

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic is a substantive crisis for world politics and an epistemological crisis for international relations theory, particularly the dominant tradition of international realism. Realism – stripped to its minimalist, modernist, structural essentials in the form of what Max Weber called an ideal type – implies that states are exclusively important in world politics. Other actors may exist, but they represent little beyond noise or an error in the equation. States guide their behavior by national interest defined in terms of power – particularly military power. These are the structural requirements for survival in an anarchic, hostile world and the epistemological foundations of the national security state. Realism claims that states can either follow the rules, become failed states, or cease to exist (cf. Orsi et.al. 2018, Donnelly 2009).

There have been many challenges to this view of the world, including ours, which we have called post-realism (Beer and Hariman, 1998, 1996). In our opinion, international relations theory, no matter how intuitively compelling its truth claims, is a form of rhetoric: it is a discourse used both to account for and to influence political decisions. But the traditional realist view of world politics is one narrative, and only one narrative, of international reality. An evolutionary epistemology must recognize that there always exist other knowledge processes (Beer and Hariman, 2020). Beyond realism, there are relevant global actors other than states. Though realism has not recognized them as essential, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, corporations, and even individual leaders have long inhabited the broader, pluralistic international relations literature. Further, though the desire for power is certainly an important motivation, states and other actors are also guided by other identities, interests, and values, by social and cultural practices that themselves can contribute to a softer side of international power.

Beyond such entities, COVID-19 brings non-human actors forcefully into the foreground; we see clearly there are important natural actors in world politics. These actors do not respect the traditional realist rules of the road. The coronavirus does not recognize that the primary actors are states, navigating by the lodestar of national interests defined in terms of power. Nor does it respect the distinction between the domestic and international spheres. The virus quickly spread across the globe through all levels and sectors of society from nursing homes to aircraft carriers. The pandemic has truly left no place to hide, though sheltering in place has been one attempt to do so.

Realists might object that non-human actors are not actors but forces, forces of nature. Thucydides, for example, discusses the plague and its effects on Athenian power and society in this contextual manner (Strassler, 1996: 118–121). Similarly, today the pandemic appears as a bio-storm, an unexpected natural disaster that will have to be factored into subsequent planning. Theoretically non-human actors are merely the material background to calculations of interest and power; they are not what realist theory is about. This blind spot in realist theory, however, is precisely the point of our post-realist argument.

Realists might argue that we may have moved away from anthropocentrism only to fall into the trap of anthropomorphism. Non-human actors like diseases are not international agents – unlike humans, they do not think or feel; they don't have intention or volition, they are incapable of rational choice. But, interestingly, the realist conception of the state-as-person is also curiously non-human. The realist state does not think or feel either. It may be a human construct, but it is not a human being except metaphorically or mythically (Beer, 2013; Beer and De

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

Landtsheer, 2004). It is a semi-humanoid power robot following, if it is to survive in the anarchic international society of its fellows, its power-maximizing algorithm. Indeed, this conception of the state is what gives realism its parsimony and elegance. Occam's razor cuts away everything else. The virus, however, could be an actor in the same form, following the same evolutionary power-maximizing function that realism ascribes to the state. If the realist state is an agent, the virus is at least its cousin.

Perhaps it is not surprising that realism now is benefitting from a revival of sorts: first, as a response to the conditions of global complexity and precarity that preceded and contributed to the COVID-19 crisis, and now to the crisis itself (Meersheimer, 2019; Gewen, 2020a, 2020b). Benefiting from nostalgia for the Cold War – something many have experienced occasionally in the last two decades of regional wars, failed states, refugee crises, illiberal democracies, and other breakdowns – realism is offered as the *only* viable alternative for managing the complexity of an interconnected world that cannot be sustained by liberal ideology alone. Thus, in response to complexity, one can recur to a familiar model of nation-state interaction, optimizing and balancing power, indifference to political regimes, top-down management of regional and global economies, and containment of Chinese expansion. This is an adaptive realism, one that recognizes global economic interdependency; it also recurs to a theoretical framework where the primary virtue, and vice, is simplicity. On both empirical and theoretical grounds, we find it difficult to believe that realist analysis by itself can recognize what is needed to address the problems that will define and test the societies of the 21st century. The question remains, the stakes are high, how can that challenge be met?

Challenge and Response

Post-realism begins with realism and indeed incorporates insights from the archeology of major realist thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Clausewitz, and many, many more that have made realism the dominant model of international relations. We ourselves accept the realist insight that the systemic structure of world politics is partly conflictual, a result of interstate competition. And the attack of COVID 19 has had an important effect on state actors, stimulating an array of competitive state actions. States have used the crisis to advance their strategic interests as they see them. The relative position of all states has been affected, some for the worse. For example, the American administration's attention has been diverted by the many domestic problems arising from its late and heavily politicized response to the pandemic. US naval capabilities have been degraded as COVID-19 invaded military vessels like the USS Theodore Roosevelt, which have become incubators of the disease.

The collapse of oil prices, resulting partly from pandemic lockdowns, has also seriously weakened US adversaries like Russia and Iran. But other states have seized the moment aggressively. China has continued to challenge US domination: Chinese military activity has accelerated in the South China Sea. China has proceeded further with the militarization of artificial islands built on reefs and advanced its shipping and fishing interests. It has worked to extend its soft power by deploying medical equipment and staff as far as Italy.

States have also actively engaged in propaganda and disinformation about the origins of the virus. US and Chinese advocates have accused the other of enhancing hard power, producing the coronavirus through militarized bioweapons programs. Social media interventions have employed soft power resources to leverage differential pandemic effects on ethnic and social groups, promoting internal divisions and influencing regime support.

Parallel to its impact on competitive external state strategic interests, the coronavirus has affected internal domestic political regimes. The virus has wrested from them at least partial control. It has weakened all political elites, though not always in equal measure. All dimensions of domestic power—political, economic, social, cultural, scientific, technological—have been affected.

The virus, like a state, is also a competitive actor. It has disturbed the existing international world order and is establishing a new order—isolation, quarantine, death. The virus has also disrupted epistemic habits, an example of catastrophic epistemology (Beer and Hariman, 2020). During extreme crises, discontinuity dominates, linearity dissolves. Prediction becomes both essential and impossible, and previously validated models are revealed to be far from the realities they purport to describe. Short term pragmatic crisis management can not touch the structural conditions that created the disaster; both scientific expertise and magical thinking are amplified. Dispassionate

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

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assessment founders in storm surges of collective anxiety. Disease effects appear to be paradoxical as some states are harmed more than others with similar conditions or fewer protective measures (Beech et al. 2020). Catastrophic epistemology thus crashes head-on into the realist theory of world politics.

Post-realism suggests that the pandemic crisis thus offers an opening for change, but one that is brief and limited. The social conditions of (im)possibility surround us. Some technologies, in medicine and communications for example, have taken remarkable leaps forward. Public discourse has also become remarkably pitched toward identifying underlying social, economic, and political problems: unlike anything many people have seen in their lifetimes. Thus, one condition for change is being fulfilled. At the same time, a high probability eventual outcome is very little change, minimal disruption in other dimensions – i.e., a long-term sclerotic catastrophe. But why is that so? What are the assumptions, conventions, and habits that will prove to be debilitating, keeping discourse as mere discourse or merely compensatory symbolization rather than a form of action?

The short answer is that there are powerful motives for restoring control and order – social, economic, psychological, and political. These motives operate at every level of association – local, national, and international. Everything from ordinary desires for normalcy to the dominant interests driving neoliberal capitalism converge on closing the window of opportunity for anything more than marginal adjustments on behalf of risk management. Against this background, realism offers an enormously appealing rhetoric of stability and rationality on behalf of a known world (Rudd, 2020). Old stories are the best stories. Other ways of thinking appear to be marginal or risky luxuries, no longer safe or affordable, while the complexities and contradictions exposed by the crisis can be reduced to a simple world view. Why fear another natural disaster when reassured that the world really is regular and predictable?

Against false assurance, post-realism welcomes attempts to reconfigure analysis on behalf of the realities exposed by the pandemic. Those realities include one in which politics should be grounded in nature but only if one changes the basic conception of nature (Purdy, 2015); where natural processes and political dynamics need not be uniform, balanced, or predictable; where successful adaptation requires both primal competition and “organic” strategies of cooperation; where large swaths of the world, both nonhuman and human, that are currently undervalued need to be recognized and given voice on a planet where there is no exit.

The virus provides a critical opening to change in two directions. If nature is more agentive, then perhaps humans are less so. Different organisms bump into one another, adapting as they go. First, the binary human/non-human boundary can be softened if non-human actors can be re-formed as agents. We have here indeed characterized realism itself as one such agent with a name, identity, and attributes acting powerfully in the field of world politics. We now also suggest that entities like COVID-19 may be reclassified for heuristic purposes, given a different form. A rhetoric of personification would move them from inchoate, inanimate forces of nature in the background environmental context of human action; that they be vitalized and moved into the foreground as if they were fully formed agents. Such a rhetoric has the heuristic advantage of making the illegible legible, the invisible visible. It should give them enhanced attention.

Such a strategy has advantages not only for pandemics but also for much larger issues involving the climate within which we all live. The personification of the planet is not a new idea. Folklore has long included Mother Earth. More recently, there has been attention to the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 2016). As we have argued, all international relations discourses rely on myth, metaphor, narrative, and other “fictional” resources; the difference is in the conventions and the degree of reflexivity. Realism’s severe suppression of reflection on its own discursive dependencies is a suboptimal strategy for creative thinking about a new class of problems.

Second, human agency can itself be re-formed and reframed in a biological context. Thomas Hobbes recognized this when drew on an old proverb pointing to animalistic human nature long ago, with his metaphorical dictum that man, in a state of nature, is a wolf to man, though, for people growing up in an actual state of nature, the wolfman reality is less clear (cf. Shattuck, 1980). A symmetrical reversal of this presumed common identity might also be that wolf is a man to wolf. In any event, viruses, like humans, can hunt, propagate, build networks, disrupt and reorganize ecosystems. Humans, wolves, and COVID-19 are each forms of biological life. Comparable to states, humans and non-humans have permeable boundaries and identities; they are hybrid beings cohabiting with massive biomes.

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

Strategic Rhetoric

Like the realism that it criticizes, and drawing partly from its intellectual resources, our version of post-realism culminates in an attempt to shape strategic judgment. Instead of the simple conventional calculus of self-interested state power maximizers, post-realism offers instead a hierarchical model of mentalities to account for increasing levels of complexity. As partly prefigured above, these include competition, control, and critique. That model (Beer and Hariman, 1996) provides one way to assess political framing and responsiveness to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Competition

The most primitive situation is that of zero-sum competition. This condition is simple, universal, harsh, and logically prior to other patterns of interaction. This reductive modality features utility, reactivity, and deception, and it can generate situational analyses that are both nuanced and powerful. Any virus is a potential threat at this level; a novel virus (i.e., where humans possess no initial immunity) could, if lethal enough, destroy the species. Fortunately, COVID-19 is not a killer on the scale of the Black Death, but it is serious enough to be seen as an existential threat. The basic survival response then is to focus all attention on elimination of the threat. The characteristic metaphor has been to declare “war” on the virus. Even progressives were demanding that President Trump use the War Powers Act. Primitive competition at the state level means mobilization by the state, centralized control, directives for war-related production, citizen compliance, and other familiar measures. Likewise, leadership and state action then are evaluated accordingly: on speed of response, effectiveness of distribution, and so forth.

One curiosity of this response to a pandemic is, as we noted previously, that it anthropomorphizes the virus. The “war” assumes an intentional adversary, deployments and attacks that must be identified and thwarted, a strategic campaign that must eliminate the enemy’s capacity or will to fight, and a place of origin that must be held responsible. Some of these factors overlap (coincidentally) with the realities of contagion such that they can guide effective response, and some lead to distraction or other wasted effort. Governmental actions have proceeded partly by trial and error, demonstrating mistakes and disruptions. Even a focused and competent response, however, can have serious problems. Merely competitive reaction – and particularly when done at the level of state action – interferes with more rational and dynamic responsiveness. It is necessary, but also too self-limiting; ironically, the lack of coordination in the US left the door open for civil society to provide more inventive set of responses to address a wider range of the problems created by the threat and the quarantine alike. In addition, the competitive response fits too well with other primitive constructs, not least nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnic hatred. The war on the virus leads tragically to attacks on supposed internal enemies, including health care workers.

Thus, the gain from recognizing a non-human actor can be lost in the way it is defined. Defining a virus as an enemy abstracts away the many ways we share a world with trillions of organisms like it—some lethal, some harmful, many essential to human life, and all of them requiring continual adjustments at every level of social organization. More important, it obscures many possible modes of response: for example, simply leaving it as a “disease” would allow for a wider range of preventive measures (which is one reason that the war metaphor may never have become dominant). Finally, it recognizes problems in the society only as they directly contribute to fighting the war and addresses them only to the extent of achieving the strategic goal. With many adversaries, and certainly with viruses, that approach ensures that other wars will have to be fought.

Control

The next level of our post-realist model features the concept of control, with emphasis on the self-control of the strategist. It complements the greater complexity, contingency, and indeterminacy in the environment, as when Machiavelli’s contrasted *fortuna* and *virtu*. Realist *virtu* attempts to exert control by establishing and maintaining international order through processes like diplomacy and balancing (cf. Kissinger, 2014). Behind these lies the rhetoric of dispassionate, utilitarian, rationality centered on national interest defined in terms of power.

Post-realism aims for a broader model of control and longer-term sustainability. Among other things, this sophisticated mentality requires persuasive power on both the international and domestic stage, and its performance

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

is one means to accomplish its own ends. Machiavelli felt that it was more necessary to appear virtuous than actually to be so; similarly, it is not enough to be competent, the strategist must also appear to be so. The rhetorical function is crucial for political leadership. It becomes evident when the crisis is defined as a pandemic – that is, as a global health problem. That problem calls for expertise, discipline, and coordination over substantive multiple areas: medical expertise, science and technology, public administration, etc. The existential threat extends over global space and time. The pandemic is pedagogical; it demonstrates successive conditions and contingencies that allow learning, adaptation and cooperation among all relevant actors.

A broad vision of control also values technocratic collaboration over partisanship, system sustainability over opportunistic advantages. This mentality has been enacted most clearly in the US with the media attention given Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases and more notably the embodiment of expertise at the President's daily briefings on the pandemic. In direct contrast to political figures, Fauci has been seized on as that last, best hope for effective crisis management. For the same reason, he has been vilified by those fomenting partisan ideologies. Fauci is valued for his reasoned approach to the crisis, and for his demonstration that someone near the center of power has the character formed by expertise and self-control.

Fauci is not alone, as many political leaders and civil servants in the United States and elsewhere have demonstrated exactly the capabilities that are needed to protect society and get past the epidemiological crisis. The two most popular people in Greece are an infectious disease specialist and the deputy minister for civil protection (Magra, 2020). Unfortunately, this model of disciplined planning is not enough to address fully the disruption created by a catastrophe. Much of what could go wrong has gone wrong. COVID-19 has, of necessity, become both a medical and an economic disaster, and it has revealed profound problems in many modern democratic societies, not least the supposed U.S. hegemon.

It is clear that crisis management is not enough. It will get us through the crisis, but not far beyond that. One problem is that each of the areas of expertise can have difficulty accounting for the others. This problem has been featured in prudential theory (Hariman, 2003) and has been exemplified in the debates about re-opening the economy: a decision that inevitably involves adjudicating among incommensurable goods. More generally, and like the modality of primitive competition, a narrow definition of control will not change the conditions that produced the pandemic. Factors such as dependence on urban density, production of economic inequity, and basic assumptions about humanity's relationship with nature will ensure that there will be other crises to manage.

Critique

Realism's ambition for longer term sustainability introduces a third level of strategic analysis from another historical realist, Carl von Clausewitz (1976, Ch.5), and his idea of critical analysis or critique. This approach integrates and expands on the prior elements of competition and control to produce the most synoptic, coherent, and dynamic plan. Its most important feature is drawing in those perspectives that had been bracketed out of the lower-level considerations. A rational decision at one level (competition) can become counterproductive at another (control) – or when tactics undo a strategy, or military success compromises a political objective, or when the political objective is incomplete.

Critique challenges transparency assumptions of conventional knowledge, the idea that the world is there simply to be seen through the analytical lens of currently accepted realism or any other single doctrine, and embraces multiple sources of information, interests, and perspectives. The basic issue is not properly coding and entering standardized data into any theoretical model or package of statistical software to achieve reliability and validity. It is rather considering whether the means of understanding themselves are contributing to problems or otherwise need to be adjusted better to understand the world—what normal people call thinking outside the box or seeing around corners (Beer, 1993).

The fullest vigilance requires consideration of perspectives that would otherwise be defined as not legitimate or pertinent, even impertinent. This comprehensive mentality must eventually give up, on behalf of sound strategy, a prior concentration on competition and control, and instead become explicitly committed to interpretation,

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

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deliberation, and imagination. This can be the work of theorists, artists, dramatists, novelists, educators, activists – and perhaps even far-sighted political leaders. Such voices, and many others, can speak in a public forum that comes to the fore when institutional practices are failing to deal adequately with a problem. The COVID-19 catastrophe opens up a deliberative space that goes beyond specific problems to put institutions and mentalities before the court of public opinion, and it allows wider participation in terms of actors and discourses than those usually deemed institutionally legitimate (cf. O’Grady, 2020; Passannante, 2019; Bleiker, 2018; Hariman and Cintron, 2015; Kornprobst, 2014).

Stated otherwise, catastrophic situations that dissolve prior contexts not only pose an existential threat to established ways of life; they also dissolve prior contexts for knowledge and judgment. In such situations, ignorance of the unknown, unless one has Cassandra’s prophetic gift, can feel like flying blind. Normal knowledge practices don’t appear to work in a catastrophe, nor did normal knowledge communities prepare for a catastrophe. What was known involved dependence on shaky assumptions of regularity, willingness to overlook variance, etc. Once into a catastrophe, however, one has a brief opportunity to know more about what preceded and caused it, including the knowledge practices that were part of that system, and to develop better means for knowing and changing the world that will follow.

Catastrophe does not change the entire epistemological context, however. Normal knowledge practices can remain partly relevant in a catastrophe. For example, realism was possibly not an exclusively relevant or optimal reaction to Kaiser Wilhelm, helping to produce a world war that nobody really wanted (Tuchman, 1962). It may have been a more appropriate response to the grander ambitions of Hitler. COVID 19 did not negate the findings of climate science. Yet the pandemic has exposed changes in world politics and constraints in international relations theory that preceded the crisis.

The virus is an indicator species for more fundamental problems in the ecosystem: problems that realism will have a hard time conceptualizing. We always needed more attention to discourses of practice and theory, and more capacious conception of strategic thinking., emphasizing a mix of collaborative and competitive strategies, linking justice and prosperity and sustainability against the horizon of the Anthropocene and climate change, rethinking nature, including nonhuman actors. Critique is the place to sort it out. Do we have any rules for critique, discernment, judgment, wisdom? No and yes. Post-realism answers such questions by stressing communication – argument, debate, discussion – rather than dicta.

Our discursive resources need to go beyond the conventional wisdom of traditional or modern realism, to expand our vision. Among other things, the pandemic stimulates us to bring nature powerfully back in, to foreground the overwhelming fact that humanity is always embedded in a much larger reality and to give that reality the agency it deserves. In the face of a previously heightened distrust of a system now proved to be seriously defective, and a current medical, social, economic, and political catastrophe, there is pressing need for serious reflection on systemic problems. That reflection will need additional resources for the political imagination: concepts, images, discourses, objects, species, and environments that can provide supplementary optics for seeing the complex relationships constituting world politics.

Realism and its offshoots have been at the hegemonic center of international relations theorizing; post -realism includes what comes next. What comes next is of course, prefigured by what has come before. Notwithstanding realism’s centrality, there is already a huge installed base of non-realist literature dealing with international relations, for example work on conflict processes, constructivism, critical theory, the English school, feminist international relations, global ecology and history, international communication, international law, international organization, international political economy, international political psychology, liberal institutionalism, Marxism, neo-functionalism, peace studies, post-structuralism, practice, regime theory, world systems theory, and much more. Beyond this, additional discourses are available – for example rhetoric, actor-network theory, evolutionary epistemology, new materialism – that can be brought into international relations theorizing to help identify previously overlooked realities and marshal resources for change.

This work may not look like strategic analysis much of the time, but it can be moved in from the margins and given

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

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heavier weight in appropriate strategic contexts. It can be a good antidote to the conformist pressures of groupthink. Views from multiple perspectives are more than chaotic, fragmented, eclectic; they can be the contents of a vast and varied epistemological tool chest available for skilled practitioners to respond precisely and pragmatically to the widest variety of situations and topics in a very complex world. They can, as well, provide strong foundations for later synthesis, broadening and deepening the most serious planning and preparedness in respect to the most severe threats, and for the most important ends. They can, in other words, be seen as responses to random variations that increase the likelihood of successful adaptation to accelerating change (cf. Hudson, 2020; Kristensen, 2018. Fishel, 2017; Slaughter, 2017; Mayer, Karpes, and Knoblich, 2014; Dunne, Hansen, and Wight, 2013; McKeil, 2013; Lake, 2013; Brown, 2012; Bennett, 2010; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Smith, 2004).

In a small way, the reframing and reweighting of international relations theory after the coronavirus pandemic has already proceeded. Naming of the non-human is a part of this. The agent of the 2020 pandemic does have a name, COVID-19. Other major epidemic diseases-as-actors do as well (e.g. Black Death, cholera, Bubonic Plague, Polio, Hantavirus, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, MERS, SARS, Smallpox, Spanish Flu, Typhoid, Tuberculosis, Yellow Fever). Hurricanes-as-actors include Andrew, Katrina, Sandy. And, as we mentioned earlier, the world-as-actor has long ago been named as Mother Earth or the goddess Gaia. Interestingly, there also appears to be a small return to wilding. As wild animals and birds have become more visible in the cities, people have celebrated them: what should be a bad sign became a metonym for a renewed relationship with nature. Such antique tropes are finding new life amidst the pandemic, perhaps because realist cultural conventions also are wavering in a context of derangement (Ghosh, 2016). In place of the stylistic conventions of late modernism, older literary and rhetorical genres contained conventions that reflect a deep-set knowledge of catastrophe as an inevitable return, the return of the repressed, that will test how well a society can care for its own and live with others.

Returning to Nature

Our version of post-realism signaled the possibility of a rhetorical turn in international relations theory; and the agentification of the COVID 19 is a new possibility within that turn. International realism presents itself as a representation of true reality. And yet, realism is also a rhetorical artifact and only one narrative about the diverse, pluralistic world in which we live. As such, it has the benefit of presenting that world in a simple, coherent, intuitively understandable fashion, useful in helping us respond and adapt to aspects of that world. At the same time, the central realist narrative is both a cause and an effect of political power. It represents a triumph of epistemological evolution and the long-term natural selection of a rhetoric that represents dominant interests. It sharpens focus on particular aspects of the world; it also blurs, distorts, or omits others. For example, when combined with nationalism, it is a form of rhetoric that pulls together political support in a kind of tribal mobilization as it suggests a deeply xenophobic view of lupine foreigners, and a hostile view of men (and wolves).

Prudence (Beer and Hariman, 2013; Hariman, 2003) demands that we pay attention not just to human actors, but also to the non-human world as well, into which category, interestingly, states metaphorically also fit. Agentification of other non-human actors is a rhetorical strategy that can help us do that. As we have suggested, the window of post-pandemic change will quickly close. We are not naive enough to believe that powerful actors in the system will find it in their nature or interests to reframe non-human actors. Reframing appears likely to end where it started, as a heuristic thought experiment that bumps up against the cognitive inertia of common sense. Yet failure to change offers no protection. Past history is full of pandemics and future pandemics are inevitable (Khan and Patrick, 2016). Were another virus never to appear, the problems revealed by this pandemic, if not addressed adequately, will ensure crippled responses to climate change and the many problems it will produce in the international arena: food security, migration pressures, and worse all loom on that horizon.

At the end of the day, the coronavirus pandemic reminds us that non-human actors are immensely powerful, more powerful than states—even great powers—that define their interests in terms of power. These actors have no need to operate at human scale, and they have identities that can become the markers of a new history. A pandemic can be more cloaked than the attack on Pearl Harbor, more murderous than Mao, more powerful than the atomic bomb, more lethal than many wars, more economically disruptive than the Great Depression. From the virus' realist perspective, like a state, it competes within a global anarchical society (Bull, 2012). It is embedded in an anarchic

Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

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world system and engaged in a post-Hobbesian war of all against all. The virus competes against humans, and against other viruses and other non-human elements of its environment, which we can also subjectify. And yet it is literally and metaphorically invisible to the naked eye. The US intelligence community's worldwide threat assessment of 2019, the last public release before the coronavirus pandemic, included almost no discussion of pandemic dangers (Coats, 2019: 21). Even when the non-human actor behaves as a realist, effective human response will require more focused long-term attention and a much larger strategic perspective.

Realism might imply that we marginally reshape realist discourse to make more visible the massive global powers, identities, and interests of non-human actors like pandemics and climate. We might admit them to a post-Westphalian global system with an expanded and more diverse membership that includes states, and many other actors including natural agents. If Andorra, the Cook Islands, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Nauru, Niue, Palau, San Marino, or Vatican City, and many other small states can have a seat at the table, why not COVID 19? This would not be a category error but an explicit rhetorical strategy to drive attention to where it is urgently needed. As noted above, political leaders have already framed COVID 19 as an example of foreign competition; there is a foreign invader, the pandemic is a war, and its deaths are war casualties. Nationalism, national security, and national defense rhetoric mobilize states for survival. Standard crisis management and technocracy try to reimpose domestic political control.

Importing non-human actors into existing paradigms would be one type of adaptation. Asking non-human actors to play fantasy realism could be a useful metaphor, but it does not go far enough in reorienting our thinking. Realism is a discourse that focuses on states and war. Our discursive resources need to transcend the realist framing of reality, to expand our vision, to bring nature powerfully back in, to foreground the overwhelming fact that humanity is always embedded in a much larger reality and to return to that reality the agency it deserves (cf. Hamilton, 2018; du Plessis, 2017; Mitchell, 2017; Fagan, 2016; Harrington, 2016).

Realism conveys an essentialist view of human nature based on a lust for power that is the essence of an imaginary Hobbesian state of nature in world politics. But the nature of the human and non-human world is broader and more complicated than this. However much we might resist all the other physical elements of the powerful reality that surrounds us – including recurrent fire and flood, drought and famine, earthquake and tsunami, hurricane and tornado, pestilence and climate – we should eventually give them their due. We cannot go outside our own mortal and limited selves to recognize nature on its own terms, but we can be open to multiple diverse ways of signifying, knowing, and being in the world. We can adapt our conversation to the powerful truth that we live in a reality much grander than traditional realism describes. Real nature comprehends the state of nature and human nature assumed by realism and much more, including the good, the bad, and the ugly of the human and non-human conditions. Real nature is always a player, a big player. We would do well to recognize much more explicitly that nature always plays last.

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Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post-Pandemic

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

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