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Realism

Introduction

Realism is the most well-established theoretical perspective in International Relations. Indeed, it has been argued that realism has dominated International Relations to such a degree that students, and indeed scholars, have often lost sight of the fact that it is in fact one perspective amongst many. The result is that realism is often presented as if it were a ‘commonsense’ view of the world against which all other perspectives should be judged. We will return to this notion of realism as ‘common sense’ later in the book. At this juncture, it is enough to highlight that realism is one perspective in IR, not *the* perspective.

Realism has been represented using the idea of a billiard table in which the balls represent sovereign states (hence, the ‘billiard ball model’).

Realism is a complex and rich tradition of thought and you need to be aware of its nuances. Hans Bartelsen, for instance, has argued that realism is an area of debate rather than a single specific position. So, just as in a different context, ‘Christian’ implies a certain set of beliefs although there are variations within this belief system, so within realism we can identify classical and scientific versions, some realists who call themselves neo-realists or structural realists and so on. Differences and nuances aside, however, a number of texts and authors in International Relations have been collectively labelled as ‘realist’, because they share common assumptions and key ideas. In line with our desire to simplify somewhat as a first stage in understanding, in this chapter we will present realism as a coherent position or perspective in International Relations and for the sake of simplicity and clarity we concentrate on two versions of realism; classical (or traditional) realism and neo-realism.

Realism claims to be realistic in comparison with the utopianism of idealism, discussed at some length in chapter 1. Realists also claim to present more accurate analyses of international relations than advocates of other perspectives. Some of realism’s major exponents have argued that their personal moral concerns or despair at the way the world is does not mean it is possible to change it. Some aspects of human behaviour are eternal through time and space. As we shall elaborate below, some realists argue that there are unchanging laws which regulate individual and state behaviour: states, like *men*, are by ‘nature’ self-interested and aggressive and will pursue their interests to the detriment of others and without regard to the constraints of law or morality.

Realists have traditionally held that the major problem of international relations was one of **anarchy**. Anarchy prevailed because, in international relations, there was no sovereign authority that could enforce the rule of law and ensure that ‘wrongdoers’ were punished. The League of Nations was a poor substitute for a truly sovereign power possessing a system of law and a military under the control of a single, sovereign government. However, realists went on to argue that it was impossible

to set up a genuine world government, because states would not give up their sovereignty to an international body. Accordingly, realists argued that war could not be avoided completely. It is necessary, therefore, to accept the inevitability of war and pursue the necessary preparations for conflict. Only in this way can war be properly deterred, or at least managed.

Anarchy: a condition in which there exists no centralised sovereign authority that enforces the rule of law. Realists are concerned with anarchy at the international level where there is no authority higher than the state.

After the Second World War realism emerged as accepted wisdom in International Relations because of the clear lessons that the conflict appeared to reiterate. Realists argued that the long history of world politics demonstrated that it was not an exercise in writing laws and treaties or in creating international organisations. Instead it was a struggle for power and security carried out under conditions of ‘every country for itself’. By way of reference, they called themselves ‘realists’ and labelled the previously dominant approach ‘idealism’. Realists argued that the focus of research in world politics should be on discovering the important forces that drive the relations between states. Realists believed that the pursuit of power and national interest were the major forces driving world politics. Focusing on these important forces, they argued, revealed that leaders had far less freedom to organise the world, and solve its problems, than proponents of idealism had originally suggested. Although realists accepted that laws and morality were a part of the workings of world politics, respect for law would only be achieved if it were backed by the threat of force. Realists also insisted that a state’s primary obligation was to its own citizens, not to a rather abstract ‘international community’.

AUTHOR BOX

Edward Hallett Carr

The reaction against idealism produced a number of very influential works in International Relations which mark the emergence of realism as the dominant world view in the post-Second World War period. One such work was E.H. Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, published in 1939. Carr is a central figure in the history of IR, whose continuing importance has been highlighted by recent attempts to (re)interpret this central work in the cause of (re)claiming Carr as a liberal, Marxist, English School scholar and even as a Critical Theorist. However, for a long period Carr has been identified with realism, because he produced a powerful critique of the core assumptions of idealism, arguing that the tragic events of the 1930s bore witness to the fragility of international institutions, the realities of the underlying struggle for power among states and the fallacy of a world public opinion supporting pacifism. Carr also rejected the normative underpinnings of idealism (a concern with questions of law, morality and justice) arguing instead for a ‘science of international politics’.

Realists argued that, rather than concentrating on disarmament as a root to peace and security (a central objective of the League of Nations), states must, paradoxically, prepare for war. Realists believed that conflict was inevitable and so the best chance of avoiding war was to be strong in the face of real or potential aggression. Realists claimed that relying on reason to resolve the problem of war was utopian and ignored certain objective truths about world politics.

Although still in its infancy, even at this stage, International Relations theory was showing signs of what was to become a central characteristic; it ‘evolved’ through a series of debates. The Second

World War effectively settled the first great debate of International Relations in favour of the realists. The Cold War simply reinforced this view and allowed realism to continue to dominate International Relations scholarship throughout the 1950s and 1960s (see Concept Box, p. 56).

Neo-realism shares many core assumptions of traditional realism regarding the state, the problem of power and the pursuit of interests. However, neo-realists place more emphasis on the anarchic structure of the international system and the impact that the structure has on the behaviour of states as well as acknowledging, to a certain extent, the importance of non-state actors.

Origins

Although realism came to dominate the relatively young academic discipline of International Relations after the Second World War, it claims that what it is saying is not new and attributes its insights to a variety of sources. This section sketches the ideas of these writers who have either written on International Relations or had their ideas applied to it. The texts chosen here are not exhaustive but seek to make the basic point that realism makes a claim not just to validity across the globe (spatially) but throughout time (temporally) as well. To emphasise this point, realists are inclined to trace back their intellectual origins to over 2500 years ago and the writings of Thucydides or even beyond to ancient China and Sun Tzu.

AUTHOR BOX

Thucydides

The guiding ideas and the basic assumptions of realism are rooted in a tradition of thought dating back at least to the writings of Thucydides on the Peloponnesian wars, between the Greek city states of Athens and Sparta. Thucydides used the war to demonstrate how the logic of power politics (the pursuit of power and interest) characterised inter-state relations and conflict, rather than cooperation or action guided by higher moral principles.

It is sometimes argued that today's scholars and students of IR do not know any more about state behaviour than did Thucydides. His studies showed that the powerful did what they were able to and that the less powerful just had to accept it. Appeals to higher principles such as those by the people of Melos to the Athenians met with an iron fist, the fate of so many powerless peoples throughout the twentieth century.

The thoughts of Niccolo Machiavelli, a sixteenth-century Italian political thinker, and the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes are also invoked to demonstrate how realism is supposedly founded on age-old wisdom. Machiavelli is famous, or perhaps notorious, for offering practical advice to the statesman which would ensure that they remained in power and achieved their objectives. He proposed a series of guides by which states' leaders might maximise their power. His advice included the instruction that promises must be broken when there is an interest to do so and that it is better to be feared than loved. These are two of the many reasons why Machiavelli is often accused of being an immoral thinker. The term 'Machiavellian' is used in common parlance to denote cynical and unprincipled behaviour, or used to describe people who act in a cunning and subtle manner, unscrupulously manipulating situations to their own advantage.

Perhaps, it is more accurate to describe Machiavelli's thought as amoral, rather than immoral, since he believed that moral or ethical behaviour was only possible under certain conditions of human

existence and that the statesman had no real choice other than to act prudently and with due regard to the fragility of the political and social order. Although Machiavelli was not explicitly concerned with ethics or justice, it is clear that he regarded moral principles or justice as simply the stated preferences of the already powerful. There is no doubt that Machiavelli held an extremely dim view of human nature. Realists continue to argue there is no place for trust or sentiment in politics and point to Machiavelli's wisdom in elucidating this point.

The work of Thomas Hobbes has also been a key influence on realist thinkers. Hobbes is influential because he was among the first political thinkers to undertake a sustained discussion on the nature of secular (non-religious) power and authority.

CONCEPT BOX

An international 'state of nature'?

Hobbes 1588–1679 lived at a time of great social change and political instability. Perhaps, not surprisingly, therefore, one of his major preoccupations was the nature of political power, the basis of political order and, particularly, the origins of the state as the central, sovereign power. In order to explain the reasons and justification for the state and government, Hobbes posited the existence of a 'state of nature' in which all enjoyed freedom from restraint but in which, in consequence, life was 'nasty, brutish and short'. The conditions of life were unpleasant because it was man's nature to try and dominate and oppress others. For Hobbes, world politics was characterised by a war of all against all. Only mutual vulnerability (all men were vulnerable because they must of necessity sleep) and the desire for self-preservation allowed the setting-up of a sovereign body that would secure the conditions necessary for civilised life. However, while men might be persuaded to give up their natural liberty for the protection of the sovereign, the international realm would remain a war of all against all, since the conditions which forced men to give up their natural liberty for security in the 'state of nature' could never be realised in an international context. Put simply, states were not equally vulnerable to attack. Hobbes' classic work *Leviathan* remains one of the most influential writings on the nature of sovereignty and international anarchy. Indeed, international relations is sometimes likened to a 'state of nature'.

At times, Hobbes appears to evoke images which suggest religious influence and sympathies – inherent evil or wickedness, for example. However, his beliefs about the essentially selfish impulses of human beings were actually rooted in what he understood to be the insights of modern science. The extent to which we can discern scientific laws which help us to explain individual or social behaviour, or the extent to which the analogy of the individual in the state of nature can be made with the state in the international realm, is debatable. However, together, these two central assumptions provide realists with support for their argument about the need for states to behave selfishly in international relations. Such a view suggests that states are unified, purposive and rational actors in international relations in the way that individuals are in society. We might ask if this is an appropriate view. In order to help us decide whether these analogies are indeed appropriate and useful, we need to unpack the key assumptions of realism further.

Assumptions

While there are different variants of realism and, indeed, some subtle and intriguing differences between them, the perspective has some central assumptions which provide a common link. What is so important about these assumptions (or indeed any assumptions) is that, while realists argue that they are based on observations about the 'real world', it is interesting to note that our basic assumptions about the world actually inform our picture of reality. It follows, therefore, that different assumptions are likely to lead to very different world views. The extent to which realism helps to shape the very world it seeks to describe forms part of some more sophisticated critiques of realism which we will return to in later chapters (4 to 7 and the concluding chapter). So, what are the key ideas and assumptions which underpin realist thought? In summary the assumptions of realism are that:

- States are the key actors in international relations.
- Sovereignty, or independence and self-control, is the defining characteristic of the state.
- States are motivated by a drive for power, security and pursuit of the 'national interest'.
- States, like men, behave in a self-interested manner.
- The central problem in international relations is the condition of anarchy, which means the lack of a central sovereign authority at the global level to regulate relations between states.
- The aggressive intent of states, combined with the lack of world government, means that conflict is an unavoidable and ever-present reality of international relations.
- A semblance of order and security can be maintained by shifting alliances among states so preventing any one state from becoming overwhelmingly powerful and, thus, constituting a threat to the peace and security of others.
- International institutions and law play a role in international relations, but are only effective if backed by force or effective sanction.
- Power is the key to understanding international behaviour and state motivation. For realists the main form of power is military or physical power.
- Human nature can be said to be inherently selfish and constant. As a result, humans will act to further their own interests even to the detriment of others, which can often lead to conflict. Because human nature is unchanging, there is little prospect that this kind of behaviour will change.

The last point to be made here on the lack of centralised authority can be used to illustrate a key difference between traditional or classical realism and neo-realism (sometimes labelled 'structural' realism). To simplify, we might say that classical realism is an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of the statesman or diplomat who is forced to operate in an uncertain and dangerous world. Realism provides a guide to action based on the guiding principles of **realpolitik** in the interests of the preservation of the nation-state. Thus, realism focuses on states as actors and analyses international politics in terms of 'units' called states. On the other hand, neo-realism places more emphasis on the importance of the anarchic international system. Realism and neo-realism will be revisited in the conclusion; it is enough at this stage that you are aware of these key differences.

Realpolitik: a nineteenth-century German term popularised because of the way it seemed to capture the shrewd awareness – including the preparedness to use force where necessary – of Bismarck.

AUTHOR BOX

Kenneth Waltz

In a much-quoted work entitled *A Theory of International Politics* (1979) Waltz argued that: traditional realism contained significant deficiencies, notably that it was very ‘agent centred’, concentrating primarily on states. States constituted the main agents and units of analysis. Waltz claimed that any theory of international relations should be able to tell us something about both the units – states – and the system as a whole. While unit-level theories focused on agents such as individuals, or in the case of realism, states, system-level theories focused on the overall structure or system in which action took place. All systems were determined by organising principles, specific functions and the distribution of capabilities. The international order was unique in that while domestic orders were centralised and hierarchic, the international system was a realm of coordination and self-help. Moreover, while the units in domestic orders (citizens, for example) were subjected to law, the units in the international order (states) were at best interdependent, autonomous entities. International order was, therefore, mechanistic rather than organic. The international order was also anarchic.

Waltz argued that the system level had been neglected in IR theory, although it was clearly important in exerting pressures upon states from outside. Since we could potentially differentiate between externally generated and internally generated pressures, it would therefore be possible to identify the level at which crucial change occurs. It was possible that changes at unit level could affect the system as a whole, or conversely, changes at systems level could affect the unit (state) level. An example of a unit-level change affecting the system might be the collapse of the Soviet Union, which profoundly affected the global power structure. A change at the system level might occur if an alliance system collapses (in the absence of a clearly defined enemy), which in turn impacts on individual states.

Waltz’s theory has been criticised on a number of grounds. However, it has proved a major influence on International Relations. Moreover, while in various ways Waltz’s analytical distinction between ‘system’ and ‘unit’ levels could be criticised, his work was important in opening up questions about the appropriate level of analysis in IR and of structure and agency in the study of International Relations. Waltz’s book was also something of a seminal text in the shift from traditional realism to the more ‘scientific’ claims or pretensions of neo-realism. This is a point that we take up and develop in the concluding chapter.

Themes**The state and power**

Perhaps the core theme in realism is the centrality of the state. Indeed, states and inter-state relations constitute the very definition of the subject. The central characteristics of the modern state are that it has a defined territory and a government which is invested with sovereign authority and exercises power over a people. Some commentators add a fourth characteristic – recognition. Recognition means that the state’s claims over that defined territory and its right to exercise sovereignty over its people are recognised by other states. Recognition can take many forms, but typically it involves opening up diplomatic relations or entering into treaty obligations with another state.

It follows from this that a central characteristic of the state is sovereignty. There are two types of sovereignty relating to states: internal sovereignty signifies the holding of authority within a given territory and over a given people; external sovereignty, meanwhile, involves being recognised by other states as legitimate in the sense of having the right to act independently in international affairs – that is, to make alliances, declare wars and so on. This conception of the state as the central actor which exercises power in particular ways has important consequences for how realists view the relationship between states and other ‘actors’ on the international stage. For example, multinational corporations (MNCs) are not regarded as independent or autonomous actors in the international economy, but seen rather as an extension of state power or an instrument of foreign policy. MNCs are not, then, held to be a significant economic and political force in their own right, exercising power and influence, but a measure and reflection of the power and might of particular states.

CONCEPT BOX

What is a ‘state’?

Despite the centrality of the concept of the ‘state’ in International Relations there are profound disagreements about, first, its nature and, second, its importance relative to other ‘actors’. These differences will become apparent as we work our way through the text. There are other problems with the notion of the state as actor, or in conceiving of international relations as a system or society of independent, or autonomous, nation-states. It is not at all clear that a state does have to have a clearly defined territory in order to be a state. For example, the borders of the state of Israel are contested by many of its Arab neighbours. World leaders frequently meet with representatives of the Palestinian ‘people’, while some governments actually recognise the existence of a Palestinian state, although there is no clearly defined territory on the map which one could point to as ‘the State of Palestine’.

For a very long period the USA and some other Western states refused to deal with the communist government of China and continued to recognise the exiled nationalist ‘government’ in Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the Chinese people. Moreover, there are numerous examples of states around the world where significant sections of the population clearly do not recognise the sovereign government as legitimate. The Irish nationalist (Republican) community in Northern Ireland is one such example. At first sight, these may appear to be isolated or exceptional cases, but in fact, there are large areas of the globe where boundaries are contested and dominant articulations of ‘national interest’ are challenged. Does this rather messier ‘reality’ render the realist concept of a system or society of bounded, unified and coherent state ‘actors’ somewhat problematic?

A second major theme in International Relations is that of **power**. Power can be regarded as an essentially contested concept – that is, one over which there are fundamental disagreements. Furthermore, it is a word which seems to be very similar to other words; words such as authority, influence and coercion. Realism has much to say on the concept of power in international relations. Realism does not claim to deal with all types of power, nor all types of power relationships, but it does claim to identify the fundamental essence of what constitutes power in international relations. Realists have been fairly careful to provide a clear definition of power, and show how it can be quantified and, crucially, who has it.

For realism, the essence of **power** is the ability to change behaviour/dominate and it often takes the form of military or physical power.

Table 2.1 Relative military and economic capability of nine major states

| | <i>Economic rank</i> | <i>GDP (2008) \$US Billions</i> | <i>GNP per cap (2008)</i> | <i>Armed forces active personnel</i> | <i>Active divs</i> | <i>Combat aircraft*</i> | <i>Principal surface ships</i> | <i>Subs</i> | <i>Nuclear capability</i> |
|---------|----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| USA | 1 | 13,886.5 | \$46,040 | 1,650,500 | 15 | 5,371 | 137 | 104 | YES |
| Japan | 2 | 4,813.3 | \$37,670 | 237,000 | 13 | 540 | 62 | 22 | NO |
| Germany | 3 | 3,197.0 | \$38,860 | 367,300 | 8 | 611 | 12 | 40 | NO |
| UK | 4 | 2,608.5 | \$42,740 | 254,000 | 2 | 586 | 38 | 20 | YES |
| France | 5 | 2,447.1 | \$38,500 | 409,600 | 5 | 868 | 43 | 18 | YES |
| China | 6 | 3,120.9 | \$2,360 | 2,930,000 | 93 | 5,845 | 55 | 50 | YES |
| Brazil | 7 | 1,133.0 | \$5,910 | 336,000 | 8 | 272 | 21 | 4 | NO |
| Russia | 8 | 1,071.0 | \$7,560 | 1,714,000 | 106 | 3,342 | 161 | 185 | YES |
| India | 9 | 1,069.4 | \$950 | 1,265,000 | 37 | 864 | 25 | 15 | YES |

* Does not include helicopters

Original source for GDP and GNP per capita, World Bank (2008), *World Development Report 2009*, New York: Oxford University Press; source for military statistics, International Institute of Strategic Studies (1994), *The Military Balance 1994–95*, London: Brassey's.

Taken from: J. Vogler (1996), 'The structures of global politics', in C. Bretherton and G. Ponton (eds), *Global Politics: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 23–48 (Economic data up-dated). Realists would recognise the military component of power. How does this table comparing military statistics and economic indicators affect your understanding of power, if at all?

Some realists see power in stark, zero-sum terms. Individuals, like states, have power at the expense of others. Traditionally, realists have seen military capability as the essence of power, for fairly obvious reasons. The capacity to act militarily gives states the ability to repel attacks against themselves, and therefore to ensure their security. Or it enables them to launch attacks against others for specific ends. Realists have assumed that it is military capability that counts. It represents the 'bottom line'; the ultimate arbiter of international disputes. Power is both an end in itself and the means to an end in that it will deter outside attack or allow the acquisition of territory abroad.

In a world made up of independent states, force has been regarded as the ultimate arbiter in the settlement of differences. It follows from this that the potential for military capability, and hence power, depends on a number of factors such as size of population, abundance of natural resources, as well as geographical factors and the type of government of a given state.

CONCEPT BOX

The balance of power

Realists have developed an analysis of how power is distributed in the international system. This idea is referred to as the 'balance of power'. A simple definition of the balance of power is that it is a mechanism which operates to prevent the dominance of any one state in the international system. The balance of power is sometimes viewed as a naturally occurring phenomenon, or a situation that comes about fortuitously. At other times it is suggested that it is a strategy consciously pursued by states. States engineer such balances to counter threats from other powerful states and so ensure their own survival. As we would expect, the balance of power is frequently measured in terms of military strength. For realists, the primary aim of the 'balance of power' is not to preserve peace but to preserve the security of (major) states, if necessary by means of war. The balance of power is about the closest realists ever come to outlining the conditions for a peaceful international order, in so far as peace is defined negatively as an absence of war.

In nineteenth-century Europe the situation was characterised by five or six roughly equal powers. These countries were quite successful at avoiding war, either by making alliances or because the most powerful state, Great Britain, would side one way or the other to act as a 'balancer' of power. Although the balance was seen as a good and beneficial thing, unfortunately the system of alliances which became 'set' in the early twentieth century – and which was ridiculed as 'deterrence' in the television show *Blackadder Goes Forth* – saw Europe ultimately embroiled in the First World War.

Although such ideas are easy to challenge by reference to many states in the modern world, a state is said to have power if it has a large population, abundant natural resources and a large area, mountainous terrain or other features making it hard to attack. There is, at times, an almost mathematical idea that adding and subtracting the strengths and weaknesses in these areas will lead to an accurate calculation of a state's power potential. In what has subsequently become an influential realist text in IR, *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau engaged in an elaborate discussion of the sources of state power. However, in fact it is not easy to quantify power in this way. For example, population is not always a power blessing if such mouths cannot be fed.

WORLD EXAMPLE BOX**Population**

The realist conception of power is challengeable in a very simple way if we look at population. Realists have assumed that large populations provide soldiers and are therefore elements of national power. If we look at China and the huge sacrifices it was able to absorb in, say, the Korean War (1950–53), then there is some evidence for such a case. However, for many countries today, including China, population size and growth is creating a range of problems. People are mouths to feed and brains to educate and place a great strain on resources. If we argue that power, even military power, must have an economic base, a large population is a big source of weakness for a country like Bangladesh.

As realists readily admit, in practice only putting power to the test in war can adequately resolve questions about the relative power of states and, even then, military power will not be decisive if there are reasons why it cannot or will not be used. For example, few doubt that the USA is a more formidable military power than Vietnam; however, the former was unable to defeat the latter in the particular conflict in which they were engaged in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to various factors such as the weight of US public opinion and differences in the leadership, tactics and morale of the two sides. In addition, the amount of power that a state can exert in any particular encounter may be specific to the issue or area under consideration. For example, collectively the states that make up the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have less ‘military muscle’ than the USA and some European countries, but they were able, collectively, to exert their will against the West and raise the price of oil dramatically in the early 1970s. As we will see in later chapters (particularly 3 to 7), there are many and varied ways of understanding power relations.

Conflict and violence

Conflict may be simply defined as disagreements which the parties involved seek to resolve to their own satisfaction. According to such a definition, conflict need not be violent and seems an inevitable part of human interaction, including as it does arguments over whether to visit the cinema or a football match, jealousy in relationships and so on. Human interaction it seems leads to disagreements. To realists, however, the conflict in which they are interested is the specific variety of inter-state conflict of a violent nature; most usually, but not always, wars.

The dominance of realism in International Relations after the Second World War can be explained in part by the Cold War, the period of history from the late 1940s to late 1980s. The causes of the Cold War continue to be hotly disputed. However, the initial cause of tensions was a series of bitter disagreements about the status of Germany after the Second World War. At the end of the war, the Soviet Union (USSR), the USA, France and Britain administered separate sections of occupied German territory. The Soviet Union and the Allies then began a series of meetings to negotiate over what would happen to Germany now that the war was over. To simplify somewhat, the Soviet Union believed it was important to ensure that Germany did not pose a threat to the Soviet Union in the future. They demanded that Germany be prevented from becoming a significant, economic and military power again. Furthermore, they believed that the Soviet Union was entitled to massive compensation for the war damage inflicted on it by Germany. On the other hand, the Allied Powers believed that the economic recovery of Germany was vital to the future prosperity of the European continent. Moreover, there is no doubt that the Allies also believed that a resurgent Germany would

prevent the Soviet Union from becoming the dominant European power in the post-war period. Clearly, the peacetime aims of the two sides were incompatible.

The Cold War seemed to bear out the major contentions of realism, in that the division of Europe appeared to be a logical outcome of opposing interests over the post-Second World War security order in Europe. The ‘problem’ of Germany – a potential major power in the future – was ‘solved’ by its division. The superpowers’ respective ‘spheres of influence’ were subsequently consolidated through alliance systems (NATO initially, and at a later date, the Warsaw Pact).

The Cold War is sometimes described as, fundamentally, a struggle about ideologies rather than interests. Realists, however, do not place much emphasis on ideas in IR. They would argue that the division of Europe was a logical outcome of power politics and irreconcilable interests and aims.

FILM BOX

The Cold War

The Cold War dominated International Relations, both in theory and practice, for nearly half a century. Consequently, it inevitably captured popular imagination in countless forms, including cinema. The anti-communist hysteria of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the pivotal role played by Senator Joseph McCarthy in identifying Soviet spies were at the heart of all aspects of American society in the aftermath of the Korean War. Coupled with the launch of Sputnik (the first satellite to be put into orbit, by the Soviets, in the late 1950s) this produced a wave of movies whose central theme was that the USA and the free world faced an imminent invasion. Much of this mood was captured allegorically in the popularity of science fiction B-movies such as *Invaders from Mars*, *It Came From Outer Space* and the classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Although the director of the latter film, Don Siegel, denied that the film had a political message, many saw the film as either anti-communist or as a subtle critique of McCarthyism. The film recounts a tale of dehumanisation in which large seed pods from outer space appear in the Californian town of Santa Mira while its residents are asleep. The pods hatch identical replicas of the sleeping citizens who then murder the original inhabitants replacing them with zombie-like clones. The ‘hero’ of the movie, Dr Miles Bennel, valiantly struggles to stay awake so that the same fate does not befall him while struggling to warn the rest of the world of the fate that awaits them. His task is made more difficult by the fact that the new residents of the town do everything they can to prevent him.

For those who saw the movie as being anti-communist, the message was clear. The USA, indeed the whole free world, was in danger of being taken over by calculated emotionless communists who would enslave humanity. This enemy was omnipresent – you could not tell who was a communist, they could be anyone and everywhere. Consequently, America had to be ever vigilant and awake to the enemy both from outside and within. For those who saw the movie as anti-McCarthyite, the alien zombies were the anti-communist zealots who demanded an unquestioning loyalty to their ideology and would destroy all those who tried to stand in their way.

A final word has to be given to one of the best satires of the logic of ‘deterrence’ that dictated the nuclear strategy of the superpowers during the Cold War – Stanley Kubrick’s 1963 film *Dr Strangelove*. In this film the Soviet Union has developed a doomsday machine that will automatically launch its nuclear weapons if the country is attacked. Unfortunately the USA does not find out about the machine’s existence until too late. The film depicts a catalogue of communication failures between the President and his Soviet counterpart and between the President and his military chiefs, including the lone bomber that, having suffered the destruction of its communication system, flies into Soviet airspace to deliver the deadly payload that will trigger the doomsday machine. Coming as it did in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the film poignantly demonstrated and satirised the potential devastating cost of the destructive logic central to the superpower stand-off.

Realists limit their interest for the most part to the causes and nature of wars. There are differences of opinion as to where the focus should lie if we are talking about general rather than specific causes. Various scholars have argued for a concentration on the nature of human beings; others have suggested a focus on states themselves; and still others have preferred to pin the blame for conflict on the workings of the international system as a whole.

It is possible to argue for consideration to be given to all three points of view. The notion of ‘three images’ is associated particularly in an earlier work by Kenneth Waltz, his influential book *Man, the State and War*, first published in 1959. To simplify somewhat, Waltz’s first image focuses on human nature as the root cause of war. This view suggests that as a species we are inherently greedy, aggressive, selfish and generally nasty. There is a good deal of evidence with which to support this claim but equally much to dispute it. The second image focuses on the state level, arguing that these are constructed in such a way that pursuit of national interest inevitably leads to nationalistic clashes with other states. The third image is that the structure of the international system itself leads to conflict by forcing states to act in a certain way.

WORLD EXAMPLE BOX

The Middle East

The Middle East is a region which has experienced considerable conflict in the twentieth century and indeed again in the early twenty-first. Though access to water is not usually the specifically cited cause of conflict, in very many cases analysts believe it underlies it. Israeli need for water, for instance, may be the most intractable reason for the failure to establish a lasting peace with the Palestinians. Water is a precious resource and becoming increasingly scarce as populations continue to expand. With rivers forming borders throughout the region, and usually flowing through more than one state, efforts to control water in one state (say through dam projects) may well lead to reduced supply in another. Such problems complicate inter-state relationships, including the Arab–Israeli and the Turkey–Syria–Iraq relationships.

More often realists look for concrete and specific causes of conflict – for instance, ‘economic’ arguments like trade wars. Some of the bloodiest conflicts of recent history have been over access to resources. We will expand upon how access to resources and environmental degradation might increase conflicts in chapter 8.

Peace and security

In realism, international relations by their very nature are characterised by conflict and competition. The existence of war is inevitable and ultimately unavoidable. International relations which are characterised by peace are therefore viewed, in a rather pessimistic (or realistic?) way, as being the exception as opposed to the norm. Peace is a condition where conflict and competition are absent, but will in time return. Thus, peace is not seen as an enduring condition nor is it seen as something which should be pursued in order to ensure security. This latter point results from the assumption that violent conflict will return. For realists in IR, security is a concept which relates to the state. A state is more or less secure to the extent that it can ensure its survival in the international system, generally through possessing sufficient power capabilities. With regard to security, instead of pursuing peace, realists concentrate on the conditions necessary to prevent war. Here, the relationship between power, security and conflict is of most importance.

For realists security is about (state) survival. For those states, the majority, unable to guarantee their own safety through their own military forces, the balance of power represents a reasonable hope of being able to feel secure in international relations. Realists argue that, unlike in domestic politics (where governments are responsible for enforcing laws), in world politics there is no government to enforce laws and, as a result, each state has to provide for its own security. Self-preservation under such conditions demands that a state be able to protect itself, because it cannot rely upon help coming from other states. Policy makers, conclude realists, must therefore seek power for their country. To do otherwise, it is argued, would invite war and defeat, as another state or states would take advantage of this misjudgment. A key area of discussion in later realist work revolves around the dilemma of increasing one's own security at the expense of others'. Realists argue that creating institutions such as the League of Nations, which presupposes states have an interest in cooperation, was foolish and therefore bound to fail.

ANALOGY BOX

The stag/hare analogy

This analogy is sometimes used to illustrate the 'security dilemma' and problems of cooperation in international relations. The story involves a group of primitive hunters isolated on an island. They agree that if they can kill a stag they will have enough to feed all of them, but that to do this they must cooperate as it will require all their efforts to entrap and kill the animal. They set off to hunt the stag. Shortly afterwards one of the hunters sees a hare, which would certainly be enough to satisfy the hunger of an individual. In breaking off from the stag hunt to capture the hare the hunter ensures that he will satisfy his need for food. However, in so doing he effectively allows the stag to escape and the rest of the group are condemned to hunger. Cooperation among all the hunters could have led to an optimal solution where all were fed. However, the hunter faced a dilemma because he could not be sure that the group would catch the stag. Furthermore, he could not be sure that another member of the group would not break ranks in pursuit of the hare, in which case *he* would have gone hungry himself. In the context of this uncertainty, it was, therefore, rational to behave in a self-interested manner. The point of the stag/hare analogy is to illustrate that under conditions of uncertainty (i.e. anarchy) it is rational to act in a self-interested way. The tragedy of international relations is, therefore, that under conditions of anarchy even mutual interest does not guarantee cooperation and hence mutual gain.

Institutions and world order

Given the emphasis on the state, power, anarchy, conflict and security, it is not entirely surprising that throughout much of its history cooperation has been a secondary concern for realists. Broadly speaking, realism has tended to marginalise areas which are not the 'real stuff' of international relations, and therefore contends that international cooperation is significant only to the extent that it is engaged in *by* states for the benefit *of* states. Realism's basic assumptions involve the belief that, while much can interest us about the world, these should not sidetrack us from its essential features. In suggesting that certain facets of international relations are timeless, the traditional realist distinction has always been between the 'high politics' of foreign policy, diplomacy and war and the 'low politics' of economics. This means that the former has been regarded as much more important than the latter.

At first sight, then, a perspective based on assumptions concerning the sovereignty of states, the primacy of national interest and so on cannot have very much to say about international institutions.

To some extent, institutions have been something of a subsidiary theme in realist writings, but this does not mean that realists have no view on the character and role of institutions in international affairs. English School scholars like Hedley Bull (see chapter 7) have argued that supranational organisations such as the EU can be regarded as ‘states in waiting’. In other words, they may acquire an identity of their own such that they become the citizen’s highest source of loyalty. At such a point current states, such as Germany or France, become simply regions of a European state even if such a process might take a long time to come about.

In contrast, realists never lose sight of the central importance of states as the predominant actors of world politics. They believe that states only join international institutions and enter into cooperative arrangements when it suits them. Accordingly, such arrangements, alliances or cooperative agreements can be backed out of or broken, if and when they cease to be in the national interest, as easily as the hunter in the stag/hare analogy above left pursuit of the stag in order to catch a hare. Realists do not entirely neglect the study of the United Nations or the European Union, just as they do not deny that limited forms of cooperation occur and that international institutions might facilitate this to some degree. Nonetheless, the bottom line, to realists, is that international institutions are significant only to the extent that they allow states to pursue their own interests.

However, an important development in neo-realist thinking about the nature of institutions and international order has taken place not in International Relations theory as such but in the ‘sister’ discipline of International Political Economy (IPE). In this chapter we referred to neo-realism first in the context of the work of Waltz and his Theory of International Politics. However, within IPE a distinctly neo-realist perspective has evolved which is centrally concerned with problems of cooperation and the role of institutions in international relations, particularly in relation to the governance of the global economy. In the 1970s an initial recognition that economic interdependence between states was becoming more widespread and complex led scholars within the emerging discipline of IPE to ask how economic activity taking place across state boundaries could be coordinated effectively. Moreover, how could this increasingly complex international economic order be ‘governed’ in the absence of government?

CONCEPT BOX

International Political Economy (IPE)

This field of study is often seen as a sub-discipline of IR, but it can also be seen as a distinct discipline. Some scholars argue that IPE developed in the 1970s as a result of the limitations of traditional IR which, it was argued, focused too much on conflict, war and the state. IPE has developed into a field of study which considers a large range of issues and actors and sees politics and economics as being inseparable. The main areas of study have been the growth of the modern liberal order, development, modernisation, international trade, conflict and forms of power. A number of scholars were important in the development of IPE in the 1970s, including Susan Strange, Robert Cox and Robert Gilpin. They called for a revision of what issues, processes and actors were studied and how they were studied in IR. The result was a movement towards studying international political economy and ‘low politics’ *as well as* ‘high politics’.

There is, however, a much richer and older tradition of IPE literature that pre-dates the 1970s rise of the discipline. Scholars such as Alexander Hamilton, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed a rich body of literature on political economy and international relations. Within this earlier literature three broad paradigms or perspectives emerged: Liberalism, Marxism and Mercantilism. The first two of these developed into Liberalism and Structuralism as we have come to know them in IR. The latter is perhaps

one of the precursors to Realism and was often termed Economic Nationalism. This school of thought informed much state policy in the late 1800s and early 1900s through to World War Two. The main premise of it was that economic power is the key to greater political and military power and states should seek to maximise their economic power through protection of domestic industries, increased exports and lower imports. This type of policy came to be known as ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ and was seen as a cause of World War Two by liberals.

The point of departure for neo-realists in answering these questions was a fairly orthodox one: the problems generated by an essentially anarchic international system. However, in this specific context, neo-realists combined some fairly traditional realist ideas about power and the centrality of states in international relations, with certain liberal ideas about rationality and economic cooperation. We will not dwell on this here, but rather concentrate on how neo-realists have developed a view of ‘governance’ based on an analysis of the role played by dominant states in maintaining international economic order.

Neo-realists employed the concept of ‘hegemony’ to describe a situation in which one state is dominant in the international system. As we will see in chapter 4, the concept of **hegemony** is also central to some strands of Critical Theory. Critical Theorists use the concept of hegemony to talk about both dominant social forces and dominant ideas in IR. In neo-realism the emphasis, as one would expect, is on dominant states. Neo-realists frequently cite two major phases of hegemonic domination (pax-Britannica and pax-Americana) which describe the periods of British dominance over the global economy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and US domination in the post-Second World War period. Neo-realists typically argue that, when conditions of hegemony prevail, there is a much better chance that institutions will be established and/or function effectively. (There is a debate about this, however. See the Author Box below.) The hegemon is able to offer other member states positive inducements to cooperate, or conversely may impose certain sanctions on states that refuse to engage with other states cooperatively. It follows that in the absence of hegemony, institutions will be more fragile and less effective.

Hegemony is the dominance of a single power (e.g. Britain in the nineteenth century and the USA in the post-1945 period). It is employed to explain how international order is possible even in the context of ‘anarchy’.

Neo-realists have found the concept of hegemony useful in explaining how an international economy based on fundamentally liberal principles and liberal economic practices could be secured in a world in which political authority was vested in nation-states with competing interests and possibly mercantilist impulses. In the absence of an international ‘public good’ which would allow the international economy to run smoothly, the concept of hegemony was used to explain how a degree of regulation, or governance was possible. Neo-realists believe that states aim to maximise wealth and that this is best achieved by securing a broadly liberal, free-market international economy.

Attempts to fuse an analysis of the growth and expansion of a liberal international economy with an analysis of where power lies in the international state system gave rise to a theory of Hegemonic Stability. The idea of Hegemonic Stability was originally advanced by Charles Kindleberger to explain the collapse of the international monetary order in the early twentieth century and the economic depression that ensued from this. Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) holds that there is always a proclivity towards instability in the international system, but this can be avoided if the dominant state assumes a leadership or hegemonic role. This role involves creating and upholding a system of rules which provide a secure basis for international order and cooperation under conditions of

anarchy. In this way liberal values and norms could be fostered and upheld. Hegemonic powers are able to control finance, trade, and so on. The Bretton Woods System which comprised the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an example of international order founded upon US hegemony. It provided a system of rules, values and norms, based on liberal economic principles (see chapter 1) which broadly served the interests of the USA, although many other states were consenting partners in forging the post-Second World War international order.

AUTHOR BOX

Robert Keohane: *After Hegemony*

In the previous chapter we introduced you to a strand of liberalism in IR theory which has been labelled 'neo-liberal institutionalism'. Neo-liberal institutionalism endeavours to explain processes of cooperation and the role of international institutions in international relations. You will recall that neo-liberal institutionalists agree with neo-realists that anarchy is a 'problem', but they argue that the problem can be overcome without the existence of hegemonic states. In so doing neo-liberal institutionalism critiques many of the assumptions of neo-realism.

An important work on the way to the development of neo-liberal institutionalism was Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony*. Keohane argued that it was wrong to infer that cooperation was impossible without hegemony, since the condition of hegemony was not the only possible form or motive for cooperation. Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) might be partially valid, but it was not sufficient for understanding the conditions under which cooperation took place. Cooperation seems to depend on: expectations; transaction costs; and conditions of uncertainty. All of these factors were affected by the existence of international regimes.

Keohane argued that, despite the fact that explicit, well-defined rules and procedures governing international monetary relations had practically vanished in the wake of the collapse of the Bretton Woods System (BWS), there had been continuity in the BWS regime principles, notably 'embedded liberalism' had persisted. Despite pressures facing trading regimes and dire warnings of the impending collapse of the system, in fact this has not occurred. Moreover, it was clear that changes in regimes and new patterns of cooperation that had emerged post-1971–73, were quite different from one issue area to another.

Keohane argued that one could possibly identify some causal links between US hegemonic decline and regime decline, but that this was not as direct and uncomplicated as HST suggested. Regime-eroding effects were to some extent counterbalanced by the value to governments of maintaining regimes (rules) that limited players' legitimate strategies and so reduced uncertainty. There was demand for regimes because they played a useful role in facilitating mutually beneficial agreements among states. Therefore, to understand processes of cooperation and the role of institutions or regimes, one must combine the insights of HST as a power theory with theories that stress the rationality and value of cooperation in itself and the functions performed by regimes in facilitating this.

Robert Gilpin, who is arguably the pre-eminent contemporary neo-realist IPE scholar, developed an analysis of US hegemony which rested on the premise that there was a direct relationship between US power and the stability of the international economic order. The Bretton Woods System eventually broke down because of a decline in the power and influence of the USA, a decline reflected in the switch to a regime of floating exchange rates from 1971. The USA could no longer maintain its currency at a high rate relative to its economic competitors. Gilpin argued that economic realities

would eventually bring about an adjustment in the system and so the USA would eventually retreat from its commitment to the multilateralism of the Bretton Woods System as US foreign policy adjusted to harsh economic realities. This had obvious implications for the stability of the international economic and political order.

Identity and community

We will keep our discussion of realism and questions of identity and community rather brief since both have been somewhat taken for granted in realism rather than explicitly problematised or analysed. Realists argue that people identify first and foremost with the nation-state. That is to say, most people see themselves as British, or French or Canadian, rather than as members of the ‘human race’ or of an abstract ‘international community’. For realists the only community of any significance in international relations is the nation-state. The state is also held to be of moral worth because it is the best form of political community that the human race has yet devised. Beyond the boundaries of the nation-state lies the realm of international anarchy where ‘might makes right’.

There is a strong sense in realist writings that national security issues, particularly in times of war, offer a sense of shared political purpose. Therefore, it is meaningful to speak of an underlying national interest which governs state behaviour particularly in relations with ‘foreigners’. The state must, of necessity, be concerned, first and foremost, with national security and the well-being of its own citizens. For this reason realists anticipate that migration and asylum seekers are likely to generate feelings of unease if not of outright hostility and nationalism among citizens and nationals of existing states. This is not because realists are personally indifferent to the plight of displaced people, but because they see fear of the ‘foreign’ as a core element of the insecurity inherent in international relations. Realists do not, however, endeavour to unpack the processes and practices involved in the construction of such identity groups and communities (this has, however, been an explicit concern of many other perspectives which we will meet later), but rather take the nation as dominant identity and community as a given in International Relations.

Inequality and justice

Realist arguments frequently make much of the dangers inherent in not accepting what we cannot change. Thus, for instance, they see great dangers for the international system in emphasising or prioritising social justice or human rights *in terms of the relationships between states*. Realists also emphasise the principle of sovereignty as the cornerstone of the international system. We outlined the realist critique of international law and problems of conducting relations between states on the basis of moral principles earlier and will not labour this point again. As is apparent from our earlier discussion, sovereignty bestows exclusive jurisdiction over a territory and people. To intervene in the affairs of other states is, then, to risk undermining the sovereign independence and autonomy of states. For this reason realists also argue that states have no grounds to comment on or criticise the domestic political, social or economic order of other states. States are relatively silent on the rights of other states’ citizens and indeed should be. If all such issues were taken up by all states – that is, if internal sovereignty were not accepted – great instability might well result as states meddle in each others’ affairs. Put another way: turning a blind eye is the lesser of two evils.

Thus, internationally, a state might regard itself as peaceful and democratic and so might therefore object to authoritarianism in Myanmar, communism in China or the death penalty in the USA but, ultimately, we have no ‘right’, either political or moral, to judge the actions of other states in regard to their own peoples. Indeed, ultimately this could lead to international conflict.

If at first sight realists appear to be giving a green light to dictatorship and oppression, they might argue in their defence that the principle of sovereignty protects the ‘weak’ to some extent. Whatever the realities of power and influence in the international system, sovereignty at least guarantees a certain formal equality among states. In contrast, English School scholars (see chapter 7) subscribe to the notion of an international society or society of states, pointing out that increasing respect for human rights is becoming an accepted norm of international society and might, in exceptional cases, form the basis for ‘intervention’. Generally speaking, it is fair to say that most realists adhere to a view of sovereignty as the foundation of the international system and so place emphasis on the principle of domestic jurisdiction and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of another state.

FILM BOX

No End In Sight

The 2007 film *No End In Sight* is a documentary focusing on the years following the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The film examines the interests and policy decisions which resulted in the war, occupation and subsequent *re-construction* efforts. It then explores the difficulties in pursuing and meeting these policy goals as well as looking at the problems that followed both in Iraq and elsewhere. Realists often argue that the domestic affairs of a sovereign state are, or should be, of no interest to other states. Furthermore, states should not interfere in the internal affairs of another state unless this directly adds to their power. There are often voices which call for intervention when there are forms of injustice, for example, if a population is governed and repressed by a dictatorship. However, realists would argue, that intervening in another state’s domestic affairs in order to resolve injustices creates more problems than it solves.

One of the main reasons given by the Bush administration in the United States and the Blair government in the United Kingdom for invading Iraq was to *liberate* the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein’s government, which was authoritarian and responsible for violations of human rights and mass murder. While it is difficult to argue against the undesirability of the Hussein regime, realists would have suggested that the problem is for the Iraqis and not for the United States or United Kingdom to sort out. The civil war, ongoing military operations, continuous bombings, sectarian conflict, crime and instability that have followed the 2003 invasion and that are documented in *No End In Sight* certainly add some legitimacy to this realist claim. To draw an analogy with your own lives, you would almost certainly struggle unnecessarily if you tried to ‘fix’ every relationship you saw going wrong, tried to break up fights, chased burglars, went and knocked on the door of a household where you’d heard it rumoured that the children were poorly treated and so on and so forth; and if everyone were acting in a similar way – trying to resolve the problems of all – our day-to-day lives would be filled with confrontation.

Summary

1. Realism is just one perspective within IR not *the* perspective.
2. Realism is a label attached to certain ways of thinking – it is a broad school of thought. There are, however, a number of distinctive strands in realist thought.
3. Realism is sometimes referred to as ‘power politics’, the Hobbesian approach to International Relations or the ‘billiard ball model’.

4. Realism developed in International Relations as a rejection of idealism in the post-Second World War period.
5. The intellectual roots of realism go back much further. Realism supports its view by reference to a whole series of authors and events going back millennia.
6. Realism is a label given to a particular set of assumptions about international relations which emphasise the importance of states, motivated by national interest and driven by power.
7. Realism does not make a claim to explain every aspect of international relations. It aims to capture the essence of one specific aspect of the world – i.e. power politics.
8. Realism claims to describe a world it is not possible to change and gives us a guide on how to survive in that world.
9. By extension, realism claims to be based on certain essential ‘truths’ about the human condition.
10. Realists make clear distinctions between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘international’ realms.
11. Neo-realism also places central emphasis on anarchy in international relations, but claims to be more scientific in its approach than classical realism.

Criticisms

While realism was not initially the dominant perspective in International Relations, historically, it has been the dominant tradition in the discipline and perhaps it is for this reason that it has been subjected to so much criticism. Liberalism and structuralism can both be used to develop a critique of realism. In more recent years realism has been subjected to complicated critiques from Critical Theorists, postmodernists, feminists, social constructivists and Green theorists amongst others. These are covered in chapters 4–8 of this book and this chapter on realism might be usefully re-read once an appreciation of the insights of these ‘critical’ theories has been fully understood and assimilated. Some of the most devastating criticisms of realism and neo-realism concern its epistemological and ontological underpinnings. This is the difficult language of theory and it is, therefore, appropriate to visit this debate in the concluding chapter of the book. At this stage, however, we can consider some of the possible shortcomings or weaknesses of this approach.

1. The fact that realism is simple and understandable is presented as a strength of the perspective. However, an opposing argument would suggest that realism is too simplistic, reducing the complex reality of international relations to a few general laws which are said to be applicable over time and space and which therefore omit much of interest and importance from our analyses.
2. Realism, in emphasising the principle of power politics and the enduring features of the international system, fails to allow for the possibility of real change. Realists accept that great powers rise and fall, and wars come and go, but insist that the basic rules of the game cannot be changed. In failing to embrace the idea of substantive changes, realism is inherently conservative and anti-innovative, meaning that it is highly attractive to, and politically malleable by, those who would have things continue as they are. Whether intentionally or not, realism may also serve to justify injustice on the grounds that nothing can be done to change things.
3. By considering states to be the only important type of actor in international relations and by only viewing the agency of non-state actors such as MNCs as part of state agency, realists have been criticised for not being able to fully account for a range of issues and processes in international relations.
4. While realism has a cyclical view of history (a repetition of patterns of behaviour) it has failed

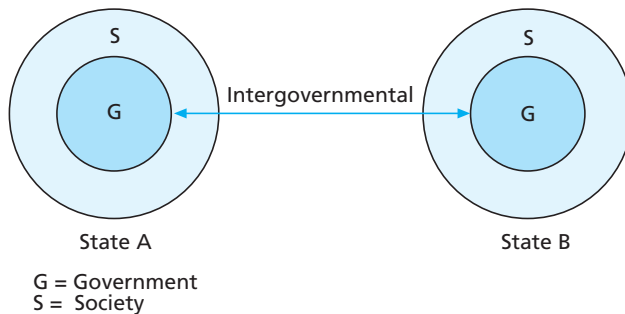
to successfully make any specific predictions. Most startlingly, realists failed to predict the end of the Cold War; given its pretensions to be, if not scientific, then at least useful, this is a very serious weakness.

5. Realism does not help us explain which decisions will be made by states' representatives, but only why they will be made. Thus statespeople will make decisions rationally and on the basis of national interest. However, how do we know if it is the national interest of State A to attack State B? Perhaps it would serve the national interest better to delay an attack or to seek an alliance against State C. Is national interest a self-evident thing? After the event, when State A has attacked State B, the realist could say this was based on a rational calculation of the national interest, but the realist offers no way of deciding which option is actually in the national interest and simply tells us that this is the motivation.
6. If we accept the possibility that the assumptions of realism are relevant only in a particular context, there is possibly great danger in treating them as if they were universal truths: that is, applicable everywhere and at all times. Far from providing universal truths, realism may simply have seemed the most appropriate way of viewing a short historical phase; the idea of universal truth may have held back scholarship which would have been better directed at freeing us from realist despair.
7. In emphasising the centrality of the state and the national interest, realism encourages people to view the world from a very narrow, ethnocentric perspective.
8. The simplistic view of human nature as being inherently selfish and unchanging has been criticised, in particular by more progressive approaches such as Green Thought and liberalism. Here it is claimed that the nature of the society one lives in can change over time and can thus change human nature or at least allow humans to be less selfish.
9. Realism ignores or significantly downplays the degree to which states might have collective or mutual interests, and so underestimates the scope for cooperation and purposive change in international relations.
10. We should ask if foreign policy really is conducted rationally and indeed what is implied in the idea of rationality. Rationality seems unlikely to be the same for the leaders of states with strong ideological or religious bases as it is for leaders of liberal democracies. Furthermore, even within, for instance, liberal democracies, can we be sure that in the hurly-burly world of foreign policy, decisions will always be made rationally? The decision maker is likely to be bombarded with information, denied sleep and asked to make several choices at once; it seems plausible at least that rationality will be compromised, affected by mood, modified by spur-of-the-moment decisions and so on.
11. The antecedents of modern realism have perhaps been selectively read or interpreted in a biased fashion. As people are fond of saying in relation to statistics, if you select your evidence carefully enough it is possible to prove almost anything. We can simply note at this stage a certain selectivity in the historical memory of realism.

While, in its simplified form, realism can present an easy target for criticism, realism's detractors, bent on exposing its shortcomings, have often found it a formidable task. Indeed after some 15 years (or more) of fending off criticisms on all fronts, realists might argue that the post-9/11 world is one in which realist propositions are clearly vindicated by current practice. For example, the euphoric atmosphere of the post-Cold War period might have opened up a space within International Relations to imagine other possibilities, including the pursuit of human security founded in respect for human rights. However, the security risk to US citizens, highlighted by the terror attacks on the twin towers, the subsequent 'war on terror' and the unwillingness of the USA to listen sympathetically or seriously to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in relation to prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, can on the face of it be used to vindicate realist propositions.

Figure 2.1

A state-centric image of the world.



Source: B. Hocking and M. Smith (1995), *World Politics: An Introduction to International Politics*, 2nd edn, London: Prentice-Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 75.

Many realist models of international relations may appear to be oversimplified and therefore useless. However, the realist argument would be that they help us understand what is vitally important about international politics.

Modifications of realism have been proposed by various authors and many differences exist within the broad category of realism. Moreover, realists acknowledge a changing world and are aware of ecological threats, gender issues and so on. However, and crucially, realists believe that their basic assumptions capture the real essence of international relations, and they argue that they are perfectly entitled to privilege some areas and issues in international relations, and, indeed, to marginalise or ignore others. However, it would be difficult to overcome the decades of dominance that realism has had in the discipline and therefore the tendency to regard it almost as a natural starting point for talking about IR, even for those eager to criticise it or offer a more adequate framework for analysis.

Furthermore, while realism may be under attack from all sides in academic circles, it continues to find favour amongst policy makers and statespeople and accordingly is implicit in rationalisations of policy offered by foreign-policy decision makers. We have chosen realism as one of our preliminary chapters for the simple reason that it has indeed provided a backdrop for much discussion in International Relations theory. To an extent this bears out our opening comments about the prevalence of realism, and latterly neo-realism, and the degree to which neo-realism particularly has become the basic point of departure for much 'critical' international theory (see concluding chapter).

Common misunderstandings

1. *It's called Realism because it's realistic.* Some of you may come to regard what International Relations calls 'realism' as being highly *unrealistic*. Clearly the adherents of realism regard it as a sensible explanation of the dynamics of the world in which we live, and the name represents almost an unfair advantage in terms of students' initial reaction to it. However, 'realism' should be regarded as simply a name for a particular way of thinking about the world; a label which is understood to imply certain basic assumptions. It is for you to decide if realism is realistic or not.
2. *Realists ignore so much.* Once you understand the basic assumptions of realism and what it regards as important in international relations, you may decide that it fails to address some crucial issues. Environmental degradation, torture, rape and many other issues are ignored by

realists in favour of concentrating on states, state interest and military power. Realists are not ignorant in this sense; they do not deny the existence of other actors, interests and issues. However, they suggest that IR should be about the really crucial aspects of international interactions and thus deliberately limit the scope of their analysis in an attempt to better understand what is vital.

3. *Realists are nasty people.* From the above it might follow that realists are necessarily heartless people who do not care about starvation, repression and rainforests as long as the international system persists and wars are understood and perhaps limited or controlled as much as is possible. The reputation enjoyed by Niccolo Machiavelli helps to perpetuate this idea. While we are sure that nasty realists exist, this is not necessarily the case. Some realists are simply pessimistic about human nature or the international states system to the extent, for them, that any other view is utopian nonsense. In effect they argue that what we would like and what we get may be very different.
4. *Structural realism is the same as structuralism.* No. Structural realism is a name sometimes given to Waltzian neo-realism and bears little relation to the ‘structuralism’ mentioned in the introduction and expanded upon in the next chapter, except in so far as they do both concentrate on the idea of ‘structure’ as being crucial in explaining international relations. For structural realists it is the structure of the inter-state system which interests them and which constrains state behaviour, forcing states to act in particular ways.
5. *Anarchy means chaos.* This is an understandable way of thinking. However, anarchy actually means absence of government, a situation which characterises international relations where there is no world government. Thus, states exist in a state of anarchy. Given the existence of international law, order is not entirely absent; this is one important reason why some authors associated with the English School talk of an ‘anarchical society’.

Structural realism, with its emphasis on the anarchical structure of international relations should not be confused with structuralism which we discuss in detail in chapter 3.

Further reading

- Bull, H. (2002), *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 3rd edition (largely seen as one of the core neo-realist texts along with Waltz (below) and originally published in 1977, it is often claimed that this is the founding text of the English School of IR theory).
- Carr, E.H. (1946), *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, London: Macmillan (along with Morgenthau – below – this is sometimes cited as an influential text within the classical realist tradition, although Carr has also been read as, among other things, a member of the English School, a Critical Theorist and even a proto-Critical Realist (see chapter 7)).
- Gilpin, R. (1987), *Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (sets out the neorealist approach to International Political Economy – note both the similarities and differences between how Waltz and Gilpin conceptualise ‘hegemony’).
- Keohane, R. (1986), *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press (a collection of papers that in various ways critique the assumptions of neo-realism).
- Morgenthau, H. (1978), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Knopf (a highly influential text not only within the academic discipline of IR, but among policy makers in the USA in the post-Second World War period).
- Waltz, K. (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley (possibly *the* major work on neo-realism in IR).