

# Has Realism 'Got the Big Things Right'?

Written by Alisa Fazleeva

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ALISA FAZLEEVA, AUG 23 2013

*The strong do what they have the power to do,  
And the weak accept what they have to accept.*  
Thucydides. 'The Melian Dialogue.'

Nothing but Realism comes to mind after hearing Thucydides' famous phrase. Indeed, it seems to come through centuries without losing its meaning and usualness. The Realist tradition has been, if not the most influential, but definitely the most discussed in International Relations, because it analyses and explains basic things and discusses the forever-current topics in politics. In general, with the theory of Realism, it is possible to explain relations at all levels: international, domestic, and human. However, having created the unfalsifiable theory, which seems to have answers to all questions ever existing about the international system, Realists committed several noticeable mistakes. They not only failed to predict such important events as the end of the Cold War and the survival of NATO after its end, but successful cooperation and proliferation of International Organizations. Thus, does Realism still have the same power in the XXIst century, when the political structure has changed, and a lot of theoreticians, especially Liberals, suppose there is no need in Realist theory anymore? Theoretical rivals consider Realism to have been essential in wartime— whatever war it was, Cold or hot—but nowadays, as we live in peaceful times, it is obsolete. Thus, the question arises: have Realists got the big things right enough?

The following essay has three main parts and a conclusion. Firstly, the essay will summarize the main concepts of Classical Realism and the two branches of Neorealism, or Structural Realism. Secondly, it will discuss nowadays' applicability of this tradition. And thirdly, the essay will reflect upon its main drawbacks.

### The Big Things

Classical Realism has an extremely tragic view of the world. As conflict and war are rooted in human nature, all states, which are rational actors, are a priori in conflict with each other. This theory sees international system through the concept of interest defined in terms of power (Morgenthau, 2006:5). In the world of anarchy and conflict, where there is no higher authority to restrain actors, states act according to their self-interest. And their primary interest is survival. The only way to survive in anarchy is to maximize power. In fact, all social relations are built upon this concept. Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus power covers all social relationships that serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another. Power covers the domination of man by man; both when moral ends discipline it and when institutional safeguards safeguard it (Morgenthau, 2006:11).

What do we see in Neorealism? Both its main branches—Offensive and Defensive—agree with their Classical brother that because there is no international orderer, the international system is anarchical. In this system, states will behave conflictually and by all means will try to gain their interests, the primary of which is survival. Offensive Realists' concept of power is quite extreme. It presupposes that even when a great power achieves a distinct military advantage, it continues looking for chances to gain more power. The pursuit of power stops only when hegemony is achieved (Mearsheimer, 2001:35). For example, Offensive Realists use the examples of Imperial Germany (1900–1918), Imperial Japan (1931–1945), and Nazi Germany (1933–1945) as actors who tried to achieve global hegemony. The explanatory variable is how much power each of them controls (Mearsheimer, 2010:87). Offensive

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Realists look only at the amount of power actors wield but do not examine the reasons why actors use this power and what actually makes them seek global hegemony.

Let us have a look at the most horrendous example of pursuing hegemony in the XXth century. I assume that the reason why Post-Great War Germany started maximizing power again was not because it was natural for any powerful country to conquer the world, but because it withdrew from the war being highly humiliated. Their national pride was hurt, and this became the most important incentive for developing an extreme form of nationalism. This was how Germany absorbed poisonous, fascist ideas through Hitler who took them from Mussolini. Therefore, the reasons of war may not be totally based in human nature, but horrible things happen when flawed ideas are imposed on weak minds within a definite society, which consequently develop flawedness in human beings.

In this respect, Defensive Realists, especially in the person of Kenneth Waltz, go further. They claim social structure of the state is what should be taken into account. States go to war because they are in bad social organization (Weber, 2010:16) Moreover, seeking hegemony is not the way to ensure survival for states, but a more likely way to undermine it, as other states will seek balance of power and will expectedly win in the alliance. This is what happened with Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany. As an example, Otto von Bismark's genius, according to the Defensive Realists, was that he understood that much power was bad for Germany, because it would cause its neighbours to balance against it. So, he wisely put the brakes on German expansion after winning stunning victories in the Austro-Prussian (1866) and Franco-Prussian (1870-71) Wars (Mearsheimer, 2010:81) In this respect, Defensive Realists' concepts of power and hegemony are closer to reality.

The concept of social relations in states brings us to the issue of human nature. As Classical Realists find humans wicked by nature, they claim this wickedness is the primary reason of conflict and also of impossibility to cooperate. However, Neorealism sees possibilities for improvement:

The locus of the important causes of war is found in the nature and behavior of man. War results from selfishness, from misdirected aggressive impulses, from stupidity... If these are the primary causes of war, then the elimination of war must come through uplifting and enlightening men or securing their psychic-social readjustment (Waltz, 2001:16).

However, even if Neorealists go further again, they, along with Classical Realists, do not believe in cooperation between states. And this becomes crucial in evaluating the theory, as Realists failed to predict not only the end of the Cold War, but success of International Institutions.

## Realism in Our Present

Thus, is Realism applicable nowadays? Realists would definitely argue that these successful institutions would disappear after some time, as would states, nations, and people—this is the natural course of events. Everything gradually passes away. What will forever exist on the Earth after centuries and millennium is unchangeable human nature, which is complex, but basically wicked. Only basic instincts would not cease to exist such as survival and food, which later would develop into desire for more power, as power is a guarantee for survival and food. The world system would stay in anarchy, as there would never be someone or something higher to watch the international situation, and of course, no cooperation. This is the unfalsifiable Realist model of the world. But, what sorts of changes would alter the international political system so profoundly that old ways of thinking would no longer be relevant?

Changes of the system would do it, but changes in the system would not (Waltz, 2000:5). According to Realists, the latter has not happened. Thus, the success of International Institutions, nowadays, is a temporary fashion. And its decay may already be observed: the EU is in a deep crisis, ASEAN constantly fails to resolve conflicts between its member-states, terrorist organizations and drug cartels are proliferating. In fact, even the United Nations, the omnipresent organization, members of which decided that all possible conflicts must be prevented and put this great responsibility[1] on themselves, appears to be toothless, at times, permitting catastrophes to happen. For instance, let us remember the innumerable resolutions on Bosnia, belated help in genocide and numberless deaths; let us also

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remember hesitation in helping Rwanda where the conflict developed into one of the most horrendous genocides ever happened in the world history, with almost 1 million people dead. Policymakers in France, Belgium, and the United States, as well as at the United Nations, were aware of the preparations for massive slaughter and failed to take the steps needed to prevent it.[2]

Nonetheless, as President Barack Obama addressing The UN General Assembly on 23 September 2009 said:

This body is made up of sovereign states... Sadly, but not surprisingly, this body has often become a forum for sowing discord instead of forging common ground; a venue for playing politics and exploiting grievances rather than solving problems.[3]

Sometimes it is hard to disagree with Mr. Obama in respect of a number of similar organizations. And it is hard to disagree with Realists as well, when they claim that every member of International Organizations pursues their self-interest. For example, there is no exact answer on the question if the IMF and World Bank help to overcome financial crises, or if they, instead, exploit poor countries making them dependent on the developed part of the world (Eriksen, 2005:5).

Similarly, actions of NATO are also extremely controversial. For example, the alliance won victory over Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya and managed to set democracy there. NATO's Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen proudly declared a victory of democracy and human rights and put further responsibility for constructing a new state on Libyan authorities.[4] Thus, he put responsibility for further violence on the country, not on themselves. And further violence indeed came—an American Ambassador was killed in Benghazi.[5]

Was not this murder an expression of freedom in a perverse way? It was. A considerable part of responsibility for these deaths lies on those who established democracy in Libya: they set freedom, but did not teach people how to use it. Thus, it seems that democracy and spreading human rights are more dangerous nowadays, as it causes more deaths and leaves internal contradictions after themselves. Democracies promote war because they, at times, decide that the way to preserve peace is to defeat nondemocratic states and make them democratic (Waltz, 2000:11).

However, if the world is now safe for democracy, one has to wonder whether democracy is safe for the world (Waltz, 2000:13). How can Realism be called obsolete when all these conflicts, death-bringing oppositions, and wars for peace are constantly around us? How can Realism be called obsolete with its tragic perception of human nature when those horrible genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda happened? Do not the Arab Spring and the conflicts between Israel and Palestine prove Realists' tragic view of the world? This is our present, not past.

## On Human Nature and Cooperation

Even though those horrible events are still parts of our lives, Realists are considerably mistaken in two big things. If cooperation is not possible, why did the European Union become such a powerful and successful organization based upon cooperation? Why, despite some controversies in their actions, many organizations have successfully coped with their agendas such as ASEAN, which contributed much to development of Southeast Asia? Or MERCOSUR which stays away from politics, but is successful at economic matters in the region? There are a lot of 'why's. However, this essay has a suggested answer.

Cooperation is not a temporary fashion, but an expression of another side of human nature. Yet, the humanity is being developed. As the world has stepped onto a new stage—became more open, with economic systems integrated and borders blurred—people started using their potential and other innate features besides conflictuality. Even though the late Kenneth Waltz spoke about the possibilities as an enlightening man, he did not develop his idea on how it should be done and with what results. He also wrote about states behaving irrationally (as above mentioned Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany). Thus, Waltz famously argued that his theory of international politics needs to be supplemented by a separate theory of foreign policy that can explain misguided state behaviour.

However, that additional theory, which invariably emphasizes domestic political considerations, is not a structural

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realist theory (Mearsheimer, 2010:84). In addition, it should not be Liberalism with its view of humans as utility maximizers since it, along with Realism, has shared commitment to rationality. Should it, then, be a reflectivist theory, like Constructivism? Or maybe Realists should reconsider the concepts which they view as “misguided”? Cooperation, mutual help, and compassion are as common for humans as egoism and pride.

As an example, it is enough to remember how many countries sent humanitarian aid after the 2011 catastrophe in Japan.[6] Undoubtedly, Realists would argue that sending aid has nothing to do with compassion as, first of all, this contributes to states' status in the international arena. But how then can private donations and charity funds be explained? The best way to understand is to consider the fact that human nature is not flawed, but dual. And even if International Organizations sometimes fail to achieve peace or resolve conflicts, they were created because of natural human impulse to help each other and to prevent future catastrophes. Because of this impulse, the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, emerged. And if people, despite previous mistakes, keep on trying to construct dialogue and continue to cooperate, the world will change for the better, not worst.

Even if we do not discuss cooperation in terms of goodness of human nature, it still does not contradict the main Realist concepts—striving for power and self-interest. What is cooperation if not pursuing a common self-interest in order to become more powerful in a collective way? Realists' picture of the world would be more realistic if they took into account duality of human nature and possibility to cooperate.

## Conclusion

Have Realists succeeded in getting big things right enough? They definitely have in a lot of ways. This theory is undoubtedly applicable nowadays, as it looks at the basic—world order, reasons of war, as well as evaluates human nature. Defensive Realists are the best at explaining the concepts of power and hegemony. Even though they failed in predicting the end of the Cold War and the survival of NATO, their basic concepts and their 'old-fashioned' way of thinking are nowadays acute. Now that the humanity is on the higher level of development, actors learnt how to hide their real interests under the mask of peacekeeping operations, spreading democracy and promising global happiness. The question what essence Realists found in humans makes them commit serious mistakes. Therefore, there is much room for further research, and there should be a deeper investigation of human nature from the medical perspective; it makes sense to take into consideration the psychological experiments on human behavior, personality and cognition, which would help to explore more within the area of Political Science and International Relations as well. For instance, the area of foreign policy decision-making would be put onto a higher level if examined from the point of view of Cognitive Psychology. Thus, if in future Realists manage to scrupulously examine such integral parts of our life as duality of human nature, cooperation and alliances, it will be the most correct theory reflecting the world of politics in its diversity and contradictions.

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## *Internet Resources*

Anders Fogh Rasmussen on Libya: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JvQRcwrJpE>

BBC: US confirms its Libya ambassador killed in Benghazi: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19570254>

Charter of the United Nations: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml>

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Remarks by the president to the United Nations General Assembly:  
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[1] <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml>

[2] [http://www.unitedhumanrights.org/genocide/genocide\\_in\\_rwanda.htm](http://www.unitedhumanrights.org/genocide/genocide_in_rwanda.htm)

[3] [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/remarks-by-the-president-to-the-united-nationsgeneral-assembly/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-by-the-president-to-the-united-nationsgeneral-assembly/)

[4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JvQRcwrJpE>

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