

A Realist Revival

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JUN 3 2012

When the idea of blogging for e-IR was proposed to me, I had a flurry of emotions suddenly come to mind – excitement at the prospect of dialoguing with fellow scholars, nervousness at the fact that most of those same scholars would find my thoughts likely silly, but mostly anxious to provide an openly (and typically unapologetic) realist analysis of the events that are currently, or may eventually, come to shape the world in which we live. So, in response to Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik’s question – yes, there is at least one realist in the world.

Throughout my time as an international relations observer, it never ceases to amaze me just how differently some of the greatest minds can interpret theoretical or empirical matters in the global realm. While I do believe our field has grown far beyond its boundaries, the plurality of what we refer to as “international relations” has changed so dramatically that it is difficult for students, especially those wanting to make a career as an IR scholar, to decide exactly where they fall on the spectrum of theoretical conclusions.

Among the most appealing elements of e-IR is that it brings students of all levels together with professional scholars in an open, relaxed, but sophisticated arena. Rather than the typically sleep-inducing arguments produced in journals, or the often outdated nature of book volumes on subjects of global interest, e-IR has dedicated itself to being fresh, innovative and extremely timely. As such, my sincerest hope is that my blog will live up to all of these outstanding qualities, and provide readers with some food for thought.

Some may wonder why a realist analysis would be at all relevant in a field that has seemingly moved well beyond any realist arguments, whether they are classical, neo, structural or neoclassical in nature. The plurality in the field that I refer to above is, in my mind, sometimes quite positive, because our horizons have expanded and we now naturally contemplate actors, trends or norms that previously went unmentioned in IR. That said, the ever-expanding character of international study must still have some sort of reference point or hard core assumptions, so that we may ourselves distinguish when we are speaking about IR, or when we have moved into sociology, anthropology, philosophy, economics or another field that may be far better equipped at examining an event or outcome.

In my opinion, realism is that hard core of IR. From the origins of our studies, realism has either been the most popular, or the most hated, interpretation of international events. Some of our greatest minds have been realists, and some of our greatest minds have dedicated their lives to disproving realism. So, while IR is moving in a direction that is less and less influenced by realism, it would be ultimately imprudent and, in the world of policy and empirical study, dangerous to think realism is somehow dead.

There are, I would argue, 3 distinct areas where realism is alive and well, and where even the most non-realists would need to respond to arguments predicated on power, security and self-help:

1. Humanitarian intervention – advocates of interventionism, especially the more radical pro-Responsibility to Protect folks, would claim the norm of sovereignty has changed and that we now live in a world where humanitarian crisis is cause for state response. It is true that states have been known to intervene in instances of human insecurity, but these cases are few and far between, and are highly selective based on state calculations about rational benefits. The ongoing terror in Syria is not on the verge of being solved by any one state, or group of states, primarily because there is no perceived strategy that will compel states to

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- willingly intervene.
2. Institutional behaviour – following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many have been waiting for the reform of the UN, the triumph of the EU, or the humanitarian spirit of NATO to shine through like beacons of hope. Why, then, is the UN Security Council still blocking intervention into Syria? Why is the EU teetering on collapse? And why was NATO's mission in Libya as restrained as possible? The simple answer is easy – that states are not moral agents and will not sacrifice their own power position in the world for institutional norms that contradict with their inherent nature, which is rational survivalist.
 3. Arctic sovereignty – the study of the Arctic is not taken nearly as seriously as it probably should be, based on the almost ideal realist experience that has emerged in the High North over the last 15 years. Human populations are used as justifications for development and state presence, but one must wonder how fighter jet flyovers, submarine exercises and military patrols would somehow lead to economic or human development. Arctic states, and also Arctic interested states, are singing old songs when it comes to the security dilemma in the Arctic – national sovereignty and resource wealth.

As this blog unfolds, the intent is to ensure that those taking the time to read leave with new perspectives on some of the most important problems in our world. Failing that, leave knowing realism is still alive and well, even if this blog is the only proof!

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This is the inaugural post from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality. Dr Murray is an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta, Canada.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.