Liberalism and Realism

“When you have two competing theories that make exactly the same predictions, the simpler one is the better.” - William of Ockham (Rowe, 2010)

Author: Nicolas Watson, International Law and International Relations, University of East London
“When you have two competing theories that make exactly the same predictions, the simpler one is the better.” - William of Ockham (Rowe, 2010)

The theories that this essay will look at are realism and liberalism. These two theories are notorious for their disputatious nature in regards to their main ideologies in relation to politics, specifically the role of the state, power, human nature and how that affects the aforementioned.

Liberalism is in essence the view that states should interact with one another through negotiations and peace treaties with conflict being the absolute final resort. They would argue that states, in the political arena, have many options and should not always be at each other’s throats (Heywood, 2011). A good way of illustrating this is by looking at a school; the children there can take part in many activities that are not just fun, but also mutually beneficial for everyone. Or they can be the school bully and cause trouble. Therefore opportunities are there for both good and bad things to happen, but it is up to the children, or the political actors, to decide what they want to do. But it is still difficult to just agree with one definition of liberalism. There are many groups within liberalism that liberalism itself will denounce as being, in any shape or form aspects of liberalism. Such as the republican liberalist group, who claim that as a liberal and democratic state, it is our duty and obligation to spread democracy to non-democratic states, even by military means (Heywood, 2011). In other words, or put simply in the words of the famous French Enlightenment’s political philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, these non-democratic states must be “forced to be free” (Liberty Blog, 2012), a stance on democracy that is profoundly illiberal.

When looking at realism, like liberalism, it is quite hard to simply give one definition of it. Perhaps the best way to explain realism is by looking at what Elman described it as; “a ‘big tent,’ with room for a number of different theories” (1996; p26), which really gulfs the different views and approaches to realism into one categorical group.

Through this we can find one interpretation that most observers of realism would settle with. That is, realism is a theory based on the importance of the state, being the only actor in the political arena. The state is in essence a reflection of the population and so will act in mirror to their characteristics, which realism defines as being egotistical and power hungry, or in more callous terms, as Hobbes put it; "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (2009; p52). Hobbes described human nature as being evil, ruthless, and power wanting and that the state of nature that humans are in is prone to “the war of all against all” (2009). That we are all at war
with each other and so this shapes the state and gives an explanation as to why states are constantly at war.

Liberals, specifically the fore father of liberalism; John Locke, would completely disagree with Hobbes in his definition of the human nature and claimed that the state of nature is the perfect place of liberty, free from the interference of others. But that it was lacking law and sanctions and it is for this reason that the people decide on a state to govern them (Locke, 1997). Locke did no claim that the state is a perfect mechanism for peace, rather it can make errors and it is up to the people to disobey the state or dissolve it and replace it when it fails to protect them and their property. Whereas Hobbes claimed that the people should only revolt and overthrow the state when they can ensure their victory over it, otherwise they should remain under this authority under all circumstances (Grant, 1987).

Liberalism, or at least classical liberalism, focus on individualism, that the individual is more important than the majority and the group. The voice of an individual should not be suppressed by the majority. It would seem illogical then to encourage or even associate democracy with liberalism. In a democracy the voices of the minority are unheard of. It is the majority that rules; explained as the “tyranny of the majority” by John Stuart Mill (2006). And so Hobbes’ concept of this notion of individual liberty is to an extent lost entirely (2009).

Through this we can see how the state of nature will ultimately mould the behaviour of the states. For instance with realism, the states will constantly be wary of each other, with no trust and only absolute gain in mind (Heywood, 2011). While liberal states will interact and cooperate with each other, staying peaceful and avoiding quarrels with one another, according to the democratic peace thesis, which is simply the notion that democracies never go to war against each other, as illustrated in Benjamin R Barber’s ‘Jihad Vs McWorld’ (1996).

This is closely linked with the concept of power and how the theories define it. With realism, it’s a much more straightforward and rudimentary definition, with power simply being military force (Heywood, 2011), while liberalism lack a specific definition. Rather, they explain that different actors are capable of different things in the political arena. For example the 9/11 attacks showed how a non-state organisation was capable of attacking a superpower like the US, yet with so little ‘realist power’. Realism lacks an explanation as to how, for instance, the US lost the Vietnam War, when they clearly enjoyed a stronger military force and economy. Perhaps it is best to explain power as a contested concept, where the likes of Joseph
Nye likened it with love “easier to experience than to define and measure” (Heywood, 2011).

To conclude, both theories give resilient arguments and explanations of how politics, in essence works. But in this ‘new world order’, realism is no longer suitable and at best will only benefit as a residue, a simple basis of how the world was structured some time ago. But it’s ineffectiveness leaves it inept of explaining the contemporary world. Whereas liberalism is no longer just a forecast of how politics ought to be, but is essentially now a contemporary and practical theory. One which explains current world affairs and provides precise accounts of the nature of peace that is achieved in the midst of this anarchic world.

However that is not to say that ‘on the other hand realism is a theory of incoherence’, rather we cannot treat it as some sort of whimsical theory that provides us with impeccable answers and solutions to everything that is political. But that it is a theory of the past, one that belonged with war and conflict.

Reference


Available at: http://libertyblog.org/2012/06/forced-to-be-free/

[Accessed 23 November 2012].