

Realism

Realism in international relations or what is also referred to as Political Realism, is seen as one of the oldest theories to international relations, and is widely held as a world view. While it is one of the earliest theories, the first coherent expressions of a realist approach to the study of international politics evolved out of the apparent failure of liberal principles to the international sphere would change the nature of global politics, in particular its endemic violence”.

Realist theorists argue that politics should be viewed as it currently exists, and not how one would wish the world were. And when looking at the political system, or more specifically, the international system, realists focus their ideas about how international relations work based upon the concepts of power and security.

While there are variations amongst realists, there are a number of assumptions that realists make regarding the international system, assumptions which can be compared to other theories such as liberalism, constructivism, and feminism.

Realism in international relations is largely centered on realist assumptions of human behaviour. The realists believe that human behaviour is often related to concerns about ego and individual passions and desires, and more specifically, the presence of evil in human beings. They believe that given the conditions of the world, humans themselves, if left to do what they could, would carry out evil actions against others. Realists characteristically give *primary* emphasis to egoistic passions and “the tragic presence of evil in all political action” (Morgenthau, 1946: 203). “It is profitless to

imagine a hypothetical world in which men no longer organize themselves in groups for purposes of conflict” (Carr 1946: 231).

Four primary assumptions of realism related to the study of international relations are as follows:

1). “The state is the most important actor in international relations” (48). As she explained, realists see the system as a state dominated one. This has been the position since 1648, during the Treaty of Westphalia or the Peace of Westphalia), where a number of European powers came together to end various wars (such as the 30 Years War). In this meeting, they agreed to the idea of state-sovereignty, where no outside actor can dictate the domestic or foreign policies of another state (although realists see the principle of sovereignty being only as good as the physical ability to protect one’s sovereignty) (Pease, 2012). And ever since the Treaty of Westphalia/Peace of Westphalia, many in the realist camp have argued that states, due to their military and economic power (through weapons, finances), have the most influence in international relations.

But along with the assumption that the political state is the most powerful actor, realists in turn also give little weight is given to non-state actors. They view individuals and non-government organizations as lacking the military power needed to compete with states in the international system.

2). A second assumption of realism that many realists (at least traditional realists) believe is that The state is a unitary and rational actor. While realists know many actors technically exist, “all of these differing views are ultimately integrated through

state structures so that the state speaks with one voice. The state is also capable of engaging in a cost-benefit analysis and choosing optimal strategies for achieving its goals". And because of the belief that states are unitary, internal differences are not nearly as important as the state. This is why foreign policy is given significant attention in realist political thought. They argue that regardless of any internal differences, the unified position will be one that is of the interest of the state.

3). All realists seem to say that the international system is one of tension and conflict. Now, the reasons as to why this is vary; some think it is due to the "pessimistic" view of human nature, whereas others think it has to do more with the structure of the international system. Nevertheless, various positions congregate on this point of conflict in international relations.

One of the reasons that some structural realists see the system as one that leads to conflict has to do with the notion of anarchy. As we know, the world is an anarchical system. This means that there is no overarching power controlling the behavior of actors within the state system. And because the system is in anarchy, states must be on the lookout for themselves against other states, since a state is primarily concerned with achieving political power.

4). Realists thus view the system as one that leads to a competition for power, where a state's objective is security and power. Anarchy compels states to arm themselves to self-defense. However, the acquisition of arms is itself a provocative act. Other states must respond in kind or risk attack or destruction. This response leaves the first state no better off than it was before, so it must acquire even better weapons to counter the

threat. Then the other states must respond in kind. And so on. Anarchy leads to arms-racing and arms-balancing behavior on the part of states. States with good and kind leaders will engage in the same kind of behavior as selfish and evil leaders because they exist in the same international environment.