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Theories of international relations

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THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Essay

QUESTION: 'Can we still say that Realism is the dominant IR theory?'

ESSAY: 'International system and Realism: the theory's answer to evolving international relations'.

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1 – Introduction

Global society is going through relentless transformations as different concerns and threats arise. The end of the Cold War has brought to the fore ancient ethnic rivalries, with sectarian nationalist movements mushrooming in former Soviet Union states. Bipolarity, according to realists, has kept the world safe from a major scale nuclear encounter, whereas liberal assertions related to the spread of universalist values as a means to increase the prospects for peace are still very influential. In an ever-connected world, states that opt for an isolationist stand are doomed to face the disapproval of the international community, finding it increasingly hard to meet domestic economic, social and political demands.

Realism, largely regarded as one of the most influential International Relations theories of the Twentieth Century, has performed a prominent role in explaining Superpowers' behavior during the Cold War era, and some would go as far as to say that realism is still a dominant theory in international relations. Conversely, critics pinpoint that new trends, relations, demands and menaces are on the rise, thereby questioning the theory's capacity to inform this new reality. Some would call for a redefinition of the theory's tenets, whereas others, in the more extreme edge, thoroughly condemn it as a whole.

What does it take to be a dominant theory in International Relations? Can we rely on Realism to build the path for the development of international society? The aim of this essay is to identify features of the realist tradition that needs revisiting, should the theory be willing to better suit our 'reality'. We shall begin by exploring the origins of the Realist thought, that is, its

very genesis. For it is imperative to come to grips with the underpinning branches of political thought to properly understand its development. Contemporary realist writers must not go overlooked, so attention should be given to them. The contrast of ancient and modern theorists' assumptions is key to the fulfillment of our goal: international institutions, present-day security threats and the emphasis on power politics as a mechanism capable of providing stability will be contested so as to demonstrate the limitations of the theory in order to address the global society's varying needs.

2 – Realism: philosophical claims, framework and proposal

Realism, conceived as one of the most influential theories in international relations, is overwhelmingly informed by political theory tradition that dates back to the Greeks, finding safe harbor in Machiavelli and Hobbes' philosophy and, more recently, Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau, to name but a few. Any analysis of the forging tenets of the theory is doomed to fail should the role performed by such writers be misunderstood. For this reason, it is imperative to acknowledge how their work has shaped realism for it is in such writer's contribution Realism aims to legitimize its assertions.

Thucydides, an ancient Greek political theorist, became notorious in the political theory realm especially owing to his account of the Peloponnesian War in terms of the analysis of the relations between belligerent actors. Athens and Sparta, two Great Powers of the ancient world, kept a rather fragile balance of power and were historically held as opposing forces. In his writings, Thucydides observes that the expansionist policy conducted by Athens has led

Sparta to seek its national interests and survival above all things. For Sparta's survival was threatened by Athenian expansionism, which would potentially shift the balance of power favorably to the latter (Dunne and Schmidt, 2007). The aggressive Athenian expansionist inclination on the one hand, and Sparta's necessity to protect its own existence at all costs in order to maintain the balance of power between both states, on the other one, can be considered contrasting policies, and war was therefore made inevitable by 'the growth of Athenian power, which inspired fear in the Lacedaemonians and compelled them to go to war' (Thucydides, 1.23, in Forde, 1992: 374).

An analytical approach to the conflict will enable us to grasp the very genesis of Realism as a theory devised to explain the behavior of national states in the international sphere. Initially, the expansionist stand adopted by Athens is justified in terms of self-help: hegemonic states (we are referring to Sparta and Athens as states to clarify our arguments, albeit we reckon they do not constitute examples of modern nor contemporary Westphalian states) must conduct aggressive stands towards other states as the only means to achieve domestic stability. For the international system constrain states to act as if their very existence was in constant jeopardy. Secondly, no sooner had Sparta acknowledged Athens' intentions, it became evident that an immediate response was needed to preserve its status as a Great Power. Clearly, Sparta was driven by what realists would call 'necessity': should a state's status be in peril, necessity allows such a state to take any measures to prevent such a state downfall, regardless of its moral implications (Forde, 1992).

Sixteenth Century Europe consisted of a fertile environment to further development of the realist theory. Profoundly influenced by the political

nuances and a rising state-centered reality, Machiavelli's work basically intended to give statesmen practical advices and philosophical justification to their governance. Morality, he claimed, should not consist of an obstacle capable of interfering in statesmen affairs: a new set of moral principles based on the achievement of 'success in the pursuit of political power before all else' (Williams, 1992) is thus proposed to grant 'The Prince' a framework to perpetuate dominance. Moreover, Machiavelli sets double standards for domestic morality as opposed to external morality: the Prince should seek to be admired (at times feared) in the domestic realm, whereas when interacting with other states in the international system statesmen must not hesitate in protecting their states' national interest. In this sense, 'the main foundations of every state,[...] are good laws and good arms; and because you cannot have good laws without good arms, and where there are good ones, good laws inevitably follow, I shall not discuss laws but give my attention to arms' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in Williams, 1992: 48). In short, Machiavelli provides statesmen with a set of rules and arguments that elevate security and strength to the top of states' agendas, in addition to a convenient array of moral rules that substitute for conventional morality.

It is imperative to explore another important feature of realism informed by political theory: human nature and behavior of states. Hobbes sustains that humans are aggressive by nature. They are driven by 'competition, diffidence and glory' and 'the conjunction of these conditions leads to a war of all against all' (Donnelly, 2005: 32). 'Every person would do whatever seemed necessary to survive, unleashing a 'war of all against all' where life is 'nasty, brutish, and short' (Walter, 1998: 12). Consequently,

humans can only achieve satisfaction through the pursue power, which often leads to conflict between individuals. When such characteristics are transferred to the international arena, one finds states in a constant struggle for dominance and power, conflict being pervasive. Differently from national states where the existence of a Leviathan brings about order and enforces the rule of law, the international system is an environment of anarchy, and dominant realist thought is firmly rooted in such conceptions.

Classical Realism, highly influenced by the work of the aforementioned philosophers, sustain that states, just like men, are self-interested and often aggressive. It is therefore the very nature of man combined with the anarchic reality of the international system the reasons why states should hesitate to cooperate or should pursue power politics above all. Jackson and Sørensen (2007) highlight how adequate a theory was realism in the 1930s: the world had just witnessed a major scale war, and the fear that another conflict of such proportions might happen again required states to abandon the idea of international harmony. 'We should assume that there are profound conflicts of interest both between countries and between people. Some people and some countries are better off than others. They will attempt to preserve and defend their privileged position. The underdogs, the 'haventots', will struggle to change that situation' (Jackson and Sørensen, 2007: 37). Similarly, the post-Second World War period was haunted by the prospect of a nuclear strife between the Superpowers, and realism was granted an even more prominent role in international relations. A major realist theorist, E. H. Carr campaigned in favor of a more 'realist' view of the world, as opposed to an 'idealist' account of international relations.

More recently, Hans Morgenthau still echoed Hobbesian and Machiavellian explanation of the human nature as key to understanding international politics. In addition, the aforementioned moral 'double standards' is once again brought to the fore: domestic morality is often contradictory to external morality, thereby rising a need to the adoption of different moral sets. Nonetheless, as Dunne and Schmidt (2007) assert, '[classical realists] recognized that acting purely on the basis of power and self-interest without any considerations of moral and ethical principles frequently results in self-defeating policies' (2007: 169). Moreover, the claim that national interest is a goal to be pursued through power politics is often contested by critics, mostly in the sense that, given the plurality of contemporary states, where different cultures, political aspirations and ethnicities coexist, who can be held accountable for defining what national interest actually stands for (Herz, 1981: 190). One could argue that states' foreign policy aims are diverse, complex and often contradictory, and further comments will be made on this very issue.

Often regarded as a variant of Classical Realism, Structural Realism has Kenneth Waltz as its chief theorist. An alternative explanation for the behavior of states is then put forth: states respond to structural pressures and forces originated from the international system. In this scenario, statesmen are not entirely free to decide what course of action to take, for the level of analysis shift from a state-centered to a structural one (Jackson and Sørensen, 2007). Furthermore, the quest for absolute power is substituted for an emphasis on relative capabilities, once actors are more or less compelled to act, thereby turning absolute power in an outdated concept in structural realist's view.

Realism in its varying forms was indeed efficient in explaining how the Superpowers interacted in the Cold War era. For bipolarity is held as the ideal set up for reaching stability in terms of balance of power. The USA and the Soviet Union engaged in permanent processes of mutual containment, constraining each other's imperialistic impetus. As for the other states, realism observes they played a minor role in such a context, never actually threatening Superpowers' status. The end of the Cold War has brought to the fore a very pertinent question: if a bipolar distribution of power is the ideal configuration (for it is rather easier to predict states' behavior), what is the forecast for a unipolar (some would claim multipolar) world? Structuralists would claim that 'like nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power. Faced with unbalanced power, some states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance' (Waltz, 2000: 28). A sort of 'system of deterrence' is then prone to rise as to bring power relations in harmony in the exact same way it operated throughout the Cold War.

Drawing on the fact that the international system has changed from a bipolar arrangement to a unipolar one, critics point out that realism have failed to envisage the downfall of the Soviet Union. On their behalf, realists claim that (and this is from a neorealist perspective) the Cold War rivalry would last for as long the structural conjectural allowed (Waltz, 2000). The basic constitutive elements that underpin realist theory – national interest, survival, power – remain unchanged, for human nature cannot be modified.

A further step will be taken on the following sections in order to investigate the prevalence of realism in international relations.

2.1 – International System: a ‘controlled’ anarchy with emerging actors?

Realism plays down the role of international institutions. Realists remain skeptical in terms of the relevance of these actors in the international system. For states are the main actors, their interests and sovereignty not to be questioned or threatened by international institutions. These assertions notwithstanding, realism has generated fierce criticisms on this very issue, being accused of overlooking a change in the tide in international relations: international institutions are not only making themselves more present, they are actually reshaping the ever-contested concepts of state sovereignty and right of self-determinations.

Lebow (1994) recognizes some fundamental changes in the international system that down play the relevance of its anarchical nature. He asserts that ‘the allegedly inescapable consequences of anarchy have been largely overcome by a complex web of institutions that govern interstate relations and provide mechanisms for resolving disputes’ (Lebow, 1994: 269). At this stage, and to exemplify our point, it is worth mentioning the role performed by international security institutions, NATO being the most notorious example: despite its military purposes, the very existence of such security communities broadly mirrors the presence of common values and ideals shared by its members. Hence, once an apparently uncontested realist feature, the notion of self-help is being reshaped by states opting for collective security schemes. Isolationism, diffidence and individuality, in a scenario where security

threats can only be fought through interstate cooperation, are behaviors that might jeopardize states' security.

A normative approach towards Liberalism reckons that the causes of interstate cooperation lie in the adoption of common ideas and norms (Owen, 1994). Realists, on the other hand, claim that cooperation is indeed an advisable course of action to a state, should the benefits to its national interests and security outweigh the drawbacks of acting so. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to admit that 'the appearance and spread of security communities closely parallel the development of democratic institutions and successful market economies' (Lebow, 1994: 272; an account of the interaction of democracy, capitalism and institutionalism is put forth by Weede, 2007). Moreover, Ruggie (1995) observes that realism has failed to grasp to increasingly important part played by institutionalism as far as US' foreign policy agenda is concerned.

International Law, it as been suggested, is not capable of bringing order, once states will not meet any coercive measures powerful enough to bring about abidingness, and the most common argument is the one related to International Law's lack of effectiveness in preventing wars. Such an argument notwithstanding, Morris (2007) argues that, as a whole, International Law is mostly obeyed, and military conflicts such as the 2003 Iraq War constitute the exception. For states find varying incentives to abide by the law, ranging from peer pressure, coercion (despite the limitations of enforcement mechanisms) and true belief in the rules and ideals.

A different sort of influence, yet still not very acute, has been played by NGOs. Regardless of the debate whether these institutions incorporate the

will of an emerging global civil society, critics point out that the predominant state-centric arrangement of the international system is based of a unilateral and static view on power (Willets, 2007). Realists are accused of downplaying interaction processes in an environment of constant communicative engagement where NGOs' voice cannot be simply ruled out. The International Landmine Ban case (Stiles, 2006) serves as an example of the sort of influence NGOs play over states: campaigning for stronger legislation related to the ban on the use of landmines, NGOs positively influenced major states (such as Canada) in favor of their cause, which resulted in more severe international legislation to be gradually implemented. States, therefore, remain the main actors; yet, it is becoming evident that states alone cannot achieve their aims.

2.2 – Has the security dilemma been substituted for an insecurity dilemma?

This section is aimed to analyze the security dilemma and its relevance in contemporary international realm. As acknowledged in the previous sections, security is on the top of the agenda realism prescribes for states. A major side effect of such a prescription is described as the security dilemma: one state's source of security is another state's source of insecurity (Jackson and Sørensen, 2007). What is more, military empowerment and quest for power are offensive policies that generate both fear and consequent uphold of similar policies. For states are trapped in an anarchical environment which cannot be overcome, unconditional security is an elusive quest.

Conversely, contemporary international security agenda cannot be properly addressed should states adhered exclusively to a traditional realist concept of security. In this sense, Rogers (1997: 668) observes: '[...]we are entering an era of genuinely global insecurity which will give rise to problems that require approaches which will need to transcend previous concepts of national, or even alliance, security, and which will therefore require us to address the basic causes of insecurity'. In order to answer to this demand, critics recognize the emergence of an insecurity dilemma: within the so called 'weak states', the lack of consistent democratic institutions, economic stagnation, ever increasing social problems and severe deficiencies in the enforcement of laws give rise to aggressive governments that exploit their own citizens, consisting of a direct menace to them (Sørensen, 2007). The conflicts in former Yugoslavia and present Darfur are examples of how major a threat national government may pose within the borders (The Washington Post, 2004).

The acknowledgement that not all security threats can be fought solely through militarization and power relations is often contrasted with the notion that states will not hesitate in adopting a realist stand in matters where their national security is thought to be under direct threat. An example of such behavior can be found in the USA's National Security Strategy (White House, 2002): interventionism, preventive war, the spread of democracy as a means to perpetuate world peace are policies directly related to the protection of USA's influence, security and domination. In sum, the consequences of a strict adherence to a realist security agenda appears to play against states, should they opt to downplay the importance of working with a broader security concept.

2.3 – The Discourse of Power and National Interest

We have identified the quest for power as a major realist feature that guides states into the incorporation of aggressive foreign policies, for power is the only means to achieve stability and defend states' national interest. Despite its influence in states behavior, the discourse of power is often recognized as one of causes of global insecurity. "Power politics is seen as an image of the world that encourages behavior that brings about war" (Baylis, 2007: 314). Therefore, we will draw on the contribution Constructivists put forward in order to understand the implications of a strict observance to power relations in international affairs, and then contrast such implications with a proposal of a democratic conception of realism's national interest.

Constructivists hold that normative and ideational structures are as prominent as material structures when analyzing states. Because the system of 'shared ideas, beliefs and values also have structural characteristics, and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action' (Reus-Smit, 2007). Structures are capable of shaping states' behavior, and processes of mutual exchange of information forge agents (statesmen) and structures. Actors and structures are in a constant symbiosis: the discourse of power is, according to constructivists, the outcome of centuries of limited policies and ideological domination that is now enshrined in institutions, agents and structures.

Therefore, realism perpetuates a discourse of belligerency for which there is no apparent way out. Constructivists rightly spot this feature. Another issue intimately related to the discourse of power is the realist understanding of what constitutes national interest. As stated above, realism plays down the

acceptance of a broad conception of national interest: it reflects external power politics, in the sense that the quest for power could be held as the ultimate materialization of national interest. Nonetheless, current democratic states must acknowledge that the existence of varying objectives within their societies have been remodeling the concept (Herz, 1981). Moreover, one might wonder, who can be held accountable for defining and implementing foreign policies in truly cosmopolitan societies? It appears that national interest calls for more comprehensive horizons that encompass ethical, social and economic forces represented in a given state. In short, traditional realism understanding of national interest is biased, outdated and doomed to drive states closer to mutual destruction.

3 – Conclusion

Realism makes a strong appeal to statesmen. It provides them with a recipe to achieve dominance through aggressive foreign policy agendas that privilege self-help rather than cooperation, diffidence instead of clear policies. By drawing on double standards of morality and encouraging statesmen to act unilaterally should it be needed, realists down play the role played by common values and ideals shared by members of international organizations. In addition, contemporary society often incorporate high expectations in terms of how statesmen should lead, negotiate, and represent their nations, which calls for minimum standards of morality.

As we have seen, Thucydides' deep analysis of the Peloponnesian War is often described as a perfect example of how states should behave in an

anarchical environment. Machiavelli enforces the weaknesses of acting morally because competing states might be conspiring to overthrow The Prince, he must be aggressive and unmerciful in the conduct of his foreign affairs, for survival comes first. Finally, with Hobbes and his understanding of human nature, states should be suspicious of each other, and ensure their survival and interests are met. Contemporary realists find safe haven in the abovementioned writers: Waltz gives us an account of how states respond to the international system, and Morgenthau reminds us of human nature in a condition of anarchy, and how such an ominous reality can only be overcome by power politics.

The complexity of modern-day international politics, we have sustained, makes realism an outdated explanatory theory incapable of addressing evolving demands. First, the international environment is indeed anarchical, but states have achieved satisfactory standards of compliance with international law. International institutions and security umbrellas, such as NATO, unite states in pursuit of common goals, which ultimately detect the presence of shared values and norms. Second, democratic societies comprise a wide array of interests and needs, thereby redesigning the traditional understanding of national interest. In this sense, national interest cannot be solely described in terms of power politics or survival. Third, modern threats to states' domestic security require cooperation rather than isolationism, and we have outlined an emerging insecurity dilemma as a major menace to citizens in several developing states. Finally, constructivists' contribution to international relations is contrasted with the so-called realist discourse of power: ideals, agents and the structure interact to forge a discourse of violence and militarization for which, it is believed, there is no apparent way out.

In short, Realism does not encompass the characteristics to adequately deal with modern-day international society. Several of its features are being redefined, substituted or ruled out as the international system acquires a universalist, cosmopolitan discourse. On the other hand, realism is very much present in states' foreign security strategies, for when it comes to threats to national security, states seem to prefer a more traditional course. Thus, realism does not seem to be a dominant theory in international relations, even though states will relate to realism in times of extreme circumstances.

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