

# The Differences Between Classical Realism and Neo Realism

Written by Victoria Jepson

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VICTORIA JEPSON, JAN 24 2012

### **Identify the major differences between classical realism and neo realism. Which approach is best suited to analysing international relations today?**

Realism is a broad paradigm and varies from the classical realism established by Han's Morgenthau through to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism which was introduced in 1979. At their core realist theories have a pragmatic approach to international relations, describing the world 'as it is, not as it ought to be'.<sup>[1]</sup> Many theorists see classical realism and structural realism as two distinct theories, as Knud Erik Jorgensen claims structural realism can be viewed as a 'significant rupture' with classical realist theory.<sup>[2]</sup> Furthermore, Keith Shimko views Waltz's theory as a 'fundamentally different conception of international politics'.<sup>[3]</sup> In this essay I will highlight the main differences between the two paradigms and also counter Waltz's claim that his theory is able to explain 'certain big and important things'.<sup>[4]</sup> Whilst it is undoubtedly still able to explain *some* important international events, structural realism is not able to explain all, or even the majority. Conversely, by virtue of considering a wider range of factors, classical realism can explain many contemporary events. However, as I will show the use of a single theory to analyse International Relations is not sufficient and consequently a numerous approaches are necessary to understand the complexities of the world we inhabit.

Whilst maintaining the centrality of the state, structural realism reaffirmed the logic of power politics within an international system lacking authority to govern state behaviour; this was termed the 'anarchic structure'.<sup>[5]</sup> The extent to which you value either classical or structural realism depends to a large extent on how you define a theory. Waltz believes that theories are 'statements which explain laws'.<sup>[6]</sup> In constructing theories we must recognise the importance of some factors above others and 'single out the propelling principle, even though other principles operate'.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus Waltz claims that whilst structural realism cannot explain every aspect of international relations, it explains certain 'important things'.<sup>[8]</sup> Whether or not we view structural realism as successful in explaining the *most* important phenomena in international relations, goes a long way to determining whether we deem it a suitable as a tool for analysing current affairs.

Although limitations exist, the structural approach still has much explanatory power concerning the prominence of the state within interactions at the global level and also regarding the continued abuse and manipulation of international institutions, including international law. The fact that these institutions play such a large role in the conduct of international relations means that structural realism is a useful tool in analysing at least one important aspect of current affairs and thus must not be disregarded completely. Although some would argue that the institutionalisation of international law nullifies Waltz's claim to anarchy, this is not the case. The most powerful nations continue to 'bend' and 'break' the rules of international law in order to secure their own national interests.<sup>[9]</sup> Although some argue that states do follow international law in numerous cases,<sup>[10]</sup> the fact that when violations do occur the fact that they usually have serious ramifications for the international system as a whole, cannot be ignored.<sup>[11]</sup> Despite this, structural realism does have its limitations. Since the end of the Cold War it has proved unconvincing in its explanation of wars, foreign intervention or the changing relations between states. In contrast to classical realism, Waltz's failure to take account of ideology, domestic factors, non state actors, and the complexities of interdependence all limit its ability to fully analyse current affairs. Although still relevant, it is too simplistic to be used

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on its own. Consequently structural realism must be used as part of a pluralistic approach when analysing international relations.[12]

## Differences between Classical and Structural Realism

The most important difference between the two theories is the determinants of state behaviour. [13] Although some theorists believe that the importance of human nature in classical realism has been neglected,[14] it is important to realise that this was just one amongst many factors which classical realists held to determine state behaviour. For all realists the struggle for power is the main motivator in political life, as Morgenthau wrote the 'will to power' was unlimited.[15] However, Morgenthau also highlighted the influence of nationalism,[16] ideologies,[17] imperialism in a variety of forms,[18] the diplomatic skills of the domestic government and popular support both domestically and internationally.[19] Thus, Morgenthau recognised a plurality of influences upon state behaviour, something for which Waltz is highly critical.[20] Waltz maintained the importance of power politics and the centrality of the state however; he ignored the role of the domestic sphere attributing the 'self help' nature of the international realm as the sole factor in deciding states' behaviours.[21] For Morgenthau although anarchy could not prevent states from trying to achieve dominant power, anarchy was a 'permissive force' not a 'causal' one.[22]

## Strengths of the Structural Approach

The lack of 'world government' means that states continue to act in ways which preserve their own interests as this is the only way to ensure their preservation. Alex Bellamy accurately sums up the 'overwhelming features' of current affairs highlighting the 'the display of the overwhelming might by the world's most powerful state, the persistence of the use of violence for political ends... and the seeming inability of internationally agreed norms and rules to constrain the world's most powerful actors'.[23] Despite the claims of many English School theorists, such as Justin Morris, that even the most powerful states 'prefer to act in accordance with international rules',[24] and as such their behaviour is held in check by international law, this is simply not the case.

In the case of international law current events would appear to justify Waltz's claim that the anarchical nature of the international system causes major powers to pursue their own interests. If and when the major powers do act in accordance with international law, this is in large part due to the fact that they as leading powers were generally involved in the very creation of that law and consequently stand to benefit, thus it is in their best interest to follow it. When a great power acts within the boundaries of international law it is merely acting within the boundaries it helped to create and thus serve its own interests. Furthermore, many great powers have a 'selective engagement' with international law.[25] Participation only occurs when it is deemed conducive to national interest. For example, the US favoured the proposals of the Uruguay Round as it would lead to an increase in US exports by reducing tariffs abroad more than in the US, [26] however they refused to sign the Ottawa Treaty regarding the use of landmines which was perceived as detracting from US security interests.[27] Due to the uncertainty regarding other states' intentions, inherent to the anarchical system, which John Herz aptly labels the 'security dilemma',[28] powerful states also use the enforcement of international law to influence the policies and behaviour of other states.[29] Scott highlights the Nuclear Non - Proliferation Treaty as an example of the US and the existing nuclear powers negotiating agreements weighing heavily in their own favour and thereby maintaining their superior military capabilities.[30]

Critics of structural realism argue that the involvement of states in international institutions disproves the theory as it fails to recognise the positive relationships that can be created between states.[31] Waltz refers to the continued existence and extension of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance beyond its original purpose to highlight how international institutions have become 'subordinate to national purposes'.[32] Similarly, Britain's involvement in the European Union (EU) is a further example of a state involvement purely to an extent that is beneficial. Despite being a leading member of the EU, Britain based its decision not to join the Euro on the fact that it was not deemed in the nations' economic interest.[33] This further highlights how the most powerful states can and do act in a manner conducive to

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the preservation of their power.

Does structure explain enough of the 'big important things'?

However, whilst anarchy may be able to explain the manipulation of international institutions, as Jack Donnelly states, structures do not 'mechanically determine' outcomes.[34] Whilst it is important not to return to the domain of purely 'political – military relations' of classical realism,[35] to accurately analyse current affairs we need to consider a neo classical approach which investigates patterns in state behaviour and considers the role of other non structural forces thus providing greater depth of understanding.[36] Furthermore, we must also consider the merits of other, sometimes contradictory, theories. For example the fear and mistrust caused by a 'self help' system often translates into a justification for violations of international institutions, as a result national interests are often hidden in the rhetoric of self defence. The Israeli bombing of suspected Syrian nuclear facilities in 2007 was clearly a violation of international law.[37] Although Israel did not attempt to provide any legal justification for its action, many have drawn comparisons to Israeli action against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 which was justified as a right to 'anticipatory self defence'. It is clear that the Israeli used the *perception* of potential Syrian aggression as a justification for the decision to strike.

Consequently, this leads us to one of the shortcomings of structural realism by highlighting that although an anarchic structure exists which forces states to react to the rise of other powers, we must also consider states' perceptions of each other's behaviour to fully understand changes in the international arena; as Alexander Wendt claims 'anarchy is what states make of it'.[38] Much of international relations is strategy, as Milner claims this draws attention to issues of communication and information and thus perceptions.[39] A consideration of perceptions combined with an understanding of the impact of anarchy creates a deeper understanding of states' behaviour.

## Mixed Motivations

Furthermore, although the 2003 invasion of Iraq can be used as an example of the anarchic system causing powerful states to violate international law to suit their needs, structural realism does not explain the *variety* of factors which caused the need to invade and the subsequent war.[40] The motivations for war in many cases lie much deeper than just the system level. As Michael Byers argues when states consider unilateral or multilateral action, 'various forms of political economic and military pressure... can be brought to bear in international affairs'.[41]

The 2003 invasion was a result of an idealist American foreign policy, which does not make sense from a Realist perspective.[42] However, classical realism goes much further in analysing such an event than structural realism, as it takes a wider range of factors into consideration. Morgenthau recognised the importance of ideology and nationalism, which are key themes of the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'.[43] He claimed politics by its nature 'compel the actor ... to use ideologies in order to disguise (his) immediate goal'.[44] Similarly, analysis of state behaviour is impossible without considering the influence of nationalism, particularly as it is in the ascendancy.[45] Morgenthau recognised that 'universalistic nationalism' enabled states to claim 'the right to impose its own values and standards of action upon all the other nations'.[46] Thus without considering a wider range of factors than structural realism will allow, it is impossible to fully understand motivations for war.

Additionally, the international system is much more complex than a single cause and effect which Waltz claims. It is wrong to assume states are always free to act without any constraints.[47] Exchanges within an interdependent system, such as the global economy, are 'mixed motive games'.[48] Structural realists have failed to take into account the rise of the European Union and underestimated the dynamics of European integration and governance upon state behaviour.[49] For example, the recent use of the veto power by Russia and China regarding the proposed UN intervention in Syria which America was keen to push through, could be viewed as just one of the constraints upon state behaviour. Thus, it is clear that structural realism is unable to adequately analyse the politics

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and economics of one of the key areas of world politics. As Helen Milner argues, the effect of interdependence upon states' behaviour needs to be given at least equal consideration to anarchy.[50]

Similarly, whilst it is possible to view Britain's support of American foreign policy as the former 'balancing', which appears to confirm the structural realist theory that states join with more powerful states in order to protect themselves,[51] a purely structural analysis cannot explain issues such as foreign intervention or changes in state behaviour. To understand both of these we must consider the power of economic factors. During the 'Arab Spring' of this year the UN chose to intervene in oil rich nations such as Libya, yet failed to come to the aid of Syria. It is possible to suggest that if Syria had the raw materials of Libya, both China and Russia may have been more willing to intervene and therefore take a share in the spoils as France saw 'fair and logical' in the case of Libya.[52]

Furthermore, structure alone is not enough to explain the changing relationship between Britain and Libya and more specifically how a former sponsor of international terrorist activity became a 'poster boy' of nuclear non proliferation less than twenty years later.[53] Such an explanation would fail to consider the lifting of US trade embargoes and more controversially the prisoner transfer agreements including the release of Abdel Baset Ali al - Megrahi .[54] It would also overlook the fact that such transfers were organised in return for the signing of oil exploration treaties favourable to British companies. Thus, whilst these events fit within the 'power politics' dimension of realism as a whole, the complexities of such changes are unable to be accounted for by structural realism alone emphasising the fact that we must consider a much broader scope when analysing international relations.

## Conclusion

To conclude, despite Waltz's faith in his theory it no longer explains *all* of 'the big important things'. Dunne and Schmidt argue that with the rise of China, Brazil and India states may actually have to become 'more realistic' in order to survive.[55] It is likely that this will be in a neo classical realist form as opposed to a structural. Whilst structural realism is useful in analysing states' behaviour towards certain institutions, it is not always as well equipped to explain other major events. National interest is becoming increasingly complex and states are being forced to take a variety of factors into account when deciding upon the appropriate course of action. Until there is an effective means of authority above the state level, states will continue to act in a self interested manner thus structural realism remains a valuable approach. However it cannot be used on its own or as a sole determinant of state behaviour

Although efforts have been made to include a wider variety of factors and move away from the purely 'structural' interpretation, for example Stephen Walt's 'balance of threat' concept,[56] more needs to be done in order for realism to survive. Areas we should incorporate into our research include religion and culture. Such studies would emphasise how a variety of factors are at work at different levels in the interaction between nations, thus a purely system level analysis see the full picture. It is fair to say that no one theory can explain every phenomenon in world history, consequently for the time being we must incorporate both structural *and* classical realism into a 'plurality of theories' in order to accurately analyse contemporary international relations.[57] Due to the likely increased changes brought about by further globalisation in the future, unless structural realism moves away from its focus purely upon structure, its utility as an analytical tool will disappear completely.

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[1] Knud Erik Jorgensen, (2010), *International Relations Theory A New Introduction*, London, Palgrave Macmillan p. 78.

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[5] Jorgenson, *International Relations*, p. 80.

[6] Kenneth Waltz, (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, London, McGraw Hill, p. 5.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[8] Halliday and Rosenberg, 'An Interview', p. 383

[9] Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural Realism After the Cold War', (2000), *International Security*, Vol 25, p. 23.

[10] Justin Morris, (2005), 'Normative Innovation and the Great Powers', in Bellamy, *International Society*, p. 264.

[11] For example some of the most serious violations will include invasions of other countries such as the US invasion of Nicaragua in 1986 and more recently the US and British led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

[12] Jack Donnelly, (2009), 'Realism' in Scott Burchill, (ed), *Theories of International Relations*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 41.

[13] Shimko, 'Realism', p. 293.

[14] Shimko, 'Realism', p. 287. Whilst there is no doubt that the pessimistic view of human nature which is seen to cause a power struggle, it is too simplistic to say that human nature was the *only* factor Morgenthau considered.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 281.

[16] Hans J Morgenthau, (1993), *Politics Among Nations Brief Edition*, foreword by Kenneth Thompson, London, McGraw Hill, p. 272.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.165.

[20] Jorgensen, *International Relations*, p. 80

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

[22] Shimko, 'Realism', p.293.

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[26] *Ibid.*, p.83.

[27] *Ibid.*, p.83 but see also Christian M. Capece, (1999), 'The Ottawa Treaty and Its Impact on US Military Policy and Planning', *Brooklyn Journal of International Law*, Vol 25, 1, p. 183.

[28] Jorgenson, *International Relations*, p. 90.

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[44] Morgenthau, *Politics*, p.101.

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[47] Ashley, 'The Poverty', p. 273.

[48] Milner, (1991), 'The Assumption', p.82.

[49] Jorgenson, *International Relations*, p. 97.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[52] Julian Borger and Terry Macalister, 'The Race is on for Libya's Oil', *The Guardian*, (1<sup>st</sup> September 2011,) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/01/libya-oil>, (accessed 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011).

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