

The Politics of the Realist/Liberal Divide

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JUL 12 2013

In his recent blog post at *Foreign Policy*, prominent IR realist Stephen Walt discusses the differences between realist and liberal scholars, and ultimately concludes that realists tend to be “lone wolves” while liberals often collaborate and write jointly, thus making them “interdependent”. Walt makes an interesting observation about how the personalities of those theorists of realist or liberal stripes tend to, at least in some ways, mimic the assumptions upon which they build their scholarly work. In the end, however, Walt misses a crucial point that I think needs to be added to his discussion.

Let me state from the outset that I do not have the scholarly fame, credibility or longevity of Walt and so I intervene in this debate as humbly as I can. I do identify as someone who prefers realism and even the name of my e-IR blog indicates what readers will get if they choose to frustrate themselves by reading my thoughts.

I would argue that a key difference between realists and liberals, and actually extending that into critical theoretical approaches, would be that realists do not see themselves as promoting a particular political agenda, but rather, are scrutinizing phenomena and commenting on observable, empirical evidence. It is difficult for realists to want to collaborate and make an argument about international politics because there is no intention of advocating on behalf of a cause. In contrast, I see liberals and those of other theoretical stripes (thinking primarily of feminist theorists, Marxist theorists, etc) as not only reflecting on “what is” but are making a concentrated effort at getting other scholars, students and policy makers to contemplate “what ought to be”. In this regard, I return to Robert Cox’s distinction between “problem-solving” and “critical” theories and the core differences between the two camps.

Referencing specifically the realist and liberal divide, I think Walt is astute in also pointing to the interpretations of personality and the scholarly realm as potentially powerful explanatory variables in describing a lack of collaboration, but even still, I do not see these as causal. The ontological and epistemological elements upon which realist and liberal scholars build their comprehensions of the world around them will assist them in gravitating towards like-minded colleagues, but the activist element is at the heart of liberal theory and always has been.

One of the most obvious areas of political agenda-setting would be the Responsibility to Protect debate that continues to grow in popularity. Empirically, R2P is an inconsistent and often misunderstood concept that is quite unlikely to ever be applied in the fashion under which it was originally envisioned. Those scholars that are R2P-proponents are often liberal or constructivist in their theoretical preferences, emphasizing that though we may not see a world where R2P is universally adopted and practiced, the “aspirational” aspect is what warrants further debate and discussion because they often see it as the “right thing to do”.

The theoretical models of realism are far more about observation, empirical testing and often a preoccupation with methodology and objectivity that remove any sort of political agenda from the discussion (or at least in the minds of those realists who claim the ability to remove their own commitments from theoretical work). My interpretations of Mearsheimer, Walt, Waltz, Layne, Morgenthau and other realists is not that they are preoccupied with trying to alter scholarly perception, but are rather commenting on what they observe and the justifications for why reality is so important to consider. While liberalism is an agenda, realism is a warning of what could happen if we detach ourselves too much from the inherent “truths” of the international system.

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If realists out there want to collaborate and write with me, feel free to contact me. I would like to think that, even as a realist, I am still friendly enough to be able to work together...assuming there is an overarching authority to control my behaviour.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray on his e-IR blog [Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality](#)

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.