

Theories of realism for state behaviour explanations



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“ How well do the different types of realism (classical, structural and neoclassical) explain state behaviour?”

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Realism is a fundamental practise of international politics, a key theory in this area of study as it helps us to understand the contemporary world, as well as the challenges that we now face. Realism helps to emphasise this role of nation-state with the belief that all states are motivated by their own self-interests, prioritising territorial integrity and securing political autonomy. The relations within domestic politics and international relations are conversely discussed by different realists, from Thucydides (460-395BC) to E. H. Carr (1892-1982) showing substantial differences within realism itself.

Firstly, classical realism derives from Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) to name but a few. The study of politics during this time was set on the foundations of human nature. Thucydides presented his belief through dialogue texts, presenting how human nature has made us crave power above all else. On the other hand, structural realists, such as Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013) believed that power is a means to an end but the ultimate aim of an individual, as well as state, is survival. Both types of realism theories have undergone much critic in the past few decades, with only a relatively recent view surfacing. This is known as neoclassical realism, a combination of classical and structural (‘neorealism’) realism, focusing on systematic variables of internal and external factors.

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My line of argument during this essay will be that neoclassical realism holds the most viable explanation for state behaviour, due to its contemporary analysis and consideration of systematic pressures through various variables, nationally and internationally. I will set out first by discussing the classical realism theory, in which I shall discuss the influence of human nature, interest and justice and how these internal factors influence the states behaviour. Secondly, I will discuss structural realism and the theories basis of system structure of the world states, which do not consider internal factors. Finally, I will critically assess whether neoclassical realism can truly explain state behaviour, despite its limitations.

Although there is not a unified set of beliefs of realism, it is considered by all that the international system is an anarchical environment, which is important to incorporate in my essay because it in turn demonstrates how states do not have anyone to adhere to in the international system due to lack of hierarchal figures. The anarchical system is supported by Waltz's description of international politics as 'being flicked with particles of government and alloyed with elements of community - supranational organizations whether universal or regional, alliance, multinational co-operations, network of trade and what not. International political systems are thought of as being more or less anarchic.' (1979: 114) ¹. This then further presents how internal and external factors are needed to understand state behaviour, which appears to be a major flaw in the understandings of classical and structural realism. I will later discuss whether neoclassical realism is able to account for the changes in the nation-states behavioural patterns due to these intervening variables.

Classical Realism

Classical realism is essentially about power, which is measured through material capabilities. When striped back to the simplest of social organisations, it becomes the tribal groups and their competition for resources, which show that power (struggles) have always been part of society. This is then interlinked, by Hobbes, with the comparison of the individual and the state - where human nature is compromised of primarily power and the essence to survive, known as the 'state of nature', correlating to what the classical realist believe to be the states priorities. This is furthered by the lack of sovereignty in the international system, making it therefore anarchical, reducing state behaviour to its own national interest and its own security in order to maintain its power and survival. The idea of this egotistical self-interest was first developed by Thucydides, who understood human nature as self-interest will overcome moral principles. In Book 1 of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, during a debate in Sparta, Thucydides states how the considerations of right and wrong have 'never turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandizement offered by superior strength.' (Chapter 1: 76).² Although this view disregards the teleological notions of political progress, it is supported by the period of origination during the interwar period.

Leading on from this, Thucydides, as well as Hans Morgenthau, further disregards the distinction between international and domestic systems, encouraging us to understand them as similar outcomes. Thucydides uses both internal and external developments alike as reason for state behaviour.

For example, when communal bonds within a system are strong, as in pre-Peloponnesian War in Greece, the laws help to restrain actors. Therefore, when community breaks down, so does this order due to the loss of legitimacy in influence. This coincides with Aristotle's observation that law 'has no power to compel obedience beside the force of habit.'³

This idea of community is furthered by the classical realist's belief that justice is the foundation of relationships in order to create these communities where security and influence are insured. Thucydides relates his text to the importance of interest and justice and how they come hand in hand - with the relationship becoming more acute in response to war. An example of this is in Pericles' Athens' which Thucydides pointed out to be under a facade of democracy rule, when in fact it was just one man (Pericles) ruling. The democratic ideology that came with this rule caused class tensions, which heightened over time, resulting in the vicious overthrow of 'democracy'. After this, justice then became the foundations for what was known as a more peaceful nation.²

Classical realists find justice an important influence as it helps to determine the understanding and responses actors have with one another. Even though influence can be bribed, its expense for the stereotypically short-lived maintenance of it, makes it a foolish investments. Therefore, policies that have accepted ethical approaches create a respected legitimacy that is more likely to be followed, creating a more efficient sphere of influence, which can also be translated to power. To add to this, the commitment to justice was one that showed the strength of self-restraint an actor has. For instance,

weaker states behave due to the external constraints that they face, whereas more powerful states are more inclined to think they are in control. Yet, this causes irrationality of the leaders, encouraging them to make hazardous decisions. These miscalculations often lead to catastrophe, with key examples of Athens, Napoleon and Hitler. Thus, internal and external constraints are closely interconnected, as self-restraint prompts behaviour in accordance with the principles of justice, sustaining the hegemonic structure that makes sufficient influence possible.

However, classical realists fell short of including all the important aspects of international relations, including that co-operation that can occur between nations. Looking from a contemporary view, with the inclusion of globalization, classical realism seems very rigid and outdated. Furthermore, the statist system has been proven wrong by Transnational Corporations (TNC's) who in fact have a larger economy than some smaller states, giving them more power even in material capabilities, with some corporations having a form of military. This also shows that states cannot be considered unitary actors.

Structural Realism

Kenneth Waltz, the founder of structural realism, describes the international system through each state considering the risk and cost-analysis of irrational action, which subsequently results in stability being maintained. Although the system is not in a constant state of war, it is thought of as 'each state decides for itself whether or not to use force; war may break out at any time.' (Waltz 1979: 111).¹ Conflict is always possible in anarchy, although

the relative chance of it occurring is what is important, rather than the possibility of it. Therefore, structural realists believe that a state should never let down its guard and always be prepared for the worst case scenario. This results in what realists believe that states need to make sure they always have military expenditure at full potential in order to be able to defend against possible aggressors.

Structural realists believe that states need to adopt the worst-case focus in order to ensure the states don't get caught off-guard, which could be argued, would have even heavier costs. ' Political competition among states is much more dangerous business than economic intercourse; it can lead to war, and war often means mass killings on the battlefield and even mass murder of civilians. In extreme cases, war can even lead to total destruction of the state.' ¹ Consequently, defensive programmes are thought of as the only dependable insurance against outside aggression, as it may help to reduce the calamities. Balancing this behaviour and attitudes with co-operation between states is thought to be conditioned by the lack of hierarchal authority in the international system, with the constant threat that force could be used.

An example of this is the regional trade blocs in the contemporary developing world. Structural realism explains that states are reluctant to co-operate due to fears, but they do believe co-operation is possible although only on the front that it is largely constrained. Moreover, this theory explains that developing countries would be the most inclined to not co-operate due to the security issues from in those regions. Yet, contrastingly to this, many

co-operations have been set up, such as ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) and Southern Cone Common Market. Even despite the fact that military expenditures have increased rapidly in the last few years, in addition to the territorial disputes, these countries are still able to co-operate which strongly contradicts structural realism's theory of state behaviour. Such behaviour is consistent with the view that economic gain outweighs the probability of security due to the promoted increased international competitiveness superseding relative gains. (Economic benefits of the trade blocs include attracting Foreign Direct Investment, increased markets and reduced transaction costs).

Despite the fact that structural realists are the leading critics to classical realists for their explanations being deduced by human nature, the characteristics of actors in structural realism is in the sense of 'fear' - part of the state of nature, as described by Hobbes. Morgenthau argues that actors will take advantage of weaker states, hence why structural realists believe that military preparedness is the only guaranteed assurance. Both areas of the arguments view the world pessimistically, interlinking them with the evidence that structural realism doesn't actually move beyond human nature, rather just replaces the idea of 'power' with 'fear'. This shows the two perspectives weaknesses as both focus on only one sole notion - rather than the intervening variables that are at play in domestic and international politics due to the variations of dynamics.

Another raised point of the structural realism theory is that a state's first concern is to maximise its likelihood of existence, thus if focusing on short term security has negative long term repercussions, it still must go ahead in <https://assignbuster.com/theories-of-realism-for-state-behaviour-explanations/>

order to maintain survival. Although, a rational state would only discount these future repercussions if the security pressures are not that strong, meaning the long term affects are given priority. This view is shaped by the ideal that states are shaped by the possibility and probability that conflict can outbreak at any time, hence the need for capability to deal with the contingency that may arise from the security issues. Nevertheless, Waltz recognises that states have other important intentions and therefore may not take all conceivable steps to achieve short term security, but security matters take priority over economic capabilities.

Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism is a relative recent theory that has been accounted by Wohlforth (1993), Gildeon Rose (1998), Zakarua (1998) and Schweller (2006) to name but a few. This theory combines structural and classical realism in order to incorporate both external and internal variables with the dynamic of the international and domestic systems. Rose described neoclassical realism in the World Politics Review (1998) as an ' impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systematic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level.' This makes the theory more contemporary and relevant due to its inclusion of more than one sole motive.

Classical realism mainly focuses on the domestic system, meaning the theory cannot be used to explain why different actors act similarly. In contrast, neoclassical Zakarua (1998) made a clear distinction between national and state power, with the claim that the systems are more multi-

dimensional than just its material capabilities.'By taking into account both domestic and international constraints on the state, and by articulating both the domestic and international choices available to the state, we are able to provide a more comprehensive integrated approach to the analysis of state behaviour'. (Mastanduno, Lake, Ikenberry 1989).⁴ Essentially, neoclassical realists state that the reason behind why different actors act similarly can only be understood if the intervening role of domestic factors is in play. Therefore, more contemporary realist state that power cannot be used to express all dimensions of politics, and that this is not just measured by its material capabilities due as they are not always mobilized to their full efficiency.

Additionally, neoclassical realists emphasise the importance of the role of the state. This contrasts sharply to structural realism, who isolate the states' role, making it unitary and a different body to the rest of society. However, neoclassical realists recognise the fundamental role that the statesman have as they are part of the intervening variables with the power to intervene, implement and assess changes in the foreign policy. Accounting for the changes over time and variations of different states countering external constraints, which may result in a need for a change in foreign policy due to the dynamism of today's globalisation. This also relates to the contemporary theory's inclusion of not only the weaker and stronger states, but also the 'middle powers'⁴ - which is discarded by both classical and structural realism. The understanding that smaller (weaker) powers focus is mainly on their domestic politics is because external constraints means their power internationally is smaller - thus the need to concentrate domestically in

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order to build this material power. Alternatively, larger power's focus is also domestic, especially its constraints. This is due to the greater power enabling them more freedom internationally, resulting in the focus being internal and on their own constraints that they face. This then leads onto middle powers being the only ones that face domestic, as well as international, focus on constraints. Yet, this means that the neoclassical theory, which deals with internal and external factors to justify state behaviour, is therefore mainly relevant towards middle powers because they are the ones that focus on both systems.

Conclusion

Realism does not have a unified set of assumptions about state behaviour, granting this, dividing realism does help to lead to a more precise conceptualization of the theory and provides a better understanding in which the variation of impacts of differential material factors help to explain state behaviour.

Structural and classical realism, both alike, are theories that are inflexible even though they claim to be operative under all circumstances. Structural realism in particular, appears substandard in demonstrating state behaviour due to the fact it is presented in the terms of being relevant in all situations at all times. Not only this, but the presentation of the international system as a relentless competition for security and power, shown through material capabilities like technology, geography and economical advantages, becomes the biggest flaw in itself. This is because of the multidimensional

system that we live in today, a cause of globalisation as states and actors are interconnected more than ever.

Neoclassical realism helps to present this, embodying systematic and domestic level of analysis, making it more relevant to contemporary systems behaviour. However, neoclassical realism, as well as structural and classical realism, are hard to use to explain state behaviour unless the application has more knowledge of the given actor/state in order to make the assumption more relevant due to the varying degree of nations.

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