

To What Extent Are Realists Too Pessimistic For The Prospects For Peace?

Written by Charlotte Lecomte

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Introduction

International Relations, as an academic discipline, is considered an ever changing subject which has greatly evolved through the years due to the emergence of different and diverse political theories. It is from these that various interpretations are drawn and used to understand events and conflicts that shape how the world functions today. When studying the subject, one is confronted with three main approaches: Liberal Internationalism, the English School, and finally, realism. All of these dogmas have distinct outlooks on the nature of the state, on war, and on the international society.

Realism and Liberal Internationalism (which, for the continuation of this essay, will also be referred to as liberalism or idealism) are identified as the two extremes of the academic arena. On one hand, the main realist theme is that “states find themselves in the shadow of anarchy such that their security cannot be taken for granted” (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 95). Liberalism on the other hand does not see the international realm as an anarchical one, but “seek to project values of order, liberty, justice, and toleration into international relations” (Dunne, 2008: 111). Hence realist pessimism and idealist optimism usually come in direct opposition of each other over issues such as the handling of the role of power, human nature, and Man’s natural position towards war and peace.

We can thus ask ourselves, focusing on the issue of the prospects for peace, to what extent realists are, perhaps, *too* pessimistic. This essay will use established arguments to explain that the cynic nature of the realist approach can be, at times, unreasonably excessive, but it still has its limitations.

This essay will be looking at how and why realism is characterized as being so negative, as well as limiting that trait in certain aspects. Firstly, it will present the foundations on which the realist dogma is built, focusing on its three core elements: statism, survival, and self-help. Secondly, it will depict the ways in which realist pessimism may be too overwhelming: looking at classical and structural realism, and observing how the pessimistic level of each differs. For this we will base our study on the works of Machiavelli and Hobbes. In this section, the nature of Mearsheimer’s offensive realism will also be considered. However, it is also important to note how the realist view can appear to be too bitter despite the actual turn of historical events. This opens up the essay’s counter-arguments, based on the idea that some realist thinkers were only moderately cynic, staying within rationality. To pursue this idea, we will focus on Waltz’s defensive realism, as well as Morgenthau’s view on the importance of the balance of power. Finally, the conclusion will group up these arguments to prove that there is a limit to the realist pessimism towards the prospects for peace.

Part One: The Foundations of Realism

The realist approach to the study of International Relations is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions; it has emerged gradually through the work of a series of analysts (Donnelly, 2004: 1). Despite its numerous interpretations, all realists follow the same three core elements: statism, survival, and self-help. For realists, “the state is the main actor and sovereignty is its distinguishing trait” (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 100). The

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concept of a sovereignty implies that the state has supreme authority to make and enforce laws. In other words, it is held at a higher power than the rest of the people. Statism is then considered as a way to organize power domestically, ensuring the creation of a community and increasing the legitimacy of the state. Yet outside the state's domestic borders, a condition of anarchy exists: "the condition for order and security – the sovereignty – is missing from the international realm" (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 100). Realists base this as the cause for the insecurities, dangers, and threats to the very existence of the state that weigh over relations between independent sovereign states. One of the main realist beliefs is that "states are the only actors that really count" (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 101). Thus statism emphasizes on the ubiquity of power and the competitive nature of politics amongst nations.

Survival is then seen by realists as the pre-eminent goal in international politics. It is held to be "a precondition for attaining all other goals, whether they involve conquest or independence"; it is the leader's supreme national interest (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 101). This core element has however been largely critiqued and questioned within the realist circle: to what extent can a state take actions in the name of pure necessity? The ethic of responsibility is frequently used as a justification for breaking the laws of war. Thus realism, by way of survival, suggests a wider objection to bringing ethics into international politics; the state is the supreme good and there can be no community beyond borders.

The last core element, self-help, dictates that no other state or institution can be relied upon to guarantee one's survival, as there is no higher authority to prevent and counter the use of force as there would be in the domestic polity. Self-help thus plays a role in the establishing of a state's security. In its system of international politics, the logic of self-interest mitigates against the provision of collective goods, such as security or free trade. From this, the question becomes not whether all states will be better off through international cooperation, but rather who will gain more than another. This contributes to the idea of international competition.

Therefore, the fundamental basis of realism, drawn from these three elements, constructs a natural pessimism towards an international community; the dogma has a sceptical idea that universal moral principles exist, and therefore state leaders must under no circumstances sacrifice their own self-interests to adhere to some indeterminate notion of ethical conduct. They are then against the idea of any international organisations such as the UN. Furthermore, power is crucial to the realist lexicon. This is where Liberalism and Realism bitterly oppose each other: realists disagree with the fact that idealists ignore the role of power, overestimate the degree to which human beings are rational, and believe that nation-states hold a set of common interests. All in all, they condone the idealist optimism reigning over the academic arena of international relations.

Part Two: Realist Pessimism

Over the years, two main different categories of realism have emerged, embracing a variety of authors and political thinkers: for one, there is classical realism, dating up to the twentieth century, maintained especially by writers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau. The other is structural realism, a more contemporary notion, issued mainly by Waltz and Mearsheimer. Each has a different definition of what constitutes the realist nature of power politics, thus a different notion of pessimism.

It has been set forth that realists assume an ineradicable tendency to evil between states due to their competitiveness. Classical realism argues that this is driven by an endless struggle for power which has its roots in human nature: the natural condition of man is one that is vain, hungry for power and glory, driven by competition and diffidence. In the absence of any superior government or hierarchical authority, man lives in a state of war, fear and insecurity. This perfectly pessimistic portrayal comes from Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (chapter 13). Another cynical view comes from Machiavelli, in his famous work *The Prince*: He saw human nature as being "insatiable, arrogant, crafty... above all else malignant, iniquitous, violent and savage" (Donnelly, 2004: 25). Furthermore he argued that "men never do good unless necessity drives them to it". For him, human egoistic passions were predominant, and could only be repressed by force, and at times only by ferocious cruelty. Within human nature, justice, law and society don't have their place.

This brings out another underlying concept of realism: that of anarchy: International politics take place in an arena

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that has no overarching central authority above the individual collection of sovereign states. Since, as discussed earlier, each state is concerned only with its own welfare, any kind of diplomatic progress is impossible. Human nature's worst aspects are expressed through a state of international and domestic anarchy, which is why statesmen should control it. The egoism inspired by human nature and the principle of anarchy are what determine the predominant role of power in international relations. Security then represents the establishment of a less dangerous and less violent world, rather than a safe, just and peaceful one.

Structural realism, on the other hand, does not put down human nature as the source of power politics. Instead, it is the anarchical international system which fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity. They attribute security competition and inter-state conflict to the lack of an overarching authority above states. The international system also served in explaining the importance of the balance of power between states: structural realists argue states care deeply about the balance of power and compete among themselves either to gain power at the expense of others or at least make sure they do not lose it. Such competition was seen during the cold war, with the emergence of a bipolar society. In short, the structure of the international system is what forces states to pursue power, in fear of losing its balance.

Within structural realism, there are two variants, one being offensive realism, a theory provided by John Mearsheimer: when it comes to describing the behaviour of states, he believes the international system compels states to maximize their relative power position. However, he goes even further in saying that there is no limit to this maximization; all states are continuously searching for opportunities to gain power at the expense of other states. According to him, the best path to peace is accumulating more power than any other state, inducing global hegemony. Yet Mearsheimer is cynic about the possibility to such an end. Believing such hegemony impossible, he concludes that the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition (Dunne, Schmidt, 2008: 99).

A historical example of realist pessimism going too far is the end of the cold war. Its somewhat peaceful conclusion caught many realist thinkers off guard; the US-Soviet competition was a perfect case of the balance of power mechanism in action. Its sudden collapse showed weaknesses of the realist dogma, resulting in much questioning and many criticisms. For instance, critics argued that the state, Realism's privileged actor, was in decline relative to non-state actors such as transnational corporations and other new innovations brought about by the emergence of globalization. In short, peace for realists did not seem like a sustainable option, something they were also quite condoned for.

All in all, realism can appear as being overwhelmingly pessimistic regarding certain views. For one, Man is portrayed as being an uncivilized creature who has no place in society; following Hobbes' state of nature, any community at all would be impossible due to Man's natural chaotic lifestyle, overridden by fear and insecurity. For the other, structural realism maintains that what drives states to war is their perpetual competition for power and security; there can be no common ground, and it is a race to global hegemony. A prime example of this is the events escalating towards and during the cold war: the rise of opposing ideologies, the arms race, the struggle for containment and the creation of the Warsaw pact and NATO. Though the cynicism of realism is unquestionable now, there are nevertheless counterarguments to prove that there are not only bitter pessimists within the realist circle: indeed, there are many texts and theorists that say otherwise.

Part 3: Realist Optimism Towards Peace

Not all realists believed in the extreme supremacy of power. In his *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau argues that "having judged [nations as we judge our own], we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own" (Morgenthau, 1993: 13). Here he argues that in order to understand international politics we must focus on the concept of interests, before that of power. Compared to Mearsheimer's idea of the race towards hegemony, Morgenthau's point seems as one in favour of world peace; it sounds more rational to the common individual and promotes an idea of international cooperation. He also held a great importance on the balance of power: the universality of power meant that it was a social phenomenon that applied to everyone. On an international level, its success was of the existence and strength of the international society that bound together the most important actors of the system.

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This goes along with Waltz's main argument of defensive realism (opposed to offensive). According to Waltz, power is the means to an end of security. Rather than being power maximizers, states are security maximizers: "in crucial situations, however, the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security" (Waltz, 1989: 40). He believes it is unwise for states to pursue power as Mearsheimer supports, as the system would punish them if they attempt to gain too much. It would also prove to be dysfunctional because it triggers a counter-balancing coalition of states. This shows that not all realists were obsessed with power and statism; others were more concerned with security and survival.

A historical example of this would be Kissinger's role as political figure. He believed the struggle for power between states could be contained if the great powers are led by individuals who can contrive a "legitimate order", and work out between some consensus on the limits within which the struggle could be controlled: "Organisation requires discipline, the submission to the will of the group" (Kissinger, 1957: 317). Realism does not signify an unwillingness for peace: Kissinger secretly negotiated peace with a Vietnam representative, Le Duc Tho, towards the end of the Vietnam War, ending eventually in the Paris peace treaties in January 1973. He also encouraged cordial relations with Mao Tse Tung's China when he organised the first visit of a US president there in 1972. Furthermore he participated in SALT 1 in the beginning of détente during the Cold War. All these strategic moves undeniably illustrate some realist optimism towards the prospects for any world peace; it was the move towards a peaceful and sustainable international cooperation.

Conclusion

To conclude, the realist dogma is primarily seen as one obsessed with power. It is governed by the concepts of statism, self-help and survival, dictating that the state must pursue power, identified as the key actor in international politics; its survival can never be guaranteed, so the use of force culminating in war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. The question as to what extent realist pessimism goes about the prospects for peace is then answered on several levels.

For one, classical realist pessimism is justified by the consideration of human nature at its purest condition, portrayed at its finest by both Hobbes and Machiavelli: the vain, greedy and violent character it presents does not encourage any kind of peaceful motion. Classical realism was fundamentally about the often violent struggle for belonging. Structural realism maintains that the real problem blocking world peace was the in-existence of a higher authority over all other states that would govern them; naturally, they compete against each-other, driven by the want of a maximization of power, towards a global hegemony. Realist pessimism is therefore drawn from the idea that states are of a most egoistic and selfish nature whose interests revolve around everything but peace.

However, on another level history and defensive realism have proven otherwise. Being more concerned with security than power, realists like Waltz and Morgenthau imagined the slight possibility of international cooperation. Along with Kissinger, they believed the sustainable outcome of society would come from encouraging peace. This is why we can say that realism taught American leaders to focus on interests rather than ideology, to seek peace through strength, and to recognize that great powers can coexist even if they have antithetical values and beliefs.

In short, realists do have a more pessimistic approach to the study of international relations than liberal internationalists, but should not be denounced as being overwhelmingly bitter about it. Given the wide debate between idealists and realists, it is unsure, given historical events, which side is optimal for ensuring a safer future within the international political arena: a new question arises, about whether world leaders should generally be utopian or rationalist.

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