

Why do Realists Deny the Possibility of Fundamental Change in the Nature of International Politics?

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ROGER KENDRICK, FEB 17 2008

Realism, one of the most influential schools of political thought in International Politics, was originally developed by esteemed academics such as E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau as a backlash against the main rival theory, International Liberalism, during the 1920s and 30s; the roots of Realism are deep within the soil of history from the work of individuals such as Thomas Hobbs (1588-1679), Machiavelli (1469-1527AD) and Thucydides (circa 460-406BC)[1]. Realists maintain that the nature of International Politics is a constant, at times blood thirsty, struggle for power in an anarchical environment. The occurrence of fundamental change, such as the end of power politics, a self-interested human nature, and the threat of war, in the nature of International Politics is considered flawed. Realists provide evidence for this by pointing firstly to the consistency of human nature, the structure of power, and thirdly to patterns in history. The nature of International Politics is 'timeless'[2], as is human nature, meaning that whatever conditions exist the nature adapts remains unaltered and wholly relevant.

The structure of the argument shall be in the following format, before the argument can be discredited, the misguided critic's claim that Realism is now an anachronism, as the current fundamental changes in the system of International Politics can, and is, fundamentally changing the nature, shall be dismantled. The argument itself, shall firstly look at the point that human nature is consistently self-interested, and that this is reflected in the nature of International Politics. Thirdly the un-altering aspects of power, as identified by Morgenthau, shall be discussed with the view that the inequalities in power will continue to fuel human nature.

While Realists have argued that the nature of International Politics is fundamentally unchangeable, some academics have superficially argued that the nature can substantially change, for example, Ian Hall writes:

"Since 1945, the sharp decline in war between nations, the unprecedented (if uneven) pace of economic growth and integration, especially in Europe, and the remarkable revival and spread of liberal democracy appear to point to profound changes in the nature of international politics. For many, these developments suggest the obsolescence of realism is near."[3]

Hall's comment certainly seems to point towards a change in the International system and the conditions in which it operates, but does this mean the nature of International Politics can be fundamentally changed? Realists clarify the argument about the nature of International Politics, arguing that while the nature can't change, the system, which is derived from the nature, can.

The apparent contradiction is actually consistent with the realist argument that the nature of International Politics is unchanging. Robert Gilpin argues that Realists have supported the now apparently dismissed importance of the state as the most important actor, but that Realists need not presume the state is the "ultimate form of political organisation"[4]. The point is clarified by a combination of Morgenthau's and Gilpin work, which points out that even if the system does change, it is by the very nature of International Politics, "if the nation state is to disappear...it will do so through age old political processes"[5]. The point is driven home by the TV political satire "Yes Minister". During an episode, "The Devil You Know", the minister argues that Britain's reason for joining the EU is to avoid

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narrow self interests a key realist belief, favouring the moral, liberal Internationalism cause of “*strengthening the brotherhood of the free Western nations*” [6]. This is rebutted by the Permanent Secretary, who maintains that ‘narrow’ national interests are exactly why all nations joined the European Union; in Britain’s case he comments, “*We went in to screw the French by splitting them off from the Germans*” [7], for the France he states they joined to protect their agricultural industry. While not an academic example of substantial change, the satire does make the clear point that while the international system maybe undergoing a substantial change, in this case towards a Liberal Internationalism ‘government of states’, it occurs through the unchanging nature of International Politics.

The main argument for the inability of fundamental change in International Politics is the outlook of human nature, which is considered to be self-interested, greedy, sinful, and evil [8]. This is reflected in the nature of International Politics where the actors manoeuvre to fulfil their interests, over that of the other actors, be they allies or rivals. This means that in every situation an rational actor will take the action that they perceive as being the best for their own self-interests, for example Bob Herbert accessed that the reason for the US invasion of Iraq (2003) was to gain control of the oil reserves, quoting Daniel Yergin, who described the reserves as “*the greatest single prize in all history*” [9], rather than the moral and security reasons put forward at the time. Realists argue that behaviour such as this can be shown to have occurred persistently throughout history, giving credentials to the belief that human nature is consistent, which, as it forms the nature of International Politics, means that international politics is consistently about the actor’s self-interests clashing with others.

This realist foundation on the pessimistic view of human nature, means that within International Politics there can be no ‘harmony of interest’ as different actors interests constantly clash, resulting in what Morgenthau named a “struggle for power” [10]. Morgenthau divided this into three categories; for an actor in International Politics their aim is either to demonstrate power, to further their power, or to maintain their power and the status quo. Power is crucial for International Politics as actors can only maintain their position and influence by it, without power an actor would cease to exist. Clearly the nature of International Politics revolves around power, which means that to argue why the nature of International politics cannot substantially change, the issue of power must be defined and discussed.

Power can be roughly split into three categories, Political, economic and territorial. However measurements within these broad categories can overlap, for example geography which can fall in both territorial and political power. Power obviously is a difficult matter to define accurately as it has both qualitative and quantitative factors, giving it several different layers. The rough measurements of power for an actor, as identified by Morgenthau, are in terms of its location (and geography), the natural resources within its sphere of influence, levels of technological advancement, population, political leadership and prestige.

Geography can vastly International Politics in two ways; firstly, when the actor is in control of a strategic location be it local, regional, or international, these locations provide the owner with some advantageous power, for example control of a trade route. These areas create tension as rival powers will seek to gain influence over the area, presumably at the cost of the other power. Secondly International Politics will be affected by the actor’s location in the world, for example America, being surrounded by oceans on both her East and West coasts, creating a fairly isolated impression from International Politics within America, influencing her foreign policy aims, and the policy of others as the oceans are an un-ignorable factor [11] Ultimately geography compounds human self-interest, as certain areas provide the group, or groups, living there with an advantage, which fuels their interest in maintaining it, and other actors in gaining it.

Another vital aspect is natural resources such as food, and precious commodities. An actor who is in a state of autarky, in the context of food, is in a greatly increased position of power than another who is less able to domestically meet the demand for food of their population; a good example of this is provided by Morgenthau, where Britain especially, and Germany to a lesser extent, had to alter their goals to maintain their food supplies during World War One and Two, whereas the USA had no need to do so, thus saving significant resources saved from defending/gaining food supplies which could be diverted into other forms of power, improving the ability for the USA to achieve its aims. [12]

The same principle can be applied to an actor with other natural resources, especially those vital during war such as

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oil and rubber, which give the actor political and economic influence over any actors which have become dependent on the resources, an example of this, was during the oil crises (1973,1978), where the Western world accepted more dictation from the Arabian oil producing countries than they otherwise would[13]

Technology also gives power to the actor controlling it, the actor with superior technology can more easily defend themselves and allow achieving their interests, by diplomacy or war, far more viable. A striking example of this was during the European Colonisation of Africa in the 19th century, where 20,000 British soldiers in Omdurman, Egypt, armed with technologically superior maxim guns gained victory over a 52,000 strong Dervishes army armed with mostly obsolete swords, spears and the odd maxim, which suffered around 50,000 casualties, while the British suffered around 400[14].

The size and quality of the population available to an actor will greatly influence its power, as populations provide a workforce including the armed forces, a market for goods, and adaptability to new technologies. The quality of a population depends on the amount of dependents to non-dependents, meaning that if the non-dependents are the largest age group then the population is young and will rapidly grow, providing a workforce for future industrial expansion and which produces more than it 'costs' to maintain (benefits, health care etc). An example of this is given by Morgenthau who shows that the US has, in terms of 'area size' compared to the 'size of population', a population ten times larger than Canada's and fifteen times larger than Australia's, which Morgenthau uses as a key reason for current American dominance of International Politics[15]

The aspect of leadership was another identified indicator of a actor's power. Leadership in general terms is the ability of the leader to balance gaining their own interests, while not provoking any other actor enough to harm the leader's efforts. A perceptive leader can take advantage of a situation while not harming their foreseeable future interests, an example of weak leadership could be that of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain(1937-1940), who gave the impression that peace could be maintained by appeasement, making crucial mistakes such as allowing Germany to absorb the strategically important country, Czechoslovakia, however his moral attitude of treating Germany justly and avoiding war, was undermined by Germany's breaking the Munich agreement, resulting in war anyway.

Prestige is a aspect of power identified by Morgenthau[16], who argues that how actors on the International stage view one another's strength is as important as how strong each actors actually are; where an actor is seen as strong, other powers will be more hesitant to challenge them, than if the actor had less prestige. Morgenthau cites the example of the atomic bomb tests (1946), where foreign observers were invited, not to share the technology, but to show the dominance of the sole Nuclear power. This is a classic Realist example of the nature of International Politics as the USA, for the sake of her own national security, displayed her military power without sharing her technology even with her allies; this 'selfish' behaviour demonstrates the dominant power's attempt to maintain their monopoly and discourage anyone from challenging them, or resisting their political aims be they rivals or 'allies'.

These aspects of power are crucial as to why the nature of international politics cannot change. Firstly these aspects of power will always exist, creating an inequality between actors as different areas, will always mean some actors are more powerful than others, which secondly, when combined with human nature means that constant conflict in one form or another, be it diplomatic or military is inevitable. Thirdly the power owned by the actors is never static, as for example resource's values rise and fall, altering the controlling actor's ability to dictate terms to others

This view is given credence by Gilpin, who argues that general patterns can be discerned from the last 2400 years of Western civilization history. The main pattern is rise of one hegemonic power has the fall of another, and that the cycle continues over time divided only by some form of conflict, which results in the re-adjustment of the hierarchy of actor's and their power. The fall of one power and the rise of the next is known by Gilpin as a '*law of uneven growth*'[17], which maintains that states grow at different rates, for example a great power who controls a burdensome empire will grow slower than a rival without an empire to drain her resources.

In conclusion the main reason for fundamental change being impossible within the nature of International Politics is due to the realist belief that it is grounded in consistent human nature, and thus self-interest. The actors in International Politics, drive to fulfil their self-interests, means that issues such as conflict will still be prevalent, and

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any substantial system change will still be underlined by the dominant actors pursuing their own interests, whatever value they may put across it. Even in an age of Nuclear Power, where annihilation from a war is more than a possibility, traditional warfare may be avoided, but the 'conflict' is simply transferred to the 'diplomacy table' where diplomats are the 'soldiers' and social and economic pressures are the 'weapons'. Human nature means nothing has changed in the nature of International Politics, and nothing ever will. Politics is still defined by actor's self-interest and the bitter pursuit for power in an unequal world.

[1] Baylis and Smith, *The Globalization of World Politics, Third Edition*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 37

[2] Baylis and Smith, 'World Politics', pp. 162

[3] Hall, Ian, 'Realists face reality check', Australian Literary Review Edition, June 6 2007 (accessed 10 November 2007)

[4] Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (jr), 'Contending Theories of International Relations (Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) pp 82

[5] Viotti P.R. and Kauppi, M.V., '*International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism Globalism and Beyond*', (Allyn & Bacon, 1999) pp 86

[6] Clip from Yes Minister, Series 2, Episode 5, Broadcast 23 March 1981, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg5GkJcFglE> (accessed 10/11/2007)

[7] Yes Minister, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg5GkJcFglE>)

[8] Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (jr), 'Contending Theories of International Relations (Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) pp 82.

[9] Charleston Newspapers, 'Oil? Iraq war motive?', Charleston Gazette, West Virginia, August 2005 (accessed 12 November 2007)

[10] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York, McGraw Hill, 1985) pp 50

[11] Morgenthau, *Politics*, pp 124

[12] Morgenthau, *Politics*, pp 127

[13] Morgenthau, *Politics*, pp 132

[14] Niall Ferguson, 'Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World' (Penguin Books, 2003) pp 271-272

[15] Morgenthau, 'Politics' pp 141

[16] Morgenthau, 'Politics' pp 84

[17] Robert Gilpin, '*War and Change in World Politics*' (Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp 94

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About the author:

Being born in 1989 was a lucky chance, I was able to be born into the dying days of a bi-polar world, grow up in an apparent Liberal safe haven uni-polar world, and now live/study in a radically evolving and confusing multi-polar world; the world is constantly changing, and never has that been so clear. Another stroke of luck saw me gain a place at the oldest department for International Politics in the World, Aberystwyth Wales, where I'm a first year student studying International Politics and International History. My personal interests are currently working to get my 'GPA' (Genocide and Persecution) campaign going.