

The tent of political realism

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Realism, or to be more precise and to avoid any confusion with the identically named philosophical term, *political realism*, is one of the most prominent theories in the study of International Relations and has had great influence on both academic thinkers and politicians over many generations. In fact it is still a very important approach for analysing the international system and has many implications for international politics today. It is a very broad and diverse realm, offering a place for various ideas and concepts. As a consequence some writers do not describe it as a theory, but as a “general orientation”[1] or “philosophical disposition with a recognizable attitude of mind”[2]. A metaphor which describes the current state of political realism quite well is one proposed by Elman in 1996 that sees it as nothing more than a “big tent, with room for a number of different theories”[3].

The aim of this essay is to examine this “tent of realism” in order to find the essential features of political realism and whether the diversity inside this tent is justified. Therefore a description of the historical development of political realism and of the most important thinkers in this field will be provided. Further on, a typology of the existing forms of political realism will be given and discussed. Addressing the main issue of the essay I will then ask if all of these theories are really necessary or whether it would be more helpful in terms of understanding to have only one unitary theory. I will argue that for a good understanding of International Politics we need to have both a simple, unitary theory that consists of the core assumptions of political realism on the one hand and more distinct and complex theories that give us exact guidance on the other. Finally, I will set the frontiers that define the area of political realism, those frontiers that define the *size* of the “tent”.

When we look at the historical development of political realism, three major names come immediately to mind: Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian war* is considered to be the first writing that contains profound realist ideas and the author is therefore often described as “the father of realism”[4]. Likewise, Machiavelli’s *Prince* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan* have had an enormous impact and continue to influence scholars presently.

Even though the timeframe from Thucydides to Hobbes covers roughly 2000 years they have developed surprisingly similar ideas and thoughts. Of course they offered different arguments ranging from Thucydides mainly descriptive historical methodology via Machiavelli’s empirical attempt to develop a theory that considers how people really are rather than how they “ought to be”, and then to Hobbes highly abstract and rational approach of a social contract theory inspired by Euclidean geometry. They all give different weight to certain assumptions or consequences but nevertheless they agree in three major points: firstly a specific (pessimistic) notion of human nature (*egoism*), secondly the idea that at international level there is anarchy (as defined as “the absence of a formal centre of decision-making or a system of government”[5]) and thirdly that states pursue interests defined in terms of power.

The insight that humans are egoistic to a certain amount is shared by all three authors and similarly they agree that this is not likely to change in the future. In addition they observe that on an international level there is anarchy. This does not mean that there is no hierarchy but it is understood as lack of rule and central government. This leads us to the third point: because states act in an area of anarchy, where no one can rely on laws or rules, they find themselves acting in a “self-help system” [6] where they have to pursue their own interests. These interests are to obtain and to

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maintain power, since power alone gives states security in a field of anarchy. The area of international relations is therefore seen as a realm of “power and interest”[7].

Another important figure in the establishment of political realism was without doubt Hans Morgenthau. A refugee from Nazi Germany who like many other intellectuals found his home in America, Morgenthau was one of the leading political realists in the aftermath of World War II and is regarded by many as “the purest as well as the most self-conscious apostle of realism of his generation”[8]. Morgenthau’s great achievement was the development of a systematic and comprehensive theory of political realism which featured only six principles.

Besides the well-known assumptions that we already find in similar form in Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes, Morgenthau further stresses that morality for states and individuals is different and the categories in which we evaluate human behaviour cannot be transferred onto states. Moreover he defines politics as an autonomous sphere[9]. However, in contrast to Machiavelli he doesn’t dismiss ethics totally from politics. He suggests that, although human beings are “political animals”, who pursue their interests, they are “moral animals”. Deprived of any morality, they would descend to the level of beasts[10]. Still, the similarities are overwhelming and to acknowledge this and differentiate his ideas from other forms of political realism Morgenthau later was labelled a “traditional” or “classical realist”[11].

The pluralist challenge of the late 20th century then forced the development of different thoughts and a new defence of the political realist worldview. Kenneth Waltz was arguably the most important scholar of what has become known as structural realism or neorealism.

In contrast to the thinkers ahead of him, Waltz did not want to base his theory on specific characteristics of human nature, but tried to develop it analogous to microeconomics. For him, states in the international system are like firms in a domestic economy. Both have the same fundamental interest: to survive[12]. After this new explanation of states’ interests he follows a common realist pathway. Anarchy is for Waltz the ordering principle of the international system and despite existing non-state actors, the acting units are states. It follows a self-help system in which each state has to look out for itself and states can only be differentiated by their relative power to each other to perform the same function. Yet, a major difference to the classical realism of Morgenthau and others can be found elsewhere. Waltz insists on empirical testability of knowledge and on falsification as a methodological ideal and tries to apply this ideal to his theory[13]. A weak point of Waltz’ theory is that it cannot be used to explain domestic policies. However it is a very helpful tool for understanding why states behave in similar ways despite their different forms of government, ideologies and growing interdependence, and it has become very influential because of its theoretical elegance and methodological rigour.

Recent forms of realism have increased in complexity and diversity and different authors offer different typologies to distinguish between them. A very sophisticated way to navigate in the jungle of today’s realist theories is offered by Jack Donnelly[14]. He proceeds in two steps:

First he considers the relative emphasis the theories give to the basic assumptions of egoism and anarchy, then he tries to evaluate the stringency of their commitment to a rigorous and exclusively realist analysis[15]. Following his first step he distinguishes between *structural realists* who place emphasis to international anarchy and *biological realists* who attach more importance to a fixed human nature and see this as the primary source for the existing international system. He refuses the terms of neorealism and classical realism which are often used to describe these two categories because one is simply an effort to emphasize the “newness” compared to earlier structural realist and the other does not tell anything about the substance of the proposed orientation. In a second step, he then suggests three different categories according to how strictly the theories apply the three assumptions of egoism, anarchy and power politics. A *radical realist* adopts extreme versions of the three assumptions of egoism, anarchy and power politics. As an example he gives the Athenian envoys at Melos in Thucydides’ *History*. A *strong realist* leaves only little space for “non-realist” concerns and he proposes Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau as his examples.

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Finally, *hedged realists* accept fully only the first two assumptions of anarchy and egoism but have various problems with the third assumption of power politics and stress that it is important not to forget about other ideas such as liberalism. E.H. Carr and Herz are Donnelly's examples for this category[16].

After looking at the historical development of political realism and describing the situation today it has become obvious that there is great variety in the field of this theory. But still one could reasonably raise the following question:

"Do we really need all these different theories with all these complicated names?"

After all they seem to have only slight differences and most of them look strikingly similar in their core assumptions. Well, the honest answer is yes *and* no. Yes, because one unitary theory alone cannot provide all the details to guide you in difficult decisions or questions. No, because one of the most basic rules for any successful theory is to keep it as simple as possible. In the words of Karl Popper: "In my view, aiming at simplicity and lucidity is a moral duty of all intellectuals: lack of clarity is a sin, and pretentiousness is a crime"[17].

So we need both, a simple theory of political realism that consists of the core assumptions of this theory, namely anarchy, egoism and states' interests defined in terms of power on the one hand and several well-defined theories that comprise an exact guidance of how to apply, how to weigh and what follows from these assumptions (and additional ones in some cases) on the other hand. Speaking in the metaphor from the beginning of the article, we need to have an *indistinct picture* that contains the full size of the tent of political realism and a *sharp picture of the special part* of the tent that we are interested in, to understand the full meaning of it. Nevertheless one further clarification in regard to the indistinct picture needs to be made.

Just as there are natural limitations on the size of a real tent, there are limitations for a "theoretical tent" like realism. Indistinct doesn't mean that it is open to every possible idea in International Relations; otherwise a specific name like political realism would be redundant.

So what are the natural limitations for a theory of political realism? First of all, and this goes without saying, any such theory must be coherent and distinct, self-contradictory theories cannot be accepted. Secondly it must contain a substantial amount of so-called realist assumptions. At least the two core assumptions of anarchy and of states' interests defined in power should not be missed as they define the political realist understanding of the system of international relations. The assumption of a specific notion of human nature does not *necessarily* need to be included. Waltz' analogy to microeconomics has shown that anarchy and states' interests defined in terms of power can be justified without making use of this assumption. So we can say that even though it is a very *typical* assumption of political realism, it is not a *necessary* one. Thirdly and finally, the realist parts in any theory of political realism must outweigh the parts of any other theory. Such a theory could contain liberalist ideas, but if they outweigh the realist, it is very easy to understand that we should call such a theory a liberal theory and not a realist one. All theories that I discussed in this essay, from Thucydides' to Waltz' fulfil these requirements; their indistinct pictures are identical and only their sharp pictures differ. Therefore they can justifiably claim to be a part of the "tent of political realism" even though they differ in certain aspects.

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