

Uncle Sugar, the Primitive Man and the Anarchy of Social Systems
Consequences of Classical, Offensive and Defensive Realisms
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Introduction

In the United States, neorealist scholars dominate the field of international relations theory. In addition, the government of the United States follows a foreign policy guided by neorealist principles. Neorealism stems from classical realism, and is divided into two streams of theory, offensive realism and defensive realism. Although the three theories are different, they share a common observation; they all see the search for power as the main driver of humanity. Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, claim that although evidence is available which demonstrates that certain primitive peoples were free from the desire for power, there is no proof that a global system could operate in such a way (Morgenthau 1978, 36). Offensive realists, whose leading theorist, John Mearsheimer, famously refers to the United States as *Uncle Sugar* and to the Soviet Union as *the Bear*, see that the end goal of states should be to attain regional hegemony. For defensive realists such as Kenneth Waltz, although power is the key, “it is unwise for states to try and maximize their share of world power, because the system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much” (Mearsheimer 2007, 72).

It must be acknowledged, that realism both in its classical and neorealist form offers tidy theories about the workings of human society. The assumptions are clearly delineated and outcomes observed seem to align with the given assumptions. So what can one criticize about these theories? How can one begin to demonstrate that their understanding of human nature is a fallacy, that the theories are structured in such a way as to support the status quo of nationalism, militarism and capitalism? How can one incite the academic community in the West – which in the most part has fallen into the trap of

understanding international politics through the lens of neorealism – that unless we question its base assumptions, the world is destined to live through never ending conflict? In effect, how can one coherently point out to the common citizen, that the paternalistic notions engrained in realist thought are designed not to liberate the individual and to attain global peace, but to attain power over all people in the world? How can one explain that in order to face the crisis’ humanity is facing, a paradigm shift is required which alters the way we see the world and human nature.

This paper aims to set the groundwork for an appropriate debate about the consequences of realist and neorealist thought on the prospects for global harmony. This paper does not offer answers but instead presents questions and ideas, which require further analysis. The paper is divided into four sections: Section one, explains what realism is, section two, presents the ideas of classical realism, section three, outlines the different streams of thought in neorealism, and section four, offers some questions and presents ideas on how we might begin to reconsider our approach to international politics.

Realism

Classical realism is a reductionist theory and neorealism is a systemic theory, although these seem like fundamentally different approaches, in essence they both deal with events at all levels from the subnational to the supranational. The difference in the theories is not in what they deal with, but in how they arrange their material (Waltz 1979, 60). Although realists do not condone conflict, they do not believe that conflict can be removed entirely from international life. In this sense, they expect “to find conflict as the usual pattern of interaction in international politics” (Morgenthau 1978, xviii). For

realists, political life tends to operate through coercion, and therefore, if one does not operate aggressively someone else will take advantage of the situation. For realists, rivalry, suspicion and confrontation are the main traits of international politics, and accommodation, amity and cooperation only conceal but never abolish the relations of power underneath. For this reason, “moderation, limitation, and channelling of conflict, not its abolition” is the most one can strive for in international politics (Morgenthau 1978, xviii). For most realists, the problem of order is only solved through effective central authority; national governments are able to build relatively peaceful societies by defending their borders, enforcing laws, and protecting their citizens, yet the international arena remains an anarchic, self-help system where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other (Lebow 2007, 55). As Mearsheimer puts it, “for realists, international politics is synonymous with power politics” (Mearsheimer 2007, 72).

Although all realists agree that states want power, they disagree on the reason for this drive. For classical realists, the reason is human nature, and for neorealists, it is the structure or architecture of the international system, which forces states to pursue power. In other words, “for classical realists, power is an end in itself [and] for [neo]realists, power is a means to an end and the ultimate end is survival” (Mearsheimer 2007, 72).

Classical Realism

Also referred to as human nature realism, classical realism sees all politics as subject to human drives and pathologies, and therefore inseparable from the struggle for power, which is part of social life itself. Life is like a Greek tragedy, in which the fear-driven world dominates because some actors always feel themselves too powerful to be

constrained by law and custom (Lebow 2007, 53-55). According to Morgenthau, “political policy seeks either to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power” (Morgenthau 1978, 50), and therefore foreign policy either supports a status quo, it is imperialistic, or focuses on gaining prestige. For classical realists in international relations there is little space for trust, “except in its resigned acceptance that humans can generally be trusted to seek to advance their own interests over those of anyone else” (Morgenthau 1978, xxi). For this reason, national leaders defending morals and values over the interests of the state are wrong, “the individual may say for himself, ‘*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish),’ but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care” (Morgenthau 1978, 12). Instead of aiming towards the absolute good, national leaders should focus on attaining the lesser evil.

Neorealism

Also referred to as structural realism, neorealism grew out of the belief that continuities and repetitions defeated efforts to explain international politics through the familiar inside-out formula characteristic of classical realist thought (Waltz 1979, 67). Because causes at the unit level and the systems level interact, unit level explanations alone would be misleading and a theory of international relations was necessary to explain system level causes. Drawing from economic systems theory, Kenneth Waltz argued that a system theory of international politics could explain how the organization of the realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it, thus revealing how units must “compete with and adjust to one another if they are to

survive and flourish” (Waltz 1979, 72). Waltz referred to a political structure as being akin to a field of forces in physics. “Interactions within a field have properties different from those they would have if they occurred outside of it, and as the field affects the objects, so the objects affect the field” (Waltz 1979, 73). These effects, in politics were produced in two ways: “through socialization of the actors and through competition among them” (Waltz 1979, 74). Whereas domestic systems were centralized and hierarchic, for Waltz international systems were decentralized and anarchic.

Based on this anarchic vision of international politics, neorealist theories consider military capabilities and alliances the very foundation of security, and in general they equate power with material capabilities. For this reason, they claim that great powers always pay careful attention to the economic and military power they have relative to each other: “It is important not only to have a substantial amount of power, but also to make sure that no other state sharply shifts the balance of power in its favour” (Mearsheimer 2007, 72).

Reconsidering our Approach to International Politics

Where can realism take us? Through its lens, coercion, aggressiveness, rivalry, suspicion and confrontation are seen as the main traits of international politics. Accommodation, amity and cooperation are only concealing the hidden relations of power. Moderation, limitation, channelling of conflict are the highest goals, and conflict can never be fully abolished. At best we can strive towards an effective central authority, which is guided by the same underlying principles of power that have shaped realist thought, as the way to co-exist. For the classical realists, power is an end, for neorealists a

means to the end of survival. In either case, states aim to keep, increase, or demonstrate power, and foreign policy is designed to keep the status quo, to be imperialistic or to attain prestige. The question must be asked, are all these the traits that humans should be promoting in order to confront the growing and numerous crisis' humanity is facing? Do we want a global community in which there is little space for trust, and in which the leaders we elect for our national governments should always put morality after nationalism? Do we want a global community, which should not strive to the absolute good, but should simply aspire to attain the lesser of the two evils? Do we want a society in which military capabilities and alliances are the very foundation of security? One cannot help but observe that these seem to be the arguments made not by democracy loving individuals, but by the justifiers of racketeering.

There would be no reason to worry about the opinions of realists and neorealists, if their influence upon US foreign policy had not been so instrumental. The problem is, that there comes a moment in which theory becomes mainstreamed and the theorist no longer observes events but actually shapes them. Morgenthau's book, *Politics Among Nations* heralded a paradigm shift in American thinking about diplomacy, from an idealist focus on values to a realist conviction on power. Since then, realist views have become part of the genetic structure of US foreign policy and the world has witnessed the imperial rise of the most powerful hegemon in human history. As Waltz said, not since Rome has the world seen such a powerful state controlling so much of the world¹. The argument and justification from US elites for this expansion, has in the last part of the

¹ Conversations with History: Kenneth Waltz. Available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9eV5gPIPZg>

20th century and the early days of the 21st, been predominantly premised by realist understandings of human nature and neorealist assumptions about international relations. In fact, it could be argued, that realist and neorealist beliefs have transformed from theory into dogma, and that the biggest challenge faced by humanity is going to be, to break away from the indoctrination. How can that be done? We can begin by questioning the use of language stemming from realist ideology. Concepts such as *power*², which are pivotal in the realist arguments for sustained military, nationalist, and capitalist structures, must be re-examined. What does having power mean?

We can also ask ourselves, whether realist theories are a fallacy designed to support the educational process ingrained in the search for hegemony of the elites, as described by Antonio Gramsci (2005). We can question whether realist theories are structured in such a way as to support the status quo of nationalism, militarism and capitalism. We can explore whether by ridding ourselves of the realist lens we might have a chance to end perpetual conflict. It seems that the hegemons driving the realist discourse are out to obtain global hegemony and certainly do not seem to aspire to individual freedom and just peace. Waltz claims that internal politics should act as the restraint of Nations in international politics, but he also emphasizes that he does not think internal politics work³. Morgenthau claims that “political ideologies... serve the purpose of endowing foreign policies with the appearance of legitimacy” (Morgenthau, 32), We

² According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, power does not just mean to have control over others, it can also mean in its more essential form: the capacity for being acted upon or undergoing an effect; and the ability to act or produce an effect. Recapturing the more neutral understandings of the term power, would radically transform the strategic goals of nation states operating in the international system.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/power>

³ Conversations with History: Kenneth Waltz. Available online:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9eV5gPIPZg>

might explore whether the ideology of realism has legitimised US imperialist foreign policy. Morgenthau argues that the United States “has become dangerous and vulnerable, feared and afraid” (Morgenthau, 25), perhaps we must ask ourselves why.

In essence, what might be required is a paradigm shift, a change in the basic assumptions within the ruling theory. Realism views hierarchy as the way to obtaining order, and in effect, it is hierarchical struggle, which seems to disrupt the Anarchic order of international systems. It is the existence of hierarchy, which leads individuals to strive for power, after all who wants to be ruled? The peaceful existence of humanity can never be built on the premise of coercion, but must instead be constructed on the natural foundations of anarchy. Perhaps Uncle Sugar is still in control, but the values of the primitive man seem to be making a comeback, after all, although history is the vehicle for tragedy, it is also the teacher of wisdom (Lebow 2007, 65).

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