

Realism and Liberalism in International Relations

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Any student of international relations can be counted on to study the basic foundations of IR, which are the theories behind the study of IR itself. Among the most prevalent of these theories are realism and liberalism. Until the present, professors still speak of the motto from the 1651 work of Thomas Hobbes, entitled *Leviathan*, that speaks of the state of nature being prone to what Hobbes calls *bellum omnium contra omnes* or the war of all against all (Hobbes : *De Cive*, 1642 and *Leviathan*, 1651), as well as Francis Fukuyama naming *Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government* (Fukuyama : *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992).

The above mentioned 'state of nature' is a central assumption in realist theory, holding that anarchy is a defined condition of the international system, as well as postulating that statecraft and subsequently, foreign policy, is largely devoted to ensuring national survival and the pursuit of national interests. Realism is, therefore, primarily concerned with states and their actions in the international system, as driven by competitive self-interest. Thus, realism holds that international organizations and other trans-state or sub-state actors hold little real influence, in the face of states as unitary actors looking after themselves.

One supposes then, that with its dark assumptions and premises of antagonistic condition, realism is tied to some of the fundamental questions of what constitutes 'human nature' with an emphasis on the limits of humanity's altruism, well-expressed by Heinrich von Treitschke, saying *it is above all important not to make greater demands of human nature than its frailty can satisfy* (Treitschke : *Politics*, 1916). It is then reasonable to contend that realism places man as a creature whose greatest instinct is self-preservation. Following Hans Morgenthau's thinking that *the social world is but a projection of human nature onto the collective plane* (Morgenthau: *Politics Among Nations*, 1948), one can contend as well that perhaps, the international system as viewed from the realist lens, is also a projection of collective human nature (the state) and eventually, this 'collective nature' is manifested in the anarchy of the global stage. Insofar as self-preservation and the gain of resources and prestige remain aims of the human creature, then maybe, taken collectively, these aims can and are being projected across state borders. One will remember, I hope, that states act in their own interest, a concept not too far from human choices in the name of self-advancement and the accrual of resources, first for survival, and eventually as whims of luxury, paralleled by the section in Thomas Hobbes work, which says *the first [competition] maketh man invade for gain, the second [diffidence] for safety and the third [glory] for reputation* (Hobbes : *Leviathan*, 1651).

Additionally, as long as armed conflict, ideological rifts and possibilities of aggression remain, then realism will continue as a valid means of interpreting international politics, since yet another of its core assumptions lie in the measurement of power in terms of military capability, within an anarchic global system, where natural antagonism presents little possibility for peace and cooperation.

All that said, however accurately realism can account for aggression, conflict and militaristic-expansionist policies, its assumptions prevent it from possessing effective explanatory capacity when it comes to the concept of transnational cooperation, free trade, the relative peacefulness of the international system, the prevalence of democratic governance and the growing emphasis on economic linkage and globalization. These concepts are almost anathema to all but the most hedged and doubtful of realism's proponents. Among the main faults ascribed to realism are *its disability to predict and account for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the pervasive peace between liberal nations* (McMurtrie : *Towards Just International Relations Theory*, Honors Thesis, 2007). Thus, we now have the

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opposite of realism itself, the liberal school of thought.

Liberalism, in stark contrast to realism, believes in the measurement of power through state economies, the possibility of peace and cooperation, as well as the concepts of political freedoms, rights and the like. Francis Fukuyama, quite notably, *believed that progress in human history can be measured by the elimination of global conflict and the adoption of principles of legitimacy* and observed the extent to which liberal democracies have transcended their violent instincts (Burchill : Theories of International Relations 3/E, 2005).

Furthermore, liberals argue for the *progress and perfectibility of the human condition as well as a degree of confidence in the removal of the stain of war from human experience* (Gardner, 1990/Hoffmann, 1995/Zacher and Matthew, 1995 ; taken from Burchill : Theories of International Relations 3/E, 2005).

That having been established as core assumptions of liberal international theory, can it be supposed, that since there are observable limits to human nature and altruistic action, as in the realist school of thought, liberalism is therefore overly idealistic in its belief in human capacity and the eventual obsolescence of war as the measure of state power in the international system?

As I believe, liberalism offers the possibility of peace even as states amass power, on the basis that power has now taken a less destructive form, from guns to bank notes and exports. In my opinion, there need not be an overarching stress on the frailties of humanity even if world peace seems too lofty of an ideal. I say this on the basis that a shift in the definition of 'power' from military capability to economic status. This shift creates the need for greater linkage (therefore, the new emphasis on globalization) as well as increased cooperation. For this reason, states still amass power even under the liberal system, the main difference being the fact that power is now better accrued if more cooperation is realized within the framework of international politics.

This need for linkage and economic progress then accounts for the liberalist's stress on free trade and market capitalism, as well as allowing for the legitimate selection of government through democratic action. As it stands, in my opinion, liberalism operates under real-world conditions, reflecting state interest and aggrandizement, if only that such advancement results in peace instead of the expected dose of conflict.

Having said that, I think liberalism is no longer just a projection of how politics *ought* to be, but is now a modern, practical theory of peace achieved in the midst of anarchic conditions and even after the state's quest for power.

Still, the debate continues as to which school remains the most relevant and timely, with regards to the interpretation of the international system. Some will always say realism is *politics as it is* while liberalism is an example of *politics idealized*. However, as the study of IR continues, we will continue to seek the answers to the engaging questions of foreign policy that confront today's global system. Whichever way we choose to justify or to answer those questions, despite their polar difference, realism and liberalism are both reflections of various aspects of the international system, which we seek to understand. The significance of both lies in their capacity to explain opposite phenomena, and though both are clearly antithetical, perhaps the answer to the question of how the world operates will lie not in the thesis and antithesis, but in the synthesis of both. One pragmatic approach for state advancement blended with a belief in humanity's inherent potentials. In my opinion, for all the disagreement that has been in existence with both schools of thought, perhaps the true path lies in combination. A state of anarchy as a condition but peace as a result, and a world that knows the obstacles confronting all of its inhabitants, but knows as well that humanity has always been great at overcoming what seems insurmountable.

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