states. Most of the former Soviet states have been moving towards achieving that goal, some have even successfully transformed their political systems and have entered the European Union, such as the Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia)[15]. In addition, liberals strongly believe in democratic peace thesis that states that democratic countries will not go to war against each other. This theory is greatly proven over time as most of the Western world is democratic and has not experienced great conflicts since World War II.[16]

While both theories provide strong and credible explanations of the way the global interactions occur and unfold, it is always crucial to keep in mind that these interactions change as does the global environment. This paper concludes that throughout most of the 20th century realism provided a clearer explanation than liberalism, including both World Wars and most of the Cold War. However, examining the current events and issues it is clear that the global political atmosphere has gone through a drastic transformation, precisely following the Cold War. Thus, considering this change it is only fair to conclude that liberalism provides a better explanation and description of the world today. That is not to say that realism is completely discredited nor does this suggest that there will be no room for the realists approach in the future, it still provides valuable lessons and explanations for humanity and perhaps will gain its dominance as the world experiences further transformations.