

Introduction

Realism and international relations

The tradition of political realism – *realpolitik*, power politics – has a long history that is typically traced back to the great Greek historian Thucydides in the fifth century BC.¹ Although dominant attitudes towards realism have varied, realist arguments and orientations have been central to the Western theory and practice of international relations. In particular, “modern” international society, whether dated from the era of Machiavelli at the turn of the sixteenth century or that of Hobbes in the mid-seventeenth century, has been closely linked to realist balance of power politics.

The link between realism and international theory is especially strong in the twentieth century. International relations first emerged as an academic discipline before and immediately after World War I, largely in reaction against realist balance of power politics. The discipline was then reshaped immediately before and after World War II by self-identified realists such as E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau. Prominent scholar-practitioners, such as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, have called themselves realists. For most of the post-World War II era realism has been the dominant paradigm in the Anglo-American study of international relations. Even in our post-Cold War era of globalization, realist theories, although much less dominant, still provide a context and motivation for many of the most important theoretical debates in the field.

This book presents a sympathetic but fundamentally critical assessment of the character of realism and its contribution to the study and practice of international relations. My approach is critical yet engaged. I approach realism largely on its own terms yet challenge many of its characteristic arguments and conclusions.

¹ See, for example, Morgenthau (1946: 42), Gilpin (1986: 304), Ferguson and Mansbach (1988: 35, 82), Cusack and Stoll (1990: 1–2, 19), Rosenau and Durfee (1995: 9), Schweller (1997: 927).

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Accepting realism's terms of reference does limit criticism to "internal" critique of its coherence and consistency. Some readers may prefer a strategy of "external" critique, which takes on realist assumptions directly. But by circumventing the usually fruitless controversy over first principles and basic assumptions, internal critique can achieve a special power and leverage.

The choice of critical engagement, however, is more than tactical. It also reflects my considered judgment of realism's place in the study of international relations. I accept and value realism as a central and perennial tradition, orientation, or approach. I try to show why realist arguments constantly recur in discussions of international relations. But I also highlight realism's diversity, ambiguity, problems, contradictions, errors, and failures.

To lay my cards on the table at the outset, I see realism as an exaggerated and dangerously one-sided set of insights rather than a successful general theory of international relations. Its enduring contribution lies in the fundamentally negative task of highlighting recurrent political constraints posed by international anarchy and human selfishness. It also has considerable promise as a source of partial, mid-level theories. But realism fails – often spectacularly and tragically – in its aspiration to provide a general explanatory theory of international politics or a prescriptive framework for foreign policy.

I try to give full weight and credit to the insights that have made realism an inescapable feature of the study of international relations. I am more concerned, however, to challenge exaggerated claims for these insights that would constrict international political theory and practice to the realm of power politics. Realists understand, and correctly emphasize, the fact that power has been, and will long remain, a central part of international relations. Most realists, however, systematically slight other no less important dimensions of international politics. Demonstrating this is one of my central concerns.

Outline of the book

Chapter 1 introduces the realist tradition through four complementary paths. I begin with a brief definition that emphasizes anarchy and egoism, and follow with a typology of realist theories. Then, in the central portion of the chapter, I present six realist "paradigms": Thomas Hobbes, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, the Prisoners' Dilemma, Thucydides, and Machiavelli. Finally, I briefly trace the cyclical rise and fall of realism in the academic study of international relations in the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 examines realist accounts of human nature and state motiva-

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tion. A brief introduction notes that many of our paradigmatic realists emphasize a motivational triad of fear, honor, and interest, as Thucydides puts it, or, in Hobbes' language, competition, diffidence, and glory. I then criticize realist approaches that emphasize human nature, with special attention to Morgenthau. The bulk of the chapter, however, is devoted to a critique of contemporary structural realist efforts to abstract from the attributes of states. I show that realism not only requires substantive motivational assumptions but that the assumptions of contemporary structural realists prove to be very similar to and at least as confused and incoherent as those of earlier realists such as Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Chapter 3 deals with realist accounts of international anarchy, paying special attention to Waltz' *Theory of International Politics*. I argue that Waltz misrepresents anarchy as a formless void and wildly exaggerates its political consequences. Anarchic orders may have considerable elements of "hierarchical" division of political labor, ranging from the differentiation of political functions represented by spheres of influence to considerable elements of international legal obligation. Anarchy implies only the absence of hierarchical government, not an absence of authoritative international governance.

Chapter 4 is a transitional chapter that examines the principal substantive conclusion of structural realism, namely, that states in anarchy "balance" rather than "bandwagon." I argue that balance of power politics depends not on anarchy *per se* but on a fear of predation, which cannot be accounted for independently of the character of those with whom one interacts. I also examine the distinction between system and structure, which has been obscured in much recent realist writing – and which opens up the question of the role of international institutions.

Chapter 5 examines the nature and extent of authoritative order in contemporary international society. I argue that abstracting from international norms and institutions, as structural neorealists encourage us to do, is no more profitable than abstracting from the character of states. After critically examining John Mearsheimer's argument that international institutions have no independent effects on state behavior, I develop two extended examples, dealing with sovereignty and the Prisoners' Dilemma, that illustrate the central role of international institutions in the practice of international relations.

Chapter 6 examines the issue of morality and foreign policy. Although twentieth-century realists characteristically deny a place for morality in international relations – or at least restrict the role of moral concerns to the periphery of foreign policy – their arguments turn out to be remarkably diverse, and even contradictory. Furthermore, a careful examination of Thucydides and Machiavelli reveals that these two paradigmatic

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realists actually give a considerable place to ethics in international relations. The chapter concludes by arguing that, as with so much else in the realist tradition, a useful cautionary insight is exaggerated into a misleading and dangerous “law” of international relations.

A brief conclusion extends this argument to provide a summary assessment of the contributions and limitations of realist theories of international relations.

Each chapter is followed by discussion questions and suggested readings. The questions revisit some of the central issues raised in the text and often suggest alternative readings or try to push arguments deeper, or in a different direction, than they are pursued in the text. Because they primarily aim to go beyond, rather than merely review, the main points of the chapter, they should be treated as integral parts of the text.

The suggested readings highlight sources dealing with issues raised or left inadequately explored in the text. Although perhaps less integral than the discussion questions, the fact that these are short bibliographic essays, rather than just lists of sources, has allowed me to highlight important topics in the text. I thus encourage all readers to at least glance at these essays, even if they are not at the moment looking for additional reading.

In each bibliographic essay a few especially recommended readings are highlighted in bold type. These are not always the most important sources, but they are both good and relatively easily accessible. Readers will rarely go wrong by starting their further reading with these sources. For convenience, all of the boldfaced readings are collated at the end of the volume in a short list of recommended readings.

Audience and orientation

As the apparatus of discussion questions and suggested readings indicates, this book has been written with advanced undergraduate students in mind. I hope, though, that its audience will be significantly larger – and by that I do not mean just graduate students. I have tried to write for the intelligent reader with an interest, but no formal training, in (the study of) international relations. Although I have no illusions that this is a potential bestseller, or even likely to appear on the shelves of any but large or specialist bookshops, I hope that nonacademic readers who pick it up will find much of interest.² I also hope that scholars, no less than their

² Chapter 1, I believe, should be widely accessible to most readers. Chapters 2, 5, and 6 also speak to issues of broad interest. Chapters 3 and 4 are more “academic,” although I hope still accessible. But because each chapter is largely self-contained, if you find yourself getting bogged down in these middle chapters, jump ahead to chapter 5 or even chapter 6.

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students, will find large parts of this book valuable. In other words, I have tried to write a book that is widely accessible yet challenging, literate, and complex. And I have tried to avoid stripping the life, excitement, and genuine controversy out of the subject in a spurious and misguided pursuit of “balance.”

Some readers may find my extensive use of direct quotations excessive, even annoying. Nonetheless, I am deeply committed to this style of exposition. Allowing realists to speak for themselves provides something of a flavor of the style of their writing. It also allows readers to check my claims immediately. This is especially important in light of the ease with which even a critic who attempts to be scrupulously fair may introduce subtle misinterpretations.

I try to portray realism as a strong and vigorous approach to the theory and practice of international relations. But my criticisms are at least as strong and vigorous. Chapter 1 is largely descriptive. The other chapters, however, are more concerned with evaluating (criticizing) standard realist arguments than describing or defending them.

My orientation, in other words, is undeniably non-realist. Many would call it anti-realist. But, as I suggest at the end of the book, my position is not all that different from that of “realists” such as E. H. Carr and John Herz, as well as Thucydides and even Machiavelli. Furthermore, one can find multiple passages in realists such as Morgenthau and Niebuhr that support such a reading. Therefore, what I have in mind might also be described as a sophisticated, heavily hedged form of realism. Somewhat more precisely, I would say that I have a certain sympathy for and appreciation of a heavily hedged realism as part of a pluralistic discipline of international studies, although my interests and inclinations lie elsewhere.

I would be pleased if realists find my emphasis on their shortcomings extreme but not fundamentally unfair, while anti-realists are impatient with my “excessive concessions” to realism. My goal is to produce a constructive account of the attractions and drawbacks of realism that points the way to transcending the increasingly sterile and formulaic “realism and its critics” discussions that have shaped so much recent writing and teaching in the field. Sound international theory, I will argue, must come to terms with, but refuse to be limited to, realism. Realism should not be ignored. But it should not be allowed to shape the study and practice of international relations, as it has for so much of the past half-century.

1 The realist tradition

One might imagine that defining an old and well-established theory such as realism would be a simple task. A look at the representative sample of recent and prominent definitions in box 1.1, however, reveals considerable diversity¹ – which on further reflection should not be surprising.

Even in traditions with authoritative defining texts, such as Marxism and Christianity, different emphases and antagonistic interpretations are common. We should expect at least as much variety in realism.

Realism² is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions. Rather, as many commentators have noted, it is a general orientation: “a philosophical disposition” (Gilpin 1986: 304); “a set of normative emphases which shape theory” (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988: 79); an “attitude of mind” with “a quite distinctive and recognizable flavour” (Garnett 1984: 110); “a loose framework” (Rosenthal 1991: 7); and “a ‘big tent,’ with room for a number of different theories” (Elman 1996: 26). Realism is an approach to international relations that has emerged gradually through the work of a series of analysts who have situated themselves within, and thus delimited, a distinctive but still diverse style or tradition of analysis.³

¹ See Cusack and Stoll (1990: ch. 2) for a review that emphasizes this diversity. More critically, see Goldmann (1988). For further definitions see John, Wright, and Garnett (1972: 96–97), Maghroori and Ramberg (1982: 14–16), Vasquez (1983: 15–19, 26–30), Olson and Onuf (1985: 7), Cox (1986: 211–212), Ferguson and Mansbach (1988: 40–47, 102), Stein (1990: 4–7), Rosenau and Durfee (1995: 11–13), Elman (1996: 19–21), Grieco (1997: 164–168), Labs (1997: 7), Mastanduno (1997: 50).

² We should note at the outset that I am concerned here with *political* realism, the tradition of *realpolitik* or power politics. “Realism,” however, is also a philosophical doctrine, asserting some kind of correspondence between knowledge claims and an objective external reality. For a good recent overview of the philosophical debate, see Kulp (1997). Katz (1998) offers a defense of philosophical realism that canvasses the leading objections. “Realism” is also the name of a literary school or movement that was of considerable prominence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (as well as in the mid-twentieth century, in its “socialist” variant). Political realists may or may not be philosophical or literary realists.

³ On the idea of traditions of international thought, see Nardin and Mapel (1992) and Dunne (1993). More broadly, compare Gunnell (1979).

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[More information](#)Box 1.1. *Representative definitions of realism*

(The following passages are direct quotations or very close paraphrases.)

1. The state's interest provides the spring of action.
 2. The necessities of policy arise from the unregulated competition of states.
 3. Calculation based on these necessities can discover the policies that will best serve a state's interests.
 4. Success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state. (Waltz 1979: 117)
-
1. Politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
 2. 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.
 3. Power and interest are variable in content.
 4. Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states.
 5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.
 6. The autonomy of the political sphere. (Morgenthau 1954: 4–10)
-
1. The international system is anarchic.
 2. States inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other.
 3. No state can ever be certain another state will not use its offense military capability.
 4. The most basic motive driving states is survival.
 5. States are instrumentally rational. (Mearsheimer 1994/95: 9–10)
-
1. The fundamental unit of social and political affairs is the "conflict group."
 2. States are motivated primarily by their national interest.
 3. Power relations are a fundamental feature of international affairs. (Gilpin 1996: 7–8)
-
1. The state-centric assumption: states are the most important actors in world politics.
 2. The rationality assumption: world politics can be analyzed as if states were unitary rational actors seeking to maximize their expected utility.
 3. The power assumption: states seek power and they calculate their interests in terms of power. (Keohane 1986b: 164–165)
-
1. Realists assume an ineradicable tendency to evil.
 2. Realists assume that the important unit of social life is the collectivity and that in international politics the only really important collective actor is the state, which recognizes no authority above it.
 3. Realists hold power and its pursuit by individuals and states as ubiquitous and inescapable.

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Box 1.1 (*cont.*)

4. Realists assume that the real issues of international politics can be understood by the rational analysis of competing interests defined in terms of power. (Smith 1986: 219–221)

1. The centrality of states.
2. The world is anarchic.
3. States seek to maximize their security or their power.
4. The international system is mostly responsible for state conduct on the international scene.
5. States adopt instrumentally rational policies in their pursuit of power or security.
6. The utility of force. (Frankel 1996: xiv–xviii)

1. The international system is anarchic.
2. Nation-states pursue their own national interests defined primarily in terms of power.
3. Skepticism toward international laws, institutions, and ideals that attempt to transcend or replace nationalism.
4. Primacy of balance of power politics. (Wayman and Diehl 1994: 5)

1. Humans face one another primarily as members of groups.
2. International affairs takes place in a state of anarchy.
3. Power is the fundamental feature of international politics.
4. The nature of international interactions is essentially conflictual.
5. Humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason.
6. Politics are not a function of ethics.
7. Necessity and reason of state trump morality and ethics. (Schweller 1997: 927)

1. History is a sequence of cause and effect, whose course can be understood by intellectual effort, but not directed by “imagination.”
2. Theory does not create practice, but practice theory.
3. Politics are not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics. (Carr 1946: 63–64)

1. Groups (states) consider themselves to be ultimate ends.
2. Any measure required for state self-preservation is justified.
3. Law and morality have a subordinate place in international relations. (Schwarzenberger 1951: 13)

Nonetheless, a set of recurrent concerns and conclusions marks these varying works as part of a single tradition. The definitions in box 1.1 share a family resemblance, even though no single set of elements can be found in each. Both realists and their critics agree that the realist “intellectual style is unmistakable” (Garnett 1984: 29; compare Cusack and Stoll 1990: 19; Wayman and Diehl 1994). As an American judge notoriously said of pornography, we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it.

This chapter attempts to orient the reader to the realist style, tradition, or approach in four complementary ways: a brief definition; a simple, two-dimensional typology; short summaries of six paradigmatic realist theories; and an overview of the development of realist thought in the twentieth century.

A definition

Realism emphasizes the constraints on politics imposed by human nature and the absence of international government. Together, they make international relations largely a realm of power and interest.

“Human nature has not changed since the days of classical antiquity” (Thompson 1985: 17). And that nature, according to realists, is at its core egoistic, and thus inalterably inclined towards immorality. As Machiavelli puts it, in politics “it must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers” (1970: Book I, ch. 3).

Some realists, such as Reinhold Niebuhr (1944: 19) and Hans Morgenthau (1946: 202), see Machiavelli’s claim as largely descriptive. Many, like Machiavelli himself, contend only that there are enough egoists to make any other assumption unduly risky. All, however, emphasize the egoistic passions and self-interest in (international) politics. “It is above all important not to make greater demands upon human nature than its frailty can satisfy” (Treitschke 1916: 590). “It is essential not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a recent heresy and a very disastrous one” (Butterfield 1949: 47).

Most realists also recognize that “men are motivated by other desires than the urge for power and that power is not the only aspect of international relations” (Spykman 1942: 7). Thus Niebuhr couples his harsh doctrine of original sin with an insistence that “individuals are not consistently egoistic” (1944: 123). He even argues for “an adequate view of human nature, which does justice to both the heights and depths of human life” (1934: 113). Likewise, Morgenthau argues that “to do justice and to receive it is an elemental aspiration of man” (1970: 61). Kenneth

Thompson even contends that “man is at heart a moral being” and emphasizes “the insatiable quest of man for justice” (Thompson 1966: 4, 75; compare Carr 1946: 145).

Nonetheless, realists characteristically give *primary* emphasis to egoistic passions and “the tragic presence of evil in all political action” (Morgenthau 1946: 203). And because these passions are ineradicable, “conflict is inevitable” (Niebuhr 1932: xv). “It is profitless to imagine a hypothetical world in which men no longer organize themselves in groups for purposes of conflict” (Carr 1946: 231). Whatever their other disagreements, realists are unanimous in holding that human nature contains an ineradicable core of egoistic passions; that these passions define the central problem of politics; and that statesmanship is dominated by the need to control this side of human nature.

Realists also stress the political necessities that flow from international anarchy.⁴ In the absence of international government, “the law of the jungle still prevails” (Schuman 1941: 9). “The difference between civilization and barbarism is a revelation of what is essentially the same human nature when it works under different conditions” (Butterfield 1949: 31; compare Schuman 1941: 9; Spykman 1942: 141). Within states, human nature usually is tamed by hierarchical political authority and rule. In international relations, anarchy not merely allows but encourages the worst aspects of human nature to be expressed. “That same human nature which in happy conditions is frail, seems to me to be in other conditions capable of becoming hideous” (Butterfield 1949: 44).

The interaction of egoism and anarchy leads to “the overriding role of power in international relations” (Schwarzenberger 1951: 147) and requires “the primacy in all political life of power and security” (Gilpin 1986: 305). “The struggle for power is universal in time and space” (Morgenthau 1948: 17). “The daily presence of force and recurrent reliance on it mark the affairs of nations” (Waltz 1979: 186). “Security” thus means a somewhat less dangerous and less violent world, rather than a safe, just, or peaceful one. Statesmanship involves mitigating and managing, not eliminating, conflict.

The “negative” side of this “positive” emphasis on power and interest is skepticism over moral concerns in international relations. Ethical considerations and objectives, realists typically argue, must be subordinated to

⁴ Throughout I use “anarchy” as it is ordinarily used in the international relations literature; that is, in the literal sense of absence of rule, lack of government. As we shall see in greater detail in chapter 3, anarchy does *not* imply chaos, absence of order; it is simply the absence of “hierarchical” political order based on formal subordination and authority. Thus Hedley Bull (1977) describes international relations as taking place in an “anarchical society” of states.