

## **some theories of international relations**

# REALISM

The theory of classical realism (sometimes called the power-politics school) is derived from the following works: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (written approximately 500 BC); from the ancient Greeks, Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 431 BC); from Machiavelli (*The Prince* 1513); from Hobbes (*Leviathan* 1651); from Rousseau (*The State of War* 1755); from Clausewitz (*On War* 1827); from E.H. Carr (*The Twenty Years Crisis* 1939); and from Hans Morgenthau (*Politics Among Nations* 1948). Other contributors of note would include: Cardinal de Richelieu who coined the phrase "raison d'etat" during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), a French term meaning a nation's goals and ambitions and today somewhat synonymous with the phrase "national interest" and Otto von Bismarck who coined the term "realpolitik" (German for "politics of reality") as the Iron Chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890. Famous phrases include: "The strong do what they can and the weak do what they must" (Thucydides) and "Better feared than loved" (Machiavelli). Most conservative as well as hard-core Marxist approaches are ultimately derived from classical realism. Morgenthau's (1948) book is regarded as the "Bible of International Relations" on the subject, and Henry Kissinger is usually credited with introducing classical realism into American foreign policy from 1969 to 1977 as national security advisor and secretary of state. Morgenthau's (1948) definition of "power" is probably the most commonly cited meaning of the term across all social sciences -- power as the possession of control or command over others, the will to make others do what one desires. Morgenthau's theory of realism in international relations is based on a synthesis of six (6) principles, as follows:

1. International relations is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature
2. The main signpost of political realism is the concept of interest defined in terms of power
3. Interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid
4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action, but also aware of the tension between morality and politics
5. The moral aspirations of a particular nation cannot be identified with the moral laws that govern the universe
6. Realist politics is an autonomous sphere that needs to be analyzed as an entity, without being subordinated to any other sphere of human concern

Realism makes several important assumptions. It assumes that the international system is anarchic, in the sense that there is no authority above states capable of regulating their interactions, which is to say that states must arrive at relations with other states on their own, rather than being dictated to by some higher entity (i.e., no true authoritative world government exists). Realism also assumes that sovereign states, rather than international institutions, non-governmental organizations, or multinational corporations, are the primary actors in international affairs. Each state is seen as a rational actor who always pursues self-interest, and the primary goal of each state is to ensure its own security. In the pursuit of that security, states will attempt to amass resources, and relations between states are determined by their relative level of power in terms of military and economic capabilities. Military capabilities must be at least sufficient to deter attack, and strategic planning should be along lines of the worst-case scenario. For example, Kaplan's (2000) book, *The Coming Anarchy*, makes one of many points which can be paraphrased as follows: sometimes external mediation (force) is justified as the only remedy for the still-plenty places in the world where conceptions of "justice" come across to others as the wholesale, even violent, denial of justice.

There are two main subschools of realism: maximal realism and minimal realism. The theory of maximal realism holds that the most desirable position to be in is that of the hegemon, the most powerful entity in the world (also called being the superpower or

hyperpower). Under this theory, a situation where there is more than one superpower is an inherently unstable situation and one which will inevitably collapse into a more stable system until one nation eventually becomes the most powerful. The theory of minimal realism holds that it is possible to have two or more superpowers because of all the strategies possible in the alliances which can be made between non-hegemonic states who frequently enact policies of the moment (e.g., playing both sides against the middle). There are also challenges to orthodox realism posed by small states which have a striking capacity to defy expectations and counter power with superior commitment, tightly-knit domestic institutions, a shared ideology of social partnership, and an agenda as "norm entrepreneurs" (Ingebritsen et al. 2006).

## NEOREALISM

Waltz' neorealism (Waltz 1979), or what is sometimes called structural realism, is the most well-known version of neorealism, although some might say Buzan's (1993) version is a better refinement, or one might say Gaddis (1994) is the most popular. Neorealism is widely regarded as a more scientific approach than classical realism because it is capable of explaining puzzling behavior by states. The "neo" in the name of the theory reflects a belief that the structure of the international system itself (rather than the power and status characteristics of actors in the system) has the most influence on behavior, like the way market forces condition thinking, behavior, and interactions. Waltz (1979) is also concerned with explaining why the anarchic international system tends to reproduce itself, and he provides three (3) reasons: (1) the ordering principle of the system is anarchical not hierarchical, the absence of central authority leading to a self-help system where states compete for survival and security through military power, regardless if they want to or not; (2) the functional differentiation of the anarchic system is such that each state is a separate and autonomous unit, forced to realize its interests on its own because "no one else can be counted on;" and (3) the distribution of capabilities is unequal and shifting, defining the relative power of the states in terms of balance of power equations.

Under conditions of ubiquitous anarchy (like the assumption of continuous competition and conflict), states only have two choices: balance or bandwagon, and states almost always choose balance in the long term (they bandwagon in the short term) whenever the system grows calm. This is because for nations, the power of others is always a threat, not a lure, and times when the system grows calm is the time they move their pieces to balance the power of more powerful states.

Although both realism and neorealism share a fundamental belief that actors will act competitively, realism and neorealism have different implications for national security policy-making. Realism leads to power-oriented strategies with power as an end in itself. Neorealism leads to security-oriented strategies based on the need to compete for security. There are differences, also, between the two theories in terms of the role of uncertainty for war and peace. For realism, certainty leads to war since rational pursuit of power simplifies calculations for war. Also, since bipolarity gives more certainty than multipolarity, multipolarity leads to peace in classical realist theory. For neorealism, certainty leads to peace since with balance of power shifts, the world is made more anarchic and states tend to take more drastic measures (such as peace) to avoid miscalculation and reduce insecurity. According to neorealism, the term "security dilemma" describes the condition in which states, unsure of others' intentions, arm for the sake of security, setting in motion a vicious circle of response and counter-response. Security dilemmas result from situations, not from the states' desires, goals, or ambitions. Neorealists also talk about hegemony, or more precisely, post-hegemony (Keohane 1984), and the importance of avoiding threat assessment failure and sticking to principle when confrontations compromise sovereignty (many people think sovereignty is an outdated concept anyway), as Gaddis (2003) outlines the neorealist "outside-in" approach to reconciling order with justice.

# LIBERALISM

The theory of classic liberalism (to most Americans) is most directly traceable to John Locke (1632-1704), the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778), and American founding father Thomas Paine (1737-1809) who believed in the following idea -- that if you just give people as much freedom and liberty as possible, authoritarian political patterns would disappear, democracies would flourish, wars would never be fought, and world peace and prosperity would surely follow. Numerous proto-liberals exist [see Contributions to Liberal Theory], and the precise heritage of liberalism is debatable (Renaissance rational humanism or Enlightenment ideology), but most scholars would agree that Locke should probably come first in importance. (In contrast to conservative) the meaning of the word "liberal" traditionally refers to someone who is free, noble, and generous, and has a commitment to tolerance and the right of self-determination by individuals. Most dictionary definitions suffice, but connotations vary. In general and perhaps as more an ideal-type, liberals usually favor constitutional government, representative democracy, and collective rule of law.

Core beliefs tend to derive primarily from Lockean theory that free individuals themselves (if given economic and intellectual liberty) can and should form the basis of political order, without the need for government regulation, other than the government's responsibility to protect and promote the individuals making up that order. Adam Smith (1723-1790) expressed Lockean theory as "laissez-faire" economics where individuals structure moral and economic life without direction, enlightened self-interest harmonizes with the public good (the "invisible hand"), and nations which leave individuals free to follow their own initiative would be the strongest. The German philosopher Kant is sometimes brought into classic liberalism for his ethics of the categorical imperative (a categorical imperative is something that "commands" action without reference to any purpose or consequence), and also included are natural (human) rights theory and portions of Rousseau's Social Contract theory. Liberalism usually defines itself by contrast, and Marxist ideas are not usually incorporated, except selectively, if at all. Libertarianism is the name given to an opposing (yet derived from the same heritage) philosophy of minimal government regulation in freedom and where the government is held to the same moral standards as individuals. Neoliberalism is the name given to strands of thought separate from (yet connected with) "commercial" liberalism (the linking of free trade with peace), "republican" liberalism (the linking of democracy and peace), "sociological" liberalism (theories of international integration), and (opposed to) anti-capitalist ideologies (like Marxism, socialism, anarchism, and fascism). Neoconservatives are conservatives who were once liberals. The four (4) core beliefs of classic liberalism in international relations have been aptly summarized by Evans & Newnham (1998) as including the following:

- peace can best be secured through the spread of democratic institutions on a world-wide basis
- a natural harmony of interests (the "invisible hand") will ensure people and states make rational calculations which make national interest and international interest one and the same
- if disputes occur, they should be settled by established judicial procedures under the rule of law
- collective security would replace notions of self-help

These core beliefs may need some elaboration. First of all, it should be noted that some IR scholars refer to classic liberalism (and neoliberalism) as "institutional" liberalism precisely because of the focus on spreading democratic institutions. Regime theory, technically a subfield of study in Treaty Law, is also a liberal (and pluralist or consensus-oriented) strand of thought. Secondly, liberalism holds that state preferences, rather than state capabilities, are the primary determinants of state behavior, and the analogy is carried over into the domestic level regarding individual motivations. What makes the "invisible hand" work is

tolerance of preferences, along with democratic institutions like "enlightened" educational institutions which promote rational calculations among both individuals and states that "war doesn't pay." Preferences may vary from state to state, depending on culture, economic system, and type of government. Governments make war, however, not people, so the best hope for peace is democracy (as the highest form of expressing the popular will of the people who will surely choose peace - a self-evident proposition based on reason and natural law). Thirdly, the rule of law is just as applicable to states as it is to people, and a voluntary system of international organizations ought to exist fulfilling the functions of a legislature, an executive, and most of all, a judiciary while preserving tolerance for as much freedom and independence among states as possible. Fourthly, just as it is always possible to identify aggressors and belligerents, it should always be possible to put together an effective coalition of law-abiding states to oppose such violators. Collective security is a Kantian idea as much a part of classic liberalism in this regard, and one can easily see that liberalism is part of the theoretical foundation upon which organizations known as the League of Nations and the United Nations were built.

Liberals can be distinguished as to whether they are (a) interventionist; or (b) non-interventionist. The first school, interventionists, believe, as Woodrow Wilson, American President from 1913 to 1921, did that war on behalf of the liberal ideal may occasionally be necessary to rid the world of illiberal and persistent opponents. Although progress is historically inevitable, sometimes it is necessary to help it out. Liberal interventionists are especially opposed to totalitarianism in all its forms, and justify war mainly in terms of just war theory. A related strand is "positive" liberalism, where the concern is whether people have "positive" freedoms (freedom to, expression e.g.) as well as "negative" freedoms (freedom from, crime e.g.), but it is unclear, on the basis of theory alone, whether intervention is justifiable in this case. The second school, non-interventionists, believe that liberalism should spread on the basis of historical inevitability alone, without any help by its adherents, particularly its most prominent proponent, the United States of America. Non-interventionism should not be confused with isolationism, whereby the latter is technically the avoidance of alliances altogether. Instead, non-interventionists usually advocate containment -- a middle ground between the two schools -- for the ultimate defeat of illiberalism on moral and/or economic grounds. Neoliberalism in many ways is an extension of this idea that the appropriate battlefield is the marketplace and/or moral high ground. Critics of liberalism (and there have been many) generally zero in on the ambivalence in almost all liberal theories over coming to terms with the use of force (for exactly what reasons and for what ends). Other critics challenge the spirit of moral omnipotence and self-righteousness that is prevalent in much liberal thinking. The second line of criticism makes for a lot of stalemate and anti-Americanism in the world, especially among competitive superpower players.

## NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is institutional liberalism that distinguishes itself by contrast and/or selective inclusion with the ideas of "commercial" liberalism (the linking of free trade with peace), "republican" liberalism (the linking of democracy and peace), and "sociological" liberalism (theories of international integration). The more inclusive theories, according to Baldwin (1993), tend to be the best challengers to realist/neorealist orthodoxy, and neoliberalism is best understood as opposed to realism/neorealism orthodoxy (its war-mongering and militaristic thrusts). According to Kegley (1988), the classical realist world view places moral standards subservient to the power concerns of international actors. In their favor, some realists sometimes address the issue of morality with seriousness and concern. However, neorealist thinking embraces the ultimate conclusion of realist premises that statesmen never act according to moral precepts thus such concerns need not be addressed by a political theory. Strongly opposed to this is the neoliberal position (sometimes called the neoidealist position) that states consistently act according to values more than power

concerns. Neorealism ignores these factors, and neoliberalism (or neoidealism) seeks to expand the notion of self-interest to include the moral sphere.

Neoliberalism defines "security" in broad terms, often arguing that factors such as health, welfare, and environmental issues need to be included in institution-building efforts, whether passive (non-interventionist) or active (interventionist). Thompson (1989) points out that the literature on "declinism" (the idea that nation-states have declined in importance as actors) is a fundamental underpinning of neoliberalism. The result of declinism is a quasi-anarchic system where "absolute" (rather than relative) gains need to be advocated as mitigating strategies in order to get nation-states to fulfill the essential functions they ought to be fulfilling for their citizens. Keohane & Nye (2000) point out that most neoliberals advocate a mixed-actor model called the theory of interdependence. This theory is based on the complex spillover effects possible for change toward world governance (by norms, rules, processes, and institutions) when one-dimensional militaristic solutions are abandoned and reliance is, instead, placed upon the possibilities when other actors are involved, like international organizations, transnational organizations, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and MNCs (multinational corporations).

## OTHER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

So far, this has only been a brief overview of the dominant perspectives in the field. Critical and "other" perspectives exist in the field, including behavioralism (the social science approach), world systems theory, critical theory, postmodernism, and feminism. Such perspectives have made, and continue to make, valuable contributions and/or inroads to the field. Critical perspectives vary, but the standard historian's critique (see Ellis 2001 or Gaddis 2003) is that policy based on theories which reify words over deeds (failing to back up words with deeds and/or being hypocritical) often becomes a failed or morally troubled policy. The following points have been or can be made toward an elaboration of some other perspectives.

### Behavioralism --

Behavioralism is the term commonly used (but not always) for when interdisciplinary borrowing takes place (of ideas, concepts, models, theories, or methods) from one of the other fields in social science; e.g., sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc. Usually, the purpose is to develop an IR theory which better explains some phenomenon, some aspect of a phenomenon, or sheds better light on a level of analysis like the macro (system, subsystem, unit) or micro (bureaucracy, individual) dimension (Singer 1969) where unit refers to the nation-state level of analysis only. Behavioralist theories tend to be eclectic, cross-level, and some are cutting-edge while most are at least an attempt to expand the boundaries of the discipline. They are distinguishable by either a heavy empirical research thrust and/or a heavy discursive critique of the "classical" tradition in IR (the philosophy-political theory tradition that doesn't really reach out to disciplines other than history, philosophy, and political theory for insight). The behavioralist critique, as a movement, reached its peak in the 1960s as an "American School" of IR in contrast to the "English School" of IR. Some fresh ideas, or paradigms, were developed, and some lasted while other's didn't (Groom & Light 1994). In the 1990s, behavioralism resurfaced, and Walker (1993) is typical of modern behavioralists who jumped on the 1989 bandwagon, explained below.

Nineteen eighty-nine (1989) was a year of historical ruptures that altered the map of international relations forever. In that year, the two halves of Germany were reunited, and communism collapsed. By the way, Evans & Newnham (1998) claim that most IR scholars believe communism collapsed of its own accord rather than due to the resolute determination of U.S. foreign policy, and this point may be debatable. In retrospect, it can be argued, of course, that the writing was on the wall with Solidarity movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and with the Gorbachev Doctrine of openness and non-intervention,

but political (conservatism) and cultural trends toward a more accelerated lifestyle in America may have played a part. A focus on cultural factors that are not the properties of states but produced by interactions, institutions, norms, and cultures is called constructivism in IR theory and is normally a part of the "English School" along with regime theory (see Wendt 1992). The ending of bipolarity with dissolution of the Cold War had numerous repercussions. The U.N., for example, enjoyed a resurgence (and was able to launch an effective coalition against Iraq's attempted annexation of Kuwait in 1990 - the "Mother of all battles" or the First Gulf War). The year 1989 provided much intellectual fodder for IR theory, and the concept of "New World Order" (President Bush's speech in September 1990) provided the opportunity for dramatic changes in political thought. The concept of New World Order is not new. Similar speeches were made in 1815, 1918, and 1946, but President Bush in September 1990 was promising "a new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the quest for peace, an era in which nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony." Behavioralists usually embrace this conception of New World Order while traditional realists/neorealists are more pessimistic about it, claiming the collapse of communism has unleashed numerous centrifugal forces in the form of pent-up ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Scholars and policy-makers alike are currently working to explain the confusing patterns of post-1989 fragmentation and integration in the world today. In the meantime, the events of 9/11 (September 11, 2001) have fueled the intellectual landscape with even more complications, and frankly left the discipline of IR in flux.

## World Systems Theory --

World systems theory (Wallerstein 1974) is a grand sociological, Marxist-inspired, dependency theory (Chirot & Hall 1982) approach to the study of world politics, although some would say it's only a perspective for looking at the world. From Marxism, the influences are historical materialism, the concern for totality, the transitory nature of some social forms, the centrality of competitive class struggle, and the dialectics of contradiction. From dependency theory, the influences are a neo-Marxist critique of economic development, particularly in Third World countries, and Latin American liberation theology. The critique is primarily against the world capitalist system where the processes behind this kind of economic development are seen as being the structural causes of inequalities, asymmetries, an exploitative international division of labour, and exploitation between relations among core, periphery and semi-periphery states. The unit of analysis is the world-system rather than unit states, which is what distinguishes world-systems analysis from other approaches that are less global and less longitudinal. Wallerstein (1974: 347) defines a world system as: "a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence. Its life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an organism, in that it has a life-span over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others. One can define its structures as being at different times strong or weak in terms of the internal logic of its functioning." The theory has prompted a somewhat extensive publishing and empirical research enterprise to spring up in academe, and continues to attract adherents from time to time in sociology and political science departments, with the Journal of World-Systems Research being the most popular outlet for ideas. An Internet book review of Wallerstein's book can be found, along with Professors' notes (pdf) explaining the approach and various other Wallerstein resource pages. There are as many critics of world systems theory as there are devoted adherents to it.

## Critical Theory --

There are a variety of critical approaches in IR, but almost all "critical theorists" hold to the belief that all theories are for someone and for some purpose. Critical theorists, therefore,

try to merge or connect knowledge and practice (called praxis), fact and value, and the knower and the known. Such epistemological contributions are not only an alternative to traditional positivist methods of problem solving, but reflect a commitment to emancipation, peace, freedom, and cooperation as core concepts and/or variables of interest. Behavioralists also tend to focus on epistemology (how knowledge is generated) and ontology (the nature of being or existence), similar to critical or conflict theories in criminology. Prof. Andrew Linklater (1990) is probably the most well-known proponent of critical theories of international relations. Some critical theorists are postmodernists while others are not. Postmodern critical theorists tend to critique modernity and modernity's notions of inevitable progress in the name of reason and technocratic application of scientific knowledge to world problems. The hard-core Marxist view, of course, is that the basic task is not to interpret the world, but to change it (also part of praxis). Other critical theorists are deconstructionists, who tend to critique or take apart other theories (mostly liberal/neoliberal theories) in order to find and open up "discursive spaces" where an important dialogue might have been missed. It is debateable whether critical theory has made significant contributions to the field other than to make it more introspective.

## Feminist Theory --

There are a variety of feminist approaches in IR, but almost all feminist theories hold that gender is of cardinal importance and it matters that almost all IR theories have been constructed by men. Realism, for example, is the frequent target of feminist critique because, among other things, it is seen as a male-dominated theory about the aggressive world of states controlled by aggressive men (Tickner 1992). Non-violence is therefore an important part of the feminist commitment to world peace. Feminists in IR sometimes claim that the world would be a less competitive and less violent place if women gained dominance in positions of power. The feminist approach attempts to critique IR theory at its core (attacking basic concepts like sovereignty, boundaries, and the meaning of being "civilized"), and it also attempts to open up new topics and horizons (e.g., the problems of women facing system transformations). A couple of important underpinning feminist arguments are that unity can be found in difference and that the personal is the political. A few feminists are postmodernists or deconstructionists, but the approach is so diverse and new that it is safer to say that there are as many feminisms as there are feminist people.