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October 8th, 2004

Realism

The common phrase associated with the theory of realism is “power politics.” While this phrase is somewhat necessary to understanding the assumptions of political realism, it is less than complete. When Morgenthau wrote about realism, he insisted that it based upon an intrinsic nature of humans. Reductionism, as proposed by philosopher Thomas Hobbes, is the idea that humans are inherently bad. Political realism is ultimately driven by power optimization. It is maintained by a balance of power. It supposes that conflict among states is inevitable in a global system characterized by anarchy. It is assumed that realism will often give way to imperialism. Many also say that it is pessimistic, particularly toward globalization. According to Carr, realism makes the privileged and powerful aware of the fact that utopianism only serves their interests. These notions about realism are vital to a state when choosing how to conduct international relations.

First, are humans inherently evil? Is this even necessary for political realism to exist as a theory? It would take God himself to answer the first question. The empirical evidence is simply not concrete enough to say that humans are inherently wicked. In response to the second question, the realism theory does not necessarily depend on some ultimate philosophical hypothesis for explanation. According to Bahman Fizouni, professor of political science at California State University, “Morgenthau could legitimately limit the scope of his explanatory claim by maintaining that, based on the observed recurrence of historical patterns, his universal generalization on power optimization only explains an important range of political phenomena and behavior” (Fizouni, 485). This idea does not take away from the theory, but simply allows

its foundation to be located in empirical data found in history. This is a relief to many who hold to the realism theory in international relations, but fail to agree with this specific philosophical idea.

Power optimization is essential to the theory of realism. It is the mode of realism by which international relations should be managed. This idea of power politics leads a nation to focus primarily upon its own interests. Thus, national interest takes precedence over interdependence among nations. As a result of this, morality is either set aside as a hindrance to obtaining power or used as a guise to obtain the national interest. As Burchill states in the second edition of *Theories of International Relations*, “There is no room for moral or ethical concerns, prejudice, political philosophy or individual preference in the determination of foreign policy because actions are constrained by the relative power of the state. Thus, the national interest ought to be the sole pursuit of statesmen” (Burchill, 79). This struggle for power and pursuit of the national interest is brought to equilibrium through a balance of power among nations.

Balance of power in the international scheme of politics can be achieved in a few ways. A country can ally itself with many other countries. It can also build up its own strength to the extent of rivaling their opponents. A nation can also find some way to weaken their enemies, whether through division or colonial takeover. This balance of power is the tool for peace among those of the realist thought. “Peace through strength,” as Ronald Reagan once put it, is a theme for realists. It suggests that the more prepared you are for battle, the less likely the battle will occur.

These first few ideas of realism move us into our next assumption, which is that realism supposes that conflict is unavoidable among states because of the anarchical state of the

international world. Whether through a theory of reductionism or empirical data found in history, realism says that the world and the people in it are not always good. If each nation is concerned about its own interests first, realists conclude that conflict can and will be used to satisfy those interests. If balance of power is the tool to ensure peace, then realists speculate that without a perfect balance of power, conflict will result. This concept of inevitable conflict drives many away from political realism as a suitable theory for international relations.

Imperialism is another negative attribute often attached to realism. Since power is the central theme of realism, it is assumed that states will often take over other countries to gain power or take power from their opponents. With morality set aside, this becomes an easy task. According to the theory, imperialism will occur if one; a state has the capability, and two, if they are seen as underextended in the political sphere of power. This characteristic of realism obviously has bearing upon the outlook of globalization. Globalization cannot occur under a realist perspective because of its central theme of interdependence rather than power.

In E.H. Carr's, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, utopianism and liberalism are attacked and realism is praised. He argued that the principles of the utopian society were an illusion. "...Peace, harmony of interests, collective security, and free trade were not principles at all, but the unconscious reflections of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time" (Burchill, 73). So, while liberals thought their goal was to ensure peace for the sake of peace, realism says that the goal was instead to continue to have the predominance of power through some type of freeze of international relations. Carr would argue that harmony of interests only occurs during transition periods and collective security is power in the hands of victorious states (Burchill, 75). His ultimate conclusion, however, is that as much

as realism battles with liberalism, a “blending” of both forms of thought will limit the “bareness of realism” and the naivety of liberalism” (Burchill, 76).

This is my concise critique on the whole thing. I do not hold to the idea that all humans are inherently evil. I understand, however, that history dictates that people are interested in power. Power is a central theme among the international sphere. It is a central theme. Realism makes power the only theme. This limits the view of cooperation among states that can result in better lives for more people. I believe that, in most cases, imperialism is not good, and realism’s encouragement toward imperialism is, indeed, negative. I do not like mercantilism, the theory of a heavy governmental hand on the economy. How realism tends to place morality on the sidelines is not favorable by my standards. With that being said, I relate to the realist thought of national interest. Just as a man cares about himself and his family before others, a nation should be concerned with the people of its nation. I also appreciate its criticalness toward utopianism, which is not available in a world of power hungry people. In today’s world, in my opinion, realism is use as a theory that limits the extreme of liberalism, but is not the theory, which should direct international relations. Its focus on power is too centralized and has little bearing on a unipolar world.

Work Cited

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