

# Explaining War: A Comparison of Realism and Constructivism

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KSAWERY LISINSKI, MAY 3 2012

Plato, the author of the 'Republic', would never consider International Relations (IR), as a discipline, as science. For Plato's definition of knowledge assumes it has to be something certain and indubitable. [1] Neither of those conditions, however, is met by IR. There are many theories of how international political arena works, i.a. realism, liberalism, neo-realism, neo-liberalism, social constructivism, Marxism, feminism, green theory, post-structuralism and many others variations of those, and all of them are equally feasible.[2] That means there is some merit to all theories, yet all of them are flawed to a certain extent. A very popular metaphor states that international relations should be understood as a set of lenses; each lens allows us to see only a fragment of the whole picture, hence we cannot limit ourselves to only one theory. The problem arises, however, when we realize that some of these "lenses" are incompatible with each other. For instance, it is impossible to bring reconciliation between realism, that assumes constant struggle between states, and liberalism, which concludes something very opposite, meaning the possibility of peaceful and just relations. Consequently, there is a dispute between academics regarding which theory offers the most accurate explanation of the IR system.

One of the most basic problems of IR is how to explain the phenomenon of war. At first it seems a very simple question – war is a military conflict between two, or more, parties. However, difficulties arise when we reflect on why wars break out. While a Marxist would say that elites in wealthy states wage wars to exploit the poorer people, a realist would argue that war is connected with human behavior, so wars are naturally occurring phenomena. Additionally, a neo-realist would assume that the absence of higher authority in international arena results in anarchical system and hence state of war.[3] Basically, each theory has its own explanation, although it does not imply that those explanations are equally accurate. Therefore the aim of this essay is to evaluate the usefulness of two theories, realism and constructivism, in accounting for war. The analysis will hopefully reveal the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches.

The theories of IR differ solely because they are built on different premises. Realism operates under the assumption that states are the only actors on the political stage, also known as 'statism'[4] and 'individualism'<sup>[5]</sup>. Additionally, the states work in an anarchical system, meaning in the absence of higher, trans-governmental and universally recognizable authority no rules are applied in the international realm. The other assumption is that politics is driven by law of human behavior- the mix of urges like the drive for powers, will to dominate, self-interest and ambition.[6] How does all of this help us understand war? Realism offers a rather cynical explanation: we are destined to wage wars, for all politics is a struggle for power and survival. Wars may be fought either to protect or expand security of the states (both the aggressor and the attacked may fight to protect their security- one to defend its country directly, the other by eliminating the threat the other country poses to its security or interests).

A clear example would be the Second World War and events that preceded the outbreak of the war. Hitler's violation of Versailles Treaty, Anschluss of Austria and incorporation of Czechoslovakian Sudetenland may be perceived as a direct way of securing Germany's survival as a state. Starting war with Poland and Western Europe should be perceived as purely ideological move, though war with Russia (known as Operation Barbarossa) was aimed at securing oil resources in Baku and Caucasus. The reference to law of human behavior is probably the strongest argument of realists. For it is undeniable that in the history of mankind there were many leaders or generals that

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fought battles for the sole purpose to feed their personal ambitions, i.a. Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Therefore realism seems as a very feasible and reasonable theory.

The cynicism of realism comes from the assumption that war is unavoidable and a constant element of our nature, while ideas and ideologies are of no importance. That is ideologies serve the purpose of arguing in favor of war using various arguments at different times. We might feel insulted by this view, and yet whether it is Alexander calling his soldiers to fight for Greece, Attila the Hun persuading his to plunder the cities of Western and Eastern Rome, Napoleon fighting under the cloak of French Revolution and freedom, or Khrushchev pretending to care about working people- one thing remains constant- we fight wars. So even though it seems as there is some development in human thought, the true intentions remains the same through ages, and wars remain an extension of politics. It is hard not to appreciate realism and its account for war, since history seems to favor it.

Constructivism, on the other hand, represents much more complex approach. It views the priority of ideas and human consciousness<sup>[7]</sup>, hence the core assumptions: holism<sup>[8]</sup> and idealism<sup>[9]</sup>. The striking difference between realism and constructivism lies in the approach to ideas – the latter demands that we take seriously the role of ideas in world politics, while the former completely disregards it. However, we already saw that realism has much historical evidence in its favor, so is it even possible to defend social constructivism? Not only it is possible, but constructivism even offers a much more accurate account for war.

To start with, statism is a flawed concept, for history has ample evidence that state power is being challenged from both above and below.<sup>[10]</sup> The American War of Independence, French Revolution, or even the struggle between Huguenots and Cardinal Richelieu pose a certain problem for realism. Also, the logical consequence of the absence of world government is not the state of war. It is rather an option that people have selected.[11] As the 20th century has shown, the trends changed and some attempts to create a world government, or at least regional governments, have been made. The United Nations, International Monetary Fund and European Union are the main examples of this. These problems are not encountered by constructivism. That is because constructivism understands IR as a social construction: a social theory that focuses on analysis and evaluation of various elements, such as culture, society, law, ethnography, economy etc. All these issues are of the highest importance to social constructivist, for they constitute differences between states and societies across historical and geographical context.[12]

Simply put, social constructivism is capable of explaining all the wars by referring not to their common elements, but distinctive features and identity. The conquests of Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar and Napoleon may be perceived as embodiments of the same cultural legacy[13] And yet, it would be an oversimplification; it is necessary to place those leaders in the context of history, for it happens that some of them were actually devoted ideologists – like Hitler, Lenin, Mussolini, Mark Aurelius or even Charles the Great. So ideas, rather than political cynicism constituted those people. Constructivism's advantage is evident in that by focusing on social factors and by stressing the importance of context, it is capable of addressing the current civil war in Mexico between the government and narcotic cartels, which is not in the scope of realism. Constructivism is therefore to be appreciated for its accuracy, while realism may be deemed oversimplified in comparison.

The essay has attempted to prove the superiority of social constructivism over realism in accounting for war. Realism, although flawed with oversimplification and inability to address various issues concerning war, remains the dominant theory of international relations. That is because although the domestic realm in many countries and across cultures has experienced a certain degree of progress, which is an unaddressed issue by realism, the international arena seems to be ruled by the balance of power. The European Union and United Nations, the organizations that are supposed to secure peace, might be understood as a realistic way to balance power. Also, politicians all over the world seem to embrace purely Machiavellian approach. As Machiavelli put it: "You ought never to suffer your designs to be crossed in order to avoid war, since war is not to be avoided, but is only to be deferred to your advantage!"<sup>[14]</sup> And so, it seems that engagement of EU and USA in Libya in 2011 was not driven by humanitarian impulse, but because the war (at least at the time) seemed to propose enormous economic and political advantages (including winning additional votes in popularity polls, as the intervention was generally welcomed by European citizens).

In theory, social constructivism offers the more detailed and accurate account for war not only than realism, but than

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any other theory. Its focus on social factors and importance of ideas allows it to address problems that are not even in the scope of realism. Additionally, the example of liberalism, Christianity and socialism, among others, prove that ideas and ideologies can really change the world. The superiority of constructivism may be explained in a way that it is capable of explaining realism, while realism is not capable of returning the favor.

## Bibliography:

- 1) Ackermann Robert, Theories of Knowledge, Longmans Green and co Ltd, 1965
- 2) Baylis John, Smith Steve, Owens Patrica, Globalization of World Politics, Oxford University Press 2011
- 3) Dunne Tim, Kurki Milja, Smith Steve, IR theories- discipline and diversity-1 edition, Oxford University Press 2010
- 4) Machiavelli Niccolo, The Prince, The Macmillan CO 1913

[1] Ackermann Robert, Theories of Knowledge, Longmans Green and co Ltd, 1965, p. 20-24

[2] Dunne Tim, Kurki Milja, Smith Steve, IR theories- discipline and diversity-1 edition, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 2-3

[3] Baylis John, Smith Steve, Owens Patrica, Globalization of World Politics, Oxford Univeristy Press 2011, p. 84, 114-119, 130

[4] Dunne Tim, Kurki Milja, Smith Steve, IR theories- discipline and diversity-1 edition, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 53-55: **statism**: assumption that state is the main (only) actor on political stage. With it comes assumption that domestically the problem of order and security is solved.

[5] Baylis John, Smith Steve, Owens Patrica, Globalization of World Politics, Oxford University Press 2011, p. 163: **individualism**-view that structures can be reduced to the aggregation of individuals and their interactions.

[6] Op. cit, p. 55

8 Op. cit. p. 163

[8] Baylis, Smith, Owens, Ibid. 163: **holism**- the view that structures cannot be decomposed into individual units and their ineractions because structures are more than the sum of their parts and are irreducibly social. The structures construct actors, not merely constraints them,

[9] Baylis, Smith, Owens, Ibid. 163: **idealism**-as a social theory argues that the most fundamental feature of society is social consciousness- ideas shape how we see ourselves and our interests. Material forces are not given by nature, but rather are driven by human interpretations.

[10] Dunne Tim, Kurki Milja, Smith Steve, IR theories- discipline and diversity-1 edition, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 57-63

[11] Op.cit. p.96

[12] Baylis, Smith, Owens, Ibid. p.164

[13] It is a fact that Cesar studied and admired Alexander the Great, while Napoleon studied and admired both Cesar and Alexander. They can be perceived as followers of one another.

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[14] Machiavelli Niccolo, The Prince, The Macmillan CO 1913, chapter 3, p.13-17

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