

Realism in International Relations

What is politics all about? Realism, as its name suggests, claims to be an approach to international relations theory that captures the *real* essence of politics. It has been the dominant IR theory over the past several decades, and its proponents like to speak of ‘the timeless wisdom of realism’. By looking at some of its intellectual precursors we can try to see why realists make such bold claims.

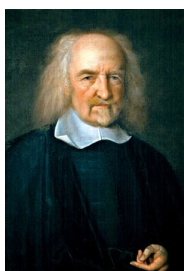
PRECURSORS



Thucydides: ‘the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept’ (“The Melian Dialogue”)



Machiavelli: ‘politics has no relation to morals’; ‘there is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others’ (*The Prince*)



Thomas Hobbes: ‘I put for a general inclination of mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death’ (*Leviathan*)

In the absence of an overarching authority, individuals live under constant fear of conflict – the ‘war of all against all’.

A few of the defining concerns of realism are already in place: self-interest, power, anarchy and conflict. However, realism is a much more specific approach.

MAIN FEATURES

First and foremost, realism is concerned with **the state**. Thus, a realist analysis will rely on the following three assumptions:

- States are the most important actors in the international system.
- The behaviour of states is determined by the rational pursuit of self-interest.
- The international system in which states act is anarchic.

- Note: IR theory uses the word ‘anarchy’ to refer to the lack of an over-arching authority – e.g. a world government – and not as a synonym for ‘chaos’



Realists interpret the world like a billiard table where states collide with one another.

Having outlined the level of analysis – the self-interested state operating under anarchy – there is one final element to be added to the picture. As Hans Morgenthau put it in *Six Principles of Political Realism*:

‘The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power’

POWER

- sum of capabilities available to a state
 - But: don’t think only about the military! Power is not a fixed concept, being relative to the context of action. Information, influence over other states, willingness to use existing capabilities and many other factors can determine what a state’s power actually amounts to.



How do states interact?

To try to answer this question, realists resort to the idea of a **balance of power**. Much like the movement of one billiard ball will be transmitted to other balls, the actions of one state (e.g. increasing its arsenal) will prompt further reactions from other states (who will in turn increase their arsenal or try to negotiate alliances etc.). The essential dynamics of the international system, realists claim, can be captured by this continuous cycle of actions and reactions. Yet even if we grant this assumption, we must still ask: what sets the balls in motion? Different answers to this question distinguish two main divisions within realism:

- **Classical realists** (E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau) argue that, by their very nature, human beings are selfish and greedy. Thus, they will try to maximize their own power at the

expense of others. Seen from this angle, state behaviour is an extension of individual behaviour, which will inevitably lead to conflict (or the threat of conflict).

- But: it seems that peace and genuine cooperation are, at least sometimes, possible (democratic peace theory, EU integration).
- **Neorealists** (Kenneth Waltz) wish to avoid the problem of human nature, focusing instead on the structural feature of anarchy. It is anarchy (understood as ‘every man for himself’), not greed, that gives international relations their distinctive character. As the famous example of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ shows, there are cases in which the rules of the game can coerce participants into adopting strategies *that no-one prefers*. Similarly, simply by virtue of having to operate in an anarchic system, states are forced to behave in ways that lead to conflict (e.g. arms races & the security dilemma).

SYSTEM

Anarchy is not the only feature of the global system that interests realists. As can be guessed by now, they are also interested in particular distributions of power. Thus, we have:

- **unipolar** systems: the Roman Empire at its peak, the British Empire in the 19th century, the USA post-1991 (this is a debated example)
- **bipolar** systems: the Cold War
- **multipolar** systems: World War I & II



Are any systems more conflict-prone than others?

Just as the billiard balls eventually come to rest, it has been argued that the political system has a tendency to reach a point of balance. (Un)fortunately, scholars disagree as to which of these systems is inherently more peaceful:

- William Wohlforth: unipolarity (i.e. ‘resistance is futile’) – Pax Britannica
- Kenneth Waltz: bipolarity (i.e. ‘know your enemy’) – the Cold ‘War’
- J.D. Singer & K. Deutsch: multipolarity (i.e. ‘the more, the merrier’) – current system

CRITICISM

- Failure to predict the end of the Cold War
- Oversimplification: states are not the only actors that matter (e.g. United Fruit Company's involvement in South America)
- Status quo bias (states in their current form date more or less back to 1648) / self-fulfilling prophecy
- Unjustified pessimism:
 - **Liberalism**: democratic peace theory
 - Reply: peace is still a result of self-interest, not some national altruism
 - Rejoinder: in an increasingly interdependent system, even self-interested actors will cooperate far more than realism would allow
 - **Social constructivism**: the 'real' world is, to a certain extent, constructed socially → there is a role for the analysis of norms, rules and institutions

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