

## Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Theories of Global Politics

<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/15/theories-of-global-politics/>

KEVIN BLOOR, MAY 15 2022

**This is an excerpt from *Understanding Global Politics* by Kevin Bloor. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.**

This opening chapter offers an exploration of the two dominant and contesting paradigms within International Relations: 'realism' and 'liberalism'. We will consider the main ideas of both theories and how they offer a contrasting perspective on aspects of International Relations. The strengths and limitations of realism and liberalism will be considered. Concepts covered in this chapter entail the balance of power, complex interdependence, the cobweb model, the society of states, the billiard-ball model and the security dilemma. This section also considers several prominent theorists from the binary debate, alongside certain theoretical divisions within each school of thought. The chapter leads towards an evaluation of realism and liberalism in the context of global politics since the turn of the century and concludes with a discussion of alternative theories outside of the realism/liberalism dichotomy prior to laying out some key terminology and points of the chapter.

### The Key Qualities of Realism

The chief qualities of realism that will be discussed individually are as follows:

- Sovereign states as the primary actor of global politics
- The balance of power
- The importance of international anarchy
- The inevitability of war
- The security dilemma

#### *Sovereign States as the Primary Actors of Global Politics*

The realist school of thought claims that states are the main actors and key agents within global politics. Whilst non-state actors are of some relevance, they pale into insignificance when compared to states. For instance, the actions of a state can be detrimental to the interests of non-state actors (such as a trade embargo upon companies from another country). In a more dramatic sense, it is only the state that can launch a military operation. A handful of states even possess the ability to press the nuclear button and bring devastation to the planet.

The realist conception of the state is rooted in the traditions of the Westphalian system. The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia laid down the principle that every state is sovereign over its designated territory, and that this should overlap with common cultural, linguistic, religious and historical norms – what we call 'The Nation'. As a theoretical concept, the nation-state can be thought of as a sovereign state in which most of its members share a common language, history and culture. In essence, sovereignty can be defined as the authority of a state to govern itself. The principle therefore applies equally for a small state like Tuvalu alongside powerful ones such as members of the G7.

The Westphalian system is thus based upon the notion of non-intervention. As sovereign states, intervention by an external power is contrary to the United Nations Charter as 'nothing should authorise intervention in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state' (United Nations 1945). However, in practice, the doctrine of

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

non-intervention is routinely violated for a number of reasons. These can range from military aggression to humanitarian intervention. Intervention in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state also undermines the Westphalian notion that each state should have equal recognition under international law. It could also be argued that the only means by which non-intervention can ever be completely guaranteed is the possession of nuclear weapons, acting as a deterrent to intervention.

## *The Balance of Power*

The balance of power is both a theoretical concept and a pragmatic means to protect the existence of the state. The concept is built upon the assumption that states can only secure their survival by preventing other states (or alliances) from bettering their military dominance and power basis.

In a world governed by 'Realpolitik', military aggression is countered by an equilibrium of power between rival coalitions. When a country is under threat, it can gain safety and security by adopting a policy of either 'balancing' or 'band-wagoning'. Let's unpack these terms. The former refers to states allying themselves against a threat to their territorial existence, such as the Warsaw Pact in response to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In contrast, band-wagoning consists of aligning with a stronger power (such as the special relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the US).

Other strategies associated with the balance of power principle include 'buck-passing' and 'chain-ganging'. The former refers to the refusal amongst nation-states to confront a growing threat in the hope that another state will act as a necessary deterrent. One of the most famous historical examples was the policy of appeasement adopted by the major powers of Western Europe in the face of Nazi expansionism. In doing so, the European Powers effectively passed the buck to the Soviet Union – 'buck-passing'. 'Chain-ganging' however is a term used to describe the probability of inter-state conflict due to multi-state alliances. The agreed principles of such alliances are usually centred upon a mutual defence clause, such as Article 5 of the NATO Charter. Inevitably, the consequence of such an arrangement is an elevated possibility of triggering war, as with the notion of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) during the Cold War.

In a system built upon self-help, structural realists, such as the noted thinker Kenneth Waltz (1979), predict that a balance of power will always emerge even in the absence of a conscious attempt to maintain equilibrium. In an anarchic system, alliances will form against those who pose a threat of some kind regardless of its intentions. In contrast, classical realists emphasise the deliberate role played by state leaders and diplomats in the maintenance of a balance of power. The Balance of Power must therefore be constructed in some manner via international law and diplomatic agreements. It is important to note that, despite such differences, all realists view the balance of power as a fundamental aspect of international relations, being the outcome of human behaviour and/or the cause of state behaviour.

## *International Anarchy and its Implications*

Anarchy is a Greek term meaning without rules or without a ruler. Within an anarchic system, sovereign states must ultimately focus their energies upon the search for stability and order, given that there is no sovereign entity higher than the state – i.e., the social condition between states is ruler-less and thus depends on their cooperative capacities. This leads them towards the pursuit of strategies such as the aforementioned balance of power within the boundaries of a particular type of polarity and structural order.

Amongst realists, there is an acceptance that anarchy is prevalent within the global system. Due to the absence of an overarching authority (such as a federated world government), sovereign states can only secure their own survival via maintaining some form of equilibrium. States must hence forge a chain of informal understandings with other units that maintain a system of cooperation. This equilibrium of anarchical self-help reveals itself to be rooted in norms and rules that can increase levels of trust and reciprocity between states.

Although the international system lacks a world government, there is a system of global governance to impose a

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

semblance of structural formality. The obvious example of this is the United Nations (UN). Created in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UN implements international law agreed upon between states out of their condition of mutual anarchy, and as such, maintains peace and stability. There are also a number of judicial organisations such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. However, effective measures from international organisations require the support of powerful states.

According to the neorealist school of thought, foreign policy decisions and the behaviours of states are shaped by the structure of the international system. The anarchic character of the global commons encourages rival states to build up their military arsenal, for example, which lead to a 'Security Dilemma' – as discussed below. In some cases, this can lead to the development of a nuclear capability (as in the arms race between India and Pakistan). The development of nuclear capability can often result in a negative cycle of regional tensions. Given the tensions between certain states, power can in essence become an end in itself as a result of the anarchic condition these states find themselves in.

Another consequence of an anarchic system is that powerful countries such as China and the United States act in a manner that would potentially result in condemnation if performed by less powerful states. There are obvious double standards in the response of the international community that are reinforced by the lack of an overarching authority at the international level, where such double standards are thus unaccountable. It would be unlikely that a state or organisation would impose sanctions on the United States for sponsoring terrorism, but the threat is often used against 'rogue' states, such as Iran – illustrating this point. The perspective taken upon an anarchic system may depend upon the relative power of the state itself. For larger states, anarchy may well be viewed as an opportunity to pursue their own interest and to act in a unilateral manner. There are few more prescient illustrations of this point than the campaign pledge from US President Donald Trump to construct a large wall along the Mexican border, naturally, without the consent of Mexico. By contrast, less powerful states may view the anarchic system as one that necessitates forging an alliance with others. It is hardly surprising to note that the most enthusiastic supporters of deeper European integration have been smaller states like Luxembourg.

## *The Inevitability of War*

In ideological terms, the realist view of human nature derives from a conservative perspective. The mindset (or ideology) of conservatism adopts a very different view to the liberal perspective. According to conservatives, humans are driven by primordial instincts centred upon survival. Inevitably, this is reflected in the realm of international relations. Having said this, it is important to note that conservatism and realism exist with a degree of symbiosis. Not all conservatives are realists, and to be a realist does not necessarily make someone a conservative.

The classical realist conception owes a great deal to the theory of Niccolò Machiavelli. His pessimistic outlook on human nature and his classically republican commitment to *realpolitik* both hold a natural affinity with the realist perspective. Machiavelli is also a figure very much rooted within practical experience due to his preference for pragmatism. For instance, his most famous work *The Prince* provides a guidebook to those who practice the art of statecraft. To be an effective leader, a politician must be able to utilise every advantage to their disposal possible and keep fortune on their side for the benefit of the political community they serve.

Machiavelli further contends that it is impossible to be a good prince whilst always being a morally good person. To be good in the spiritual sense is to be considered weak in the eyes of others. Ultimately, it is fear of the consequences that keeps people in check – rather than piety or meekness. For a statesman, it is better to be feared than loved, but not feared alone. Indeed, to act in a Christian way with every decision would be very dangerous for any statesman. As a Prince, therefore, it is necessary to learn how *not* to be good (Machiavelli 2008, 53).

According to the realist conception, International Relations is characterised by a Machiavellian world devoid of morality. In such an environment, it is better for a state (and its leader) to be feared on the basis of hard power. Sovereign states have no choice but to face the world as it is and act accordingly. Even when a powerful state pursues a policy of upholding liberal values, these can only be secured via actions devoid of morality. There are few better examples of this argument than the United States. In promoting capitalism, the US has engaged repeatedly in

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

Machiavellian policies. Although something of a simplification, the realist conception of International Relations can be described as 'the end justifies the means'. Having said this, there is a degree of division within realism as to the inevitability of war. According to the classical strand of thought, the cause of war is human nature, following the thought of classical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes (2017) or Hans Morgenthau (1948). However, structural realists emphasise the importance of an anarchic system.

## *The Security Dilemma*

According to the theorists Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth (2007), the term can be defined as a situation in which the military preparations of one state creates an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another. The search for security for one state is very often another state's source of insecurity. Other states must ask themselves if those military preparations are designed to enhance that country's security, or if they are designed to secure an advantage.

According to the realist outlook, states are naturally suspicious of other states, given the self-help system. The security dilemma contributes to a spiral of insecurity, especially evident in those scenarios in which two or more states are implacable rivals. In a hypothetical case of the Middle East, a military build-up by Israel or Iran would be viewed in a hostile light by surrounding states and as such increase tensions and the possibility of 'flash points' that could spark a conflict. The historical conflict within the region makes the security dilemma and the spiral of insecurity virtually inevitable. In the words of Michael Howard (2000, 1) 'war, armed conflict between organised political groups, has been the universal norm in human history'.

Following on from this point, some form of military escalation (or exercise) may do little to enhance the security of the state that engaged in that action. Ironically, its position may actually become more insecure in that it may provoke neighbouring states to militarise out of fear. The security dilemma can also be applied to an organisation. From the perspective of policymakers in Russia, the expansion of NATO towards Russian territory appears to be an offensive strategy. Whilst member states of the organisation might view their enhanced military capacity as strengthening their security, it is also likely to provoke anxiety within the Russian Federation – as seen in 2014 with the emergence of the conflict in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

The dependent factor is often the perspective taken of another country. In a system in which mutual trust exists, military operations by one country may provoke little or no concern amongst others. This may be due to a habit of cooperation between those states. A military build-up by the United States will cause little concern amongst the governments of its natural allies. In contrast, even the prospect of American military involvement may cause considerable anxiety amongst policymakers in Beijing.

A related point to consider here is the role of propaganda. Traditionally, governments have used propaganda in order to identify and exaggerate an external threat. This can lead to the public having a distorted perception of the outside world. The significance of propaganda is more overt in the case of a closed society such as North Korea. The regime in Pyongyang blames interference by the United States for every misfortune faced by the country. Anti-Washington propaganda is also a feature of the Tehran-based regime in Iran.

The spiral of insecurity caused by the security dilemma can at times take on a force of its own. On 26 September 1983, the world came very close to an all-out nuclear war. It was a time of heightened tension between the two military superpowers after the Soviet Union had shot down a Korean airliner. Although not widely known within the West, the world was saved by the calmness of Duty Officer Stanislav Petrov. His system reported that missiles had been launched by the United States. Luckily, he judged the reports to be a false alarm and therefore disobeyed orders given to him by Soviet military protocol (Aksenov 2013). His quick thinking prevented an erroneous retaliation on the US and its NATO allies. This isolated example serves to underline the sheer magnitude of the security dilemma. Now that the principles of realism have been discussed, we shall turn our attention to the qualities of the liberal perspective.

## **The Key Qualities of Liberalism**

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

The chief qualities of liberalism that will be discussed individually are as follows:

- The significance of morality and an optimism concerning human nature
- Harmony and balance within the international system
- Complex interdependence
- Global governance
- The importance and growth of international institutions

## *The Significance of Morality and Optimism Concerning Human Nature*

First and foremost, liberalism adopts a normative approach to international relations. The discourse of liberalism is embedded with norms and values that seek to establish a better world. Whereas realists are primarily concerned with the world as it is, liberals focus on how the world ought to be. From this basic starting-point, the whole tone and language of liberalism differs dramatically from the realist perspective. Secondly, liberal theorists seek to make the world a better place. This is based upon progress towards a more peaceful and prosperous environment grounded on global governance, respect for human rights and the spread of liberal values. These objectives are underpinned by an increasingly optimistic view of human nature. Whereas realists take a Machiavellian view, the liberal outlook flows from an assumption that human beings are rational entities who can recognise and respond to shared interests. Extending this practically, such a perspective produces a world of cooperation as opposed to that of a Hobbesian 'State of Nature'.

The fundamental mission of liberalism concerns 'the bonds of perpetual peace', in the words of the enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1991). Theorists from the liberal viewpoint believe that an international system grounded on free trade, democratic accountability and dispute-resolving institutions provides the most effective means towards securing a lasting peace between states – forging a world that is governed by rationalism as opposed to passion.

As a normative theoretical perspective, the worldview of liberalism gravitates towards that of morality. It is both necessary and desirable to create a system in which liberal norms and values are fostered amongst nations. Unlike rogue and dictatorial regimes such as North Korea, liberal democracies must always take into account the wishes of their electorate. This acts as a significant motivational factor in the need to avoid warfare and pursue diplomatic means.

Liberalism is therefore based upon three interrelated principles. Firstly, it is a body of theory that attempts to reject the power politics highlighted within the realist perspective. Secondly, it is a belief-system which claims that the recognition of mutual benefits shapes international cooperation. Finally, it seeks to create a system of global governance in order to influence and adjudicate the policy decisions of states and non-state actors. Unlike realists, the liberal perspective has greater faith in the ability of international organisations to maintain an effective level of global governance. For instance, international law provides a forum in which states can identify and pursue their mutual interests. These principles, thus, push for a peace based upon rational behaviour and mutual cooperation.

## *The Possibility of Harmony and Balance*

Liberalism contends that international institutions maintain a system of harmony and balance amongst states. Military and political conflict can be reduced with a combination of international institutions combined with a complex system of 'interdependence'. According to liberals, mutual dependence provides the key towards a degree of equilibrium within international relations. Harmony can therefore be created through an emphasis upon liberal values.

Following on from this, there are three main theories to consider. Firstly, 'the democratic peace thesis', which suggests that the spread of democratic values can establish a better world. In a democracy, leaders have an electoral incentive to avoid military conflict. Elected leaders will always seek to avoid war whenever humanly possible due to the financial and human costs involved. Amongst liberal democracies, warfare is very much the last resort after all reasoning has failed. The democratic peace theory has a lengthy tradition amongst liberal scholars dating back to the Enlightenment and is continually a topic of discussion even today (Placek, 2012).

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

Equally, 'commercial peace theory' also has a lengthy pedigree within International Relations. Associated with free-market economists such as Richard Cobden (1903) and David Ricardo (1817), it is a body of thought which claims that free trade has a pacifying impact on the international system. Countries that trade with one another have an overwhelming economic reason to maintain those trading links. In a contemporary twist to this argument, Thomas Friedman (2000) points out that no two countries with a McDonalds have ever gone to war. Known as 'the Golden Arches theory of international relations', Friedman observed that: 'countries with middle- classes large enough to sustain a McDonald's have reached a level of prosperity and global integration that makes warmongering risky and unpalatable to its people' (1996).

The third element to consider is the 'institutional peace theory'. Unlike the other two theoretical models, the emphasis here is upon the beneficial role played by forums such as the UN, the World Bank and the EU. International institutions seek to generate a habit of cooperation amongst sovereign states. Following from this, institutions can also provide a means by which bilateral disputes can be resolved in a non-violent manner. Furthermore, institutions ensure that states interact with one another in a relatively transparent manner and thereby uphold the norms of global governance. Given the right mix of economic and institutional factors, states will maintain a harmonious system in order to maximise prosperity and minimise conflict. As a conclusion, it could hardly be more at odds with the realist paradigm, at least without a deeper investigation of the manner in which they may hold similarities; a subject that is discussed later.

## *Complex Interdependence*

The term 'complex interdependence' is associated with the ground-breaking work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977). When '*Power and Interdependence*' was first published during the late-1970s, it offered a robust intellectual challenge to the realist paradigm. Their work seemed to capture an era of détente between the two superpowers and growing calls for a new international economic order that included developing countries. It remains a seminal text in the liberal perspective on International Relations. Nonetheless, what does the term indicate?

Complex interdependence consists of four interrelated elements. First of all, there are important linkages between states and non-state actors that shape global politics. Secondly, the international agenda exhibits none of the realist differentiation between low and high politics. The former relates to economic, cultural and social affairs whilst high politics centres on that which is essential to the survival of the state. Thirdly, there is a recognition of multiple channels for interaction amongst actors across national boundaries. Finally, there has been a marked decline in the effectiveness of military force as a tool of statecraft. In a system characterised by complex interdependence, there are multiple channels of interaction between societies. The existence of a global civil society has brought about a decline in the reliance upon military force and power politics. Even the most powerful military states no longer rely upon the fire and fury of their military arsenal. The web of linkages that connect states together, that lead to their condition of mutual cooperation and dependency – this is the condition of complex interdependence.

In a world of complex interdependence, 'soft power' will gradually replace the use of hard power. According to Joseph Nye (2004, ix), soft power relates to: 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion ... it arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies.' States could thereby achieve their objectives via non-military means such as diplomacy and cooperation. Due to a system of complex interdependence, military force or coercion is no longer a common feature of international relations. Nye (2012) also adds that 'the best propaganda is not propaganda.' In other words, the most effective use of propaganda is via persuasion rather than force; to make others want what you want. This aids the creation of a normatively interconnected, pacified, world.

It should also be noted that multiple channels of interaction are present within a system centred upon complex interdependence. Informal ties between governmental elites and non-governmental elites exist alongside regular and routine communication amongst transnational organisations. These arenas of multiple channels are often summarised as inter-state, trans-governmental and transnational relations. These links generate a shared mindset, interest, and a habit of cooperation. In doing so, the concept of complex interdependence contends that we have moved beyond the boundaries imposed via the realist paradigm, of states out for themselves alone.

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

## *Global Governance*

Global governance is a movement towards political cooperation amongst transnational actors with the aim of negotiating solutions that affect more than one state or region. There are several institutions that function within a system of global governance. This being said, global governance is not a unified system which can be observed precisely because there is no single overarching sovereign world government – as explained above when discussing the concept of anarchy within the realist framework.

In terms of a definition, James Rosenau (1995) claims that the term governance denotes the regulation of interdependent relations in the absence of an overarching political authority. Others have suggested that global governance refers to the management of global processes in the absence of a 'cosmocracy'. The term is widely applied to a shared political authority that leads towards a single government or state with global jurisdiction (Skolimowski 2003). Either way, global governance entails concrete and co-operative problem-solving arrangements on either a formal or informal basis. Such definitions are flexible enough to apply whether participation is bilateral, regional or international.

By its very nature, global governance entails a number of states and international organisations. That said, a powerful state or institution may take on a prominent role and drive the process forward. In the case of tensions within the Middle East, the United States has long sought to establish stability in an area of clear economic and strategic importance. Russia also plays an interventionist role within the region and both countries are members of the Middle East Quartet (alongside the EU and the UN).

The term global governance has gained greater prominence in the contemporary era given the trend towards globalisation. It is a relatively broad term that encompasses the process of designating laws, rules and regulations within the global commons. The need for global governance is almost certain to increase as globalisation becomes embedded further within the field of International Relations and global social relations as a whole.

The post-Cold War world of the 1990s instigated a renewed attempt to establish a systemic form of global governance. The end of the Cold War shifted the goalposts of international relations beyond the somewhat narrow confines of US-USSR 'bipolarity' – the international power structure that forms around two major poles of power – and the balance of power between two monolithic spheres of influence. Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this trend is the growing salience of environmental issues. This can also be identified in the context of a more conventional political realm. Naturally, this poses a number of interrelated challenges. Building a responsible and effective global governance requires the establishment of democratic legitimacy amongst important stakeholders. However, obtaining the required level of legitimacy demands a complete rethink of the Westphalian system due to its emphasis on state sovereignty. The purpose, remit and scope of international institutions would also have to be transformed entirely. Sovereignty is ultimately a concept that embeds the status quo, placing ultimate decision-making power in the hands of the state; emphasising a certain statism. Above all, the relationship between the state and global institutions would require recalibration. For instance, sovereignty would have to be shared or pooled, whereby ultimate decision-making power is disseminated amongst a plethora of international bodies.

Global governance has also encroached upon the realm of high politics. For instance, almost every sovereign state is a signatory to the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). More countries are party to the NPT than any comparable agreement. Adherence to the NPT is a testimony to the ability of sovereign states to protect the shared global commons. However, it is also the case that a handful of nuclear states have either not signed (or simply withdrawn from) the Treaty – North Korea, India, Israel and Pakistan. This is a significant problem as this condition of exclusive dissent adds to the perception of instability within the regions these states cohabit. Whilst multilateral agreements can, and do, play a crucial role in global governance, it is also important to note their limitations.

The War on Terror is another interesting case study to consider in regards to global governance. This term was used repeatedly by the Bush administration in order to justify intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Firstly, the nature of the threat is transnational. Secondly, international security and cooperation is largely driven by Washington on the basis of their hegemonic status. Partly because of this, attempts to prevent the spread of global terrorism lack the

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

institutional support compatible with its overall importance.

For all the high-minded rhetoric of global governance, there are three notable gaps to highlight. The first of these is the jurisdictional gap between the growing need for global governance and the lack of appropriate authority to take action. Secondly, the incentive gap relates to the factors that motivate cooperation. Although globalisation does enhance the incentive to co-operate with one another, this clearly does not occur in every situation. For example, there was very little cooperation during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the participation gap refers to the fact that international cooperation remains primarily the affair of governments. This inevitably means the marginalisation of civil society groups such as pressure groups and non-profit organisations, even when international in scope and reach, or at least their secondary placement in relation to the significance of state actors.

Arguably the most optimistic objective for those who seek global governance is the formation of a global constitution. According to Gustavo Marin and Pierre Calame (Marin and Calame 2005), a global constitution would act as 'the common reference for establishing the order of rights and duties applicable to UN agencies and to the other multilateral institutions.' One of the conditions for building democratic governance is the development of platforms for citizen dialogue on the legal formulation of global governance and the harmonisation of objectives. Furthermore, a global constitution must clearly express a limited number of objectives in order to remain pragmatic and applicable globally. Such a constitution could guide the common action of UN agencies and multilateral institutions. The specific role of each of these would be subordinate to the pursuit of such objectives. In order to achieve this, citizens must be persuaded by tangible benefits to their own standard of living.

As with much else within the subject matter, the significance of the phrase 'global governance' is a contested one. Despite the continued process of globalisation, realists tend to downplay its importance. Institutions remain relatively weak within an anarchic international system. However, liberals contend that the term has gained increasing significance. The noted academic David Held even claimed that global governance has changed the parameters of debate surrounding sovereignty. Here it was argued that we have now moved beyond classical sovereignty, in the Westphalian sense of the phrase, to a mode of sovereignty that is internationalised (Held et al. 1999; Held and McGrew 2002).

## *The Impact and Growth of International Organisations*

It is widely accepted that a correlation exists between the number of international organisations and the process of globalisation. The impact of those institutions has also increased alongside an expansion in their scope and scale. For instance, there was a rapid increase in the number of peacekeeping operations launched by the UN shortly after the end of the Cold War. Between 1989 and 1994, the Security Council authorised 20 new operations and an increase in the number of peacekeepers from 11,000 to 75,000 (United Nations Peacekeeping 2021). There have also been a number of international organisations created since the 1990s, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), the African Union (AU) or the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), all formed to deal with the growth of a truly global politics.

In terms of regional integration, the European Union is perhaps the clearest example of an organisation expanding its influence on global affairs. Since the 1990s, the EU has more than doubled its membership. Consistent with the process of deeper integration, twenty-seven sovereign states have willingly chosen to pool their resources within an institution that contains supranational institutions. From a continent with a devastating history of warfare and rampant nationalism, this is a major achievement. In the contemporary era, the European Union holds considerable elements of soft power with over 140 diplomatic embassies throughout the world. The Single European Market is the largest of its kind, and the EU continues to adopt a greater burden in terms of global governance as its power (both hard and soft) grows.

The effectiveness of international organisations depends upon several factors, some of which may be interrelated. Arguably the most important dilemma is the tension between the liberal values embedded within such institutions and the concept of national sovereignty. For such institutions to be effective, they must transcend the barriers posed by national sovereignty. However, many of the most powerful states are reluctant to accept the authority of international



# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

organisations when it conflicts with their own narrowly defined national interests. For instance, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) sometimes flout the rules of international institutions in the absence of any effective sanction. It is also common for a superpower to simply ignore international condemnation. Illustrating this, since 1992, the UN General Assembly has passed an annual resolution condemning the American embargo against Cuba, yet this has amounted to little in the way of US response. Under successive administrations, the United States has also brushed aside criticism from Amnesty International (2020) for its treatment of 'enemy combatants' in facilities such as the infamous Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp.

Another problem to consider is the level of legitimacy held by several institutions. Reliant upon soft power, such organisations can only persuade rather than coerce. As such, the presence of international organisations needs to be seen as legitimate by the parties involved in order to be effective. For instance, between 1999 and 2006 peacekeeping troops were welcomed in Sierra Leone and contributed to stabilising the country. By contrast, the 'blue helmets' (UN Peacekeepers) sent to Somalia in 1992 and 1993 conspicuously failed to secure peace because rival groups did not view the involvement of the UN as legitimate. In the oft-used phrase, there was no peace for the peacekeepers to keep. As such, the perceived legitimacy of international institutions is key to their successful functioning in achieving their objectives.

The efficacy of international institutions is further limited by the lack of political will to address vested and powerful economic interests. In regards to the Washington Consensus, international institutions have proved incapable of addressing the problems associated with multinational companies. The role of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank may have been complicit in the growing economic strength of technology giants known by the acronym FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google). A similar critique is applicable when addressing the threat posed by environmental degradation and human rights violations.

A further inherent weakness with institutions is that they are often reactive. For instance, the UN Security Council (UNSC) first discussed the Covid-19 pandemic some three months after the issue arose in the Wuhan province of China (Nature 2020). International institutions have also been slow to act when faced with humanitarian disasters. In the case of Sudan, repeated human rights violations in the region of Darfur were either downplayed or simply ignored for many years, leading to what is now considered to be a genocide.

On a more prosaic note, such institutions often lack the necessary funding to be an effective actor on the international stage. It is often problematic to gain funding in the first place. For instance, the United States is in considerable financial arrears with the United Nations. As the largest contributor (around a fifth of the total budget), this is clearly a major problem. Donald Trump even withdrew American funding to the WHO for its inability to deal effectively with the Chinese government in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are also problems specific to particular organisations. For instance, the effectiveness of the UN is undermined by the difficulties posed by representativeness. The General Assembly operates on the democratic principle of one vote for each member state. However, this distorts representativeness and results in a loss of credibility. Rather than exercising the capacity to influence, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) effectively passes the buck to powerful countries. Thus, each organisation holds equally unique and distinct problems.

The 'alter-globalisation' academic Joseph Stiglitz (2015) argues that the need for international institutions has never been so great, but trust in them has never been so low. This is indeed a salient point. Those of a reformist outlook argue that improved global governance demands more powerful institutions, consensus-building and heightened levels of accountability. However, this first requires a level of engagement and cooperation from national governments.

## The Divisions Between Realism and Liberalism

The main distinction between realism and liberalism concerns human nature, power, security, the likelihood of conflict, and the importance of institutions and states. We will now consider each element in turn, beginning with their different views of human nature.

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

## *Human Nature*

Liberalism is built upon the assumption that individuals are rational entities whose behaviour is shaped by their own best interests. Like individuals, nation-states are able to identify areas of shared benefit such as trade and mutual security. States are also able to rationalise that their interests are best served by the avoidance of warfare. This can be achieved via cooperation with other states, pooling sovereignty within a regional organisation or by conforming to the norms and conventions of international relations.

The realist perspective however is based upon a very different set of assumptions. Unlike liberals, realists generally hold a more pessimistic view of human nature. As with individuals, the relationship between nation-states is characterised by power politics. In an anarchic system, it is simply impossible to completely trust another state. There is always the possibility that a state (or even a group of states) will ignore international diplomacy and cooperation. For instance, during the 1930s, military expansion by Nazi Germany took place without an effective system of prevention from the League of Nations. All realists, whether classically or structurally inclined, would concur with the slogan 'to ensure peace, you must prepare for war.' According to the realist position, liberals are far too naïve about (a) the potential for cooperation amongst sovereign states, and (b) how national interest undermines common interest.

Perhaps the first-ever document to outline the realist position on International Relations was Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. The ancient Chinese military strategist considered each aspect of warfare from laying plans to the use of spies. There are several arguments put forward by Sun Tzu, but perhaps the most useful is that 'war is a thing of pretence' (Tzu 2010, 10), of deception, alongside that 'the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting' and that we should know our enemies and ourselves (Tzu 2010, 20). When using force, the aggressor must also appear inactive. When they are near, they must seek to make the enemy believe they are far away (and vice versa). Many a battle has been won or lost without fighting, and his observations have been adopted by other guides to statecraft.

The realist perspective also owes a great deal to the influence of the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. According to Hobbes (2017, 80), the relationships that govern human nature are characterised by 'a perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death.' In an anarchic system, states must ensure their survival against the threat of military action. In the eyes of a realist, this can only be achieved via the balance of power. Forging alliances on this basis acts as a check upon potential aggression from a hostile state. In the realist conception of international relations, states must at all times acknowledge that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'.

In contrast, there is an unmistakable streak of idealism that runs through the liberal perspective. Liberalism is built upon an assumption that we *should* be optimistic about human nature and its capacity to make the right decisions. Whilst realists view human nature as fixed and immutable, liberals contend that human nature is perfectible. This enables social progress based upon democracy, free trade and effective institutions. In a system of complex independence and global governance, foreign policy decisions can actually make the world a more peaceful and prosperous place. In order to support this argument, research into globalisation has shown that we are living in the most peaceful era in history (Pinker 2011).

## *Power*

In relation to power, the language of liberalism is normative whereas realists are cynical. The former emphasises the possibility of conflict-resolution by international institutions, whilst realism is grounded upon a more hard-headed assessment. For realists, states must ensure their survival through self-help alone within an anarchic system of international relations. This can only be achieved via an emphasis upon hard power such as military hardware and economic inducements.

Within foreign policy discourse, in order to distinguish between realists and liberals, the terms 'hawks' and 'doves' are sometimes used. Hawks focus upon a realist worldview whilst doves adopt a more liberal and idealistic tone. This distinction enables us to categorise the interests and actions of various bureaucracies within government. For

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

instance, in the US, there is often a tension between the hawkish approach of the Department of Defense and the diplomatic approach of the Department of State. Symbolically, as the chief foreign policy actor of the United States, the presidential seal contains both an olive branch and a quiver of arrows.

Another area of division between liberals and realists in the contemporary era concerns their grasp of how power operates. To neoliberals, the process of globalisation has transformed the manner in which power is exercised. In the early 1990s, Joseph Nye applied the concept of soft power which consists of the ability to attract rather than coerce. Soft power entails the utilisation of culture and political values in order to persuade. The mobilisation of soft power enables one country to get other countries to want what it wants without the threat of coercion. The term soft power is emblematic of the assumptions that govern the liberal perspective.

In contrast, neorealists claim that globalisation has not changed the fundamentals of global politics. In an article entitled '*Back to the Future*', John J. Mearsheimer (1990) challenged the prevalent liberal argument of the time that the end of the Cold War would lead to a more peaceful world. Instead, Mearsheimer (1995, 9) observed that cooperation would still be: 'constrained by the dominating logic of security competition, which no amount of cooperation can eliminate'. According to the neorealist outlook, the end of the Cold War era would result in the return of traditional balance of power concerns. Talk of a peace dividend was therefore nothing more than a false dawn. According to realists, physical force will always trump persuasion.

## *Order and Security*

Alongside human nature and power, there are also a number of divisions between these two grand narratives in relation to order and security. Realists contend that the focus must be upon preventing another state (or alliance) from securing sufficient military resources to impose its will upon others. The state system is governed by Darwinian principles in which the strong exploit the weak. The emphasis within the realist perspective is therefore upon high politics (such as warfare and national security). For realists, order can only be secured via an equilibrium of power. It is a self-help system with no overarching world government to impose an effective sanction.

Liberalism however asserts that order is borne out of multiple interactions of governance. Stability within a global system of governance stems from laws and behavioural norms between states and non-state actors. Liberalism seeks to ensure a more orderly system via the democratic peace theory, the commercial peace theory and the institutional peace theory. Taken together, they provide the means by which liberal values of peace, prosperity and progress can be achieved.

The distinction between these two seemingly polar opposites emerges from unproven and untestable assumptions. When it comes to order and security, realism describes the world as it really is (or as opponents point out, the way that realists choose to see it). By contrast, the language of liberalism is notably more progressive. There is a shared hope amongst liberals that the world can (and should) be improved via a system of global governance and the spread of commerce and democratic norms. There is also a tendency amongst liberals to highlight the importance of transnational linkages and mutual dependence.

Given the contestable character of theoretical assumptions, there are clearly problems with both grand theories of international relations. For instance, the realist roadmap contributes towards the security dilemma which can spiral out-of-control and lead to yet further conflict. There is also disagreement within the perspective itself over which system of polarity is most likely to ensure an equilibrium of power. Equally, the liberal mindset can be criticised for its excessive and misplaced faith in the ability of democracy and capitalism to ensure peace and stability. In addition, international institutions are themselves greatly constrained by the realist outlook adopted by member states.

## *The Likelihood of Conflict*

Under the realist paradigm, conflict between states is inevitable. The world only has a limited number of resources available – and in the absence of an effective world government, states are locked in a Darwinian struggle for survival. In order to support the realist position, the likelihood of conflict is usually greater when a state (or region)

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

holds valuable resources. In the case of oil, the Middle East has been a source of geo-political tension. Realists would claim that Washington has sought to intervene in the region via a deliberate strategy of 'divide and rule' amongst Arab states in order to aid Israel. The high-profile attempt at peace under the Trump administration recognised Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, established Jerusalem as the undivided capital, and recognised the Jordan valley as part of the Israeli state. The bias shown towards Israel by the Trump administration forms part of a clear and lengthy narrative of American engagement in the Middle East.

Although the realist stance has been modernised over time, its main tenants can be traced back to the Athenian historian Thucydides. His work considered the conflict between the oligarchs that ruled Sparta against the more democratic Athenians. In the specific context of conflict, an understanding of the realist paradigm is outlined further in contributions ranging from Hobbes to Machiavelli – who were keen readers of Thucydides, and in Hobbes' case is credited with the first translation of Thucydides into English (Skinner 2002). Whilst the international system can at times drift towards a more peaceful equilibrium, such phases are merely temporary. In the words of the neorealist Kenneth Waltz (1959, 232) 'wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them from occurring.' It is an observation of particular relevance towards his neorealist '*Theory of International Politics*' (1979) as it marked the same year that the era of détente came to an abrupt end. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 is widely seen as marking the end of a general thaw in the Cold War that characterised the 1970s period of 'détente'.

Liberals, however, believe that states are rational entities who seek to avoid the financial cost and economic disruption caused by warfare. Even in regions of the world with a lengthy history of tension, states do co-operate on a regular basis. Once again, this could be readily applied to the Middle East. There have been several attempts at reconciling peace between traditionally warring neighbours. This has usually entailed a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

As one would expect, both the realist and liberal positions have been subject to criticism. Realists have been charged with imposing 'truths' which turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This prevents the possibility of creating a more peaceful world in which swords turn into ploughshares. There are few better illustrations of this point than the security dilemma. Equally, it must surely be observed that the supposed stability of MAD brought the world to the brink of disaster during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The First World War could also be seen to expose the inherent flaws with the realist assumption that alliances lead to order and stability.

Liberals however have long been accused of overestimating the ability of states to recognise shared interests and acting rationally upon them. They may also have placed too much faith in the efficacy of international organisations to ensure cooperation. During the late-1980s, Joseph Grieco (1988) identified two barriers towards cooperation. The first is simply that of cheating. In the absence of effective sanctions, it is often possible for one (or more) states to cheat the system. The second barrier concerns the relative gains secured by another state. According to Grieco, 'absolute gains' refers to those situations in which states are able to increase their power and influence. This makes cooperation relatively straight-forward. However, states are also concerned with relative gains. The likelihood of states accepting international co-operative efforts is greatly undermined when participants see others as gaining more from the arrangement. In an unpredictable world of rivalries and a hierarchy of states, the issue of relative gains offers a thoughtful critique of the liberal mindset.

## *The Impact of International Organisations and the Significance of States*

Perhaps the most important point of departure to consider is their conception of how the international system operates. According to realists, domestic politics ends at the water's edge. Relations between states operate according to the 'billiard-ball analogy'. In this analogy states are like billiard balls: they are self-contained and their reaction to an exogenous force from another self-contained unit coming into conflict with it is calculable, reinforcing the notion of a self-help system. International organisations designed to ensure peace and cooperation are largely irrelevant to a realist outlook on International Relations. The most significant actors are (and will always be) states. In contrast, liberal theorists such as Keohane and Nye view the world as a cobweb of interactions. As a consequence of globalisation, states have been permeated – making the billiard-ball conception redundant. Some theorists even predict the end of the nation-state due to the dynamics of globalisation (Ohmae 1995).

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

It is important to note that there are strands of thought within both of these paradigms. Most notably, there has been a perceptible shift in the focus of realist thinking. Neorealists claim that international actors shape the behaviour of states. As such, international organisations do have some impact upon the behaviour of states. Unlike classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, neorealists stipulate that structure determines behaviour. According to Kenneth Waltz, the interaction of sovereign states can therefore be explained via pressures exerted upon them by the anarchic structure of the global system. Inevitably, this imposes a constraint upon their choices.

From a shared perspective, Graham Allison (2017) claims that national security concerns can no longer be resolved by a strategy of unilateralism. Global pandemics, terrorism and climate crisis require a multilateral approach from a plurality of organisations and institutions. It may also be necessary to forge partnerships with non-state actors. The attention of international relations has therefore shifted towards a multitude of actors, although states retain primary importance for a variety of reasons, such as their monopoly upon the legitimate use of political violence.

Although there are clear areas of overlap between them, the main distinction is that classical realism claims that warfare is caused by human nature, whilst neorealism stipulates that the dynamics of an anarchic system determines the behaviour of diplomats, leading them to seek structural security and power for their nation state in a self-help system. Warfare is therefore the result of an anarchic system rather than merely the primordial desire to dominate others.

Another area of dispute between realism and liberalism is the importance attached to the role of institutions. Viewed from the realist lens, institutions are relatively insignificant when compared to states. Moreover, institutions are largely constrained by the interests and interplay of states. Organisations tasked with global governance ultimately rely upon states for funding and support. Without a major state playing a key role, the actions of various institutions are unlikely to achieve peace and cooperation. The realist perspective adopts a much more conservative outlook in regards to human nature. Our behaviour is fixed and immutable, and institutional change based upon high-minded rhetoric does little to change that. The ill-fated experience of the European Union in the Balkans conflicts of the 1990s offers a stark illustration of this argument. Early talk was of a European problem requiring a European solution, but it took the military might of the United States and NATO to bring stability to the former Yugoslavia and end the genocidal activity that thinkers such as Mary Kaldor (2013) have labelled as 'New Wars', typical of the contemporary world.

Liberals however view institutions as having a crucial role to play in terms of facilitating cooperation and ensuring peace. Regarding the significance of states, one of the most influential liberal thinkers is the English philosopher John Locke (1667) who claims that civil government can remedy the anarchic state of nature. People are more likely to act rationally when a government is in place because there are laws and consequences to abide by. Locke's dictum (1667, 324) 'without laws, man has no freedom' has been adopted by liberals in terms of creating a method of global governance. In the contemporary era, the purpose of international institutions should be to serve as a mediator to inter-state problems. In a world characterised by complex interdependence, actors are mutually dependent and therefore have a rational interest in maintaining economic ties and peaceful cooperation. The role of international organisations is to maintain this system and ensure that rules are adhered to. In contrast, having states deal with economic and political disputes would be much more costly and uncertain. Ultimately, it is better for states to rely upon international institutions to resolve problems.

On a final note, liberalism tends to gain momentum amongst scholars of International Relations after the perceived failure of the international system to avoid the outbreak of war. As an ideology, liberalism first emerged from the Thirty Years War. The conflict was brought to an end via the Treaty of Westphalia, in 1648, which in turn shaped political thinking behind the concept of state sovereignty and the social contract. Liberalism also gained greater prominence as a result of the horrors of the First World War, and to a lesser extent as a reaction against the prospect of nuclear armageddon at the height of the Cold War. Realism however benefits from its traditional predominance within International Relations theory. Most of us probably carry a realist mind-map around to a certain extent, and that invariably makes the perspective slightly more convincing.

## Anarchy and The Theory of International Society

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

There is much that divides liberals from realists within the contested arena of International Relations. However, there is one thing they both accept – the international system is anarchic. Although the term anarchy is associated with disorder and chaos, this would be misleading. In the specific context of international relations, anarchy implies the lack of a supreme authority. In absence of a world government, there is no higher body in which states can go to resolve disputes. However, there are certain rules and conventions similar to any social structure. This is widely described as thus being an ‘international society’ or a ‘society of states’ (Bull 2012; 1966).

In terms of a definition, Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley describe a society of states, an ‘international society’, as a ‘norm-governed relationship whose members accept that they have ... limited responsibilities towards one another and the society as a whole’ (Brown and Ainley 2009). As with all relationships, there are certain rights and duties to observe. For instance, the right to self-determination entails a duty to respect the national sovereignty of another state. The obligations that fall upon states are also outlined within the United Nations’ responsibility to protect (R2P).

The society of states theory begins with the realist argument that an international system emerges the moment two or more states have a sufficient level of interaction. The theorist Hedley Bull (2012, 9) describes that an international system is formed ‘when two or more [states] have sufficient contact between them, and...sufficient impact on one another’s decisions to cause them to behave as part of a whole.’ He also observes that states share a limited degree of common interest within this system of power politics. For instance, the fear of unrestricted violence leads towards the development of certain rules and conventions. A society of states, in contrast to an international system, thereby exists when a group of states establish diplomatic procedures for the conduct of their relations – i.e., it exists in the emergence of common norms, values, interest and principles that are reproduced and upheld by state behaviours within said society. Even within an anarchical order, a society must have rules and restraints upon the use of coercion and the sanctity of agreements. Simply put, in this condition, obligation and responsibilities remain. Without these elements, there would be no such thing as even the thinnest society (of states).

The rules that govern the society of states are contained within a set of institutions that reflect accepted behavioural patterns. Since these rules are clearly not binding in a manner comparable to domestic politics, the emphasis upon norms holds particular relevance towards our understanding. In the society of states, there are norms that govern the conduct of warfare and the recognition of sovereignty. Crucially, this argument is applicable from both a realist *and* liberal perspective.

The ‘English school’ of IR, as the ‘society of states’ or ‘International Society’ approach as it has come to be known, adopts a non-deterministic nature of anarchy that draws upon the normative element of liberalism, alongside the power-centric statist focus of realism. It is a body of thought built upon the assumption that a society of states emerges from the ideas that shape an anarchic system. The English school is commonly divided into two main wings: pluralists and solidarists. The former claims that the diversity of humankind is contained within a society that facilitates the greatest possible independence for states. Pluralists such as Robert Jackson (2000) or James Mayall (1990; 2000) contend that states must be able to express their own conception of ‘the good life’. Solidarists however argue that the society of states should be limited towards the promotion of human rights and a cosmopolitan outlook. According to figures such as Nicholas Wheeler (2000), humanitarian intervention should take precedence over the Westphalian concept of non-intervention in domestic affairs.

## *The Absence of Overarching Authority*

According to classical realists, states are the primary actors within the international system. Ultimately, states can only rely upon themselves for security. They have no choice but to accept the doctrine of self-help within an anarchic system. The fundamental motive for the behaviour of states is simply one of survival.

From this basic starting-point, the interaction of states becomes clear. States are forced to take into account the threat posed by others within the anarchic order. Security can also be viewed in zero-sum terms. In other words, enhancing security means a decline in security for another state. As such, an increase in the security of one state can lead to a decrease in the security of others (especially neighbouring states). The system is therefore competitive and, as the classical theorist Hans Morgenthau (1948, 13) once observed, ‘international politics is a struggle for power.’

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.'

Not surprisingly, the realist conception of power is firmly centred on military terms. This can be viewed through the prism of either offensive realism (in which a state seeks to become a dominating hegemonic power) or defensive realism (in which states forge alliances based upon the balance of power for security). A sovereign state may therefore enhance its security on the basis of seeking dominance over other rivals, or via siding with others in order to balance the threat of another state (or group of states) (Waltz 1979). Either way, the realist paradigm is centred upon military capabilities. It also places an emphasis upon the economic dimension of hard power. This may entail the use (or threat) of economic sanctions.

In an article entitled '*Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation*', Joseph Grieco (1988, 485) argued that 'international anarchy fosters competition and conflict among states and inhibits their willingness to co-operate even when they share common interests.' This is an insightful quote to consider when seeking to identify the realist position on the significance of anarchy. Grieco emphasises the assumption shared by all realists that states can never entirely trust another state. There are several implications to consider here. According to Robert Jervis (1978), states can never be fully aware of the intentions of others. The build-up of military resources by one state could therefore be (mis)interpreted as an aggressive act. This particular view is more likely when it leads to a relative gain for another state. In this scenario, an arms race on a regional or international scale is virtually inevitable.

The security dilemma might also force states to form new alliances or strengthen existing ones. According to Glenn H. Snyder (2007), there are two reasons that an alliance will form. Firstly, a state dissatisfied with its current level of security will form an alliance in order to bolster its own national security. In addition, a state will decide to secure an alliance when it has doubts about the reliability of an existing ally. The French President Charles de Gaulle once raised this quandary in regards to American assistance during the Cold War, with his provocative question 'would Washington risk Philadelphia for Paris?'

Finally, realists claim that the security dilemma necessitates a reliance upon the balance of power. There are two concepts to consider (e.g. 'chain-ganging' and 'buck-passing'). In a multipolar world, national security is interconnected with other members of an alliance. When an ally decides to participate in warfare, it drags its partners into warfare. If one member marches, the others must follow. If the partner does not participate, it will endanger the security of its allies. In regards to buck-passing, states might choose to avoid confronting an emerging threat. It is hoped that other states will balance each other out, or engage in a war of annihilation. In doing so, they are acting as a 'free-rider' on the military capacity of others. They are therefore able to gain the benefits of a military alliance without bearing any of the costs.

Neorealism emerged during the 1970s as an attempt to rectify some of the conceptual limitations of the classical approach. Neorealists would argue that their perspective is not based on interpretivism; what makes them different from Classical Realists is that they are not interpretivists but positivists – they focus on structure due to their engagement with political science methods and the measurement of power by quantitative means. Neorealism is most closely associated with the influential theorist Kenneth Waltz. Whilst classical realists such as Morgenthau attribute the dynamics of power politics to human nature, neorealists emphasise that state behaviour is influenced by the overarching structure of the anarchic system. From a shared perspective, John Herz (1976, 10) reminds us that global politics is a struggle for power 'even in the absence of aggressivity or similar factors.' As is abundantly clear, the tone of the realist perspective is one which lacks optimism.

## *Cooperation From Common Norms, Rules and Obligations*

Liberalism offers a very different interpretation of the anarchic international system. According to liberals, anarchy can be mitigated via institutions, democracy and interdependence. It is therefore both possible and necessary that institutions are created to bolster levels of trust and provide for a system of behavioural reciprocity amongst states. Liberals advocate a better world via three related models discussed above (the democratic peace thesis, commercial peace theory and the institutional peace theory). All three are based firmly upon the desirability of liberal-democratic values, central of which are those such as free trade.

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

Liberalism asserts that the combination of democracy, free-market economics and global governance will greatly reduce the likelihood of conflict. According to liberal theorists such as Norman Angell (1909), Leonard Woolf (1916, 1922) or Thomas Friedman (2005), democratic capitalist states are highly reluctant to fight one another due to the financial cost involved, and as such increased trade reduces the likelihood of war. To engage in warfare would be highly disruptive to trading links with other states. As rational enlightened actors, states fully recognise that warfare is emphatically not in their interests.

The liberal view of the national interest differs significantly from the realist conception. Whereas the latter is focused upon the high politics of security matters, the liberal view is somewhat broader. For instance, the interests of the state can be identified from an economic and even cultural angle. These multiple ties bind us all together on a variety of levels. Either way, it is an argument that moves beyond the narrow security concerns put forward by the realist model of behaviour.

The implications of the liberal perspective are stark. Peaceful existence between states is entirely possible even in the absence of an overarching sovereign. States have mutual interests and in cases when a dispute arises, international institutions can offer a channel for mediation between them. The potential conflict is therefore mitigated by the actions of various international organisations (the apex of which is the UN).

The liberal perspective of power, broadly, is clearly very different in character to that of realism. Whereas the latter is focused upon 'hard power', liberal theorists claim that states can pursue their objectives via 'soft power', by, as Nye (2004, 6) claims: 'getting others to want the outcomes you want'. Liberalism thereby rejects the realist view that power is secured via the threat of military action. Rather than focus upon the three S's (survival, self-help and statism), liberals argue that shared values generate mutual dependence. In doing so, the prospect of military conflict is considerably weakened. As Norman Angell (1909, 137) points out: 'we cannot ensure the stability of the present system by the political or military preponderance of our nation or alliance by imposing its will on a rival.'

As with realism, the main tenets of liberalism have been adapted to reflect the complexities of the contemporary era. Neoliberalism emerged as a response to the neorealist argument that institutions are simply unable to mitigate the constraining effects of anarchy, yet mirroring its scientific and positivist approach to International Relations. Even with the absence of an absolute sovereign, cooperation between states can (and does) emerge on the basis of trust and reciprocity.

According to neoliberals, such as Robert Keohane, the effects of the anarchic system are distorted by the realist prism. Time and time again, states are more concerned with absolute gains rather than relative gains. This argument holds major consequences for our understanding of the behaviour of states. The logical conclusion of the realist worldview is that anarchy necessitates a focus upon survival and self-help. In contrast, the neoliberal perspective emphasises cooperation between states based upon mutual interests.

The most important contribution from this perspective is that of neoliberal institutionalism. This branch of theory prescribes a mediator role for international institutions such as the WTO and the UN. As a means to achieve cooperation, such institutions help to govern the international system. These institutions endorse multilateralism as a means of promoting peace and prosperity. The dynamics of inter-state relations are thereby governed by an alphabet soup of institutions. Although some regions are more integrated than others, the process of integration and mutual dependence provides a means whereby states co-operate in a non-military fashion. Due to globalisation, we are witnessing an increase in the role and significance of intergovernmental and even supranational institutions. As an aside, neoliberal institutionalists recognise that cooperation is difficult to achieve when leaders perceive there to be no areas of mutual interest between them.

The distinction between neoliberalism and neorealism is particularly stark when we consider the vexed issue of security. Neorealists (and realists broadly) assume that security is a competitive and relative concept. Neoliberals (and liberals broadly) however adopt an entirely different conclusion. Rather than a zero-sum game, states can enhance their own security by engaging in cooperation with other states. Crucially, this does not mean that the security of other states is in any way compromised, thereby allowing states to move beyond the potentially



# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

destructive spiral of insecurity known as the security dilemma.

## **To What Extent Do Realism and Liberalism Explain Twenty-First Century Developments in Global Politics?**

When seeking to evaluate realism, the obvious starting point is the state system that emerged from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. The Westphalian system is built upon several interrelated elements. Firstly, each state holds exclusive sovereignty over its territorial boundaries. The UN Charter (United Nations, 1945) declares that 'nothing should authorise intervention in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.' Secondly, each state is entitled to have its sovereignty respected by other states. International law centres upon an assumption that all states should be treated equally regardless of their size or relative power. Intervention from another state would therefore be illegal unless expressly authorised on humanitarian grounds. States can also act in accordance with the notion of self-defence.

Realism is also based upon the assertion that states are the most important actors within International Relations. Although realists concede that non-state actors hold some significance, global politics is conducted primarily at the state level. Following on from this, states are analogous to a billiard-ball. In theoretical terms, states are unitary actors and their internal politics are irrelevant to their behaviour on the international stage. In the realist conception, domestic politics ends at the water's edge, and beyond is the realm of international politics. Theorists within the realist tradition centre their attention firmly upon the interaction of states. In contrast, liberal theorists adopt a cobweb model towards their understanding of the subject matter, a web-like nexus of connectivity between actors on different levels but with the state still firmly in a position of primacy.

In terms of the distinction between high politics and low politics, classical realism emphasises the importance of those matters essential to the very survival of the state. In an anarchic system, the state must ensure its survival and therefore engage in policies that fall under the remit of high politics (such as maintaining a nuclear deterrent). In contrast, the liberal perspective views low politics as a fundamental element of International Relations. For instance, no realist would ever claim that the capitalist peace theory offers a convincing explanation of international relations. The liberal emphasis on the salience of democracy and institutions is also rejected by state-centric realism.

The function of any theoretical perspective is to enable us to better understand the world around us. In regards to events since the turn of the century, the realist perspective offers a persuasive and coherent account. For instance, the sovereignty of the state has been reasserted in recent years. Powerful countries such as China and the United States have pursued their own national interests with considerable vigour. The reassertion of state sovereignty perhaps shows that the impact of globalisation has been exaggerated and misunderstood by liberals.

It should also be noted that the world remains one in which conflict and warfare are central towards our understanding. The realist emphasis upon warfare underlines on-going conflict throughout the world, i.e., that war is, has been, and will continue to be an ever-present part of human dynamics. In historical terms, some of these conflicts have been significant. For instance, until 2021 the United States was engaged in the longest military conflict in its history, in Afghanistan. The liberal assumptions that underpin the democratic peace theory have been shown to be somewhat optimistic. Whilst inter-state warfare is less common, the incidence of civil war has continued to be a marked feature of international relations. There have also been sporadic acts of terrorism (most notably on 11 September 2001) and concerted attempts to create a caliphate amongst Islamic extremists at different localities around the globe. Over the last two decades, the battle against Islamic extremism has dominated national politics in several countries. Realism also provides a convincing and clear framework for understanding outbreaks of ethnic cleansing against minority groups (such as Christians in Iran) and genocide (such as against Iraqi Yazidis by ISIS). The Chinese government has also been accused of genocide against Uyghur Muslims (Newlines Institute 2021; Amnesty International 2021). Unlike liberals, realism fully recognises the existence of conflict and hatred within international relations.

The discourse of realism also provides a convincing account of relations between competing states and alliances. The realpolitik concerns of states are clearly evident in regards to the relations between the West and Russia,

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

especially following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The security dilemma, and the associated spiral of insecurity, also offer an explanation of relations between rival states. The politics of the Middle East lends itself towards the language of realism, given the justification for conflict and political manoeuvres taken in the 'national interest'. For instance, Israel employed a narrative of national defence in terms of tensions with Palestinians in both 2014 and 2021.

Although there have been some attempts at peace, the continued tension between Israel and many of its Arab neighbours can be clearly understood through the realist lens. The normative and optimistic tone of the liberal outlook doesn't translate well to the long-standing conflict between Israel and Arab States within the region. The realist perspective also highlights the conduct and broader significance of proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

However, the realist perspective falls short in its account of certain aspects of global politics. There are several aspects to this critique. Of these, perhaps the most insightful is the tendency to reduce global politics towards a negative view of human nature. The subject matter is arguably far more complex than the framework offered by thinkers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli would have us think. There are habits of cooperation, patterns of behaviour and systems of mutual dependence within global politics that realists always downplay. Since the year 2000, the international community has managed to make some progress towards a more peaceful and progressive world. For instance, the International Criminal Court was established in 2002 and the UN Human Rights Council was created in 2006. These institutions have since provided a rigid apparatus for dealing with global justice, interdependence and cooperation in the name of common interest.

Secondly, the realist perspective seems particularly unconvincing in the context of regional integration. The fact that countries throughout the world have transferred sovereignty to various organisations sits uncomfortably with the emphasis upon the three Ss (statism, self-help and survival). Even the transfer of sovereignty towards supranational institutions within the EU has provided a template for other regions in the world (such as ASEAN). Moreover, the African Economic Community is committed to deeper economic integration by the year 2023. In addition, the realist preoccupation with hard power offers a less than convincing description of the contemporary era.

On a final note, the myopic focus upon the Westphalian system is also flawed. Indeed, the whole concept of sovereignty could be described as a Eurocentric construct designed to serve the powerful whilst marginalising the periphery. The Westphalian rhetoric of non-intervention and equality amongst nations hides the exploitative character of neoimperialism. As the former diplomat Stephen Krasner (1999) points out, talk of absolute sovereignty for many countries is little more than 'organised hypocrisy'.

Liberalism adopts a very different approach to their understanding of International Relations. First and foremost, the whole tone of liberalism is more normative and optimistic. This enables us to better comprehend the growing emphasis within the international community upon protection of the global commons and the salience of human rights. Liberalism also casts light upon soft power, the importance of low politics and mutual dependence.

This normative narrative leads us towards a better understanding of how the world has made progress towards peace and prosperity in recent years. Since the turn of the century, democratic values have spread throughout many parts of the world. Liberals claim that there is a degree of causation between the spread of liberal values and a more stable and peaceful system. The counter argument would suggest that only a slight correlation exists between the two variables. It is therefore difficult to properly ascertain if the expansion in the number of people living in a democratic system has contributed towards the bonds of perpetual peace.

The capitalist peace theory also presents certain flaws when applied to real-life events. The liberal perspective advocates free trade as a means by which to establish a more peaceful international system. This is based upon the innate view amongst liberals that free trade creates the circumstances by which warfare can be largely avoided. Once again, there is a great deal of evidence to support the golden arches argument of Thomas Friedman. According to liberals, the realist standpoint misses the significance of commerce as a contributor towards global peace.

The institutional peace theory is another central element of the liberal prescription for a better world. Liberals argue

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

that international institutions have a positive impact upon cooperation between state and non-state actors. Liberalism also seeks to go beyond the narrow focus upon state sovereignty towards establishing a system of global governance. Interactions between states are shaped by the rules, conventions and sanctions that derive from international institutions. In the contemporary era, it must be recognised that the actions of states are governed in a direct and indirect manner by the system of global governance. For example, the existence of a global governance may prevent states from engaging in warfare against neighbouring rivals.

In each of these three areas, liberalism enables us to better comprehend the world of global politics. Most notably, liberalism helps to explain why states that trade with one another are less likely to engage in warfare. There is a clear economic and political benefit in maintaining a constructive relationship. To take one example, the rivalry between China and the United States since the turn of the century has not yet stepped over into outright conflict. Part of the reason can be found in the mutual economic benefits established between Beijing and Washington.

Liberalism also assists our understanding of international law. Liberal values concerning the universal character of human rights are upheld via a number of institutions. There is also a legal process that is broadly followed when the international community considers humanitarian intervention (such as Libya in 2011). Despite the G77 (and China) rejecting the concept of humanitarian intervention at the turn of the century, intervention on humanitarian grounds has been implemented on several occasions.

Another important point to consider is that global governance enables states to manage disputes and thereby avoid a deadly and disruptive path to warfare. Having said this, global governance still suffers from three gaps (jurisdictional, incentive and participation). For instance, there have been several criticisms levied against bias shown by the International Criminal Court. Equally, global governance failed to prevent the world's hegemonic power from unauthorised military engagement in Iraq, in 2003. The hard-headed approach of realism enables us to properly comprehend the motivation behind the intervention (such as achieving regime change, gaining access to oil, and out of security concerns for national interest). The realist outlook also helps us understand how and why powerful states often ignore international law so as not to limit their individual interests.

Whilst the realist account may be more persuasive in terms of power and developments, and the continued importance of the state; it is somewhat less relevant towards an understanding of global governance. According to the realist outlook, states are the most important actors within International Relations. The growing significance of non-state actors and international institutions is far more likely to be recognised via the liberal perspective. Moreover, the liberal perspective offers a particularly persuasive description of globalisation.

Another crucial point of departure of the two main theoretical perspectives concerns their understanding of human nature. Realism is fundamentally conservative in its outlook on human nature. According to their outlook, we must adopt a pessimistic view about the capacity of humanity for improvement. Liberals however are notably more optimistic about human nature, with humans intrinsically holding rational capabilities that forge a will to mutual interest and cooperation. Since the year 2000, there is evidence to support both sides of the argument. The realist discourse enables us to comprehend the fact that global spending on defence increased from 1.14 trillion US dollars in 2001 to 1.92 trillion US dollars in 2019 (Szmigiera 2021). The pessimistic outlook of realism also casts light upon the continued threat of terrorism, the actions of rogue states and the threats posed by failed states. Equally, the liberal perspective emphasises the centrality of low politics and the dynamics of mutual dependence.

It is also worth noting here that dramatic events such as 9/11 can be used to support both perspectives. To the liberal perspective, the terrorist attack on the American mainland underlines the significance of globalisation. The multiple atrocities were committed by citizens of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Egypt. Moreover, the response from the international community in Iraq brought together troops from Poland to Mongolia (Beehner 2007). Equally, the terrorist acts of 9/11 underscore the continued relevance of the realist paradigm. As the analytic philosopher John Gray dramatically declared at the time: 'the era of globalisation is over' (Gray 2001). The causes and consequences of other historic events since the turn of the century (such as the financial crisis and the coronavirus outbreak) can also be understood from either perspective with the interrelation.

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

For all their differences, both liberalism and realism provide a useful framework for seeking to comprehend International Relations. As the political scientist Robert Cox (1981) rightly points out, they can both be described as problem-solving theories offering a blueprint for dealing with cooperation and security. When seeking to properly assess these two contrasting outlooks, it is important to recognise their similarities. It is also important to acknowledge where the similarity ends. No theoretical perspective is entirely watertight, and theoretical debate is a constant feature of International Relations.

## Alternative Theories of International Politics

### *Constructivism*

Outside of the dichotomy between realism and liberalism, there are a wide number of contesting theories available to broaden our palate. Of these, constructivism is arguably the most vibrant of the alternative perspectives (Katzenstein 1996; McNamara 1999). Unlike the pessimism of realists and the optimistic tone that characterises liberalism, constructivism claims that concepts used within International Relations are socially constructed. These include power politics, state sovereignty and the absence of a 'cosmocracy' (defined as a world government with a single state or polity).

Arguably the best-known contribution within constructivism derives from Alexander Wendt (1992). In an article entitled 'Anarchy is what states make of it' Wendt offered a thought-provoking critique of the 'neo-neo' debate between neorealism and neoliberalism. In highlighting the centrality of the social construct, he offers a pathway in which we might move beyond the limitations posed by the two dominant paradigms. According to Wendt, concepts within International Relations are formed via an ongoing process of social practice and interaction. The identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these dynamic forces. States can therefore have a multitude of identities socially constructed via interaction with other actors. Identities are representations of an actor's comprehension of who they are, which in turn signals their interests to others. It is the construction of these identities and interests that should be placed at the forefront of our understanding of the subject matter.

Following on from this, another important element of the constructivist school of thought is their robust intellectual challenge to neorealism. According to constructivists, the behaviour of actors is governed by their identities and interests rather than the structure of the international system. States and non-state actors have the scope to attach different meanings to different things. They are not trapped within a realist prism in which behaviour is determined solely by the need to protect themselves in the absence of a global government. The structural determinism that, according to neorealists, means that states can only rely on themselves for survival is merely a construct established by social practice. Crucially, Wendt argues that anarchy is not objectively a self-help system. It only compels states to self-help if they conform to neorealist assumptions surrounding security as a relative concept. Instead, it is entirely possible for states to adopt an alternative conception of security on the basis of cooperation. States could thereby maximise their own security without any adverse impact on the security of others. Neorealists are also flawed in their belief that meanings are unchangeable. Indeed, concepts and conventions are capable of being transformed by human practice, out of agency. This enables states to escape the debilitating consequences of the security dilemma.

The primary insight offered by constructivists is the capacity for transformation. Interests and identities are always in a state of flux. As such, we can move beyond the blunt dichotomy of realism – liberalism and the inherent materialism of both. Constructivists seek to comprehend interests, norms and identities in order to explain the international system. For instance, the World Bank is influential in terms of attitudes adopted by the international community towards the eradication of poverty. It is a mindset consistent with the Washington Consensus of privatisation, marketisation and deregulation. Changes in the nature of social interaction between states can thereby bring about a sustained and lasting change within international relations. For instance, the relationship between the two superpowers may be improved by the interests and identities of the two leaders.

It should also be noted that constructivism is not entirely inconsistent with either liberalism or realism. It is possible to offer a synergy of realism and constructivism – such as Jennifer Sterling-Folker's analysis of American unilateralism (2008). That said, constructivism offers a perspective that is widely thought of as distinct from the realist-liberal

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

debate. Most notably, the focus on how language and rhetoric construct the social reality of the international system offers a more optimistic view of international relations than realism. We should therefore focus on the identities and interests of actors within the system itself as interests are constructed through social interaction (Finnemore 1996).

## *Critical Theory*

As the term itself implies, critical theory offers a critique of mainstream International Relations (Cox 1981). This is primarily achieved via the lens of positivism and post-positivism. The former can be thought of as a scientific approach towards a study of the subject matter. Positivism is built on the assumption that the social sciences should replicate the methodology employed within the natural sciences. In doing so, knowledge can be verified on a scientific and causal basis. Within International Relations, the positivist approach is characterised by the Marxist (and neo-Marxist), neorealist and neoliberal perspectives. This particular approach has a lengthy history within the subject matter. For instance, in utilising the socio-economic and political thought of Karl Marx and his 'Scientific Socialism', the Marxist perspective offers a critique of capitalism that may be empirically discernible. Post-positivism however refers to those theories that reject the epistemological basis of positivism. For instance, the study of ethnicity casts valuable insight towards the subject matter (such as stateless nations). Unlike the predominant metanarratives, the focus of post-positivism centres on how power is experienced. Post-positivism also claims that discourse can never be entirely free of power concerns. Post-positivist critiques stem from a number of sources (such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism). Of these, the post-colonial approach, which is discussed below, is the most important contributor towards contemporary understandings of global politics.

One of the most insightful contributions from the field of critical theory is the famous observation from Robert Cox (1981, 128) that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose'. Dominant ideologies and actors can therefore be said to serve a particular purpose within international relations. For instance, the Washington Consensus plays a key role in upholding the inequities of the global economic system. As a branch of critical theory, post-colonialism seeks to redress this imbalance via a focus on the persistence of colonialism and prejudice within political discourse. For instance, the term 'developing countries' is constructed via measurement to a Western-centric standard. This inevitably downplays the quality of life within countries outside of 'the West'.

Regarding the post-positivist element, critical theory does not attempt to create an overarching grand narrative. Critical theory is not a general theory of International Relations in the manner of either realism or liberalism. Instead, it is a method of analysis that allows for useful insights into existing theories and our conventional understanding of the subject; locating the site of both the powerful and 'the oppressed' or 'subaltern'.

On the plus side, critical theory could be praised for raising awareness of the impact of Eurocentric exclusivity in relation to the frameworks and concepts the discipline examines and employs. For example, the widespread assumption that the Cold War provided stability on the basis of mutually assured destruction ignores the devastation caused by proxy wars outside of North America and Europe. On a final note, the most salient contribution of all from critical theory is to point out that metanarratives have proved unworkable.

## *Feminism*

In the field of International Relations, the feminist perspective may be said to offer a critique of patriarchy and a prescription for a gynocentric interpretation of social issues. In the field of International Relations, the primary focus of feminist theory has been on the role and importance of gender as a social construct. Feminist theory has also sought to highlight the negative consequences of the mindset created from the mainstream (or malestream) approach. For example, Carol Cohn points out that the overtly masculine mindset of the defence establishment has served to separate war from human emotion (1987). This narrative serves the interests of patriarchy at the expense of the female experience.

In terms of gender as a social construct, Charlotte Hooper offers an excellent insight into the relationship between power and masculinity. For instance, Hooper (1999) observes that masculine identities are perpetuated by how the subject is practised. A certain view of masculinity predominates within International Relations because men compose

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

the vast majority of scholars within the field. Borrowing language from the constructivist approach, she claims that masculine identities have been socially constructed over time. International Relations often presents a contrast between hegemonic masculinity and a subordinate feminine approach.

One of the most important contributions from the feminist theory of International Relations is that of anti-militarism. The anti-militarism of the feminist approach is couched within an understanding of how masculinity is imposed within malestream literature. Masculine identity is commonly assigned to strength and rational behaviour, whereas feminine identity is associated with weakness and irrational behaviour. In this deliberately engendered paradigm, the act of disarmament can only be perceived as one of emasculation. As a consequence, the build-up of military weapons becomes normalised (Cohn and Ruddick 2004). Theorists such as Cynthia Enloe (2004) have also sought to raise consciousness as to how a gendered lens offers an explanation of International Relations. In terms of applying feminist theory to the subject matter, Parashar (2013) observes that men are portrayed as the sole actors in wartime. In contrast, women are routinely characterised as grieving widows and mothers, selfless nurses and anti-war activists. Yet, this is not exclusively the case. Feminist scholars also seek to explain why sexual violence against women is so prevalent during wartime.

In terms of the various strands of feminist thought, the impact of liberal feminism has been the most notable. Liberal feminists have engaged with the conventional decision-making process and campaigned effectively for an inclusive approach towards policymaking. For example, the language of 'lived reality' and equal opportunities has shaped strategies implemented by agencies of the United Nations. Liberal feminism has also impacted on the formation of foreign policy from countries such as Sweden, France, Mexico and Canada. The principal focus has been in terms of foreign aid and women's empowerment. For instance, in 2017 Canada launched its foreign assistance programme entitled 'Canada's feminist international assistance policy'. Canada's budget for foreign aid supports initiatives that assist women in the Global South. Such policies are consistent with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (notably the focus on gender equality). The policy stems from the notion of gender mainstreaming. Gender is therefore placed at the forefront of foreign policy initiatives.

The feminist perspective has also offered a valuable analysis of how gender, as a social construct, impacts the subordination of the female and 'the feminine'. Women face a significantly greater level of criticism for their actions, and a myopic focus on their appearance. These factors combine to place women at a major disadvantage. Female politicians and issues of greater relevance towards women are effectively marginalised within the political realm. In recent years, the level of misogynistic hate expressed on social media platforms acts as a particularly salient barrier towards women entering public life. In doing so, the predominant status of masculinity is reinforced. It also underlines that patriarchy has the ability to reproduce itself from one generation to the next.

The feminist perspective has paid considerable attention towards the importance of discourse within academia. There are a wide number of concepts that could be analysed here such as intersectionality, heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity. The feminist perspective has therefore expanded our terminology within the subject matter via a focus on how gender serves to maintain the subordination of women. It is the 'personal as political' mantra that opens up much of the vibrancy and relevance of feminist theory. This slogan seeks to highlight the political significance of the personal realm on women's lives. For instance, poststructural feminism casts light upon the public / private dichotomy within political discourse. Notably, Judith Butler (1990) challenges the assumptions that lie behind our understanding of gender identity. In her study into gender performativity, Butler (1988) points out that gender is something we both physically and linguistically act out in our daily lives, rather than something we are objectively born into. The traditional understanding of gender and sex is geared towards the assumption that sex is biological and natural, whereas gender can be seen instead as a social construct – a product of norms and linguistic speech acts. Gender can therefore be (re)constructed in order to shatter patriarchy and facilitate a more representative society.

## *Postcolonialism*

Postcolonialism centres on the persistence of colonial forms of power and the existence of racial prejudice and discrimination. Postcolonialism therefore seeks to highlight the pernicious impact of racial stereotypes within

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

International Relations. For instance, 'the white man's burden' is a narrative that denies the non-white perspective any level of validity or agency (Easterly 2007; Wintle 2020).

Arguably the main contribution from the postcolonial perspective is in terms of its robust challenge to the Eurocentrism that prevails within the discipline. Postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said (1978) claim that mainstream theory is built on the assumption that the Western enlightenment project is superior to all others. The dominance of the Western approach is further upheld via a construction of 'the other' as irrational and backward. The bias within mainstream International Relations is readily identifiable both within state-centric realism and the progressive tone of liberalism. Moreover, the historical context of global politics is characterised by a Western-centric (mis) understanding. There is much veracity to the often made comment that the domineering power writes history.

The postcolonial school of thought has also taken aim at geographical parochialism and cultural chauvinism. In terms of the former, the widespread portrayal of the Cold War as an era of stability wilfully ignores the devastation caused in the developing world. Postcolonialism also seeks to expose the parochial assumptions that underpin conventional thinking, such as the belief that enlightenment thinking is superior, progressive and universal and a concurrent cultural insensitivity to those perspectives that fall outside of these paradigms.

A clear illustration of cultural chauvinism is the construction of race. The 'white man's burden' was a fundamental ideological element of colonialism and may help to comprehend contemporary concepts such as humanitarian intervention (Ayoob 2004). The debate is often framed in a manner that more developed countries are saving less developed countries. It does not take much effort to identify a degree of racial stereotyping at work here.

As one of the leading proponents of the post-colonial perspective, Edward Said considers the political importance of Western dominance over knowledge. On the basis that knowledge equates to power, Said claims that ultimate power is dominance over our means of establishing knowledge, drawing on thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. The framing of an academic discipline will invariably match the vested interests of the powerful. Much of the literature within the field of international relations seeks to uphold and reinforce the status quo. In his book '*Orientalism*', Said (1978) points out that the ability to frame debate is held by those in the West. The manner in which an argument or debate is framed will have a considerable impact on the eventual result. He also points out that the Western-centric understanding of the Eastern world contains culturally inaccurate representations. As such, orientalism is contained within an imperialist mindset. Said also argues that those subject to imperialism are viewed from a colonial perspective.

Another prominent figure within the postcolonial tradition is Frantz Fanon (1963). Based on a psychoanalytical approach, Fanon claims that the colonial subject is locked into the oppressors' gaze. The colonial subject is therefore unable to reconcile its own self-image with the image projected back by the imperialist power. It is also the case that the coloniser's identity is shaken by the realisation that our common humanity is denied by the political impact of colonial discourse. In common with other theorists of the post-colonial approach, Fanon reminds us that discourse is never neutral. Instead, it is a deliberate attempt to uphold existing power structures.

## *World Systems Theory*

World systems theory emphasises the global system as our unit of analysis (Wallerstein 1979). As with all theories, it is built upon a number of assumptions. First and foremost, the world systems theory claims that the global economic system is an exploitative one. As a theoretical framework, it therefore adopts an entirely different set of assumptions to a free-market approach. The unregulated marketplace has long been championed by classical economists and (more importantly) the powerful institutions that uphold the Washington Consensus. However, the world systems theory suggests that the global economy is structured in order to serve and reproduce conditions that are beneficial to the interests of economically dominant states alone. The global system is, thus, deliberately designed to extract the maximum profit from people and other resources found at the very margins of globalisation.

The world systems perspective stipulates that a division of labour exists within the global economy, forming a discernible structural relation between states of domination and dependence. In the world systems perspective, there

# Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

are three kinds of states: 'Core', 'Semi-Peripheral' and 'Peripheral'. The former consists of those states that specialise in high-skill sectors of the economy whilst peripheral states are those that concentrate on the low-skill sectors of the world economy (with semi-peripheral somewhere in between). Marking a clear distinction between the core and the periphery, it claims that the 'rules of the game' are heavily rigged in favour of the core. Countries at the periphery are therefore unable to progress in the same manner as those that have already developed and modernised. For instance, countries within the core control wages and monopolise the production of manufacturing goods. It is therefore impossible for less economically developed countries to progress in the same manner as those in the core. It is therefore necessary to reject the assumptions that drive modernisation theory (Rostow 1971).

The third aspect of world systems theory is the insights offered into the process of globalisation. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), we need to consider the world system as a whole rather than via the perspective of individual states. Our focus should be upon the global system rather than the nation-state. Moreover, multinational corporations are significant actors within International Relations. The movement of global capital underlines the porous nature of state boundaries. In order to comprehend the reasons why some nations are wealthy, and others are not, we need to comprehend the considerable power of economic institutions and corporations.

In terms of its positives, world systems theory could be said to capture the dynamics and exploitation of the global economy. Core countries are driven by a competitive need to extract profit from those less powerful, and it is this search for profit that shapes the boundaries and contours of international relations. Those at the core are continually identifying and exploring new methods of gaining profit from those at the periphery. This can only lead to an inequitable global trading system. Another major strength of world systems theory is that it offers a relatively convincing framework towards understanding how a fundamental economic concept (the division of labour) can be applied on a global level. It is also sufficiently nuanced to recognise that three different zones could apply to the same country (such as the emerging economies). It even claims that a semi-peripheral zone may exist that resembles the core within urban centres, whereas the level of rural poverty is comparable to countries within the periphery. Moreover, countries can be upwardly or downwardly mobile within the system. There are several clear and cogent illustrations of these movements, most notably the BRICS (a grouping between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), that teeter between the semi-periphery and the core.

As with other theoretical perspectives, world systems theory has been subject to criticism. Firstly, it could be argued that the causes of underdevelopment are more complex than those identified by Wallerstein. Economic reductionism ignores other salient factors ranging from corruption to ethnic tensions. The global economic system may have little actual impact on the day-to-day lives of those living in the periphery. This is particularly notable in a failed (or failing) state. The power vacuum may be filled by religious fundamentalists or a self-serving elite. It could also be claimed that the world systems theory ignores the fact that some regions throughout the world remain relatively unaffected by global capitalism. In addition, the division between the three sections is vague and problematic to delineate. Whilst this does not in itself undermine the persuasiveness of the entire perspective, it does expose an undoubted flaw.

## Conclusion

This opening chapter sought to examine the two main theoretical paradigms within the subject matter and in the context of salient issues. Realism and liberalism offer contesting assumptions for scholars to consider. As with all theoretical perspectives, there are positives and negatives to weigh up. There is also a specific language used by both, and internal divisions to highlight. Each perspective offers a cogent explanation of events in global politics since the year 2000. Following this, an understanding of realism and liberalism would have been incomplete without some reflection on alternative theoretical perspectives, prior to a discussion concerning the concept of the nation-state and globalisation.

---

## About the author:



## Theories of Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

**Kevin Bloor** is an author, Principal Examiner and teacher. He has over twenty years of experience in the social sciences and is the author of several texts and educational resources such as *Understanding Global Politics*, *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies*, *Understanding Political Theory* and *Sociology: Theories, Theorists and Concepts*. He holds a BA in Politics and International Relations and an MA in International Relations, both from Staffordshire University, and an MPhil in Government from Manchester University.