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An Investigative Overview

Realism and Neorealism: An Investigative Overview

By [Maysam Behravesh](#) on December 19, 2010

The roots of the modern debate on international politics and power relations between states can be traced back to decades earlier between the First and Second world wars when many political analysts and scholars still were contemplating the causes of the Great War and politicians were endeavouring to set up such institutions as the League of Nations to prevent a reiteration of international aggression by institutionalizing a collective as well as normative order-preserving and security-providing structure. The dramatic failure of the League – that represented the liberal ideals of democratic peace and emphasized the possibility of building a *modus vivendi* beyond national boundaries – in stopping the outbreak of another calamitous international war gave rise to serious doubts about its effectiveness and the assumptions upon which it had been founded. One of the most prominent among critics at the time was Edward Hallett Carr, a British historian and former diplomat who in broad terms attributed the failure of the League to contain aggression and, by extension, the Second World War, to its failure to take into account the conflicting *interests* of states and prevailing socio-political *realities* on the ground.^[1] Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*^[2] is by and large regarded as a classic text of what is now known as 'classical realism' in the study of international relations.

In the book he launches a sustained critique of idealism – what he dubs 'utopianism' as opposed to realism – due, *inter alia*, to its overemphasis on free will, neglect of the exigent and grim realities in the external environment that impose severe constraints upon human action, and its false optimism for the feasibility of moral universalism. Prominent among these idealists were Woodrow Wilson, the 28th US president, Alfred Zimmern, a British scholar of international relations, and Philip Noel-Baker, a British politician and Nobel Prize winner, whose beliefs have been summarized by Hedley Bull in a passage well worth quoting,

"The distinctive characteristic of these writers was their belief in progress: the belief, in particular, that the system of international relations that had given rise to the First World War was capable of being transformed into a fundamentally more peaceful and just world order; that under the impact of the awakening of democracy, the growth of the 'international mind', the development of the League of Nations, the good works of the men of peace or the enlightenment spread by their own teachings, it was in fact being transformed; and that their responsibility as students of international relations was to assist this march of progress to overcome the ignorance, the prejudices, the ill-will, and the sinister interests that stood in its way."^[3]

The utopian optimism, rooted in the nineteenth-century moral philosophy, 'was based on the triple conviction', in the words of Carr, 'that the pursuit of the good was a matter of right reasoning, that the spread of knowledge would soon make it possible for everyone to reason rightly on this important subject, and that anyone who reasoned rightly on it would necessarily act rightly'.^[4] Applied to the dynamics of international politics, the argument leads to the conclusion that if the delicate task of foreign policy-making is assigned to educated intellectuals who follow democratic norms under a republican constitution, instead of monarchs and aristocrats, 'whose sectional interests dispose[s] them towards warfare', then war will cease to be a possibility.^[5]

A more systematic study of the power relations between states, however, was offered by Hans J. Morgenthau, the German-born American political scientist, in his book *Politics Among Nations* (1948) that is also seen as representing a classical realist approach to international politics. Central to Morgenthau's theory are the concepts of national-state 'interest' and its definition in terms of 'power' whose maximization is seen from the conventional realist perspective as the principal objective of all states in the international sphere. Within a realist framework, the statesman is believed to 'think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers'.^[6]

Political realism is a theoretical approach to the study of international relations which has been traced back to the writings of Thucydides, the Greek historian of Peloponnesian wars between Athens and Sparta, and the philosophical thoughts of (amongst others) Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes.^[7] Apart from Carr and Morgenthau, other leading realists who have developed the theory and explored its different facets and focus points include George Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aaron, Robert Gilpin, John Herz, Henry Kissinger, Stephen Krasner, Susan Strange and Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. With regard to the development of realism as a mode of political thought, Bell notes that realist arguments are a combination of 'two discrete, though often intersecting, literatures', with the first emerging from the discipline of International

Relations (IR) and in particular the works of 'classical realists', and the second 'spreading across the history of Western political and philosophical reflection'; a literature which generally advocates, in the words of Bernard Williams, 'the priority of politics to morality' and whose traces can be found in the works of above-mentioned philosophers as well as Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber.[8] One of the most significant aspects of realism is its use of historical evidence and appeal to realist political thought stretching throughout the past centuries, as if one can detect a 'timeless wisdom', of a conception of world politics centred upon the principles of *realpolitik*. [9]

While idealists – or those Carr calls 'utopianists' – seek to build a safe or peaceful world by reliance upon or recourse to ethical considerations and universal principles of humanity and morality, realists see statesmanship as an effort to mitigate and manage, but not totally eliminate, conflict and therefore place their hopes on building a world that is 'less dangerous'. 'Realism', according to Morgenthau, 'maintains that universal moral principles do not apply to the actions of states'. [10] However, believing in the value of modernity's moral underpinnings, as represented by Judeo-Christian values, Morgenthau himself pleads for an international political situation where universal morals should take precedence over national ones as the former transcend the latter. [11] Generally for realists, the rules and norms governing relations in the domestic domain of states are believed not to be applicable to relations in the foreign domain. Some even argue that the difference between *domestic* and *international* relations forms the foundation for all international theory. Famously, in the words of Raymond Aaron, 'international relations are relations between political units, each of which claims the right to take justice into its own hands and to be the sole arbiter of the decision to fight or not to fight'. [12] Being still at the heart of analytical and theoretical debates in international politics, realism broadly contends that struggle for survival constitutes the basis of state behaviour beyond the internationally recognized territorial borders, a sphere which is marked by the absence of sovereign authority, and therefore the presence of anarchy. In such an anarchical situation, states, according to realism, have to take care of their own security that is the pivotal component and foremost guarantor of their survival. For many realists, anarchy is not the sole cause of conflict that renders the international sphere into a 'self-help' environment, but they also give considerable weight to 'the constraints on politics imposed by human selfishness', [13] or 'the limitations which the sordid and selfish aspects of human nature place on the conduct of diplomacy'. [14] Put otherwise, it is the internal factor of 'egoism' and external condition of 'anarchy' that, according to Robert Gilpin, requires 'the primacy in all political life of power and security'. [15]

In a partly different vein, neorealism is a form of *structural* realism that stresses the concept of international 'anarchy' – lack of central orderer – and its structural properties such as inter-state competition and power distribution, and employs these features to theorize 'causal patterns' in the behaviour of states and also the function of 'balance of power' in securing the stable operation of international 'system'. [16] For Kenneth Waltz, who for the first time propounded a systematic theory of neorealism in *Theory of International Politics* [17], the major deficiency of traditional realism lay in its failure to develop a scientific theory that could move beyond state-level theoretical abstraction and explain the systemic properties of international politics. For neorealism, in other words, it was wrong to reduce international relations simply to dealings between individual egoist actors and view egoism and human nature as the primary factor determining state behaviour in the last instance. 'Rather', as Crawford notes, 'it is the anarchical structure of the system as a whole that Waltz (and his followers) see as *the* determinant of state behavior'. [18]

A number of IR theorists tend to conflate classical realism, represented by Carr's theoretical ideas and Morgenthau's non-systemic theory of the state and international politics, and neorealism, articulated mainly by Waltz. [19] Hobson, however, significantly differentiates between these 'realisms' in terms of the 'agential power' they allow for the state, and thus sees them as two distinct theories. It is realism's fundamental claim that all states, either they have small or great domestic agential power, enjoy 'sufficient levels of international agential power to shape the inter-state system', while according to neorealism, contends Hobson, though the state enjoys high agential power and institutional autonomy at home, it has no international agential power and cannot act free of international structural constraints. Therefore, states, for neorealism, are 'passive bearers' of the international political structure. [20]

A succinct explanation of Hobson's 'six principles' about classical realism and neorealism will shed enormous light on the chief tenets of these theories and their nuanced distinctions. Here the underlying assumption, as indicated, is that neorealism views the state as a 'passive/adaptive' actor in the international system, whereas for realism it operates as an autonomous agent. According to these principles (1) while classical realism argues for the 'historical variability' of the state and its ontological superiority over the international system as a whole, neorealism adheres to the 'continuity' assumption whereby the anarchical states system is an 'autonomous and self-constituting realm' ontologically superior to the units comprising it; (2) in contrast to the classical realist argument for the *potential* 'absolute cooperative gains' or a win-win state of affairs states may achieve in the future through higher forms of political cooperation, the neorealist invariably prioritizes short-term 'relative gains' over long-term absolute ones due to the security uncertainties caused

by anarchy and power struggle; (3) for classical realism 'socialized national' sovereignty of the state is subject to change over time as a consequence of the change in the status of citizenship rights, but for neorealism sovereign states will continue to exist as pivotal actors in international politics despite the growing momentum of economic interdependence and globalization; (4) whereas realism maintains that the state is not a unitary entity and its rationality is subject to change, neorealism stresses the monolithic nature of the state, which acts on the basis of its unchanging rationality to pursue its national interests; (5) for classical realists, domestic agential power of the state varies through time, and so does its international agential power, but neorealists generally endorse the 'billiard-ball model' whereby states are likened to 'billiard balls' whose internal or domestic properties has very little, if any, to do with their behaviour in the international system; and (6) As mentioned above, classical realism grants a considerable degree of international agential power to the state, while neorealism insists that states lack any external agency and cannot resist the international systemic logic of anarchy which requires them to overlook norms of morality and seek the necessary means for survival.[21]

In conclusion, it might be appropriate to understand realism as 'a "big tent", with room for a number of different theories that make quite different predictions'. [22] There is a good deal of consensus, however, on the 'negative and cautionary' character of realism as a way of thinking and looking at things which admonishes against 'moralism' and emphasizes the 'unlikely or difficult' in world politics; [23] what Carr describes as 'the necessary corrective to the exuberance of utopianism'. [24] In more explanatory terms, realism 'depicts international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war'. [25] a 'disposition', according to Reinhold Niebuhr, 'to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power'. [26] Finally, Donnelly argues for understanding realism as 'a philosophical orientation or research program' that requires us to abandon 'the gladiatorial vision' of international relations theory and embrace a pluralistic vision of the discipline instead. What matters, after all, is not the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of theoretical perspectives but when and where they can help us appreciate and explore phenomena 'that interest us'. [27] The embrace of such a theoretical pluralism might prompt the observer to transcend the 'wrong/right' binary opposition and look for a better understanding of and insight into those dark sides of things even in the most apparently weak and unpopular of ideas, either they be realist, liberalist or constructivist.

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Notes

[1]. Martin Griffiths, Terry O'Callaghan and Steven C. Roach, *International Relations: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), viii.

[2]. Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Houndmills and New York, 1981). The book was initially published in September 1939 soon after the outbreak of WWII, and was revised and re-published in 1945-46.

[3]. Hedley Bull, "The Theory of International Politics, 1919-69," in Brian Porter, ed. *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics, 1919-69* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 361.

[4]. Cited in Charles A. Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48.

[5]. *Ibid.*

[6]. Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 165.

[7]. For a rigorous study of the psychological and philosophical origins of realism, see Annette Freyberg-Inan, *What Moves Man: The Realist Theory of International Relations and Its Judgment of Human Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), Part I especially pp. 19-63; See also Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Ancient Greeks and Modern Realism: Ethics, Persuasion, and Power', in Duncan Bell, ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-40.

[8]. Duncan Bell, "Introduction: Under an Empty Sky – Realism and Political thought," in Duncan Bell, ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

- [9]. Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.
- [10]. Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 166.
- [11]. Mihaela Neacsu, *Hans J. Morgenthau's Theory of International Relations* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2009), 150-152.
- [12]. Cited in Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.
- [13]. Jack Donnelly, "Realism," in Scot Burchill and others, *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2005), 30.
- [14]. Kenneth W. Thompson, *Moralism and Morality in Politics and Diplomacy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 20; Cited in *Ibid.*
- [15]. Cited in Jack Donnelly, "Realism," in Scot Burchill and others, *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2005), 30.
- [16]. Martin Griffiths, Terry O'Callaghan and Steven C. Roach, *International Relations: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), xi.
- [17]. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979).
- [18]. Robert M. A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 32.
- [19]. John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17. Among these scholars Hobson refers to Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," in Robert O. Keohane, ed. *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 301-21 & Joseph Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," in David Baldwin, ed. *Neorealism and Neoliberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 116-42.
- [20]. John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.
- [21]. *Ibid.*, Figure 2.1, 18.
- [22]. Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6, 26 (1996); Cited in Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6, 196.
- [23]. Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 193-94.
- [24]. Cited in *Ibid.*, 194.
- [25]. Stephen M. Walt, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy* 110, 31 (1998); Cited in *Ibid.*, 194.
- [26]. Cited in Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194.
- [27]. Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195-96.

Tags: [neorealism](#), [Realism](#)