



Grand Theories of International Relations

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Reminders

- Prompt 2 due Thursday night.



Today's Class

- Recap
- Grand Theories and Their Use
- Shift To Midrange Theories



What are the Grand Theories of IR? How
are these theories used in IR today?



Key Terms

- Realism
- Liberalism
- Constructivism
- Midrange Theory



Foundational Concepts

- Politics: process by which scarce resources are allocated.
- Anarchy: no central authority above states in international politics.
- States: sovereign central authorities over a given territory with a monopoly on the use of force.
- Institutions: common sets of rules that order interactions.
- **International system/international order**: the way states fit together into a system, usually defined by **power**.



- **Power:** the ability of one actor to get another actor to do something they would not ordinarily do.
- Where does power come from?
 - Military resources
 - Economic size and diversity
 - Territory
 - Population
 - Fungibility (ability to turn the above into military strength)
- But where do those resources come from to begin with?
- The state's ability to organize and tax within its territory, enabling it to mobilize these resources when needed.
 - “War makes the state, and the state makes war” (Tilly 1979)



- How do you exercise power?
 - Persuasion
 - Rewards
 - Threats
 - Non-violent punishments (sanctions, tariffs, etc.)
 - War
- How to tell when one state is more powerful? Hard to quantify, but political scientists have tried.



Correlates of War Project: CINC Scores

- Correlates of War (COW) was started in 1963 by J. David Singer at the University of Michigan.
- Goal: systematic accumulation of scientific knowledge about war.
- Has since developed many useful quantitative conflict datasets (ex: Militarized Interstate Disputes; CINC Scores).
- CINC scores attempt to measure a state's military power.



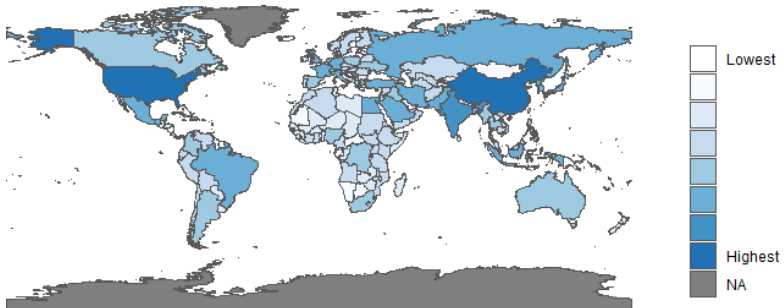
Correlates of War Project: CINC Scores

- CINC scores aggregate 6 indicators:
 - Military expenditure
 - Military personnel
 - Energy consumption
 - Iron and steel production
 - Urban population
 - Total population
- Higher CINC scores (in theory) indicate greater military power.



2016 Global CINC Scores

2016 CINC Scores





Explaining International Relations

- All grand theories implicitly or explicitly draw on assumptions about human nature.
- The type of explanation a theory gives is heavily influenced by this starting assumption.
- **“Grand theories” attempted to explain everything about the international system, including how and why states wielded their power.**
- They have fallen from popularity in recent years, but they still have useful components.
- Most importantly, our ideas for how to explain world politics are built out of the elements of the grand theories, and informed by their failures.



Structure of This Lecture

- What does the theory assume about human nature?
- What are its core components?
- Where did it come from?
- How was it useful?
- How has it failed?
- Running example: US decision to invade Iraq in 2003.



“International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.”

-Hans Morgenthau



- Assumption about human nature: other people can never be trusted.
- Thus, no actor can ever be sure they are safe.
- The only way to ensure safety is through physical force (to have a strong military).
- States, because of sovereignty, are the basic units that control militaries.
- Therefore, states are the only actors that matter in world politics, because only they can guarantee this core need of safety via military power.



- States thus become the primary unit of analysis, and are viewed as the only actors that matter in our theories of politics.
- States are assumed to be constantly focused on survival via increasing their security and power.
- To improve their security, they must improve military power.
- States interact in an anarchic world, with violence always possible.
- Therefore, all world politics is bargaining under the shadow of conflict.



Realism: Security Dilemmas

- States in a realist world often find themselves trapped in a **security dilemma**: defensive improvements to their military power due to this anarchy and uncertainty cause other states to fear those improvements will be used to attack them, leading those other states to improve their military capabilities.
- Those improvements cause the first state to feel threatened, leading to arms races and potentially war.



- A main prediction of realism is **Balance of Power Theory**: Weaker states will improve their security by forming a balance of power, banding together with each other to “balance” against stronger ones.
- Another core assumption (borrowed from game theory and economics) is that states can be theorized as rational actors.
- Structural factors of the international system mean that states in similar positions will behave similarly regardless of their domestic institutions.



In sum: international relations is a Hobbesian state of nature in which every state is constantly measuring itself against others in terms of their ability to win wars. Rules, norms, institutions, even individuals don't matter - all that matters are states and security.

- Note how this sidelines international institutions and economic considerations.



History of Realist Thought

- This pessimistic view of human relations is very old and very well-established.
- Thucydides (460—400 BCE): “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”
- Niccolò Machiavelli (1469—1527 CE): “Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.”
- Carl von Clausewitz (1780—1831 CE): “War is nothing but a continuation of politics by other means.”



Where does modern Realism come from?



The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. The popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman's thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil.

— *Hans Morgenthau* —

Hans Morgenthau (1904—1980), especially *Politics Among Nations* (1948)



Where does modern Realism come from?



Kenneth Waltz (1924—2013), especially *Theory of International Politics* (1979)



How useful is Realism?

- Guides policymakers on avoiding war by assuming the worst (ideally).
- Explains competition between great powers as due to insecurity.
 - Cold War
 - US—China?
- Iraq War: The centrality of military strength explains why the US was willing to resort to war against a weaker foe.



How has Realism failed?

- Internal flaw: Might assuming the worst make you less secure? Does this just trap states in a Prisoner's Dilemma of assuming the worst in any situation, missing opportunities for cooperation?
- External flaws:
 - Completely failed to predict the fall of the USSR (major reputational blow).
 - Cannot describe why non-state actors (e.g. terrorists) are important.
 - Ignores role of international institutions as well as economic interests.
 - Indeterminate Balance of Power predictions.
- Iraq War:
 - Cannot explain why the U.S. was willing to use military might **at that moment**.



“States do not typically cooperate out of altruism or empathy with the plight of others... They seek wealth and security for their own people, and search for power as a means to those ends.”

-Robert Keohane



- Assumption about human nature: humans are basically trustworthy but also self-serving.
- Thus, humans care not only about their safety but also their welfare (generating wealth).
- Thus, humans need both military security and economic growth.
- Therefore, states are still the most important actors, but they are no longer the only actors worth examining.
- Scholars must also account for other actors that are relevant for the economy.
- **International institutions are particularly important. Why?**



- The primary goal of states is to amass wealth and grow their economy.
- International institutions can help with this, as they enable cooperation between states by setting rules and sharing information.
- Economic interactions are generally about making both sides better off.
- Thus, world politics is primarily about finding ways to enable cooperation.



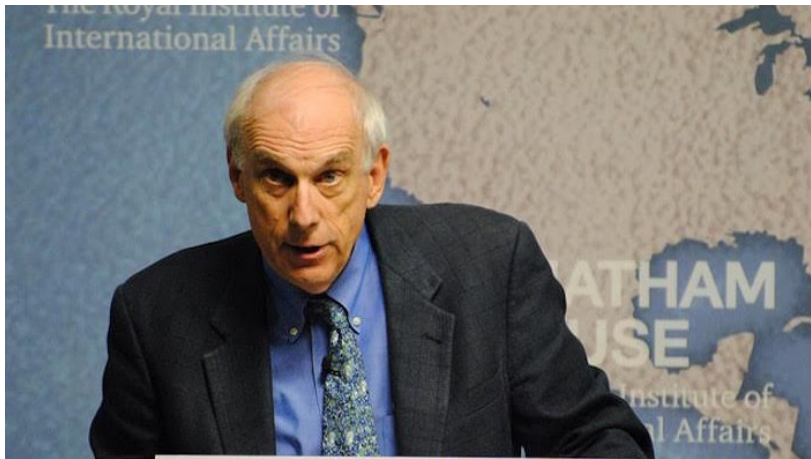
- What about security?
- Wealth is required for any military, so even though states can care about security, they need to focus on gathering wealth to ensure their security.
- States here are no longer solely focused on military power as the source of all strength.
- Thus, the international system is shaped not only by military power but also by economic power.



- This focus on international economic activity means this theory accepts that non-state actors that have economic importance (international institutions, companies, domestic institutions) can influence international relations.
- In sum: IR is about states as the primary - but not only - actors, trying to cooperate for economic gains. Conflict is ultimately the result of a failure to find a way to cooperate.



Where does Liberalism come from?



Robert Keohane (b. 1941), especially *After Hegemony* (1984)



How useful is Liberalism?

- Incorporates other issues (esp. economics) that are clearly important to states besides security.
- Helps to explain why international institutions exist at all.
- Iraq War
 - Explains why Bush and his administration tried to get UN approval before invading.



How has Liberalism failed?

- Overlooks the importance of zero-sum bargaining in politics.
- Still cannot explain any real variations in outcomes in the international system.
- Iraq War: Doesn't explain why the US decided to invade despite failing to get approval from the UN (an international institution).



“Anarchy is what states make of it.”

-Alexander Wendt



- Assumption about human nature: it is socially constructed.
- Human society, including IR, is all socially constructed.
This includes anarchy.
- The state is socially constructed from warfare, so it has a central place in world politics.
- Thus, world politics is what states choose to make it, and there is no overriding logic for how states must behave.
- State behavior is shaped by the norms, beliefs, and identity of those within the state rather than just power considerations.



- Actors do what they think is appropriate (they follow rules).
- Ideas define the rules, so the rules can change over time as new ideas take root.
- Therefore, other actors besides states are extremely relevant for creating the ideas that drive the construction of the system.
- International institutions and transnational actor networks (like non-governmental advocacy groups) can help create or change norms that constrain state behavior.



- Critiques the assumption of the other two theories that anarchy is inherently threatening.
- Argues that there is no inherent reason why lack of central authority is a problem.
- Fears of violence and the need for security under anarchy are **assumptions** humans bring to the situation, not inherent aspects of the situation.



In sum: behavior in international relations is defined by rules, and rules are changed by ideas. Actors that influence ideas - states, institutions, transnational actors - influence world politics.



Where does Constructivism come from?



Alexander Wendt (b. 1958), especially *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999)



How useful is Constructivism?

- Oftentimes very descriptively accurate.
- Focus on ideas clarifies a focus on who has the power to set rules.
- Adds stronger emphasis on the influence of non-state actors in spreading ideas.
- Can explain how norms and practices change over time.
- Iraq War: suggests that the invasion occurs because the primary actors were driven by ideals.
 - US view of democracy as the best form of government.
 - US should rectify human rights abuses of Hussein's regime.
 - United States as the enforcer of world order.



How has Constructivism failed?

- If human nature can be anything, this framework becomes so expansive as to explain very little of interest.
- How often do these rules really change?
- Politics is especially difficult to study if you're concerned about actors' ideas and self-perceptions.
- Iraq War:
 - Again: why the invasion now?
 - How to explain all the materialistic rhetoric leading into the war?



Where Are the Grand Theories Now?

- So, where are these grand theories now?
- While some still have adherents, most political scientists would not exclusively identify with any one of these camps.
- Why?



The Fatal Flaw

- Each of these theories draws its explanatory power from factors which either don't change or are so expansive as to be useless analytically. Each struggles to explain changes in the international system (Snyder 2004).
 - Realism: If anarchy is constant, why does war happen in some cases but not others? If states are the only actors that matter, why do they spend so much time worrying about institutions? Why do specific balances of power form?
 - Liberalism: Why does cooperation fail sometimes? What does drive conflict in some cases but cooperation in others?
 - Constructivism: What drives human assumptions anyway?



The Fatal Flaw

- Each of these grand theories struggled to explain why the Cold War ended, and why it ended the way it did.
- **More fundamentally, their focus on the international system meant a lack of variance: the basic structure of the international order does not change much or frequently, but we observe lots of differing outcomes for states within that order.**



Shift to Midrange Theory

- General realization by political scientists that each of these theories had flaws, while failing to explain different outcomes at the state level.
- Despite these flaws, they also recognized that these theories contained useful elements.
- Thus, there was a shift away from “grand” explanations of the entire international system to more “midrange” explanations of specific phenomena.
 - Types of war, specific economic interactions, etc.



So, what did political scientists keep from these grand theories?

- From Realism: states as primary actors, importance of security, anarchy, strategic interactions.
- From Liberalism: ability of international institutions to influence states, importance of economic activity, importance of nonstate actors like corporations.
- From Constructivism: importance of the influence of starting assumptions.



Midrange Theory Sampler

What are some successful midrange theories?

- Bargaining model of war
- Models of violence in civil wars
- Theories of terrorism
- Impact of domestic factors on both war and trade
- Domestic and international political economy