The Realist School of Thought: An Analysis

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the main differences between classical realism and neorealism by focussing on landmark books written by scholars from the realist school of thought. Realism will be approached as a united tradition, implying that neorealism is not a chronological continuity of classical realism, but rather, a change from within it that was adapted to the challenges of the real world and to those of other schools of thought. For this purpose, classical realism and neorealism will be considered as strands of thought from within the same school, and therefore, each time the term 'strand' is used, it refers to the contents of the same body and not of another school. It is only in this framework that the main purpose of the realist theory of international relations, which is to explain international outcomes, will remain intact.

In the first part of the essay, classical realism in contemporary international politics and neorealism will be defined. Moreover, the main scholars of each strand will be mentioned. In the second part of the essay, an outline will be provided illuminating what the major contributors to each strand have written on international politics, and the basic issues that matter for realism will be provided as well. The works of Carr, Niebuhr, and Morgenthau, will be examined for the account of classical realism, while Mearsheimer and Waltz will be studied for the account of neorealism. Then, it will be possible to proceed to the final and most essential part of the essay, which examines the differences between these two strands.

Before moving to the main body of the essay it is useful to provide some definitions of the tools that neorealism uses in its effort to explain international outcomes.

Self-Help: Since anarchy is what defines the international system, Waltz differentiates domestic from international politics, by arguing that in the latter survival (for him security) can only be achieved through self help. *Self-help is necessarily the principle for action'* (Waltz, 1979, p.111)

Security Dilemma: The situation that emerges when a state or coalition of states grows in power, thus, making another state or coalition feel threatened, leading it to seek ways to check the other (Waltz, 1979).

Definition of terms

In the literature regarding realism, terminology can be found that questions if there is one unified and coherent tradition of thought under this name. If realism is codified chronologically, then there are the distinctions of classical, modern, and neorealism (Dunne and Schmidt 2008). If it is codified according to the content of their respective analysis and consequent hypotheses, then more lines of distinction will appear. For example, within realism one can distinguish an offensive (Mearsheimer) and a defensive (Waltz) version, according to how much power they believe that states need to achieve for survival. Furthermore, if a chronological perspective is taken, after the end of the Cold War some scholars of realism tried to incorporate into Waltz's realism the element of foreign policy, and these scholars were named, by Rose (1998), as neoclassical realists.

For the purpose of this essay, the core assumptions and hypotheses of all strands within realism will be used by making one main distinction which can be seen either chronologically, or methodologically, since the two are correlated. The distinction takes place chronologically after the writing of Waltz's book the *"Theory of International*

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Politics" in 1979. Methodologically, he distinguishes himself from the previous efforts of realism to explain international outcomes by trying to create a theory, on realism's behalf, for international politics by finding law-like regularities, clearly influenced from his era's predominance of positivism (Burnham et al, 2008).

The term 'classical' realism will be used in the broader chronological sphere, rather than how it is usually referred to. Therefore, except for Thucydides, Nicollo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau, when the term 'classical' is used here, it also refers to the works of Edward Carr (1929) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1932). However, the guiding text that is used for classical realism will be the one written by Morgenthau and revised by Thompson (1985), which is "*Politics Among Nations, The struggle for Power and Peace,"* as it is the most conscious effort to codify classical realist thought by organising it into principles. On the other hand, the term 'neorealism' will be used to refer to Mearsheimer's work (2001), but primarily to the work of Kenneth Waltz for the reasons mentioned above. The novelties he introduced will be examined in the appropriate part. The guiding text that is used for neorealism is, of course, Waltz's (1979) *"Theory of International Politics."*

Classical Realism

Classical realism's roots can be found in the works of Thucydides in ancient Greece, Kautilya in ancient India, Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes in the 16th century, and most recently with Hegel and Weber (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff Jr., 1990). This essay, however, will focus on the work of three 20th century scholars because each one's writings can be considered a valuable contribution to the understanding of international relations, during the particular time it was written.

After the First World War, and during the interwar period of the 1930s, the basic assumptions of the predominant school of thought were challenged by a number of factors. Liberal institutionalism declared that it is in mankind's best interest to cooperate, and therefore, law should be the guiding collective principle, not war. Facts, however, like the behaviour of Hitler and Mussolini, and most of all, the ongoing failure of liberalism's favourite League of Nations, gave rise to a different way of conceptualising international politics. In this context, the work of Ronald Niebuhr in 1932, "*Moral Man and Immoral Society-A study in Ethics and Politics,"* is the first serious challenge to liberal institutionalism. His central argument is that liberals overestimated the ability of humans to work collectively in a way that is truly moral (Brown, 2001). Throughout Niebuhr's work the morality argument is obvious and it is used to explain that international cooperation is unachievable due to human nature. He does not believe that statesmen do not have the capacity to be good, rather, this capacity is "always in conflict with the sinful acquisitive and aggressive drives, present in human nature" (Niebuhr in Brown 2001, p. 28). Consequently, he had theses on some of the basic analytical tools mentioned earlier. In regard to national interest, he believed that since national interests are subjective for each nation, the rule that statesmen must frame policies within it cannot always apply (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff Jr., 1990). Regarding the balance of power, he believed that "it is the organisational device for achieving a semblance of justice" (ibid, p.94). Since human nature is sinful there can be no absolute justice, and in conditions of disproportional power, the balance of power is the closest thing to justice.

The second work that can be considered a turning point, which defined the turn from liberalism to realism, is Edward H. Carr's *"The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939, An Introduction to the Study of International Relations."* Carr refers to liberalism as utopianism and he believes that utopia lies in the liberal notion that a harmony of interests can be achieved. Up to this point he agrees with Niebuhr, but he distinguishes himself when he argues that cooperation cannot be achieved, not because of human nature, but because of a conflict between the haves and have-nots (Carr, 2001). He sees scarcity as the central feature of the world and it is within this context that international politics are to be understood. On the concept of power, he contributes by separating the theoretical models of military, economic, and persuasive power, arguing that every form is needed from states and power should be treated as a whole, which is the law through which social dynamics are shaped (ibid, Ch.8). Carr is himself concerned with morality, distinguishing it between the individual and the state (ibid, Ch.9), he argues that international morality comes as a result of the morality of each state, but he conceives the personalisation of each state as a tool, however a tool cannot have morality. Consequently, morality is irrelevant in international relations.

The final, but most influential, classical realist work is Hans Morgenthau's*"Politics Among Nations, The struggle for*

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Power and Peace," written in 1948. It shaped the post-war synthesis in international politics literature, which at the time was dominated by realists (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff Jr. 1990, Brown 2001, Dune and Schmidt, 2008). In the study of international politics, the novelty which Morgenthau introduces is that he consciously tries to systematize realism (Brown, 2001). This can be seen in the first chapter, in which he depicts the 6 principles of political realism. By examining his six principles of political realism, his main points are that states are the primary actors, national interest is hard to define but the minimum goal is survival, and national interest is defined, however, in terms of power. Morality is once again irrelevant since there are no universal moral principles which can be applied at all times. Morgenthau, as Niebuhr and Carr, separated the morality of states from the morality of individuals, but he goes a step beyond stating that statesmen are the ones responsible for distinguishing the morality of the state from the morality of an individual, in order to assure national survival. Finally, he suggests the autonomy of the political sphere from all other social spheres (Morgenthau, 1985). In this sense, his work is not really an objective effort to theorize, but it also has propositions and indications for policy making. Morgenthau dedicated a whole chapter on the balance of power in order to introduce it as the most effective technique to manage power. For him, only through the balance of power can international peace ultimately be achieved. He gives four different meanings for it and proposes many different methods to achieve it, but what matters for it to work is the consensus upon which it is built. In other words, states as the primary actors of the international system have to accept that they work within a balance of power system and within this context only, can power be checked (ibid 1985, ch. 11 and 12). Overall, his rationale is simple and can be reduced to the sentence: international politics is governed by states which pursue their natural interests by pursuing power. Morgenthau, just as Niebuhr did, by bringing to the front the aggressive, power seeking nature of states, highlights the imperfection of human nature.

Neorealism

It is difficult to define neorealism without comparing it to classical realism. In this part, however, the main characteristics of neorealist theory will be mentioned as presented by Waltz, and later supported by Mearsheimer.

Waltz first conceptualised the idea of international politics as a system. In his first book, the*"Man state and the War – A theoretical analysis,"* he studies why wars happen because of human behaviour, state behaviour, and introducing a new dimension, he studies why wars happen because of international political systems, which he examines as one entity. This first book was the basis for the second, which would be the defining one for contemporary realists and students of international politics in general, the *"Theory of International Politics."* It is in this latter book that international politics are examined as a particular theory by introducing the idea of structure to the international political system (Kleiser, 2003). As Waltz states in his second book, the goal of his theory is to explain "why patterns of behaviour reoccur… a theory of international politics will, for example explain, war recurs… but it will not predict the outbreak of particular wars" (Waltz 1979, p.69). In a few words, Waltz consciously tries to create an independent theory of international politics, which as he says, like every theory, can explain how the system works but not make particular predictions. The principal characteristic of the international political system is that it is a whole that cannot be reduced into parts, which is why his theory is called a systemic one. The international political system has separate units but these act according to the structure of the system (Waltz 1979, Ch.5). There are also other important characteristics. First, the organising principle of the system is anarchy, as it was for previous realists. In this context the minimum goal of states is survival (ibid). The second characteristic of the structure of the international system is the nature of the units that constitute its parts and their functions. He argues that in the anarchical system, states are primary actors, as previous realists also suggested, which perform similar functions (ibid).Third, Waltz talks about the distribution of capabilities among states as parts of the system, and here he argues that although capabilities are characteristic of the units (states), it is the system that defines how those capabilities are to be distributed. Within the Waltzian concept, states are the primary actors, and act as unitary parts of the international political system. National interest could be defined, at a minimum, as state self preservation, and at a maximum, as the state's drive for universal domination (ibid). Therefore, the balance of power is once again needed to preserve the system and it will happen as a condition of the system, meaning that if the actual distribution of power is such that a balance can emerge, and if states take notice of their surroundings, they will adjust their policies to the configuration of worldwide power (ibid). Of course, that presupposes two critical provisions, one systemic and one of the state, but this is exactly how the Waltzian concept works.

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It could be argued that Mearsheimer cannot be included in the same basket as Waltz due to a critical difference that they have when answering the question; how much power do states need? However, since Mearsheimer agrees with the underlying core assumption of the Waltzian concept, that it is the structure of the international political system that defines the actions of states as its unitary actions (Kreisler, 2002); I believe that his work can be included in the neorealist strand. In his book, which is considered his main contribution in the field of international politics, *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,"* Mearscheimer concludes the same points as Waltz in the following matters. First, anarchy is what defines the system and therefore states continue to feel threatened. Second, the primary goal of national interest remains survival and since the system is anarchical they turn to self-help. Here is where their paths separate, however, since Mearscheimer believes that in order to achieve survival it is necessary to dominate the entire regional international system (Mearscheimer, 2001), whereas Waltz believes that too much power can be risky as it leads to security dilemmas.

Now that a comprehensive view of the classical realist and neorealist traditions has been provided, their main differences will be analysed, as they appear by comparing the previously mentioned books.

Main Differences

The focus now turns to what distinguishes neorealism from classical realism. An inversion of the question, what distinguishes the latter from the former, would not be appropriate here because Waltz's neorealism came as an answer to classical realism and it actually revitalised it (Dunne and Schmidt, 2008).

In order to answer the above question, it could be asked what distinguishes Waltz's work from that of Morgenthau. In Waltz's own words: "…Morgenthau and other realists failed to take the fateful step beyond developing concepts to the fashioning of a recognizable theory" (Waltz, 1990). So, what he tried to do in the *"Theory of International Politics"* was to first "… develop an idea of the structure of international politics, which would make it possible to think of international politics as a subject matter that could be studied in its own right" (Kleiser 2003).

It could be argued that Morgenthau in *"Politics Among Nations"* tried to provide a theory of international politics by making reference to many 'laws of politics' or by codifying basic concepts. However, this is not exactly the case because although he argues that he tries to explain how the world works according to his theory, what he really does is tell statesmen how they should behave by providing prescriptive elements (Brown 2001). In this sense, his work is mostly a textbook for foreign policy making rather than a general explanatory theory.

Where Morgenthau failed, Waltz succeeded by introducing the idea of structure. Waltz (1979, 1990) argues that international politics should be perceived as a system with a precisely defined structure. Unlike Morgenthau (1985) who believed that when studying international politics one should not distinguish it from the realm of influences, such as national politics, economics, and international politics; Waltz isolated the realm of international politics by depicting an international political system as a whole, just to deal with it intellectually. By introducing the concept of structure, meaning the autonomy of international politics, he was able to produce what can be perceived as a theory. For him "… international structure emerges from the interaction of states and then constraints them from certain actions while propelling them towards others" (Waltz 1990, p.29). Structure is defined by the ordering principle of the system which is anarchy, and by this structure is able to perpetuate itself because of a differentiated distribution of capabilities across the system's units, which are states (ibid and Waltz, 1979).

After this core assumption, of international political systems as a defining structure, is introduced, we can proceed to the next differentiations of neorealism from classical realism.

Keeping in mind that the main purpose of realism is to explain international political outcomes, a second difference emerges. Classical realists' work on this matter is inductive, meaning that they explain outcomes by focusing on unit level explanations. They focus on states to explain outcomes. This way the characteristics and interactions of the units are taken as the causes of outcomes. Neorealists, on the other hand, take a deductive approach, arguing that political outcomes can be understood only when the affects of the structure, that Waltz introduced, are added to the classical realist unit level explanation. This way international political outcomes are explained when the effects of

structure on the units are added, and the focus shifts from the characteristics of the states to the characteristics of the structure.

While Niebuhr (1932) and Morgenthau (1985) concentrate on evil human nature, Waltzian neorealism focuses on the structure defined by anarchy and the differentiation of power and capabilities among states. On the other hand, however, it could be argued that Carr, one of the main figures among classical realists when examining the causes of war, did not focus on evil human nature, but on scarcity (Carr, 2001), and in this way he underlined a structural characteristic and came closer to the neorealist perception of international politics.

A third difference emerges in how power is perceived in each strand. By focusing on state level analysis, classical realists argue that the desire for power emerges from the nature of states, which in turn emerges from the nature of man (Niebuhr, 1932). In this context however, power is never enough and it is perceived as an end in itself, and as Morgenthau noted, "The desire to attain a maximum of power is universal" *(1985, p.36)* and it is "one of objective laws that have their roots in human nature" (ibid, p.4). Waltz, however, argues that power is a means to an end, and that end is security, and as Waltz notes, "Because power is a possibly useful means, sensible statesmen try to have an appropriate amount of it. In crucial situations, however, the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security" (Waltz 1988, p.616).

This also explains the classical realist notion of engaging with moral philosophy and issues of morality in general (Niebuhr 1932, Carr 2001 and Morgenthau 1985), whereas neorealists do not rely on it to explain outcomes. Neorealists like Waltz perceive power as a means to an end because their focus is on the structure of the international political system which is anarchical, and therefore, their ultimate concern should be security. Waltz argues that power is risky if one has too little or too much. If a state has too little, it is vulnerable to threats, but if it has too much it raises the issue of a security dilemma, therefore its ultimate concern should be survival (Waltz, 1979).

Finally, a fourth difference can be spotted among the two strands in how each of their theorists perceives anarchy. In classical realism anarchy is a condition of the system, whereas in neorealism anarchy is what defines it. Consequently, in their respective efforts to explain international outcomes they see different ways how states would react to it. In classical realism, states react to anarchy according to their population, location, domestic politics, and leadership qualities, whereas for neorealism there is no question of reaction to anarchy, rather than similarity in the way they function, since anarchy defines the structure of the system (Waltz, 1990). In this sense, the difference among states' reactions emerge not from their domestic features, but from the constraints that the system imposes on them. Consequently, each strand, commencing from a different assumption, concludes with a different interpretation of international political outcomes.

Neorealism, in order to explain these outcomes, introduces the concept of distribution of capabilities. It is the anarchical system that distributes power and capabilities among states, and states use them in order to achieve security. Waltz argues that it is normal for changes in the unit-level to affect the system's structure, but this however will not change the way we should theorise international politics (ibid). An example is needed in order to depict how Waltz perceives anarchy.

In today's anarchical world, different states follow different policies according to what anarchy imposes on them. For example, Italy which has few resources will react to a security threat, not by trying to increase its military power, but through joining an alliance (NATO) or by cooperating regionally. However, China, with increasing wealth, is likely to respond to such a threat by increasing its military strength. Morgenthau would argue that Italy and China would respond to such a threat only if their political leadership or domestic policy necessitated it. However, this is not enough to explain international political outcomes on the whole.

These are the main differences between classical realism and Waltz's realism. Mearsheimer, as a contemporary neorealist, would also concur with most of Waltz's points, but not on how power is perceived. There he would agree with Morgenthau that the desire for power has no limits, he would say however, that this happens not because of human nature but because of the system's structure (Kleiser, 2002).

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In the literature that is considered as neorealist there is also a part that focuses on relative and absolute gains, like Grieco's work (Dunne and Schmidt, 2008). However, they are mostly concerned with explaining issues of cooperation and the study of their work would be more appropriate in comparison with the neoliberal tradition of thought, so for the purpose of this essay it has been omitted.

Conclusion

After having examined both strands, differences and similarities have emerged not only between these two approaches, but also within themselves. In order to find those differences I focused on the defining difference between neorealism and classical realism, that the concept of structure has emerged in order to theorise international politics. After this clarification I found that classical realists explain international politics by focusing on human nature and, apart from Carr, they perceive power as the ultimate goal of states, like Mearsheimer. Moreover, for classical realists anarchy is not the primary focus when explaining different state policies. Hence, classical realism remains more of a foreign policy guide than a theory like the one Waltz wanted to introduce. I have consciously preferred to limit the debate to its theoretical applications, since no strand can fully explain particular cases from the real world.

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