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Political Realism in International Relations: Classical Realism, Neo-realism, and Neo-Classical Realism

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Abstract:

Realism, also known as political realism, is one of the most dominant theories of international relations. The school of thought in realism was established in the post-World War II era; however, it is widely associated with the ancient Greek studies, particularly, in the works of Thucydides who allows a more sophisticated analysis of the conception of power and its place in the anarchic international system. Unlike idealism and liberalism, which underline the idea of cooperation in international relations, realism stresses a competitive and confrontational side of human nature and argues that in global politics there is no space for morality. Thus, states show constant readiness to obtain power and achieve their political ends. The article aims at studying the basic approach, the theory of realism is based on. The study has been prepared as a result of examining articles and books written by dominant realist scholars who have influential opinions in the field.

Introduction

As highlighted by Gilpin; “(...) realism is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions, it is a “philosophical disposition” (Gilpin, 1984, p. 304); Ferguson and Mansbach argue that realism is “a set of normative emphases which shape theory” (Ferguson & Mansbach, 1988, p. 79). According to Garnett; it is “an attitude of mind” with “a quite distinctive and recognizable flavour” (Garnett, 1984, p. 110). As theorized by Rosenthal, realism is just “a loose framework” (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 7), whilst Elman believes that it is a “big tent with a room of a number of different theories” (Elman, 1996, p. 26).

In the discipline of International relations, there are several theoretical perspectives, which tackle to understand and assess the concepts of social institutions that shape the multidimensional phenomenon of politics, including freedom, justice, identity, equality, democracy, culture, religion, etc. In other words, political theories attempt to describe and predict events in international relations and provide a conceptual framework upon which it could be analyzed. According to the Oxford Handbook in Political Theory (2006), the field is described as: “(...) an interdisciplinary endeavor whose center of gravity lies at the humanities end of the happily still undisciplined discipline of political science” (Dryzek, Honing, & Phillips, 2008).

The theory of realism is considered one of the most dominant theories of international relations. It became the principal philosophy during the Second World War, which substituted a deep-rooted doctrine of idealism and provided a more detailed, comprehensive explanation of the basic causes of the war in an anarchic international system. It argues that “Throughout historic time, regardless of social, economic, and political conditions, states have met each other in the contests of power” (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 33).

Realism encompasses a wide range of approaches based on their view of the essential causes of the conflict. The main schools of thoughts are as follows: Classical Realism, twentieth-century realism also known as “modern realism”, neo-realism (defensive and offensive realism), and neo-classical realism. They are separately discussed in the article.

1. The Roots of the Realism Traditions (Classical Realism)

The roots of realism could be found in ancient Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese studies. Thucydides’ (460-411, B.C.) work *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which dates back to the events of the 5th century B.C., related to the invasion of the Athens on the island of

Melos, is one of the best illustrations of the classical realism. In *Melian Dialogue* by Thucydides, we find the following words, declared by the Athenian delegate: “(...) the decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion, but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 117) . As argued by Thucydides, humans are egoistic, self-centered creatures who have a distinct nature to obtain power, and stronger ones always get as much as they can.

Paul Woodruff asserted that according to the political philosophy of ancient Greece, in the condition of the anarchic international system, power always outweighs highly valuable principles of ethics and morality (Woodruff, 2014, p. 183).

Kautilya’s work *Arthashastra* has also been recognized as one of the best illustrations of realism. As stated by Griffiths and Callaghan (2008), Kautilya focuses on the position of the potential conqueror who always aims to enhance his power at the expense of the rest .

Niccollo Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1532) and Thomas Hobbes in *The Leviathan* (1651) provide a universal approach of classical realism and emphasize the fundamental motives of the theory. Machiavelli and Hobbes argued that during the whole era of the historic development, humans have always been inclined to defend their own ego and self-concern based upon their necessities and compulsions, thus humanity has a distinct tendency to seek supreme power (Machiavelli, 2006); (Hobbes, 2018).

According to Machiavelli “in the wider world of international politics where the law of the jungle applies” (Machiavelli, 2006), states do their utmost to spread hegemonic ambitions over the weaker states in order to first obtain the power and then maintain the power. The mentioned, on the other hand, increases countries’ continuous necessary and constant readiness to go into the war.

Realism is usually contrasted with idealism and liberalism and effectively provides the answers to all the questions regarding the war, its basic causes, and motives. It emphasizes the “conflict side” of global politics, which tends to idealize state interests. The school of thoughts in realism differentiates national politics from international one, since according to their philosophy, if national politics is based on the legal and moral principles, international politics, on the other hand, has a more competitive and forceful nature, and is most inclined to the self-helping system (Sleat, 2016); (Griffiths, Roach, & Solomon, 2016).

Thus, Machiavellianism is a radical type of political realism that is applied to both domestic and international affairs. It is a doctrine, which denies the relevance of morality in politics and claims that all means (moral and immoral) are justified to achieve certain political ends.

Realists deeply believe that highly respectful human qualities such as morality, ethics, tolerance, and decency are supposed to be realized by individuals only; however, the state has an extremely severe nature since the fundamental purpose of it is to protect its people from the aggression of another state. They argue that in international politics “anything is justified by reason of state” (Bull, 1995, p. 189).

Therefore, the heads of states should consider the interests of not one or two people but the interests of the state, as a whole. Realists view waging a war as a legal and permissible act and argue that states should, by all means, achieve what they are seeking for, as long as its results are beneficial for their national interest (Griffiths, Roach, & Solomon, 2016).

Brian Orend in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Orend, 2016), differentiates two kinds of realism, descriptive and prescriptive realism. According to Estrella; Descriptive realism is the claim that states, as a matter of fact, either do not (for reasons of motivation) or cannot (for reasons of competitive struggle) behave morally and thus moral discourse surrounding interstate conflict is empty, the product of a category mistake. Prescriptive realism, though, need not be rooted in any form of descriptive realism. Prescriptive realism is the claim that a state ought (prudential “ought”) to behave amorally in the international arena (Estrella, 2012).

2. Twentieth-Century Realism

Hans Morgenthau, highly influenced by the French scholar and political thinker Reinhold Niebuhr and English scholar Thomas Hobbes, once again emphasized the significance of power in international relations as;

(...) It is sufficient to state that the struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience. It cannot be denied that throughout historic time, regardless of social, economic, and political conditions, states have met each other in contests of power (...) (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 33).

In the Scientific man, Morgenthau also refers to the nature of a man in a negative fashion, and states as; "(...) science attributes to man's reason, in its relation to the social world, a power of knowledge and control which reason does not have" (Morgenthau, 1946). Morgenthau also agrees with Hobbes that man's feelings of insecurity are prevalent, adding that the "intellectual and moral history of mankind is the story of inner insecurity" that characterize humans. The first can be deduced safely arising from the inner insecurity of a man that is mainly man's "will to power" to overcome this insecurity. However, "conflict and concomitant evil" can arise from the will to obtain power (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 192).

Thus, the principal objectives of realism are deeply embedded in the fundamental nature of a human being. Humans possess certain "lust of power", that is an ambition to be superior to others, and simply made people act according to your needs and demands. The same rule applies to the states as well. The balance of power is a combination of equilibrium and disequilibrium mechanisms. The first concept describes the condition where the balance of power between the two antagonist sides is more or less identical; The latter defines a specific condition of power in which the distribution of power between the rivals is not balanced, therefore, disequilibrium balance of power is more prone to hegemonic approach in international relations which neutralizes other states.

Furthermore, one could argue that power is the most significant factor in international relations. Since some states are extremely influential and some are not, the level of supremacy varies from state to state, depending on the power. In other words, power means force and force, in turn, is a principal element in international relations.

To sum up, the theory of realism highly stresses humankind's egoistic nature and the absence of a central authority above the state, where the law of the jungle still prevails. As stated by Machiavelli, all men basically are wicked; hence doing wickedness is in their nature when they get an opportunity of achieving it (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 202). Morgenthau argues that "It is a characteristic aspect of all politics, domestic as well as international, that frequently its basic manifestations do not appear as what they actually are-manifestations of a struggle for power" (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 101). Treitschke accentuates on the disastrous effect of the egocentric mankind on the society (Treitschke, 1916), while Waltz suggests that "the daily presence of force and recurrent reliance on it mark the affairs of nations" (Waltz, 2010, p. 186). Morgenthau's six principles of political realism are as follows:

1. Politics governed by objective laws; International relations theory is a rational theory that reflects these laws;
2. Politics is an autonomous sphere, independent of economics and personal morality;
3. International politics is about national interests though these interests reflect the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated;
4. The political ethics is different from the universal moral principles;
5. Particular nations cannot impose their national aspirations on the nations;
6. Pessimistic knowledge of human nature is in the center of international politics (Morgenthau, 1978).

3. Neo-realism and neo-classical realism

As distinct from Hans Morgenthau, Organski, Sullivan, and Waltz are true advocates of contemporary neo-realism theory and raise an issue over the “struggle of power” among the states. They argue that traditional liberals, as well as classical realists, take a somehow wrong path of understanding the balance of power. Unlike classical realism, Waltz highlights the growing importance of security rather than using the power itself and suggests that states are obliged to concentrate more on how to effectively distribute the power and not demonstrating power permanently for their national interests.

Kenneth N. Waltz in his book *Theory of international relations*, suggested that the states in the international system have the same fundamental interests to survive. According to him, traditional liberals and classical realists neglect “the wider socio-political domain” (Waltz K. , 1979). He distinguishes the domestic realm from the international environment and argues that in the anarchic system of international politics states are forced to act in a way that primarily ensures their security, which on the other hand, increases the conflict risks among them. Waltz developed the theory of defensive neo-realism, also known as structural realism, however, he somehow neglected the importance of military capability of the states as a primary goal of their survival in the “world of the jungle”. John Mearsheimer places the principal emphasis on security competition among great powers within the anarchic international system. In contrast to defensive neo-realism of Kenneth Waltz, offensive neo-realism put forward by Mearsheimer emphasizes the significance of hegemony for security for the states in the twenty-first century,

which according to him is caused by the anarchic makeup of the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Mearsheimer's central assumptions are deeply rooted in the central principles of Kenneth Walt's defensive neo-realism. These are as follows: 1) Great powers are the main actors in world politics and the international system is anarchical; 2) All states possess some offensive military capability; 3) States can never be certain of the intentions of other states; 4) States have survival as their primary goal; 5) States are rational actors, capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Aaron Friedberg, William Wohlforth, and Randal Schweller are recognized as the most prominent scholars of neo-classical realism who as distinct from Thucydides, Niccollo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes stress on the distribution of power in the international system such as independence variable, dependent variable, and intervening variable (Donnelly, 2000)

It is also worth noting that realism theorists are strongly condemned by the school of thought in pacifism. They oppose using force or any other kind of violence in international relations. Pacifists realize the destructive, totally negative impact of the war on civilization, consider it a consummate evil and vigorously prohibit using force and aggression by the states. Pacifists suggest that war can never be morally acceptable in global affairs and each and every state should try to never engage in a war.

The fundamental basis of the pacifism theory is absolutely consistent with the Holy Book of Christians- Bible. The roots of pacifism can be found and traced back with the early Christian beliefs where the use of violence is never permissible. Christian pacifist grounded their argument for never resorting to war:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave a room for God's wrath, for it is written: "it is mine to avenge, I will pay," says the Lord (Estrella, 2012, pp. 69-70).

To sum up, the major difference between the structural (neo-realism) and neo-classical realism could be explained as follows: While structural realism continues the traditions of rationality in international affairs, in its turn, identifies a much broader catalogue of determinants of the state's foreign policy and accepts less verifiable nature of some of them. Hence, it aspires to combine the elements of positivism and traditional humanism and focus

more on foreign policy making than general rules of international relations (Freyberg-Inan, Harrison, & James, 2009, pp. 6-8).

Conclusion

Following the first early state-formations emerged into existence, power has become the most fundamental and utterly decisive mechanism of survival in international affairs. While small states are struggling to maintain their independence and national identity, in the wild world of politics, where ‘the law of the jungle’ applies, there is no space for morality. The greatest political players are using every possible tool to widely spread hegemonic ambitions over the weaker states, obtain the power and thus, achieve their political ends.

The twentieth century appeared to be the most destructive in recorded history. The humankind went through two bloodiest wars that resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people. In the first half of the twentieth century, the realism again remained the most dominant theories in international relations, which has defeated the doctrine of idealism and shown the world that universal peace, stability, and security was still a mirage of distant vision. This has made the scientists rethink once again about the chances of civilization’s future survival.

Following the triumph of Capitalism over Socialism, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1989) argued that liberal democracy would become the last point of socio-cultural evaluation of the society and “the final form of human government”. Some believed that the end of the “Cold War” and disintegration of the USSR would mark a turning point in the global political affairs and democratic states would no more engage in a war against each other since they share the same values of equality and sovereignty. Furthermore, the United States aimed to make the world “Safe for democracy”.

However, the collapse of the bipolar world order the disintegration of the USSR marked the defeat of realism paradigm, particularly, the structural theory of Kenneth Waltz since the theory could not properly explain political processes in the USSR. Furthermore, the static neo-realism was also unable to explain domestic disturbances in the former Yugoslavia as well, which, once again, strengthened the idea that not only realism but even liberalism faced serious explanatory issues at the end of the twentieth century.

Growing numbers of the multi-national corporations and non-governmental organizations in the modern epoch of globalization have increased the relevance of the theory of pluralism, developed by Robert Keohane, however, it could be argued that realism still does

not lose the actuality in the era of globalization and great powers still employ the tools of realism in contemporary international relations.

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