

Is ‘realism’ the best way to explain international relations?

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William Wohlforth noted that it is “only a slight exaggeration to say that the academic study of international relations is a debate about realism,” but prominence is not the same as accuracy or truth.¹ A debate that has run for eight decades without resolution attests to stakes that remain unsettled. Realism’s centrality might mean that it has captured something essential about global politics, or merely that it performs an invaluable function in IR theory, and performing a function, however indispensably, is far removed from being ‘best’ at explaining international relations.

This essay approaches the question historically, via the methodology of the Cambridge School, treating ‘realisms’ (plural) as efforts, at particular times and places, to intervene in specific debates and crises, rather than as successive drafts of a single theory across time. The ‘realist tradition’ that stretches from Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes to the realisms of the twentieth century is a largely retrospective invention after the fact, such that “political realists have been eager to construct a realist ‘tradition’ around a canon” populated by thinkers who neither called themselves realists nor *could* have, since they predate the term’s coinage.² We must also ask what ‘best’ could mean. IR theories cannot claim predictive power; even Waltz insisted that “explanation, not prediction, is the ultimate criterion of good theory.”³ ‘Best’ must therefore mean explanatory adequacy, in the scope of outcomes a theory can account for, and the plausibility of its mechanisms. My argument is that there is no single ‘realism’ to evaluate, only a family of situated attempts to correct the prevailing wisdom, each of which succeeds in puncturing the moralism of its moment but falls short when it claims to be a complete theory.⁴ Realism is best understood as a recurring ethos, which is what unites disparate realisms besides commitment to a word. It is not the best explanation of international relations but, perhaps, its best corrective.

¹ Wohlforth, 2008: 131.

² McQueen, 2017: 298.

³ Waltz, 1997: 913.

⁴ See Mearsheimer, 2001.

We might be tempted to see the movement from classical to structural (neo) to neoclassical realism as a series of Kuhnian paradigm shifts; this is in part the discipline's own origin story, with interwar idealism thrown into "scientific crisis" by the anomaly of the Second World War and displaced by a realist paradigm.⁵ Kuhn's paradigms, however, presuppose normal science under a framework of consensus, followed by a revolutionary displacement of the old paradigm.⁶ Nothing of the sort has happened: the three realisms coexist today, and realism lacks the doctrinal consistency a paradigm would require. In turn, Quentin Skinner's contextualism shows up the foibles of the appeal to 'the realist tradition'. First is the 'mythology of doctrines', in which scattered or incidental remarks by classic theorists, writing at different times and for different audiences, are given an illusory coherence as a 'doctrine' on a theme the historian expects to find.⁷ Second is the 'mythology of prolepsis', which conflates what a work meant for its author with the significance it later acquired, turning Thucydides into a proto-structural-realist before the fact. Such teleological readings mistakenly demand that "the action has to await the future to await its meaning."⁸ This is precisely the tradition-building of which realists are guilty: as Alison McQueen shows, a retrospective taxonomy is mistaken for participation in a historical tradition.⁹ Skinner's own work on Machiavelli presents him as engaged with the humanist tradition of classical republicanism, not with the power politics of nation-states that did not yet exist.¹⁰ The invention of tradition (what Duncan Bell calls "disciplinary mythologies") has acted as "a powerful legitimating device for certain substantive positions in postwar IR", political realism chief among them.¹¹ It also had an institutional dimension: as Nicolas Guilhot lays bare, 'IR theory' with realism at its center was codified through the deliberate work of the Rockefeller Foundation, whose 1954 Conference on Theory met behind closed doors, rendering realism "essentially a reclusive, if not a secretive, project."¹² Realists have also engaged in shadow-boxing: the 'First Great Debate' between idealists and clear-eyed realists "never happened", because "an 'idealist' or 'utopian' paradigm never actually existed"; 'idealism' was Carr's broad

⁵ Wilson, 1998: 1.

⁶ Kuhn, 1962.

⁷ Skinner, 1969: 7.

⁸ Skinner, 1969: 24.

⁹ McQueen, 2017: 304–305.

¹⁰ Skinner, 1981.

¹¹ Bell, 2009: 5–6.

¹² Guilhot, 2011: 22.

label for positions he opposed.¹³ What defines realism, then, is neither inheritance nor doctrine but a particular sort of posture: the claim to tell hard truths against moralistic illusion. Each conception of realism I set out below inherits it, and each should be judged by what it can, and cannot, explain.

Classical realism reacted to the collapse of the Versailles order, the impotence of the League of Nations, and the failure of collective security to contain revisionism. E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, completed in the summer of 1939, was a polemic rather than a general theory. Carr defined realism negatively, as a corrective to utopian pieties about the commonality of interests and the efficacy of international law and institutions. He refused pure realism, which offers only "a naked struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible"; his preference was a synthesis of utopia and reality, and he held that demolishing the current utopia obliges us to build a new one, itself destined to fall to the same realist weapons.¹⁴ The corrective, in other words, was self-consciously provisional. It was Hans Morgenthau who gave classical realism systematic foundations in *Politics Among Nations* (1948), whose six principles rest on "interest defined in terms of power": the assumption that leaders think and act in these terms, grounding politics as a distinctive sphere.¹⁵ His thought was shaped, as William Scheuerman has shown, by his formation as a young lawyer in Weimar Germany, and reacts against the rationalist confidence that politics could become a science, ironically the ambition of the later Waltzian project.¹⁶

Classical realism's success accordingly lies in its corrective function. John Herz's security dilemma was introduced in an article that explicitly sought to mediate between realism and idealism as two recurrent reactions to the same predicament: acts of self-protection are read as threats, prompting responses that confirm the original fear.¹⁷ Measured by authorial intent, even this canonical 'realist' concept was a corrective, not a doctrine. Where classical realism claimed more, it overreached. A theory grounded in the constants of politics (human nature, the *animus dominandi*, the insecurity of anarchy) cannot explain variation: if the will to power is always

¹³ Ashworth, 2002: 44; Wilson, 1998: 1, 8–9.

¹⁴ Carr, 1939: 87.

¹⁵ Morgenthau, 1948: 4–6.

¹⁶ Scheuerman, 2009: 5–7.

¹⁷ Herz, 1950: 157–158.

operative, it accounts for war and peace, aggression and restraint, equally well, which is to say not at all. ‘Power’ and ‘interest’ became elastic to the point of unfalsifiability, leaving classical realism a counsel of prudence and a theory of political tragedy rather than an explanation of why particular states do particular things.

Neorealism belongs to the mature bipolarity of the Cold War and the behavioural revolution’s demand that IR become a ‘science’. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979) answered by stripping away claims about human nature and locating explanation in anarchy alone. States became ‘like units’ differentiated only by the distribution of capabilities, and from this austerity Waltz derived balancing, power politics independent of states’ internal character, and the stability of bipolarity.¹⁸ The black box of the state became the theory’s darkest mark, ejecting regime type, ideology, and domestic politics from causal relevance. The model was explicitly microeconomic: “[i]nternational-political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units”, and an international-political theory no more implies a theory of foreign policy, Waltz held, than a theory of the market implies a theory of the firm.¹⁹ Critics almost immediately saw the limitations of importing from the discipline of economics: John Ruggie showed that a system of like units cannot explain transformations of the system itself, such as the shift from medieval to modern politics.²⁰ Alexander Wendt later pressed the point to its constructivist conclusion: structures are causally inert apart from the norms and practices that instantiate them, and “self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy.”²¹

The most damaging judgment came with the collapse of the Soviet Union, for reasons that were overwhelmingly internal: economic exhaustion and the unintended consequences of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. A theory that treated states as black boxes could not, within its own terms, explain this outcome, leading John Lewis Gaddis to remark that “one might as well have relied upon stargazers, readers of entrails.”²² It was, in Richard Ned Lebow’s words, the “failure of

¹⁸ Waltz, 1979: 93–99.

¹⁹ Waltz, 1979: 91; 72.

²⁰ Ruggie, 1986.

²¹ Wendt, 1992: 394–395.

²² Gaddis, 1992: 6, 18.

realism.”²³ William Wohlforth did mount a realist explanation of the Cold War’s end, but his reliance on perceptions of “the relative decline in Soviet power” concedes the very unit-level, black-box politics that neorealism disavowed.²⁴ Neorealism was equally silent on the democratic peace, the overwhelming empirical finding that “democracies have almost never fought each other”, because that regularity lives at the unit level.²⁵ A theory built to explain recurrence could not, in the end, explain either change at the systemic level or continuity at the unit level.

The third realism was born of the second’s embarrassment. In 1998 Gideon Rose coined ‘neoclassical realism’ for a body of work (Zakaria on American expansion, Christensen on mobilization, Schweller on interests, Wohlforth on perceptions) that retained relative material power as the independent variable while reopening the black box. For neoclassical realists, “systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level”: there is no perfect “transmission belt” between capabilities and behaviour, because policy is made by leaders whose perceptions, and whose capacity to extract resources from society, mediate everything.²⁶ Later work systematized the approach: systemic factors drive outcomes, but domestic intervening variables moderate them.²⁷

This looks like improvement, but reopening the black box concedes that structure explains too little, inviting the charge that “the proliferation of emendations exposes a degenerating tendency” in realism’s research program.²⁸ Once realism absorbs domestic politics, perception, and ideas, nothing distinctive remains, and the label becomes “a hindrance rather than a help in structuring theoretical debates.”²⁹ The most empirically adequate realism, in short, is the least distinctively realist.

In short, then, realism is not the best way to explain international relations, not least because *nothing could be*. There is no realism (singular) to judge, only a series of conceptions, each responding to its own crisis and connected by little more than a corrective impulse. Recent

²³ Lebow, 1995: 23–56.

²⁴ Wohlforth, 1994: 92, 96.

²⁵ Russett, 1993: 4.

²⁶ Rose, 1998: 146, 147.

²⁷ Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 5, 58–79; see also Schweller, 2006; Zakaria, 1998.

²⁸ Vasquez, 1997: 899.

²⁹ Legro and Moravcsik, 1999: 8.

events have given that impulse renewed force, first in Crimea and then in Ukraine, as when Mearsheimer argued that the West bore “most of the responsibility” for the Ukraine crisis.³⁰ But even here, Mearsheimer’s argument “demonstrates the limits of realpolitik”, because it fails to explain why Russia waited fifteen years after NATO enlargement to act, and treats Russian decisions as if a structure, rather than leaders within a particular strategic culture, made them.³¹ Mearsheimer famously called offensive realism “a powerful flashlight in a dark room”, but a flashlight only illuminates what it is pointed at, and if realists keep pointing at conflict and war, they will find their precepts confirmed.³² Realism is at its best as a corrective against the politics of good intentions, and at its worst when it claims to be more than that.

³⁰ Mearsheimer, 2014: 77.

³¹ McFaul, 2014: 167–168.

³² Mearsheimer, 2001: 11.

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