

# The Practice of Realism in International Relations

Written by Davide Orsi, J.R. Avgustin and Max Nurnus

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## The Practice of Realism in International Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/09/the-practice-of-realism-in-international-relations/>

DAVIDE ORSI, J.R. AVGUSTIN AND MAX NURNUS, JAN 9 2018

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Realism in International Relations can be considered as the discipline's oldest theory, having its first advocate in Thucydides, who presented the idea that power trumps justice and morality in *The Peloponnesian War*. Among many others, Machiavelli and Hobbes, first, E.H. Carr and H. Morgenthau, then, offered to their readers provocative and eternal questions that still challenge our times (Boucher 1998, 47-170; Molloy 2006). In a way, realism (also with its more contemporary versions with Waltz and Mearsheimer) can be considered as one of the most enduring approaches in IR. One of the reasons for this is that 'it sets itself up as a no-nonsense practical science of international politics' (Sutch and Elias 2007, 42). In realism, all events in international politics make sense and can be explained through relatively clear and immediate principles. For these reasons, realism not only remains a cornerstone of International Relations theory (Gold and McGlinchey 2017, 46-49), but also a thriving approach in the broad fields of political studies and political theory (Bell 2017). Classical realism has shaped the way in which the relations between states over the centuries have been understood and still influences policymakers today. According to some observers, realism has determined the foreign policies of both Barack Obama (Pillar 2016) and Donald Trump (Cole 2017).

On the other hand, realism is often challenged by the changing circumstances of contemporary world politics. For example, the notion of timeless principles and human nature, which are 'unaffected by the circumstances of time and place' (Morgenthau 1985, 10-11), has often been considered as an abstraction, more useful to understand realism as a theory than world politics. Among many other possible issues with realism, recent events such as the rise of non-state actors and non-conventional confrontation between international agents, made the often state-centric realist view more and more fragile. Already in a 1995 article, Ethan Kapstein argued that realism in International Relations might be 'deeply and perhaps fatally flawed' yet 'continues to define the discipline' (1995, 751). Not long after, Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik also saw a dominant role of Realist voices, while at the same time perceiving realism 'in trouble' and 'in need of reformulation' (1999, 5, 54). Today, realism is again accused of being grounded on 'astonishingly bold' claims and 'empirically unprovable' tenets (Motyl 2015) and of being unable to explain the complex reality of world politics.

The purpose of this collection is not to solve this dilemma; it is not to establish whether realism should be considered as the bearer of eternal truths regarding world politics or whether it should be abandoned. This book takes instead a more limited and nuanced approach, by appraising the current relevance and validity of realism as an interpretative tool in contemporary International Relations. In this spirit, all chapters of the book are animated not only by a theoretical effort to define the conceptual aspects of realism, but also by the aim of finding whether the tradition still provides the necessary conceptual tools to practitioners and scholars of International Relations.

In the chapter that opens the volume Lebow and Rösch present some of the perennial ideas that have shaped the realist tradition in international thought. By challenging the common reading that sees profound differences among

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various schools of realism (structural, classical, neo-positivist, and more), Lebow and Rösch find some essential elements of realism. These are the 'tragic vision of life' and the controversial relation between ethics and power. However, Lebow and Rösch not only offer this important interpretation but also claim that, on this ground, realism can still enlighten our understanding of world politics, by offering critical insights on the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East.

In the second chapter, Beer and Hariman show the persistent relevance of realist thinking in International Relations with regard to the rise of ISIS. To this end, they take a different approach from that of Lebow and Rösch and present an updated version of realism: post-realism, which seeks to offer a much more accurate account of the immaterial and cultural aspects of international politics.

Several contributions try to assess whether realism still offers a valuable instrument for the understanding of the world after the end of the Cold War. Pashakhanlou (Chapter 3) evaluates the explanatory power of Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism in the light of the challenges of the allegedly unipolar post-Cold War world. In this light, a series of chapters addresses the rise of China in the post-Cold War era. Lee (Chapter 4) identifies the main challenge to realism in the rise of China's soft power and in the theoretical shortcomings of the conception of power as it is defined by various realist schools. Chapter 5 by Carsten Rauch examines the case of China by comparing the realist approach to Power Transition Theory. Dawood (Chapter 6) analytically examines the Chinese balancing role towards the USA, with particular regard to the problem of the South-China Sea and the building up of China's naval power.

War has always been at the centre of realist theory. The activities of hackers during elections and the disruptions they caused against public services and governments (for example the attack against the NHS in Britain in May 2017) show the growing importance of this new important level of confrontation among states, which is examined in the contribution (Chapter 7) by Craig and Valeriano on cybersecurity.

In Chapter 8 Anders Wivel focuses on 'peaceful change' as an instrument of international politics in its relation to power. Despite being recognised by E.H. Carr as one of the fundamental problems in international morality and law (see below), realist thinking has rarely considered the problem. In Chapter 9, Simpson examines the issue of small states and neutrality, challenging the traditional realist interest in great powers. By offering an historical excursus from the Melian dialogue to the post-Cold War era, the author examines the place of neutrality in contemporary politics, shaped by the return of multipolar politics.

One of the characters of realist theory is to identify a tension between ideals, and normative frameworks, and political reality. In contemporary politics, the *lingua franca* that shapes our normative expectations towards political actors is set by human rights. McGlinchey and Murray examine the American policy in the Middle-East during the Carter presidency and show the continuous tension between systemic pressure and ideals, including human rights and disarmament (Chapter 10). On a more theoretical level, and in the light of the growing literature of the politics of international law, Casla challenges this traditional view and finds instead that traditional realism offers substantial arguments for the relevance of International Human Rights Law in world politics (Chapter 11). The conclusive contribution (Chapter 12) by Peterson identifies in the persistence of power politics the main reason of the continuing relevance of realism in international relations.

All the chapters included in this volume rise from an urgent practical need: that of understanding the changing landscape of contemporary international politics. The relative decline of American power, the ambivalent Russian return and the rise of China, as well as the threats posed by non-state actors and new forms of military might are the problem felt by scholars in international politics as well as by the educated public. Notwithstanding the many critiques that the chapters of this volume advance against classical realist thinkers, what emerges is that realism offers an incredibly multifaceted understanding of world politics and enlightens the increasing challenges of world politics.

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