



REALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

¹USIEMURE, Oghenerioborue Christopher

and

²GBIGBIDJE, David Lawson

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the realist theory of International Relations and attempts an explanation of how it illuminates our understanding of inter-state relations. We analyse the key assumptions of the realist theory and look at the main criticisms of the theory with the purpose of establishing how relevant it is to the study of International Relations and world problems today. The thematic, chronological methods and secondary sources are employed in the gathering and presentation of data. The researchers conclude that, despite its criticisms, realism remains a key theory in explaining international relations issue.

Keywords: Usiemure, realism, theory, Sandrina, Antunes, critique

INTRODUCTION

In his article, "Realism," published in Encyclopedia Britannica, Duncan Bell attempts a definition of realism. According to him, "Realism is a set of related theories of international relations that emphasises the role of the state, national interest and military power in world politics."¹ Also Sandrina Antunes and Isabel Camisao note that, realism "is a school of thought that emphasises the competitive and conflictual side of international relations."² Suffice it to say here, that available literatures show that, there is no single coherent definition of realism.

Perhaps, this is why Jack Donnelly, emphasised that, "realism is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions."³ For Jack Donnelly,

realism is a general orientation. Gilpin, quoted by Jack Donnelly also views it as a “philosophical orientation.”⁴

Realism as a theory of International Relations underscores the notion that states work to increase their own power relative to other states. It is a theory which presents power as the only certainty in world politics. A powerful state, by military power, will always out-do its weaker competitors. Realism stresses the limitations on international politics imposed by nature of man and the absence of international government, which combine to make international relations largely a realm of power and interest.⁶

Jack Donnelly writes: “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; that the statesmanship is dominated by the need to control this side of human nature.”⁷

THE MAIN ASSUMPTIONS OF REALISM

An authority, Kelly-Kate S. Pease, a Professor of International Relations, identifies four major assumptions of the realist theory of international relations as follow:

Realists believe that, the state is the most important actor in international politics. This has been the position since 1648, during the Treaty of Westphalia or the Peace of Westphalia where a number of European states converged to end various wars like the thirty years war. They accepted the idea of state sovereignty during this meeting, whereby no outside actor can dictate the domestic or foreign policies of another state. Since the peace of Westphalia, many realists have argued that, states, by their military and economic power wield much influence in international politics. While they argue that state is

the most powerful actor, realists view individual and non-government organisations as lacking the military power required to compete with states in the international system.

Another assumption of the realist theory of international relations is that, the state is a unitary and rational actor.⁸ National interests, particularly in times of war, lead the state to speak and act with one voice.⁹ A single actor, the state is capable of identifying goals and preferences and determining their relative importance. The state is able to engage in a cost-benefit analysis and choosing optimal strategies for achieving its goals. In the realist view, since the state is a unitary actor, domestic differences are not almost as important as the state. The realists submit that, “regardless of any internal differences, the unified position will be one that is of the interest of the state.”¹⁰

Third, realists believe that the international system is conflictual. In other words, international politics is characterised by tension and conflicts.¹¹ The realists usually give two reasons for this. One, that the international system is anarchical. By this the realists mean there is no supranational authority which regulates the conduct and behaviour of states within the international system. Because the system is in anarchy, states must be vigilant, against other states, since a state is basically concerned with achieving political power. According to the work of Holsti, realists call this a “self-help system” where “one nation’s search for security often leaves its current and potential adversaries insecure.” Any state that struggles for absolute security leaves all other states in the system absolutely insecure and it can provide a powerful incentive for arms-races and other types of hostile interactions.

The fourth assumption of the realists is akin to the foregoing which according to Kelly-Kate Pease is that states are perpetually locked against one another in a struggle for power and security. Anarchy compels states to arm themselves to

self-defence. Acquisition of arm on the other hand, is a provocative act. Other states must respond in a like manner or risk attack or even destruction. This response leaves the first state no better off than it was before, so it must acquire even better weapons to counter the threat. The other state in turn responds. And the struggle continues. Therefore, the realists posit that anarchy leads to arms-balancing behaviour on the part of states. States with good and kind leaders will engage in the same kind of behaviour as selfish and evil leaders because they exist in the same global system. Thus states desire power to ensure self-preservation. The behaviours and actions of these states are geared towards the propagation of their self-interest. There can be no middle ground or moderation with regard to magnitude of power accumulation. A state either possesses power or not at all.

In the light of the above, realists believe that when there is a power imbalance, the possibility of war is high since the powerful state can attack weaker state, without much penalty, if any at all. The realists therefore argue that, the balance of power prevents wars. States that are balanced would be less likely to attack and fight one another.

One basic concept under realism is the international distribution of power termed system polarity. It refers to the number of blocs of states that exert power in the international system. A multipolar system is composed of three or more blocs, a bipolar system is made of two blocs, and a unipolar system is dominated by a single power or sovereign.

Under unipolarity, realists predict that states will band together to oppose the hegemon and restore a balance of power. Even though, based on realist theory, all states seek hegemony to ensure their security; other states in the system are incentivised to prevent the emergence of a hegemon by balancing.¹¹

Duncan Bell discusses two most distinctive strands of realism, which are classical realism and neo-realism. Classical realism frequently claims to draw on old tradition of political thought. Among authors usually cited by realists are Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jaques Rousseau and Max Weber.¹² However, it should be noted here that, as Sandrina Antunes and Isabel Camisao rightly point out, authors like Thucydides were not realists because International Relations theory did not exist in named form until the 20th Century. But when looking back from present vantage point, theorists found some similarities in the thought patterns and behaviours of the ancient world and the modern world. They cite the earlier writings of authors mentioned above to lend weight to the notion that there was a timeless theory running through all recorded human history. That theory is named realism.¹³ Realism emerged as a self-conscious movement in the mid-20th century. It was inspired by the British political scientist and historian E.H. Carr.¹⁴

Carr criticised what he saw as the dangerous and misleading idealism of liberal internationalists especially, their assumption on progress through the setting up of international institutions, like the League of Nations. He paid attention to the perpetual role of power and self interest in determining state conduct.¹⁵ The outbreak of World War II made many scholars embraced classical realism. Realism as an International Relations theory was given boost by a host of European immigrant scholars. Most notable among whom was the Germany-Born political scientist and historian, Hans Morgenthau.¹⁶ It is realism as espoused by Carr, Morgenthau and their followers, that has become known as classical realism. Classical realists were united by that which they criticised: the optimism and explanatory ambition of liberal internationalists.¹⁷ They emphasised instead, the various obstacles to progress and change that they believe are innate in human nature.¹⁸

Neorealism on the other hand was the theoretical contribution of Kenneth Waltz. It is an attempt to translate some of the basic insights of classical realism into the language and methods of modern social science.

It is also referred to as a structural realism. Neorealism stresses that states decision are arrived at by a simple formula rather than being based on human nature. For the Neorealists, states are limited by existing in an anarchic international system (the structure). Again the neorealists believe that any action states take is based on their relative power when measured against other powers.¹⁹ Kenneth Waltz indeed provides this strand of realism that recommends that theorists should assess the characteristics of the international system for answers instead of delving into weaknesses in human nature.²⁰ Kenneth Waltz's variables of international anarchy, how much power a state has, etc can be empirically measured unlike the philological views of human nature classical realists based their propositions.²¹

CRITIQUE OF REALISM

Critics have questioned the realist theory of international relations on various grounds. As J.C. Johari points out, pure realism can offer nothing but a naked struggle for the power which makes any kind of international society impossible.²² Propositions of the non-cooperative and egoistic nature of men, and of anarchy in the international system are nods given to leaders to act based on suspicions, power and amorality.²³ Hence some critics describe realism as self-fulfilling prophecy. Realism is also being accused of being extremely pessimistic because it views the confrontational aspect of the global system as unavoidable. Realists argue that leaders can do little to overcome the reality of power politics since they are constantly faced with constraints and few chances for co-operation.²⁴ So the realists replied to critics who accused them or being extremely pessimistic predicament is not pessimism –it is prudence.

Critics also point out that, the inability of the realists to explain or predict the end of the cold war in 1991, is a major short-coming. With the end of the cold war came a rapid transformation in world politics which offered a new period of reduced competition between states and many opportunities for cooperation.²⁵ According to Christian Scheinphy, this change brought in a positive view of international politics that ebbed away realist theory as cold thinking.²⁶

Again, realism is said to have focused too much on the state as a solid entity, and overlooking other actors and factors within the state as well as issues not directly connected to the preservation of the state.

For instance, end of the cold War was a product of rebellion of the ordinary citizens of socialist-dominated nations in Eastern part of Europe against existing power structures. The acts of ordinary citizens (or international organisations) have no principal place in the reckonings of realism. It is as a result of the state-centric thinking that realism is built upon. It sees states as concrete pool balls bouncing about a table – never stopping “to look inside each pool ball to see what it comprises” and why it moves the way it does.²⁷ Realists acknowledge the vitality of this criticisms but rather view incidents as the end of the Cold War and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union as exceptions to usual patterns.²⁸

One of the main realists’ strategies in the management of international politics, termed the balance of power has also been questioned by several critics. “Balance of power” suggests a situation where states are always making choices to improve their own “capabilities while undermining the capabilities of others. This brings about some kind of balancing though no state is allowed to become too powerful in the international system. If a state attempts to grow too much, like Nazi Germany in the 1930s, war will break out, because other powers in the system will form an alliance to try to defeat it i.e. restore balance

of power. Realists describe the balance of power as a wise tactic to regulate an insecure world. However critics view it as a way of legitimizing war and aggression.²⁹

Despite the above weaknesses of realism pointed out by critics, it remains central in the study of International Relations Theory. More also realism continues to offer insight about global policy-making as it offers tools of statecraft to policy-makers.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Realists are unified by the theories of the nation-state as the principal actor in world politics, national sovereignty, security, survival and state's interests as the ultimate goal. Realism stresses balance of power and alliance in a state of anarchy as a strategy for managing war, matching terror with terror and dominance. The main assumptions of realism are: the international system is anarchic, that is in a way dangerous; states are rational and unitary actors, states are the major actors in the international system, states while struggling for survival have to follow the principle of self-help. This makes cooperation less likely and not stable. E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and John Meisheamer are usually credited with the development of the realist theory.

E.H. Carr, though a realist himself wrote: “

But we cannot ultimately find a resting place in pure realism, for realism though logically overwhelming does not provide us with the springs of action which are necessary even to the pursuit of thought.³¹

The above brings to the fore one major short-comings of realism in addition to the fact that it fails to predict the end of the cold War and how it ended.

Despite its criticisms realism is one of the major theories of international Relations. It arguably offers the most powerful explanation for the state of war; and the rise and fall of great powers.

ENDNOTES

1. Duncan Bell, "Realism" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
2. Sandrina Antunes and Isabel Camisao, "Realism" in Stephen Mcghinchey et al. (eds), *International Relations Theory*.
3. Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations," in Scott Burchill et al (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, Basingstoke Hampshire UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
4. Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations,"
5. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*, New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 2009, P.200
6. K.J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979, P. 29.
7. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939*.
8. J.H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*, Chicago: Chicago University press, 1951, P. 18.
9. James Dougherty, *Contending Issues in International Relations Global Politics*.
10. Klans Segbers, et al., *How to use and Apply Theories of International Relations*, retrieved from <http://www.oei.fuberlin.de/politik/publikationen/AP56.pdf>, 04/04/2018
11. "Realism in International Relations," http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/, retrieved on 04/04/2018
12. Sandrina Antunes and Isabel Camisao, "Realism"

13. "Realism in International Relations,"
http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/,
retrieved on 04/04/2018
14. "Realism in International Relations,"
http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/,
retrieved on 04/04/2018
15. "Realism in International Relations,"
http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/,
retrieved on 04/04/2018
16. "Realism in International Relations,"
http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/,
retrieved on 04/04/2018
17. "Realism in International Relations,"
http://internationalrelations.org/realism_in_international_relations/,
retrieved on 04/04/2018
18. J.H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*,
19. J.H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*,
20. J.H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*,
21. Klans Segbers, et al., *How to use and Apply Theories of International Relations*
22. Klans Segbers, et al., *How to use and Apply Theories of International Relations*
23. Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations,"
24. Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations,"
25. Duncan Bell, "Realism"
26. Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations,"
27. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*,
28. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*,
29. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*,
30. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*,
31. J.C. Johari, *International Relations and Politics (Theoretical Perspective in the Post Cold War Era)*