Why IR Realism Persists

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In a world of International Relations theory dominated by discussions of globalisation, interconnection, capitalism, ecological crisis, norms, beliefs, global civil society, and world culture, realism seems irrelevant. This is not surprising given its roots in the very different 18th century world of lightly connected and sharply competitive dynastic states. Even in analysing conflict, its lessons, drawn largely from studying inter-state wars, seem less relevant to an era dominated by internal wars than does understanding the psychological and social-psychological roots of the ethnic hatreds, religious intolerance, and other human impulses that fuel so much internal strife. Yet, in certain fundamentals, the world has not changed as much as many contemporary IR theorists believe, and Realist thought remains relevant. This chapter will identify the extent of that relevance in three steps. It begins by outlining the three knowledge domains that need to be mastered to develop an adequate understanding of international relations, then indicates how realist approaches fall well short of providing understanding in two of them, followed by indicating why realist approaches remain central to understanding in the third. The conclusion affirms that, while realism alone is insufficient for understanding international relations, its insights remain necessary to that enterprise.

For all the talk of transformation, international relations remain a multi-level phenomenon. These levels have been defined in various ways. One is by geographic size, as a global system, within which exist territorial states, within which in turn exist sub-state units. Some define the levels horizontally, as a mutual interaction between a globe-spanning 'world of states' led by governments concerned with their domestic constituencies and an equally globe-spanning 'world of humans' interacting as individuals and through their own organisations across state borders. A third way, most clearly reflected in Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* (1959) identifies humans, states (more accurately, governments as managers of political communities living in territorial states), and the international system (the politically decentralised world context in which the territorial states co-exist), as the distinct levels. Contemporary states remain territorial entities encompassing more or less well-integrated communities of humans, with governments capable of mustering more resources and coordinated activity than any non-state actors. Thus, Waltz's conception of human, state, and international system as distinct levels remains a powerful intellectual framework for sorting out causal patterns in international relations.

Realism has four main weaknesses. Three of these weaknesses, which inspire much of the criticism against Realism, appear at what Waltz identifies as the human and state levels of analysis. First, Realism has typically relied on a gloomy view of humans derived from assuming a supposedly unchanging conflict-prone 'human nature.' This leads to the second weakness, a tendency to treat politics both within and between states as involving unending competition for advantage. Third, Realists lack clearly articulated theories of how governments of states (or any other type of actor) make decisions. The fourth weakness spans the state and international system levels, and consists of insufficient attention to the increased influence of non-state actors resulting from changes at both of those levels in the last 150 or so years. Conversely, Realism's continued strengths derive from the attention Realists pay to the structure and the process at the international system level. The shape of that system level does not directly determine

Why IR Realism Persists
Written by M.J. Peterson

the choices of governments and other actors, but it does constrain their choices significantly and shape the outcomes of their interactions. Each of the next three sections focuses on one of Waltz's levels of analysis, outlining how Realists address each and indicating the weaknesses and strengths of Realist approaches to phenomena at that level.

Humans

Realists' concerns with humans, and particularly 'human nature' as a starting point for theorising, is well-expressed in Hans Morgenthau's claim that 'politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature,' a human nature 'that has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavoured to discover those laws' (1954, 3). Yet, in recent decades the notions that there is a clear divide between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' and that there is a singular human nature have been subjected to withering attack in philosophical, philosophy of science, psychological, feminist, and anthropological literatures.

Contemporary Realists, like most IR theorists, avoid deep engagement in contemporary philosophical debates about the subjective and objective. Contemporary Realists are also much less likely to invoke generalised notions of 'human nature' in their arguments, though can identify enough greed, aggressiveness, cheating, and other forms of bad behaviour in both inter-individual and inter-group activity to maintain their view of politics as highly conflictual. They can sidestep debates about whether there is some overall 'human nature' and what it might be by focusing on results of recent work in human cognition to emphasise how processes of perception and misperception affect governments' choices and themselves encourage conflict (e.g., Jervis 1976, Wohlforth 1993). Thus, contemporary Realists have backed away from some of the very strong assumptions about human cognition and conduct prevalent in earlier decades without discarding their overall expectation that interactions among states are likely to be competitive and conflictual.

Government Decision-Making

Realists' low level of interest in the details of decision-making is not surprising. They generally regard explaining decisions and choices as less important than understanding the implications for states and other actors operating within global decentralisation and a thin set of shared norms for interaction. In their view, the competitive pressures that exist in a decentralised system also characterised by few sources of normative restraint on conduct significantly constrain the alternatives available to any government concerned, as it should be, with its state's security and persistence over time. This stance is not surprising in light of the history of Realism's long gestation. Insights that we now regard as elements of the Realist theory had emerged well before the interwar period, so were available even before E. H. Carr (1939) launched his withering critique of what he regarded as the overly idealistic approach to international relations prevailing in the 1920s. Realists' focus on action within a highly competitive states system mirrored the concerns of rulers, ministers of state, and diplomats after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) established the basic outlines of the European system of territorial states. Notions of effective policy and negotiation techniques were expressed in the 17th and 18th century 'manuals for princes' (e.g. Callières 1716) and modes of coexistence through the acceptance of common rules of conduct outlined in the early writings on 'the law of nations' (Grotius 1625, Pufendorf 1672, Vattel 1758). Since most governments were not directly accountable to the populations of their state and there was only a modest level of cross-border interaction, governments were able to maintain a fairly clear separation between 'domestic politics' and 'foreign policy' or 'diplomacy.'

Conditions changed later. The late 18th and early 19th centuries were marked by the rise of democracy and nationalism. The mid and late 19th century were a period of increasing cross-border interactions in trade, finance, travel, science, and culture, and greater ideological divergence as the international workers movement posed strong challenges to established ways. The 1930s were dominated by an intense three-sided ideological contention culminating in total war among democratic, fascist, and Leninist blocs. All these developments meant that the neat separation between 'domestic politics' and 'foreign policy' prevailing in the mid-18th century progressively weakened and even the governments of great powers were no longer as uniformly insulated from domestic or transnational influences as they had been.

Why IR Realism Persists
Written by M.J. Peterson

Under these new circumstances, realist theory's lack of explanations for government decision-making increasingly appeared to be a serious weakness. IR theorists reacted in one of two ways. Some sought to expand the realist tradition by combining realist insights about the international system with particular theories of how governments perceive, choose, and act. Kenneth Waltz provided a rallying point for one such effort, using a rational choice conception of government decision-making in *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Later efforts along these lines have reflected the modifications of rational choice theory propounded in earlier years but also rest on making strong assumptions about governments as egoistic rational utility maximisers able, in the final analysis, to act in a coherent way for their state (e.g., Fearon 1995, Grieco 1996). Other Realists, most notably Robert Gilpin (1981, 2001), acknowledge linkages between the international and domestic levels in their more theoretically eclectic approach to understanding state behaviour. Some IR theorists outside the realist camp went further, filling the gap by locating the primary influences on foreign policy within the domestic level. This was most prominently expressed in the democratic peace hypothesis (e.g. Doyle 1997, Lipson 2003) placing domestic regime-types at the centre of explanations regarding foreign policy decisions and outcomes in the international system. Yet domestic-centred explanations are also prominent in examinations of international trade (e.g. Mansfield and Milner 2012).

Not all IR theorists are satisfied by either the Waltzian ignoring of domestic factors nor the claims that the primary causes of state behaviour exist at the domestic level. IR theorists inspired by historical sociology have focused analysis on the country-specific processes by which governments address the dual challenge of maintaining themselves domestically through a strong state-society connection and adjusting to challenges emanating from changing external political and economic developments (e.g. Hobson 1997). Another group, taking inspiration from Antonio Gramsci, understands international and state levels as linked by contentions over governing ideas shaping politics at both levels (e.g. van Apeldoorn 2002, Gill 2003). Rationalist theorists (e.g. Putnam 1988) have conceptualised inter-state negotiations as a two-level game: an interaction in which chiefs of governments are simultaneously trying to negotiate agreements with each other while also paying attention to what sorts of agreements will win sufficient support at home among attentive publics and other mobilised groups to be carried out.

Intensified interconnection between states has inspired another line of criticism, one rejecting Realists' continued emphasis on politico-military (or 'security') concerns as the primary focus of foreign policy. Realists never denied the relevance of other sorts of concerns; they simply maintained the older conception, widely shared among 19th century rulers and diplomats, that the 'high politics' of security and politico-military competition was not strongly affected by the 'low politics' of trade, investment, and other activities of private individuals or entities. This separation of political and all other concerns, and the consequent tendency to focus primarily on governments' interactions with other governments, gave Realism what another group of critics regard as an overly 'state-centric' view of international relations. These critics sometimes challenge the adequacy of state-centric conceptions for understanding even the 19th century, pointing to governments' susceptibility to influences exerted by what today are called transnational advocacy movements – most notably the anti-slavery movement (Iriye 2002) or trans-governmental networks of officials or experts – such as the bureaucratic reformers behind the development of intergovernmental organisations for technical and administrative cooperation in the 19th century (Murphy 1994).

Similar criticisms stem from a long tradition of highlighting the impact of economic issues and economically-motivated actors. The latter can be the transnational capitalist class emphasised by Marxists in their calls for organisation of an equally transnational-minded proletariat to end their domination (e.g. Marx and Engels 1848) as well as the communities of bankers and traders long viewed as exerting pressure against war (e.g. Angell 1909). Many contemporary theorists point to a broader set of transnational advocacy coalitions and social movements (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998, Kaldor 2004). Greater transnational ties and wider expectations about what governments should be doing in the realm of domestic politics have also combined to expand the foreign policy agenda beyond older concerns with coexistence to building cooperation in the face of shared problems like environmental degradation, cross-border crime, or controlling infectious diseases.

The current debates about how and how far domestic politics and the economic and other interconnections among societies pose serious challenges to Realist theorising by increasing the salience of the politics within states and the growing interconnections among societies. Both developments allow other theorists to make persuasive claims that Realism is sufficiently wrong to be irrelevant today.

Why IR Realism Persists
Written by M.J. Peterson

International System

No one challenges the observation that the world remains politically decentralised. However, IR theorists disagree strongly on how international relations play out within that decentralised condition. Part of the debate involves how to define the most important element of the system structure. For Realists, the political decentralisation is primary because it means that the problem of assuring security must be solved by individual states through self-strengthening, alliances, or policies of neutrality regarding the fights of others. Particularly in the neorealist vision propounded by Waltz (1979) this leads to a particular view of system-level processes as dominated by considerations of state power in a world where the possibility of war can never be ignored. Marxist (e.g. Jessop 1990; Rosenberg 1994), world-systems (e.g. Wallerstein 1974, Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997, summarised for newcomers in Wallerstein 2004) and dependency theorists (e.g. Amin 1976; Cardoso and Felatto 1979) all offer an alternative view of system structure, defining it as produced by the workings of a global capitalist economy. This leads to a very different view of system-level processes in which competition for economic position, not for maintaining or augmenting their state's power, provides governments' primary motivation.

For all their disagreements on particular points, Marxist, world-systems, and dependency theorists have a similar view of the international-level processes of interaction: they are defined by the dynamics of class struggle; even the world-system and dependency discussions of conflict between core and periphery states have a class dimension since political penetration of peripheral state elites by dominant classes in the core assures that – short of global revolution – the core remains in control. However, their shared assumption that political leaders and government bureaucrats serve as agents of the capitalists and have no independent interests of their own has been strongly contested by analysts emphasising the continuing importance of political and military concerns (e.g., Chirot 1986, Mann 1988, Tilly 1990).

Analysts who continue to view security and political concerns as primary have developed a wider variety of ideas about international-level processes. For Realists, the political decentralisation of the world puts states into a competitive situation in which governments are impelled to focus on 'interests defined as power' (Morgenthau 1954, 5). This competitive milieu requires state leaders who want to maintain their state over the long haul to analyse their situation, choose, and behave in broadly similar ways (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001; Walt 2005). While agreeing that the international system remains decentralised, other groups of IR theorists have developed other visions of system level process that challenge the Realist emphasis on an enduring logic of security-focused competition. English School theorists launched their notion of a 'society of states' to argue that certain fundamental practices of international politics guide government decisions more than typically assumed in Realist thinking (e.g., Bull 1977; Wight 1977) and are maintained through processes of mutual socialisation indicating what is or is not acceptable conduct (e.g., Clark 2005). Constructivist theorists, drawing to varying degrees on linguistic and cognitive theories of meaning, argued that the system process is malleable – or, as Alexander Wendt put it, 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992). Though disagreeing on the precise pathways through which meanings are formed, Constructivists, ranging from those influenced by sociological institutionalism (e.g. Finnemore 1996) to those inspired by Critical Theory (e.g. Fuchs and Kratochwil 2002), all agree that there is no intrinsic reason political decentralisation is always marked by thin sets of shared norms; governments and other actors can shape those norms as they remake their view of the world. For Constructivists, then, decentralisation is compatible with the operation of thicker sets of norms that provide more limits to choices and conduct than does the Realist version of unending and unremitting security competition. Feminist theorists agree on the malleability of system process, attributing much of its current highly competitive form to the predominance of masculine notions of how the world works (Tickner 2001, Shepherd 2010, Goldstein 2011).

A separate challenge to Realist depictions of the system level stems from changes in the level of interconnection between states and societies. These involve not only higher levels of cross-border trade and financial flows since the mid-20th century, but also more contact between peoples and wider diffusion of ideas, images, clothing styles, cuisine, and other aspects of daily life. This challenge asserts the reality and impact of what was once called 'complex interdependence' (Keohane and Nye 1977), but is now generally called 'globalisation.' Whatever it is labelled, strong interconnection between members of the societies living within territorial states is viewed as creating conditions in which states have shared as well as competing interests, and governments need to modify the pattern of their interactions to address shared concerns. In the mid-1980s, a new generation of IR theorists began combining

liberal and institutionalist arguments into claims that shared sets of rules for conduct in various areas and formal institutions, such as intergovernmental organisations, moderate the intensity of competition (e.g. Keohane 1984, Oye 1985; Ikenberry 2001). Increasing interconnection also inspired a world society approach maintaining that increasing interchange among societies and networks of non-state actors was creating a new set of expectations regarding governments' management of their states' external relations – not just with other states but also with societies outside their own borders (e.g. Meyer et al. 1997, Boli and Thomas 1999).

Even those IR theorists who regard state-level factors or interconnection as the primary influences on individual states' choices and actions acknowledge that the decentralised character of the international system influences outcomes by impelling states into interaction regardless of whether they seek to cooperate or to compete. Thus, even they acknowledge that understanding the international system level and the features of its structure and process remains essential to effective analysis and participate in as well as follow the continuing debate about how the international system functions and what sorts of constraints it actually creates. Both of the main system-level debates noted above – about whether political or economic considerations are the primary driver of competition and about whether interconnection is significant enough to alter the balance between competitive and cooperative drives – continue unabated. As with the debates at the human and state levels, the debate about the character of the international system proceeds partly on the basis of logic and partly on the basis of what conception seems most useful for understanding and explaining world affairs.

The Place of Realism Today

As the continuing debates among rival theoretical schools indicate, analysts of international relations have not converged on any single conception about how best to analyse, interpret, and understand international relations (see summaries of the field in, e.g., Booth and Smith 1995, Weber 2004, Burchill et al. 2005, Baylis, Smith and Owens 2008, Jackson and Sørensen 2013). Contemporary events, particularly those occurring since the end of the Cold War, have either produced – through the end of the then-prevailing bipolar balance – or opened up opportunities to more clearly perceive significant changes in the patterns of interaction among the states and other actors on the world scene.

Two changes receive the most attention. There is wide agreement that the level of interconnection prevailing before 1914 was not attained again until the 1970s, and has been exceeded today because the interconnections are not just in trade and finance. Movements of individuals and families from place to place occurred earlier, but the later 20th century provided transportation and communication technologies more conducive to maintaining contact and organising 'diasporas' to influence home country developments or cross-border relations. The intensifications of economic connections through global supply chains and global marketing have inspired claims about the rise of the trading state (Rosecrance 1986), and of a global culture or polity (e.g., Meyer et al. 1997, Boli and Thomas 1999). Nor can contemporary analysts of international relations ignore the steep reduction in international war and the significant reduction in the total number of casualties inflicted in both international and internal armed conflict since 1945. This has inspired claims that war is obsolescent (Mueller 1989, Goldstein 2001) and that this obsolescence strongly influences the conduct of territorial states. The strength of these developments explain why, as William Wohlforth (2011) noted, most IR theorists now regard Realism with its emphasis on war in a state-centric world as outdated and irrelevant.

Yet, as the current example of Syria reminds us, there is nothing inevitable about the post-1945 developments. The reduction in warfare and war-caused human suffering is notable, and the literature on security communities (e.g., Adler and Barnett 1998,) suggests that there are ways states can remove resorting to armed force from their foreign-policy repertoires vis-a-vis one another. However, what Deutsch (1957) called 'non-amalgamated security communities' – groups of non-fighting states in which the participating states remain independent – take a long time to build and do not expand easily beyond regional borders. Economic and social interconnection do matter, but it remains unclear whether interconnections would now prove to be a bulwark against a world war or would be broken up as easily as they were in 1914 and after the Great Depression. Feminist arguments about the strong differences between 'male' and 'female' ways of thinking have also been challenged by arguments that many of the gender differences presented as 'hardwired' are more the products of social expectations than of intrinsic working of human

Why IR Realism Persists

Written by M.J. Peterson

brains (e.g., Fine 2011). Optimism about the spread of democracy has been replaced by worry about revivals of xenophobic forms of nationalism in many parts of the world.

All of the changes in phenomena or in human understanding of them at each level of analysis have not altered the fact that international relations remain multi-level. Good explaining and understanding require taking all levels into account. Realism has not developed good tools for understanding the human and state levels; at those levels analytical tools generated by other traditions of theorising must be brought to bear. Though 20th and 21st century developments suggest that the system level is not equivalent to Thomas Hobbes's (1651) conception of life in the 'state of nature,' the default mode of international conduct – the one chosen when no other considerations or conditions incline actors toward doing otherwise – remains much more opportunistic and self-help oriented than the default mode of conduct within reasonably well-ordered territorial states. As a strong tradition within rational choice theory explains, the tone of interaction in society as a whole depends on the relative prevalence of 'co-operators' willing to temper immediate self-advancement for longer-term shared gain, and 'non-co-operators' always seeking their individual immediate advantage. Normative restraints are stronger when co-operators predominate, but even when they do predominate, co-operators need to adopt strategies for interaction that will limit the gains accruing to non-co-operators so that normative restraints will be maintained and cooperation remains the best choice (e.g. Axelrod 1997; Doebeli, Hauert and Killingback 2004, Nowak 2006). The continuing problem of dealing with non-co-operators means that the Realist warnings that governments of states need to keep a wary eye on other actors and be ready to defend themselves and their own states remain relevant.

In sum, the causal mechanisms leading to actor perceptions, choices, and behaviours and the conjunctions of factors shaping the outcomes of their interactions are too complex to be understood using only Realist theory. However the world remains decentralised and sufficiently competitive that the Realist analyses of power politics and of how differences in material and organisational capability are brought to bear in interacting and using capability advantages to gain more influence over outcomes remain essential to understanding choices, actions and outcomes. IR Realism is not sufficient for understanding and explaining international politics, but its concerns with power politics in a decentralised system remain necessary. That is why it persists.

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Why IR Realism Persists
Written by M.J. Peterson

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