The International Relations theories; its strengths & weaknesses

Critically assessing one of the International Relations theories in terms of its strengths and weaknesses as an explanation of contemporary International Relations

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“The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.” - William Arthur Ward (Think exist, nd)

The theory that will be assessed, as quoted above, is the theory of Realism. This essay will be going through how realism applies to contemporary International Relations (IR) by providing examples of how they have proven to be accurate in explaining issues around the world today, but also how they may have been inaccurate in other cases.

Realism is not a theory which is defined explicitly, rather many of those who study it, differ with regards to its interpretation. Some would argue that it consists within a general, normative state (Ferguson and Mansbach, 1988; p79). However, others would contend that it is in fact “a loose framework” (Rosenthal, 1991; p7) rather than having a structured, rigid definition. The opposing end of the spectrum, as Elman put it, “a ‘big tent,’ with room for a number of different theories” (Elman, 1996; p26) resulting in the two former theoretical approaches being gulfed into one categorical approach. It is the latter opinion that most analysts of realism take on. That it is not one simple theory, rather each view is merely a branch from the tree.

One interpretation of realism that is unbroken amongst most commentators of the theory is that realists are individuals that believe the State is the principle actor in international politics and that they are very concerned with the balance of power. They argue that all the State’s actions and choices are a reflection of the collective will of the people, which is also an argument put forward by Statists, albeit the fact that may come across more totalitarian, they still argue that the State is in fact a representative of its people (Liberty Blog, 2012). It is because of the people’s characteristics that the State acts the way it does. This is closely linked with Thucydides’ theory on human nature; that all humans are egoistic, power hungry and self-interested. They seek protection for themselves and exclude all others from this protection, unless in some circumstances they are to gain from this inclusion (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2011; p89). This then builds the foundations for the State itself, making it an egoistic State, one which seeks to protect itself and assure its survival, even at the cost of other States falling, also known as ‘absolute gain’ (Heywood, 2011; p67)

A good example of this is East Timor and its relationship with Australia during the Second World War. During the war:

“Australian and Dutch troops, acting under orders from Allied Command, landed in East Timor around the Christmas of 1941 to establish an offshore line of defence
against the advancing Japanese (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2000). The Japanese forces were stopped, partly due to the ‘remarkable close friendship that was forged with the Timorese, who supplied and protected the troops’ (Inbaraj 1995). As a result, Allied troop losses amounted to just forty soldiers, while the Timorese paid [sic] a higher price for their help, with as many as 40,000 (14% of the population) estimated to have been killed.” (Oxford University Press, nd)

As a sign of ‘gratitude’ Australia dropped leaflets as they left the country to thank the East Timorese for their help (Suter, 2001; p152-5). The realist argument here is that Australia acted in favour of its own protection and survival and cared little for East Timor, no matter how much it may have helped during the war. Thus, supporting the theory, in its definition of the self-interested and egoistic state.

There are other examples of this, one which again involves East Timor and is conflict with Indonesia during the 1975-1999 periods. Here we saw Indonesia invade East Timor with only hours after the US President Gerald R. Ford and Henry A. Kissinger left a meeting with Suharto (Indonesian President) where they discussed whether Indonesia should or shouldn’t invade East Timor. President Ford gave his support to the Indonesian president and agreed to supply Indonesia with the entire arsenal needed for the invasion. Again we see that, even though the US is one of the 5 permanent members of the UN (a body that roots it’s self on liberalism and the strive for peace) it still failed to approach this situation liberally. It only took into consideration the absolute gain it will accomplish from the invasion, which was mainly financial (through the production of arsenal needed by Indonesia) and by supporting Indonesia, it will now have another ally in the Easter Asian part of the world, one which is growing (The George Washington University, nd).

When it comes down to war and the reasoning behind war, realists come across as being quite accurate and praiseworthy as they tend to argue points like war being ‘inevitable’, and it can be quite challenging to argue against that, with the numbers of war that have and are still taking place around the world. Whereas Liberals would argue that war should be the last resort to any conflict, that there should be debate and negotiation between the opposing sides before any side goes to war. But we can clearly see this doesn’t always take place with the simple example of the Second World War, or even more recently the 2003 Iraq war. Realists don’t tend to give a solution to a problem, rather an explanation for it. That war happens because States
are power hungry and because States fear for their own survival and so by abolishing other competition they guarantee their own existence.

A perfect example of this would be the 2003 Iraq war. Here we saw the US invade Iraq for many reasons, none of which were clearly specified. At first it was to disarm Saddam of his Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). After the revelation that Iraq had no WMDs, Saddam suddenly became a ‘dictator’ and the invasion was for the spread of ‘democracy’. In the words of the famous French Enlightenment’s political philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Iraqi nation was “forced to be free” (Liberty Blog, 2012). But on the consensus of most of the critics that looked at the reasoning behind the war, it was because the US had concerns regarding its security, following the 9/11 attacks. They felt that these ‘terrorist’ groups may be getting too powerful and so they had to be removed. This clearly exemplifies the issue of survival and egoism. The state here is in fear that the opposing state is challenging it, and so it must be dealt with. There were also interests in the region regarding the oil that Iraq possessed and so it can also be argued it was an issue of absolute gain rather than one of power and fear of opposition. These are in clear upkeep with the classical realism argument of the reasoning behind war.

But if we are to look at this in terms of power and who manages power we see that the classic and Neo-realists view tend to be very rudimentary in their definition of it. Classical realists explain power as simply a military force, and those who attain it are the states (Heywood, 2011; p212). While Neo-realists tend to define power in terms of “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence” (Waltz, 1979; p131). They fail to provide an explanation as to how Al Qaeda, a non-state organisation, managed to bring a super power, like the US down to its knees. Realists argue that States are the only key players in the international system, yet we have non-state actors, with none of the features of power, as defined by realists, applying to them, that managed to display power nonetheless, in ways that are unfamiliar to the realist argument. Clearly presenting a weakness in the realist theory.

Libya is another example of how realism can be both commendable and quite mistaken in its explanation for current world affairs. In Libya we saw the NATO intervene and assist the rebels to overrun the ‘dictator’ Gadhafi. The reason behind this, as realists would argue, is for the absolute gain because once again there were and still are national interests in the region (Russia Today, 2012). Libya is known for its huge oil reserves, with the largest oil reserves in Africa and 8th in the world (Business Insider, 2012). However the fact that the NATO decided to intervene and
claim that it was in the name of democracy clearly proves that some states are not actually egoistic. Realism doesn’t acknowledge the importance of international institutions, making it hard to explain the issue of intervention in Libya.

If we take Palestine as another example, we see that even after absolute bombardment of Gaza by Israel, there has been no intervention from the western states or much intervention from the states surrounding Palestine to stop this wanton brutality. It seems illogical to support and aid Israel in a situation like this, where Israel is actually the more powerful state in the conflict, yet the US has and continue doing so (The Guardian, 2012). The realists argument here seems creditable, as these states, especially Israel, is only acting out of fear for its own survival and so it must abolish this threat of ‘Palestine’ in order to assure its existence. It also substantiates the idea that international institutions are really not that influential and it actually does come down to the states themselves as they are the only actors in IR. But we recently saw Morsi (Egyptian President) help out with a ceasefire between both sides, which actually gives praise to the liberal theory while at the same time finding faults in it. The liberals would argue that the conflict in Palestine and Israel is a result of the democratic peace thesis. This is where a democratic state will always remain at peace with another democratic state (Heywood, 2011; p64). This is why these two states are always in conflict with each other, because either Israel is a democratic state and Palestine a totalitarian one, or vice versa. But the fact that Egypt managed to accomplish a ceasefire between the two sides demonstrates that third party states can actually play a big role in the IR of two other states. This shows just how realism can, in some cases, have no explanation for certain conflicts or even resolutions. As they tend to revolve their theory on struggle and anarchy and ignore most hope for peace, unless this ‘peace’ is reached through war e.g. the Cold War. Neo-realists actually argue that peace can be obscured within war and give the example of the Cold War as the perfect model for this. They claim that during the Cold War there was actual peace, putting aside the tension between the 1st and 2nd world, there was no physical conflict between the US and the Soviet Union (Heywood, 2011; p61) and that this was due to the fact that we had Bipolarity (Heywood, 2011; p216).

To conclude, in this ‘new world order’, realism can only, at best, benefit as a remnant or a relic, a basic groundwork of how IR was steered in the past. Due to its inconvenience and ineffectiveness, realism is inept of explaining contemporary IR, specifically the demise in state conflicts, the rise of dependency between states and the increased power and influence of non-state actors on IR. However that is not to say that it is a theory of incoherence, but that realism is not a whimsical theory that British Middle-East Center for Studies & Research
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can offer us with flawless answers to present-day IR. Realism is beneficial in producing an understanding of IR due to its simplicity, practicality and rationality. In essence, it acts as a cautionary theory, warning us to be safe than sorry.

Bibliography


