

# Realism/Neorealism

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## Realism/Neorealism

Realism is a tenet that views the world as it is, and not in terms of an unrealized ideal. It emphasizes the constraints of the real world and the need for pragmatism and prudence. Applied to international politics, realism sees a conflict-ridden world of states concerned pre-eminently with their security and pursuing power as the means to assure their survival. Realists therefore see the distribution of power as the major determinant of state behavior and international stability. Within this broad rubric, realists have developed alternative formulations, emphases, and distinctions.

### 1. The Realist Vision

The realist vision of international politics holds that states interact in an anarchical international environment in which survival is uncertain. Because power is the key requisite for survival, states define their interests in terms of power and constantly assess their strength relative to that of others. What emerges from their interaction is a balance of power that is the sole basis for order, regularity, and stability in international politics.

Realism emphasizes the competitive and conflictual nature of international politics. States either constantly prepare for war or are at war with one another. Fearing adverse shifts in the balance of power, they respond with internal mobilization and, should that prove inadequate, with external alignment. Self-reliance is preferred in a system of self-help, but allying with others to confront a common threat may be temporarily necessary. Cooperation is thus short-lived, lasting only as long as the common threat, and is a function of common interests and not common values or ideology. Realism can therefore readily explain alliances, such as the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939, between wholly antithetical political systems. The result, mobilization and alignment in response to adverse shifts in the balance of power, returns the system to equilibrium. Hence, balances of power recur and reemerge in international politics.

#### 1.1 Realist Assumptions

Realism is a statist perspective, for it assumes states to be the key actors in the international system. It excludes multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and a variety of transnational and subnational entities that matter only to the extent that they affect states.

The theory assumes that states face recurrent threats and challenges in the international system. Power, especially military power, is the basis of both threats to a state and to its ability to assure its survival.

Realism presumes survival and its requisites to be the highest priority of states, indeed, their very reason for being (*raison d'état*). States value security considerations above all and respond to the imperatives of the international system. The primacy of security also implies that other policies, including foreign economic ones, reflect considerations of international power politics.

#### 1.2 Realism Deemphasizes

For realists, international law and international organizations are largely irrelevant to international politics. Both reflect the interests of powerful states, for in international politics might makes right, and international institutions do not constrain great powers but merely provide additional venues for the

exercise of power. At most, both play a role only in matters of low politics, in regulating transportation, communication, and economic exchange, for example, and not in matters of high politics, especially military security.

Realists also consider the requisites of survival to dominate any moral considerations. Indeed, realists transform necessity into a moral imperative.

Realism downplays the role of domestic politics. It treats states as unitary actors that are functionally equivalent to one another, and the constraints imposed by the international system generate similar behavior even by dissimilar states. The international system once consisted largely of monarchies and then of authoritarian and military governments, and is now increasingly composed of democratic states. For realists, however, it continues to function in the same way.

Self-reliance precludes states from allowing the development of any division of labor or any interdependence regarding the requisites of state survival. Small states may have no choice but to rely on others, but great powers do have such choices and thus do not allow the emergence of any meaningful interdependence.

### 1.3 Realism as Equilibrium Theory

The balance of power is an equilibrium theory. The security policies of nations result in a balance of power among states. The equilibrium can be disturbed, but only by exogenous shocks, ones outside the model. The disturbance then sets in motion forces that return the system to a new equilibrium. The implosion of the Soviet Union, for example, disturbed the balance of international power, but was an event outside the model and inexplicable by it. But realism does purport to explain the set of forces that then would come into play to return the system to equilibrium.

Put this way, balance of power theory functions like Adam Smith's invisible hand in creating an unintended outcome. For Smith, the self-interested behavior of producers in a competitive market generated the best price for consumers. In international politics, the pursuit of national interest and the struggle for power in an anarchical system create a peaceful stable order. It is not the search for peace but the search for security that creates this stability.

### 1.4 Realism—its Historical Roots

Realism traces its lineage to Thucydides, who argued that his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1996) provided the one and true explanation of the war: the growth of Athenian power and the fear this struck in Sparta. Thucydides argued that preceding incidents and specific complaints notwithstanding, the true cause was a shift in the balance of power.

As important to current realist formulations is the work of Thomas Hobbes, who translated Thucydides into English and argued (in *Leviathan*) that the state of nature, which he characterized as a war of all against all, is one in which war and preparation for war are a constant. Conflict is limited within societies by the creation of the Leviathan, a coercive state. For modern realists, who distinguish international from domestic politics, international relations remains an anarchic realm; there is no Leviathan and the war of all against all endures.

Realism dominated the study of international relations in the middle of the twentieth century as the world came to grips with the very occurrence of the Second World War and the failure of both international law and international organizations to prevent it. Hans Morgenthau's (1948) influential formulation of realism drew upon psychology and rooted realism in a human nature presumed to be inherently aggressive and in a view of individuals as power seeking.

Beginning in the 1950s and increasingly in the 1970s, realists (led by Waltz 1959, 1979) linked their arguments to systems theory and structuralism. This variant rejected basing realism in any theory of human nature or any internalized commitment on a balance of power. This neorealist formulation did not posit any individual or collective propensity toward power maximization *per se*. Rather, it posited a minimalist concern with survival in an anarchic setting as the only necessary conditions. Even good people and good states caught in an anarchic structure have no choice but to arm themselves in preparation for the possibility of war and must assiduously guard their relative power. Neorealism or structural realism firmly rooted the problem of international politics in the international system and not in the nature of individuals or states.

## 2. Disagreements

Despite the consensus in emphasizing states as the central actors, security as their prime concern, and power as their key instrumentality, there is some confusion and disagreement in the core of realist thought. First, there is confusion whether the theory is positive or normative. Realists typically argue that theirs is a positive theory of how the system actually works (an iron law of international politics), yet many have also used realist precepts to criticize the foreign policies of specific countries. Realists have argued, for example, that states do only what is in their national interest but have criticized specific actions, such as US intervention in Vietnam, as not being in the national interest.

That politicians adopted the argument has also led to confusion. First, the term balance of power has come to be used loosely and applied to virtually every configuration of power. Second, there is a disagree-

ment between scholars as to whether realism operates through intention (states must aim for a balance of power) or irrespective of it (as an unintended consequence).

Despite agreement that the distribution of power determines stability, scholars disagree about the relative stability of different configurations of power. Within the balance of power tradition, some scholars find bipolarity more stable, others find multipolar systems more stable. Although most agree that the international system tends towards balance (though more predictably and more quickly in some settings than others) and that hegemony and unipolarity are not possible or sustainable, some hold that the system tends towards power preponderance rather than balance, and that hegemony is stable but that a balance of power is not.

### 3. Problems

Realism is criticized for leaving too much out. A pristine realism that only says that balances recur cannot explain most foreign policies of most states most of the time. Moreover, the theory is static and cannot explain change over time. Important transformations of recent centuries, such as the rise of nationalism, the industrial revolution, the rise of ideological politics, the spread of democracy, the revolutions in communication, transportation, and warfare, realists judge irrelevant to international politics, which they treat as unchanged as long as anarchy continues to characterize international politics. Realists deem these factors to matter only to the extent that they affect the relative power of states (whose alteration is the only source of change in international relations) and are viewed as exogenous shocks. The only transformation that some realists accept as affecting world politics is the nuclear revolution, which they consider to undercut fundamentally the importance of relative power in a classical military sense.

The theory is also vague and imprecise. It is not clear what factors enter into a calculation of the balance of power, nor how balance is ascertained. It is difficult to test assertions of the theory when there can be wide disagreement over whether a particular distribution of power is balanced or not. Scholars dispute whether stability during the Cold War derived from US military superiority, a balance of power between the US and USSR, or the existence of nuclear weapons.

More important, the theory is indeterminate. It cannot predict which particular distribution of power will emerge, only that balance will. Nor can it predict the process by which balance is restored. US containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War can be explained as the working of the balance of power, but so can the US roll back of German and Japanese

power during World War II. A US decision simply to contain German and Japanese power in the 1940s would have been as consistent with realism as the actual US decision to wage war and undo the consequences of German and Japanese aggression.

The theory makes precise predictions only when the constraints of the international system are presumed to be tight. Although the theory holds that it is great powers that structure global politics, the international system is most constraining of small powers and least constraining of large ones. Hence, the theory is typically indeterminate regarding the behavior of the great powers, which are presumed to matter most for international politics.

Formal studies have shown that realist premises are consistent with international cooperation, the construction of international organizations, and even the emergence of international norms. These works challenge the deductive logic of realism, arguing that the premises are insufficient to lead to realist conclusions.

Realists have had some difficulty in recent years in explaining significant international developments. The disjuncture between military and economic power has been sustained for an extended period of time. During the later stages of the Cold War, the world remained militarily bipolar, dominated by the might of the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet economically the world was multipolar, with Germany (and the EU more broadly) and Japan as significant economic powers that did not translate their economic prowess into military strength. Such sustained disjuncture between the distribution of economic and military power is problematic for realism.

### 4. Modifications

Realist thought continues to develop, in part to deal with such anomalies. One variant now posits that it is the perception of power rather than the actual distribution of power that matters. Another decouples changes in the distribution of power from the perception of threat, and holds that states respond to threats and not just shifts in power. Some see realism as characterizing particular eras rather than international politics generally. Eras in which territorial acquisition brings greater rewards than does commercial exchange are ones to which the logic of realism is more applicable; eras in which the nature of warfare gives the offense an edge are ones in which a realist logic is more likely to prevail.

Realism has a core strength: its emphasis on power and interest and an unregulated international system. Yet its most pristine formulation is rejected by many, if not most, scholars who articulate their positions relative to a core realist argument.

*See also:* Balance of Power, History of; Balance of Power: Political; Cold War, The; Conflict and War,

Archaeology of; Conflict Sociology; Geopolitics; Globalization: Political Aspects; National Security Studies and War Potential of Nations; Political Science: Overview; State, History of

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A. Stein

## Realisms and their Opponents: Philosophical Aspects

In everyday usage, ‘realism’ is often used as a name for a practically or epistemically low-ambition attitude, while ‘idealism’ is often taken to denote a high-ambition—if not utopian—attitude. In philosophical usage, mostly, it is the other way around: those who are called realists tend to claim more than their opponents—they are the philosophical optimists.

Within philosophy itself, ‘realism’ adopts a variety of interrelated and contested meanings. It is used as the name for doctrines about issues such as perceptual access to reality, the existence of universals, the goals and achievements of science, the nature of truth, the objectivity of morality, and many other things. Given this variety, no single shorthand definition of the term ‘realism’ can be provided.

One manifestation of this variety is that the opponents of realism about these issues are not called

uniformly by a single label (other than the rather uninformative ‘antirealism’): the labels used include idealism, phenomenism, instrumentalism, conventionalism, fictionalism, noncognitivism, constructivism, relativism, irrealism, and others. Sometimes such labels vary from one dispute or domain to another even when similar ideas are being expressed. Sometimes they are used to make claims that are specific to the domain at hand and distinct from other antirealist theses.

In what follows a brief tour will be taken along some of the representative philosophical highways and lanes, from ontology through semantics to epistemology. Along the way, realism will be confronted with some of its various opponents and internal conflicts. The philosophical landscape in the neighborhood of realism is nowadays much broader than it used to be: in a typical older encyclopedia, ‘realism’ was taken to name doctrines about universals or about perception, or both, to the exclusion of much of its present coverage, and many of the current opponents were missing from view altogether.

### 1. Ontology

As an ontological doctrine, realism is a claim about the existence of something. Versions of ontological realism differ from one another in regard to what this something is—the domain of existents (things that exist)—and what kind of claim is being made about items in this domain. If we take ontological realism to have the form of the statement ‘*X* exists,’ then in order to identify different versions of realism and its denial we need to examine the various ways in which its two components are interpreted. We need to consider the two questions: ‘what exists?’ and ‘what is existence?’

If we just claim that the world exists, without providing further specifications of the constituents and structure of the world, our realism will remain rather uninteresting. Philosophers of the nominalist persuasion add that particulars, and nothing but particulars in time and space, exist. The world consists of objects such as you and me and the particular copy of this encyclopedia that you are reading now. A radical nominalist will claim that only ‘bare’ or propertyless particulars exist, while properties do not. Whereas nominalists can be realists of sorts, they are opposed by those who have been called the realists in the debate over the existence of universals. In this debate, realists claim that universals—kinds, properties, relations—exist, that they are, or are among, the constituents of the world. Not only does this particular encyclopedia exist, but among the furniture of the world are books as a cultural kind, properties such as weight and colour, and the relation of being owned by someone. Such universals can be multiply instantiated in particular objects in space and time. Platonic realism takes universals to constitute reality: redness, ‘book-

12815