

Classic Realism and the Balance of Power Theory

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The term “realism” was first used to formulate the philosophical doctrine that “universals exist outside of the mind” (Freyberg-Inan, 1). Yet, in political theory, “realism” represents a school of thought that analyzes the political process as it is or as it is disclosed by historical forces “...that the able political practitioner takes into account ...and incorporates ... into his political conceptions and his political acts” (Ibid, 1-2). In the field of international relations, realism became the dominant analytical paradigm mostly after the start of the Second World War, when it displaced idealist doctrines, promising “to provide more accurate information, more powerful, and more relevant answers” to the roots or causes of peace and war (Brecher & Harvey, 54).

At the same time, many features of the current realist paradigm can be traced back to the time of Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Among contemporary thinkers recognized as major writers and contributors to the realist tradition are Hans Morgenthau, Edward Carr and Kenneth Waltz (Freyberg-Inan, 8). What are then the basic tenets or common features of a realist thinker? Machiavelli would acknowledge that to be a realist one has to look at history as “a sequence of cause and effect whose course can be analysed and understood by intellectual effort, but not directed by imagination” (Carr, 64). Hobbes would persist in the same train of thought and insist that to be a realist thinker one must look at things as they are and not as they should be (Warner, 37). Thus, both of these thinkers direct us to the idea that the creation of the realist paradigm and theories are in fact an inductive process whereby “theory does not create practice, but practice theory” (Carr, 64). Suggestive and provocative declarations such as those of Machiavelli and Hobbes not only make the evaluation of the realist paradigm and its

theories very important to study, but they also lead to intense debate within the international relations field (Brecher & Harvey, 52). This paper sets to explore and evaluate classic realism and the balance of power theory's main assumptions about the international society.

The Nature of Man

Prior to making a fair assessment of classic realism's vision of the international system, it is imperative to analyse what are its assumptions about the nature of man. Hobbes' *Leviathan* is considered a major work that well-known contemporary realist and non-realist writers in the field of international relations draw their insights from. According to Hobbes, men's lives are full of "cruelty, brutish egotism and unconstrained passion that is directed by insecurity and fear in the state of nature," an invented place where all societal constraints are taken away: "Hobbes did not argue that such a state of nature had ever really existed. To him, the state of nature was the result of a thought experiment—imagining what the world would be like without governmental authority or any other social structure" (Kauppi & Viotti, 60). In other words, the state of nature for Hobbes is a chaotic and anarchical place where every man feels insecure and distrusts each other. Moreover, Hobbes assumes that man is continually fearful because men are equal mentally and physically. Hobbes ultimately argues that men would want to hurt each other because of this constant fear and because they naturally compete for wealth, limited supplies and glory amidst the lack of any kind of authority (Klej, 10).

In the *Scientific Man* Morgenthau also refers to the nature of man in a negative fashion. He criticises the notion that our modern age or the "age of science" mistakes the nature of man: "science attributes to man's reason, in its relation to the social world, a power of knowledge and control which reason does not have" (Morgenthau 168, 1946). Morgenthau also agrees with Hobbes that man's feelings of insecurity are prevalent, adding that the "intellectual and moral history of mankind is the story of inner insecurity" (Ibid, 1). Morgenthau presents two drives

that characterize humans. The first can be deduced safely arising from the inner insecurity of man, mainly man's "will to power" to overcome this insecurity. However, "conflict and concomitant evil" can arise, according to Morgenthau, from the will to obtain power or from "the desire to maintain the range [or power] of one's person with regard to others, to increase it or demonstrate it" (Ibid, 192). In other words, war can be said to originate from the second drive, which is more of an elementary selfishness "that arises from the competition" of scarce material and "ideational goods" that allow man to stay alive (Freyberg-Inan, 68). Moreover, Morgenthau views that the first drive or evil lust for power is an essential assumption to understand the nature of politics, mainly because man's desire for power is indivisible from any society in which he lives (Morgenthau 9, 1946).

Kenneth Waltz, even though a neo-realist now, in his book Man, the State and War, considered a classical realism work, gives also an important account of Morgenthau's view of the nature of man. Waltz comments on the two drives that man possesses that make him resort to the use of or the search of power. He views that man's first drive for power because of his lust for it presents power as an end in itself. The second drive that motivates man to search for power is instrumental. In other words, man's struggle for power "arises simply because men want things, not because there is some evil in their desires" (Waltz 34-5, 1959). Critics have argued that this realist view of the nature of man is problematic, something which will be elaborated later on because it seems to posit different explanations of the behaviour of states strategically. Yet, to Waltz this dual analysis of man's relation to power does not mean much to him:

In the one instance, power is a necessary means, then power inevitably takes on some of the qualities of an end. Whether one adopts the first or the second explanation, or mixes the two, may then make little difference in the policy conclusions reached. It may, however, confuse the analyst and flummox his critics (Ibid, 35-6).

The Nature of the State

Apart from the general negative view of the nature of man from these realist thinkers, classical realists writers provide extensive literature on the nature of the state. The state, according to Hobbes, is the organization of men that can prevent civil war or war among individuals. The formation of the state is established through the consent to a social contract that can be coercively enforced by the state to promote its inner stability and order (Klej, 11). The other fundamental reason for the formation of the state is to protect the whole nation from other states that may use force against it, since all states exist in the state of nature, which is the state of war (Ibid, 11).

Morgenthau's explanation of the nature of the state and its politics is similar to the one of Hobbes. The nature of the state would ultimately be based on power. That is, states are power seekers and thus engage in a constant struggle for the dominance of one another. The power struggle that states experience is the result of the human nature to seek also for power: "It is a characteristic aspect of all politics, domestic as well as international, that frequently its basic manifestations do not appear as what they actually are—manifestations of a struggle for power" (Morgenthau 101, 1985).

Edward Carr's explanation of the nature of the state is also very similar to Hobbes' as well, although not so negative. Carr views the state made up of two differing elements of human nature, mainly morality and power (Carr, 95). Carr also sustains that these two aspects of human nature can be observed in any society or state for that matter:

Man in society reacts to his fellow men in two opposite ways. Sometimes he displays egoism, or the will to assert himself at the expense of others. At other times he displays sociability, or the desire to co-operate with others, to enter into reciprocal relations of good-will and friendship with them and even subordinate himself to them...No society can exist unless a substantial proportion of its members exhibits in some degree the desire for co-operation and mutual good-will. But in every society

some sanction is required to produce the measure of solidarity requisite for its maintenance (Ibid, 95).

However, Carr, as Hobbes before him, also acknowledges that “consistent realism”(Ibid, 91) can defend the fact that moral principles of conduct are “suspended or overshadowed by the greater concern for survival” (Klej, 10). In other words, Carr also acknowledges that the nature of the state is such the goals of the state or its ends justify the means that the state uses to obtain its goals. That is, Carr would acknowledge that “consistent realism” seems to advocate that the use of force overrides any moral action when the security of the state is at stake, both internally and externally:

Where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought no to enter any consideration of just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty (Whelan, 203).

Nevertheless, Carr argues vehemently that “consistent realism” fails to grant “any ground for purposive or meaningful action” (Carr, 92). That is, if the logic of cause and effect that consistent realism posits to establish is inflexible enough to allow for the systematic prediction of events, and “if our thought is irrevocably conditioned by our status and our interests, then both action and thought become devoid of purpose” (Ibid, 92). Thus, Carr ultimately views the rigid way of thinking of “consistent realism” as not compatible with humanity (Ibid, 92). Thus, Carr complains that consistent realism assumes that man’s thought and action are hollow and automatic (Ibid, 93).

Kenneth Waltz seem to agree with Carr’s complaint as he further clarifies more about the relationship between man, the state, the international system and war by sustaining that wars would not exist if human nature would not be what it is. However, he also acknowledges the important fact that men are sociable and participate in “Sunday School... philanthropic

organizations and criminal gangs” (Waltz 81, 1959). Consequently, he argues that since everything is related to mankind, the “events to be explained are so many and so varied that human nature cannot possibly be the single determinant” of war (Ibid, 81). Thus, he proposes to look at the international system because war takes place among states or to look at states themselves as war are fought in their name:

War most often promotes the internal unity of each state involved. The state plagued by internal strife may then, instead of waiting for the accidental attack, seek war that will bring internal peace...the best way of preserving a state, and guaranteeing it against sedition, rebellion, and civil war is to keep the subjects in amity one with another, and to this end, to find an enemy against whom they can make common cause (Ibid, 81).

Ultimately, Waltz also suggests three ideas already presented. First, war can be used by men and the state as a method to accomplish the most basic needs that humans and states seek, mainly security or survival as an independent entity (Freyberg-Inan, 3) and power. Second, Waltz also suggests by the example he gives about war—arising from establishing internal security inside the state—that states resort to one of the main tools that realism proposes for the creation of domestic and international stability, mainly the balance of power. Third, he also hints to the anarchical nature of the international system by stating that states might decide to wage war even when there is not an external aggressor.

The Nature of the International System

Looking to the nature of man through the realist paradigm, the study of his evil nature does not provide complete information on the main cause of war. That is, since human nature is fixed, this assumption moves us away from the attention of man to that of the state “because human nature, by the terms of the assumption, cannot be changed, whereas social-political institutions can be” (Ibid, 41). Namely, it might be necessary that the state use more force than admonishment to control “rapacious” men. Similarly, it must be clear that to understand the

behaviour of man one must also comprehend the nature of the state. The behaviour of the state, as a collective group of individuals, its behaviour is identical to that of man because it coexists among other states in anarchy. The state of anarchy is permanent in the international system: “war lurks in the background of international politics just as revolution lurks in the background of domestic politics” (Carr, 109). Therefore, it is essential to understand the nature of the international system in order to grasp why states resort to fight each other. Thus, since all these three different levels of analysis are interdependent, it is not sufficient to look at each of them in isolation. Hence, one must also look to these three levels of analysis in conjunction to have a better understanding of the nature of the international system (Ibid, 12).

Furthermore, how international anarchy is defined by the realist paradigm is the next task to examine. To Hobbes the state of anarchy meant the inexistence of a supranational entity to establish order among states:

But though there have never been any times, wherein particular men were in condition of war against each other, yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their torts, garrisons and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors; which is a posture of war (Kauppi & Viotti, 61).

Does the fact that the permanency or the constant nature of anarchy mean that warfare is ubiquitous in the international system? According to Vasquez (Brecher & Harvey, 57-9), a scholar of international relations, constant warfare is suggested strongly by Morgenthau in his book Politics Among Nations: “All history shows that nations active in international politics are continuously preparing for, actively involved in, or recovering from organized violence in the form of war” (Morgenthau 1973, 42). Hobbes and Waltz too suggest that war is constant in the international system since for them too war is the result of global anarchy and anarchy is seen as a constant (Brecher & Harvey, 57). Constant anarchy would logically “predict constant warfare, but this is not true, according to Vasquez (Ibid, 57).

Vasquez, therefore, offers three historical examples based on historical record to support his argument that war is not a constant in the international realm. The first example refers to the existence of non-violent periods, “especially among major states.” The second example is the “presence of peaceful dyads.” The third historical fact is the existence of “peaceful zones.” What is more, Vasquez concludes that the realist paradigm does not offer any universal answer to the question of peace: “The fact that ...classical realism does not think a permanent peace is possible raises questions about how much their empirical theory can tell us about peace, and how it should be constructed” (Ibid, 63). Thus, if Vasquez’ is right about

the irrelevance of the classic realist paradigm to solve the problem of war and peace, then why is still realism the dominant paradigm in international relations? Why states still use the realist view to formulate their foreign policies? Is classical realism truly relevant in our times? If yes, then what are the classical realist's proposals that would help prevent wars or diminish their destructiveness today? How reliable are classical realist's predictions? What form of analysis does classic realism offer about international regimes and institutions? (Kleij, 12). Since these questions are very important to help evaluate the significance of the classical realist paradigm, they need to be answered. In order to answer these questions this paper will start first by analysing the theory of balance of power, which, according to realism, provides solutions to the problem of war. We will conclude by analysing the modern relevance of the theory of balance of power.

The Balance of Power Theory

As it has been shown, realism observes that international politics or the behaviour of states towards each other is based on the constant struggle for power: "so long as the notion of self-help persists, the aim of maintaining the power position of the nation is paramount to all other considerations" (Waltz 160, 1959). In that sense, international politics as observed in reality is essentially power politics. In order to contain power and limits its potential abuse, the balance of power is therefore central to the realist perspective of international relations. To understand what is meant by the balance of power, we must first define power (Kauppi & Viotti, 64). Since it is commonly acknowledged that Morgenthau's Politics Among Nations has transformed the field of international relations from "idealist advocacy to realist analysis," (Brecher & Harvey, 55) we will rely mainly on his explanation of power and the balance of power.

Morgenthau defines power basically as man's control over the minds and actions of other men or the ability to convince people to behave in a certain way. In military terms, he sees power as either the threat of the use of force or the actual use of force in war. He also believes that the use of power can be legitimate or illegitimate, depending on the existence or not of moral and legal justifications (Morgenthau, 32-4). More importantly, he understands power as relative, that is: the power of one state is evaluated in "terms of its capabilities relative to the capabilities of other states" (Kauppi & Viotti, 64). Yet, despite Morgenthau's efforts to clarify the concept of power, there is no agreement on the definition of power among realists. Some realists view power as absolute, others as relative (Kauppi & Viotti, 64). Thus, in the absence of a common definition of power, we can safely assume that realists would also have problems defining what the balance of power is. But once again, let us turn to Morgenthau's interpretation of the balance of power.

According to Morgenthau, the balance of power can be understood as a situation or as a policy. As a situation, the balance of power could be in equilibrium or disequilibrium. A balance of power in equilibrium refers to conditions whereby the power of one state or set of states is literally "balanced" by the equivalent power of another state or set of states (Inis, 13), as it may have been the case during the Cold War between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union or NATO and the Warsaw Pact. A balance of power in disequilibrium describes a condition in which the distribution of power among the contending states is not balanced (Ibid, 14). This condition clearly favours the leading hegemon and may result in the abuse of power by the strongest state, "which neutralizes other states" and may feel "free to be the deciding force and the deciding voice" (Ibid, 14-5). This seems to be the case with the U.S.A., after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The balance of power as a policy often refers to actual efforts to encourage the preservation of equilibrium (Ibid, 17). This policy to reach equilibrium would be most commonly found in a system that acknowledges that unbalanced power is unsafe (Ibid, 18). On the other hand, the balance of power as a policy could also promote disequilibrium: “Morgenthau... asserts that it has been standard American policy to maintain ‘unchallengeable supremacy’ in the Western Hemisphere” (Ibid, 19). For Morgenthau and others classical realists, however, a policy of equilibrium is essential to preserve the sovereignty of nations and the pluralistic nature of the international system. In this sense, they believe that the balance of power can be created by “statesmen” (Kauppi & Viotti, 73) and that it may well be not only the best, but also the only choice:

[T]he balance of power and policies aiming at [the] preservation [of] the international balance of power are not only inevitable but are essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations; and that the instability of the international balance of power is due not to the faultiness of the principle but to the particular conditions under which the principle must operate in as society of sovereign nations (Morgenthau 187, 1985).

Morgenthau further argues that “[t]he balancing process can be carried on either by diminishing the weight of the heavier scale or by increasing the weight of the lighter one” (Ibid, 198) In this case, the balance of power would have to signify a policy aimed at changing the status quo or at preserving it. He offers four ways in which this balancing of power can be done. The first form make a hostile state weak by dividing it or keeping it divided. For example, “the Soviet Union, from the 1920s to the present, has consistently opposed all plans for the unification of Western Europe” (Ibid, 198). The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Irak could perhaps be seen in the same light..

The second manner to change, maintain or re-establish the balance is through territorial compensation. During the “later part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the principle of compensation was again deliberately applied to the distribution of colonial territories and the delimitation of colonial or semi-colonial sphere of influence” (Ibid, 199). Although this particular form of maintaining the balance among European powers (and their dominance in the world) worked for a while, it soon led to the First World War, because of fundamental conflict of interests among European powers. One could even argue that a similar attempt to re-establish the balance, after the First World War, actually led to the Second World War.

The third way, in which a policy can change, maintain or re-establish the balance, is through arm races or disarmament. However, Morgenthau maintains that the arms race is unstable, because it increases “the burden of military preparations devouring and ever greater portion of the national budget and making for ever deepening fears, suspicions, and insecurity”(Ibid, 200). On the other hand, disarmament could be a form of re-establishing the balance, “if not to establish permanent peace” (Ibid, 201). Although disarmament may reduce military confrontations, Morgenthau and other realists argue that it is difficult to control disarmament among competing nations (Inis, 7). Moreover, recently some feared that if the U.S and Canada participated jointly in building a missiles defence, this may have triggered an arms race, perhaps with China and Russia, mainly.

Lastly, alliances are “historically the most important manifestation of the balance of power.” In this case, alliances can be either a policy aimed at changing, maintaining or re-

establishing the balance. For example, “[n]ations A and B, competing with each other...to maintain and improve their relative power positions...can add to their own power the power of other nations, or they can withhold the power of other nations from the adversary” (Morgenthau 201, 1985). Although, the Allied Powers during the Second World War helped to stop the imperial threats from world domination by the Axis Powers, many realists do not recommend the formation of permanent alliances. They argue that alliances can also destabilize a peaceful situation at least in five ways:

- 1) Alliances would enable aggressive states to combine military capabilities for aggression.
- 2) Alliances threaten enemies and provoke them to form counter-alliances, which reduce the security for *both* nations.
- 3) Alliance formation may draw otherwise neutral parties into opposed coalitions.
- 4) Once states join forces, they must control the behaviour of their own allies to discourage each member from reckless aggression against its enemies, which would undermine the security of the alliances’ other members.
- 5) The possibility always exists that today’s ally might become tomorrow’s enemy (Kegley & Wittkopf, 534).

As it seems, the balance of power or the policy of states to maintain, change or re-establish a preferred situation can be a very unstable process, since to do so states might often resort to war. For example, some realists argue that a multipolar system is more complex and unstable. On the other hand, they view a bipolar system as being more “simple and predictable”: in such a system, “direct conflicts between superpowers” can be more easily circumvented (Kauppi & Viotti, 75-6). Although the policy of balance of power seems to be unstable, one must also argue that the sovereignty of the state is important and the balance of power could be used to maintain a pluralist international system, even at the cost of war (Inis, 52). Morgenthau agrees with this view, but he also denies that the balance of power is the sole basis for securing the sovereignty of states:

The clouding picture begins when we find Morgenthau saying that “Small nations have always owed their independence either to the balance of power... or to the preponderance of one protecting power... or to their lack of attractiveness for imperialistic aspirations. This would seem to indicate that the preservation of weak states depends upon an equilibrium, the absence of an equilibrium, or sheer luck (Ibid, 67-8).

According to Inis Claude, the picture becomes even more confused when some scholars assert that classical realism shows that a “preventive war” is a “natural outgrowth of balance of power” and that “most of the wars that have been fought since the beginning of the modern state system have their origin in the balance of power” (Ibid, 52). This idea leads them to raise the question of whether the balance of power views war as a means to an end or an “evil” that is supposed to be suppressed or both (Ibid, 53). Despite the criticisms that realism and the balance of power theory receive from scholars, including realist scholars themselves, we cannot easily discard the realist paradigm and replace it with completely new ones. It should rather be accepted that “a paradigm does not provide all answers, it may only provide scholars with the promise of some answers” (Brecher & Harvey, 55).

In conclusion, classical realism and the balance of power theory offer fundamental propositions about the international system. It gives us an understanding of the nature of man, the state and the international system, and why war occurs and how it could be avoided. Although explanations of various issues and situations are clearly ambiguous, classical realism and the balance of power theory help to understand our system better. For instance, Carr states that where “utopianism has become a hollow and intolerable sham, which serves merely as a disguise for the interests of the privileged, the realist performs an indispensable service in unmasking [this sham, which is even a product of realism itself]” (Carr, 93). Thus, as realism remains a leading paradigm of our times, it is certainly worth deepening our understanding of its potential contributions to the creation of a more stable future.

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