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# A Constant 'State of War' Or A 'Dog-Eat-Dog' System? A Critical Analysis of (Neo)realist Perspectives on World Affairs

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**Abstract**

*It has become far too fashionable to adopt a (neo)realist approach to world affairs, especially since this approach purports to deal with the 'here and now' of international politics. While this perspective can be seductive and even dominating, it is imbued with certain shortfalls that cannot be left unchallenged. (Neo)realism often presents a world that is anarchic, bound by state power and self-interest. Although these are "real" features of world politics, an exclusive concentration on these aspects alone does not present a comprehensive understanding of what states do and why they do what they do. This paper investigates realism, particularly the realism of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, to ascertain the extent to which the assumptions these authors present explain the nature and scope of international relations. The contention is that (neo)realism's perspective on world affairs is unprogressive, non-transformative, and deterministic of state behaviour, a feature that makes its analysis limited even in capturing the 'here and now'.*

**Keywords**: international relations (IR), (neo)realism, power, self-interest, morality/ethics

## 1. Introduction

The discourse of international relations (IR) is replete with many assumptions and predictions about the motives, interests and behaviour of actors on the international scene. There is, however, no consensus on what constitutes the theory of international relations.

This paper analyzes (political) realism and neorealism, particularly the ideas of

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Hans Morgenthau (1973[1948]) and Kenneth Waltz (1986; 1959), respectively. While these two theorists differ in some ways, I find in their arguments these core themes: 1) the question of having a "science" of IR, 2) the idea of state of nature, 3) the concept of power and order, and 4) the ethical challenge. The paper's focus will be on these four main themes, although it is admitted that there may be variations in the worldview of E. H. Carr for instance, who is considered a classical realist. The clarification is that while the new realists are more "self-consciously scientific" than their predecessors, there is no fundamental difference between the old and new especially regarding methodology (Gilpin, 1986: 307). The limits on this paper will not permit us to delve into the various strands of realism and neorealism, and thus I find Morgenthau and Waltz to be a fair representation of these two somewhat interrelated schools of thought. This does not mean that these two theorists represent the vast body of literature on (neo)realism.

The main premise with which this paper begins is that while the use of power and/or force is visible in world politics, it is not progressive or transformative to assume that the international system is anarchic, and that states dwell in an arranged structure where there is a perpetual balancing of power to ensure stability and maintain the status quo. What I mean by progressive and transformative is the ability of a theory (and its proponents) to revise, change, reinvent, and adapt itself to be useful in many contexts and paradigms. The subsequent question will be why a theory should be transformative; and the answer to this derives from the fact that the objects that IR theorists tend to study are not stationary entities which remain constant over time and space. Thus, any quest to illuminate the processes and practices they are engaged in should take account of both continuities and discontinuities instead of straightjacket monocausal assumptions. The nature of the realists' argument is often too constricted, disallowing this overhaul. The 'old school' critique is that realism, as the dominant theory at the time, could not predict the collapse of the Soviet Union (see Ruggie, 1998). This is mainly because the logic of anarchy and balance of power gave way to the triumph of a hegemon.

While the argument against (neo)realism might sound liberal in tone, it has to be clarified here that liberalism (or neoliberal institutionalism) certainly has its weaknesses, just like any other theory. The paper chooses to focus on what some may consider as dated readings mainly to show that the debates in the 'realist camp' has not changed that much since the mid-1950s, although there are some attempts to adapt the theory to recent trends – for instance, the growing need for reflexivity. The paper starts with a brief

account of the core assumptions that underlie realist thinking, particularly the assumptions spelt forth by Morgenthau. The second section will address the core themes within these assumptions and the final part discusses the current place of (neo)realism in IR theory. Revisiting such debates contributes to the ongoing discussion of issues such as war, peace, stability, and consensus in world politics, as these theories often inform international relations praxis.

## 2. Core Themes in (Neo)realist Assumptions

The core themes in Morgenthau's (1973[1948]) writing are based on his six principles of political realism where he argues that self-interest is the fundamental standard by which all political action should be judged and, in fact, directed. Waltz (1959) also posits that self-interest inhibit any recourse to morality. While some theorists have tried to reformulate these main principles for their own purposes (see Tickner, 1988 for instance), they remain the core assumptions of realism and it is based on these that we proceed with our analysis of (neo)realism. This section discusses the four main themes identified in the core assumptions in both Morgenthau and Waltz, including the question of having a 'science' of IR, the idea of state of nature, the concept of power and order, and the ethical or moral challenge to state behaviour and practices. There may be other themes inherent in the realist perspective but for the purpose and scope of this paper, concentration shall be on these four.

### 2.1 The question of having a "science" of IR

There is no unity in the discipline regarding the appropriate approaches to adopt in the study of world politics. At the least, there has been a contention between those who believe the inductive methodology of the natural and physical sciences can be applied (for instance, Kaplan, Neumann, Morgenstern, Modelski, among others) and those like Morgenthau and Waltz who belong to the so-called "classical" or "traditional" school. Both of them challenge the application of science to IR as a result of the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the material the observer has to deal with. I must indicate, however, that of the two, Waltz appears to have been the one to make 'real' efforts at constructing a theory that explains state behavior, a theory which lies within the broader framework of structuralism. On the question above, Morgenthau insists that even the science of economics which many assume is the most accurate of all social sciences is "incapable of

reliable prediction" (Morgenthau, 1973[1948]: 22). For Waltz, though the empirical approach is necessary it is not sufficient. On the idea of a metatheory of IR,Waltz expresses doubt since a macrotheory of IR for instance "would lack the practical implications of macroeconomic theory" (Waltz, 1986: 107). This is because change, stability or the behavior of states cannot be predicted as the economists can predict economic change. He thus suggests a "micropolitical approach" which will cover some matters and leave others aside. He admits that the predictions of his balance-of-power (BOP) theory are indeterminate, making falsification difficult. Morgenthau (1973[1948]: 21) maintains that "world affairs have surprises for whoever tries to read the future from his knowledge of the past and from the signs of the present." The implication here is that since we cannot give a good prediction about what states will do, we cannot have a "science" of international politics.

While I agree with them in principle that we cannot have a "meta-narrative" or theory that explains the entirety of world politics, there is a contradiction between the arguments they make and the propositions that follow. First, it would be useful to distinguish the Waltz of 1959 form Waltz of 1986. The former Waltz, in trying to understand the causes of war, focused on the systems level of analysis, looking at what he calls the "third image" – the international system. He later builds on his understanding of the system to construct a more structural analysis which espoused the balance-of-power (BOP) theory. Both analyses are behaviourist and have elements of scientism in them but specifically, his BOP theory follows a more game-theoretic, economic model based on a utilitarian actor (the unit/state) who continually rationalizes and calculates their actions in order to establish both their survival and the stability of the system. This position clearly contravenes his discounting of a 'science' of IR, as noted above. Besides, Waltz's theory ignores the influence of motives, ideology and the value-laden nature of the object of study. The argument here is that international affairs is a broad and diverse arena and cannot be explained in a cause-and-effect manner. Moreover, it becomes very problematic when explanations derived from such analyses are considered *general* theories. With my understanding of IR which encompasses the multiple interconnections and interface among diverse entities, including states, corporations, institutions and individuals, I will argue that both classical realism and neorealism fail at the attempt of constructing a theory that would apply in many contexts as they sought to do. It is static and deterministic to the extent that it disallows "effective change" that could cause the units as well as structure to interact with other variables outside the system.

The reason why the realism of E. H. Carr is not considered under this discussion is that he fits more into what Bull (1966) calls the 'classical' tradition or what Kaplan (1966) calls 'traditionalism', which sets him apart from the scientific-inductive tradition to which Waltz adheres. Although the scientific approach has become the "orthodox methodology" in the US and the IR discipline in general, Bull, who argues for the classical approaches, posits that the scientific approach is "positively harmful" (Bull, 1966: 366) to the field of study. He provides seven propositions to support this conclusion: 1) Abstinence from "intuitive guesses" or "wisdom literature" keeps practitioners of the scientific approach far removed from the substance of international politics, 2) While they advocate for the scientific approach, they employ the classical methods since most of their work consists of unsubstantiated and untestable judgements that are not established by the scientific method they employ, 3) Since only 'peripheral' topics have been dealt with in a scientific way, practitioners of this approach are not likely to make the progress they aspire to, 4) Their conception of the field of IR as the construction and manipulation of models is a great disservice because essentially these models lack internal rigor and consistency, 5)The fetish attachment to measurement or quantification by the scientific school distorts and impoverishes some of their cases, 6) The need for rigor and precision in IR has been amply accommodated within the classical approach, and 7) By ignoring history and philosophy, practitioners of the scientific approach have deprived themselves of the means of self-criticism and consequently have a narrow but arrogant view of the subjects.

Underlying this critique is the level of analysis problem (Singer, 1961) which is also referred to as the agent-structure problem (Wendt, 1987), the issue of whether it is the individual agent or the structure/system of states that deserve the focus of analysis. Some of the arguments against the scientific approach can be levelled against Waltz since of the two (Morgenthau and Waltz) he makes a concerted effort at constructing a structural model for the understanding of world affairs, a model with no agency. There is still no agreement on which of these two main theoretical/methodological approaches best captures the nature and scope of IR. As Bull critiques the scientific approach, traditionalism or the classical approach is also criticized for applying unfalsifiable generalizations that are "indiscriminately applied over enormous stretches of time and space" (Kaplan, 1966: 15). These have been contested methodological issues that remain unresolved but for the purpose of this paper, we insist that the idea of a scientific and deterministic IR is only an elusive convenience of scholarship which fails to represent the

subjectivities, diversity, and value-laden nature of the discipline. In fact, it is this positivist tone of (neo)realism that makes it a "theory-masked-as-method" which does not facilitate a proper understanding of IR, particularly regarding its treatment of the social world as "an external, objective, 'dump generality'" (Ashley, 1986: 281).

### 2.2. The idea of state of nature (self-interest vs. self-help)

Morgenthau's first premise is that the objective laws that govern politics have their roots in human nature, and since interest dominates actions, politics becomes governed by interest defined in terms of power. Waltz, on the other hand, believes that since man is the root of all evil, "he [man] is himself the root of the specific evil, war" (1959: 3). The point is that if humans derive their nature from society, then studying them can neither be separated from the study of society nor from the study of government, both of which are intertwined. In answering the question, where can we find the major causes of war? Waltz answers; "within man, within the structure of the separate states, within the state system" (1959: 12). The commonality between the two is the belief that self-interest rules. However, while Morgenthau stresses a constant struggle, a state of nature, and a war of all against all, Waltz insists on the state of war.

First, the idea of "politics in the absence of government" is where Waltz thinks the problem lies. It was the fear of returning to the solitary and brutish life of the state of nature that led human beings to enter the social contract, and to elect someone to possess all the powers they share in common. In Hobbes there was a sovereign, and in Locke, a political society with legislative, executive and federative powers to make sure the contract holds. With world affairs, "the strong do what they can and the weak do what they must" (Thucydides, 1951: 331). A universally accepted governing power is absent in international relations, or at least ineffective. However, to think of a state of constant chaos or anarchy condemns to futility efforts towards cooperation. The ideas of "state of nature" itself by Morgenthau and Waltz's "state of war" are both questionable if they derive from the Hobbesian perspective. Empirical evidence from Kropotkin (2006) shows how primitive human and animal communities were not always in a state of fierce competition to survive. He argues that history shows human beings posses the tendency to cooperate and to aid. So, man was not such a beast! Two things are implicit in this evidence. One, it is possible Morgenthau and Waltz misunderstood the "state of nature" and "state of war" ideas as derived from Hobbes and Locke, respectively. Two, it suggests there is a potential for

cooperation even within the anarchic international realm just as there was some cooperation in the so-called state of nature.

**2.3 The concepts of power and order**

With the idea of the state of nature and war arises the concept of power and the need to maintain order in the chaotic system of states. Waltz claims that international politics is characterized by the absence institutions that look more like government in the domestic realm; Morgenthau argues it is "the struggle for power" and regardless of whatever ultimate goals exist, "power is always the immediate aim" (1973[1948]: 27). Although efforts such as the League of Nations and the UN aimed at eliminating power from the international scene, he maintains that the struggle for power is universal across time and space. This universality of power derives from the insatiable human tendency for dominance. As such, the whole political life of a state, be it local or national, is a perpetual struggle for power –and states are condemned to this struggle in the international system.

Morgenthau's idea of "relative stability" and "peaceful conflict" could be compared to Waltz balance-of-power theory. Waltz proposes an international system made up of states as units within an abstract structure where states are ordered or arranged in terms of relative capability. The ordering principle here is decentralized and anarchic unlike a domestic system. To him, international-political systems are formed by "the coactions of self-regarding units" (Waltz, 1986: 84) whose survival or annihilation depends on their own efforts – which makes it a self-help system. Essentially, whether balance of power or the perpetual struggle for power, both of them glorify the idea of self-help. The only difference is that in Waltz's self-help system, "units worry about their survival, and the worry conditions their behavior" (1986: 102) to co-act while still maintaining a measure of independence. In Morgenthau, however, the fierceness of the struggle does not guarantee anyone's security. We shall now turn to a critique of both Waltz's and Morgenthau's conception of power.

First, the extreme prominence Morgenthau gives to power makes his conception of IR myopic. He distinguishes between actions of a political nature (which takes into consideration power) and actions that are of some legal, economic, humanitarian or cultural nature. Yet, every action a state takes is of a political nature as the "political" does not only encapsulate the "vicissitudes of power"; calling some actions political and

relegating others to the non-political is like removing the limbs of an individual and yet claiming that he is a whole being, and should be able to do what every human being does. Morgenthau gets this wrong. This is not to say that power is not at play on the stage of world affairs, neither does it mean that states are altruistic entities seeking the welfare of all. If power did not exist, we would not have countries divided into first, second and third worlds, neither would we expect that members of one category need to help "the rest". If power was not at play, there would not be an ever-widening North-South divide (see Kacowicz 2007; Bowles, 2005) which has created the "castaways" of development Collier (2007) calls "the bottom billion." But this would not also mean that states are condemned to a perpetual struggle of diverse self-aggrandizing interests. While the UN and its affiliated agencies do not adequately perform the role of a universal, "truly governmental" power, the fact that the 192 states that make up the body have not abrogated it means there might be some value in cooperation or interdependence at the international level, which derives from mutual instead of self-interest.

Second, Waltz' focus on the state and causes of war is reductionist in terms of level of analysis, so is Morgenthau's idea of where power lies in the international system. The power he frequently refers to is power possessed by nation-states, not other actors that may exist within or outside the state. While he briefly mentions that domestic politics is also characterized by the struggle for power, he does not establish clearly what he means by "domestic". The claim is that actors operating on behalf of the state still work within the broader framework of state-interest and would usually separate the "official" from the "personal". But even beyond these state actors, we can cite examples of international organizations such as Amnesty International, Green Peace, Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, among other nonstate actors who influence world affairs. Thus, reducing the level of analysis to the state renders Morgenthau and Waltz's theory incapable of explaining the role the myriad actors in world affairs play. While the state still holds a good position in world politics, the 1648 Westphalian foundation on which it once stood faces the intercourse of many actors (state and nonstate) who do not only influence as Morgenthau would claim, but also may potentially weaken the pillars of the temple. Although the realist may cite the US invasion of Iraq and "war against terror" as evidence of dominance and international anarchy, the idea that a nonstate actor (al-Qaeda) managed to topple monumental buildings in a so-called powerful state would nullify aspects of their arguments.

Additionally, the use of "international system" in realist thinking is questionable. Waltz (1986: 70) argues that "a system is composed of a structure and of interacting units" and the structure is the system-wide component that makes it possible for one to think of the system as a whole. Yet, he says to be able to make a definition of structure theoretically useful, it has to be delinked from the characteristics of units, their behaviour and their interaction. A system would usually entail "an aggregation of diverse entities united by regular interaction according to a form of control" (cited in Gilpin, 1981: 26). In this way, we can talk of the digestive system, which represents an interaction right from the esophagus through to the rectum. Even from a limited knowledge in biology, it is quite obvious that one cannot remove any of the internal organs that form part of this digestive interface and still maintain it is a functional system; neither can one sufficiently justify the "power relations" between the small and big intestines without recognizing the role the veins, arteries and blood cells play in this interaction. To conceive of units within a structure that is self-enclosed and influential on the composite units without the units reacting to it or to some external factors outside of the structure is short-sighted. In sum, whether it is called a "system" or a "society of states" the argument is still reduced to one level – the state – ignoring other levels that could be incorporated into the analysis. Introducing other levels such as the social, economic, cultural and so forth makes a theory more adaptable to a variety of contexts without necessarily making it a "grand narrative".

Furthermore, Waltz's idea that the domestic is orderly and the international is disorderly is ambiguous. This means that the theory may apply in certain contexts but definitely does not explain the dichotomies of domestic and international politics worldwide. There are many instances where there is what he calls "government" and some kind of a hierarchy, yet order is absent. What would he say of such cases like Somalia where there has not been a formal government for a decade or so? What about Rwanda where, despite the installation of formal government, order has not yet prevailed? In most of these cases formal institutions accepted by all were in place before they retrogressed into disorder, and they have not be able to recuperate as Waltz claims the domestic will. This case basically refutes this statement: "National politics is the realm of authority, of administration, and of law. International politics is the realm of power, of struggle, and of accommodation" (Waltz, 1986: 111). The paradox, however, is that sometimes international affairs is a realm of "relative order" while the domestic could be one of "relative disorder". Relative here means that none of these conditions is permanent, and

we cannot hold any theory constant in its ability to explain these phenomena. Recent developments in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt, and presently Libya) and parts of the Middle East (for instance, Yemen and Syria) show that the domestic can be as anarchic as the international, even when it is perceived that systems and processes of *government*, instead of *governance*, are in place.

### 2.4 The ethical challenge

In the system both Morgenthau and Waltz describe, morality is scarce, if not completely absent. Realism insists "universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation [...]" (Morgenthau, 1973[1948]: 10). It is naive to assume that a diplomat will pursue moral goals as against the national interest since political prudence outweighs issues of morality, further limiting a normative IR theory. As such, there cannot be universality in a complex and diverse world but there is the UN Declaration of Human Rights for instance – an agreement by a large number of countries whom Morgenthau will claim co-exist in a "peaceful conflict". This declaration at least shows the potential for world leaders to agree on some elements of what can be called a moral/ethical standard of living.

My argument is not that morality exists. The point is that there is the need for an acceptable moral code that will limit the use of force or resort to war. If morality was the main issue countries like China, for instance, might not have joined the UN as a result of its track record in human rights abuses: the same would have been the fate of some African states where the absence of rule of law, mass killings and genocides were obvious. Nonetheless, if morality was totally nonexistent states would not offer humanitarian assistance to people from whom they will gain no political or commercial returns. At some point, we might need to move beyond the realists' "doomsaying" to assess the feasibility of a normative IR. Here, the argument is not necessarily for Kant's (1795) idealist perpetual peace because such peace will require a more robust international society or community which seems far-fetched, for now.

In fact, it is the realist critique of morality that appears to be the most apparent (perhaps, 'real') feature of world politics today. While there exist the UN declaration and other statutory documents that speak to some kind of international concerted efforts towards "the universal good", there is still evidence of absolute neglect of "moral" concerns when it comes to foreign policy. We are aware of the claim by Kennan (1985/86)

that "government needs no moral justification, nor need it accept any moral reproach for acting on the basis of them" and also Thucydides' assertion that in anarchy, the strong always wins. These claims derive from the cumbersomeness in defining morality or ethics, yet paying too much attention to Thucydides, as Welch (2003) argues, can be "largely pernicious" because it can potentially limit a conceptualization of "justice", "equality", and "fairness" – if only these words mean anything in actual practice.

This argument does not imply that because it is difficult to think of a universal morality, issues of morality do not apply to IR. To the strong states, morality is a relative term used to suit the particular action they wish to take to secure their interests. A case in point, which has almost become a cliché is IR discussions, is when the US defied all international laws governing sovereignty and noninterference to enter Iraq and then also to Afghanistan after the September 11 terrorist attacks. This even happened in the presence of the UN which is perceived by liberal institutionalists as representing the era of "governance without government" (see Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992; Ruggie, 2004), and thus showing that this architecture of global order is not formidable enough. Waltz (1959) will generalize that a foreign policy based on his third image (the international structure) "is neither moral nor immoral." States in Waltz's international system are regarded as acting units who are pressured by the system to behave in one way or the other in the sense that if, for instance, one state decides to "pare down their military establishment, other states will be able to pursue similar policies" (Waltz, 1959: 161). However, this is hardly the case because states cannot act in a purely rational manner unless they are fully convinced that others will do same. Rationality in such a system is so relative and fragile that no one would want to take chances.

Thomas Hobbes, for instance, saw no such thing as order present in a system with the absence of a superior governing power. According to him, "[…] the bonds of words are too weak to bridle men's ambition, avarice, anger, and other passions, without fear of some coercive power […]." (Hobbes, 2005; 596). For Waltz (1959), it is due to "the absence of truly governmental institutions" that war arises. In this instance, the "element of co-operation and regulated intercourse among states" (Bull, 1977: 41) is limited or even absent, and thus we assume its existence at our peril. This addition to the critique reveals the complexity of world politics and shows that we cannot simply hold on to a fixed and rigid explanation of how states behave or how they will behave in the future, and that no

single theory can claim to know the "truth". But in no way does it delimit the overall argument that has been pursued against (neo)realism so far.

## 3. Conclusion

Like Buzan notes, "power politics … and the dynamics of (in)security do seem to be universally relevant to international relations" (Buzan, 2000: 60). States are often self-interested in their actions, and the absence of a moral code or a universally accepted sovereign power to curb such interests and tendencies can extend this condition to higher, sometimes deplorable, proportions. However, to argue that state interest and power are the central underlying principles of state behaviour is inaccurate since in most cases there are so many interests (other than national) and motivations (other than political) that define the choices and decisions states make.

If considered in entirety, (neo)realism is rigid, deterministic and narrow in its description of the international political reality. Waltz in particular is limited in "his atomistic view of states, his rationalist assumptions about their behaviour and his view that the texture of international politics remains highly constant […]" (Joseph, 2010: 479). From the discussion above, it is clear that while power does not define the totality of state behaviour, there is the expression of power in many forms (military, social, political and economic), mostly by powerful states and especially when it suits their self-interests. However, in the context today's growing interdependence and the increasing role of numerous nonstate actors in international affairs, it would be naive to hold on strongly to realist assumptions and discount multidimensionality, intersectionality and contextuality. Let me note that there have been some attempts to synthesize realism with other theories such as constructivism (see Molloy, 2010) and with liberalism (or pluralism), and Marxism culminating in International Political Economy (see Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998). These are useful configurations but until (neo)realism in itself is able to adapt itself to the changing nature of the discipline, it will remain unprogressive and unable to capture in any greater detail the phenomena that define IR both as a discipline and practice.

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