AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS OF REALISM

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In the attempt to explain and understand international relations, a number of theories have competed for prominence among scholars. Foremost among these is realism, a theory which has evolved from such historical writings as those of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. The ideas of these classical theorists differ in many aspects, as do those of their contemporary advocates, yet it is possible to discern certain congruencies within their work. This enables the creation of a school of thought to which the realist label can be applied. The main assumptions of realism have been widely criticised for their weak foundations, their ‘ethical poverty’, and their over-emphasis on such poorly defined concepts as power and national interest. Despite these charges, realism continues to receive much interest from the academic community and beyond. As Hedley Bull has noted, its «doctrines... profoundly affected a whole generation of students... [T]he lessons of the realists have to be learnt afresh by every new generation» (quoted in Smith 1986:21). Despite its flaws, realism raises many important questions; furthermore, it has generated a number of important insights into international relations. For these reasons, the study of realism continues to be relevant, and it is thus that this paper will delineate and critique the major assumptions of realist theory.

When evaluating the role played by realist theory in terms of understanding international relations, it is necessary to first question the purpose of theory. In his book, Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger, Michael Smith asks:

Must an adequate theory generate testable hypotheses, with its propositions rigorously, even deductibly, related, so that prediction, at least under controlled circumstances becomes possible? Or is it enough for a theory to define key questions and concepts, to seek to identify patterns in the behavior of states in history, to try to
understand how and why states act as they do with an awareness that "the more we understand the clearer should be about the limits and uncertainties of prediction?" (1986:219).

To this debate is added the problem of competing images of international relations, and hence disagreement regarding the nature of international relations theory. As Inis Claude has noted:

...it is unfortunately true that there exists no well-defined body of systematic thought which clearly deserves that rather dignified title. The theory of international relations is as yet a thing of shreds and patches" (1962:8).

A solution to this debate is thus beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is important to keep this point in mind throughout the following analysis, and to assess realism's contribution to this debate. By examining the main assumptions of realism, the point is not only to determine their validity but also to evaluate their usefulness in terms of creating an employable theory of international relations.

Initially, it is important to qualify what is meant in this paper by the term realism. A wide variety of authors with sometimes very distinct viewpoints have all been labelled realists, and thus it is with some hesitation that the term is applied. Yet for the purposes of analysis, criticism, and so forth, some simplification is necessary; but one must be wary of over simplification. Within realist writings it is possible to draw out several themes which reoccur, and it is with these common strains that this paper will be concerned. With this caveat then, the main assumptions of realism are: state-centricity; the state as a unitary, rational actor; the notion of power; the primacy of national security issues; and the emphasis on structure. As a final note, the paper will consider the criticism levied against realism's alleged "ethical poverty". This should by no means be construed as an exhaustive list but rather one suitable for analysis.

Since realist analysis focuses on the actions of states, the state-centricity assumption is one of the most fundamental. This assumption stems from the realist belief that "the important unit of social life is the collectivity and that in international politics the only really important collective actor is the state (Smith 1986:219). Admittedly, the notion of the state is an
abstraction; but it receives its expression from the individuals which compose it, and thus can be treated as if it were a concrete reality.

In addition to being the most important collective actor, states are also sovereign entities which recognise no authority above themselves. Waltz has explained this quality as follows:

To say that states are sovereign is not to say that they can do as they are free of other’s influence, that they are able to get what they want... To say that a states is sovereign means that it decides for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems, including whether or not to seek assistance from others and in doing so to limit its freedom by making commitments to them” (1979:96).

This description is in line with the realist claim that international relations take place within a state of anarchy. Used in this fashion, anarchy means only that there is no supreme authority, that there is no set hierarchy among states. This is not to say that there is necessarily chaos or disorder. As Waltz explains, “While states retain their autonomy, each stands in a specifiable relation to the others. They form some sort of order…” (1979:100). Order does in fact exist, but it is not fixed; order is constantly changing or it has the possibility to change.

This assumption has been widely criticised for the lack of attention paid to non-state actors and transnational actors. With the rise in influence and power of such bodies as the United Nations and multinational corporations, critics claim that realists are ignoring a very vital component of international relations. The immediate response to this criticism is that realism does not deny the existence of non-state actors; rather, it relegates them to secondary importance. As Keohane notes: «Understanding the general principles of state action and the practices of governments is a necessary basis for attempts to refine theory or to extend the theory to non-state actors» (1986b:159). Waltz’s rebuttal to this criticism is twofold. First he states that the emphasis on states is based on the fact that they are the major actors in international relations, not the only actors. Secondly, Waltz claims that any effective non-state actors are those which have themselves «acquired some of the attributes and capabilities of states, as did the medieval papacy in the era of Innocent III» (1979:88). Moreover, Waltz states: «It is important to consider the nature of transnational movements, the extent of their pene-
tration, and the conditions that make it harder or easier for states to control them» (1979:95). Although he acknowledges the importance of non-state actors, his view of their role is subjugated by his belief in state-centricity. That is, he considers the role of non-state actors but always in relation to their effect on the actions of states. The outcome of his research, then, will obviously favour the primacy of states because this is the view he holds to begin with.

At this point a word on the role of facts and values in international relations theory is in order. Although realism has attempted to postulate a «value-free» theory, based on the model of the objective, natural sciences, it can easily be shown that this is impossible. In her book, *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, May Brodbeck has written:

Values... intrude into even the most austere attempts at objectivity at two points in our investigations. First, they determine the subject matter we select for study, and, secondly, they influence our judgement about the cause of a specific event (1968:80).

Because men’s actions result from intention (rather than the occurrence of natural phenomena due to natural law) we can never know precisely what influenced and/or caused their behaviour. We can only infer based on what information we are aware of, and this process of inference is subject to value-laden judgements. If inference is the best that can be done, then it must be accepted but not without a warning regarding its subjectivity.

The second assumption to be dealt with is that which claims that states are unitary, rational actors. For purposes of analysis, realists assume that the state speaks with one voice, and any internal disputes are resolved before a foreign policy is implemented. Secondly, the state is said to be rational in that it evaluates policy options according to a cost-benefit analysis in which its preferences are clearly prioritised. Thus the policy which maximises the state’s interests is chosen. Morgenthau explains the concept of rationality in terms of the notion that governments “have consistent, ordered preferences, and that they calculate the costs and benefits of all alternative policies in order to maximize their utility in light of both of those preferences and of their perceptions of the nature of reality” (Keohane 1986a:11). While this conception is not incorrect, it is also not necessarily true.
The model of decision making used by Morgenthau is that of the rational actor, a model which does apply to some decision making situations. But there is great debate over which decision making theory is more appropriate. For example, the bureaucratic politics model has recently been seen as more likely to be valid (1). In this model decisions are a result of complex interaction and bargaining between various individuals and organisations involved in the decision making process. The result is thus not necessarily the best alternative but more likely the best compromise; that is, able to satisfy the greatest number of participants. Hence the term satisficing has been accorded more validity than Morgenthau’s conception of maximising (2). The bureaucratic politic model also contradicts the realist notion of the state as a unitary actor; it sees the state as disaggregated into competing components, which is complementary with the pluralist notion of international relations.

Keohane argues that assumptions of maximising rationality may lead to incorrect observations:

This objection [to maximising rationality] is reinforced by recent findings that satisficing or near rational behavior at the unit level can produce substantially different system level outcomes than those characteristic of maximizing rationality... Conceptions of satisficing or near rationality open up the possibility of constructing systemic theories of world politics that do not rely on the implausible unit-level assumption of perfect rationality built into classical microeconomics (1986a:13).

In response to such criticisms, Morgenthau acknowledged that rationality was not always a valid assumption, but that it:

Serves a valuable theoretical function. With it the analyst can infer actions from interests, and thereby construct an explanatory theory of behavior. Against the baseline provided by the theory’s prediction, we can ask how ‘imperfections’ caused by misperceptions, a lack

(1) There exists a number of other models which may provide greater insights, but in the interests of time and space only the bureaucratic model will be considered.

(2) However, the notion of satisficing makes assumptions about power which are contradictory to the claims of the critics of realism, as will be shown later.
of information, bargaining perversities, or even sheer irrationality could have made actual patterns of behavior diverge from our expectations (Keohane 1986a:12).

Keohane, in a criticism levelled not only at the rationality assumption but also at the realist emphasis on systemic forces, explained why the rationality assumption is essential to realism:

The link between system structure and actor behavior is forged by the rationality assumption, which enables the theorist to predict that leaders will respond to the incentives and restraints imposed by their environments. Taking rationality as a constant permits one to attribute variations in state behavior to variations in characteristics of the international system (1986b:167).

Otherwise, factors internal to states would have to be relide upon, which would be at odds with the central concept of system and structure. The realist defense of this assumption lies partly in their reliance on systemic forces (which will be dealt with later in the paper) and partly in their claims to parsimony. A theory which had to deal with the internal factors of states as well as the external environment loses its parsimony. Yet it is clear that the realist avoidance of domestic forces is a debilitating one.

From the rationality and unitary assumptions we can proceed to the concept of power, one of the key elements of realism. Most realists have a pessimistic view of human nature which posits “a search for power and security as a fundamental human motivation” (Smith (4) 1986:219). By extension, then, the state, as a human collective, is also fundamentally concerned with power, a condition which is exacerbated by the anarchical nature of international relations: without a supreme authority there is nothing to govern or regulate the competition for power. Moreover, it is this very

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(4) To be fair, Waltz rejects this notion. In his book, Man, the State, and War (1959), the notes that pessimists wrongly «pin the blame on one or a small number of behavior traits» (p. 39). He further states that, «human nature is so complex that it can justify every hypothesis we may entertain» (p. 40). For his part, Waltz sees he search for power as a response to systemic forces.
anarchy which is a source of conflict: states must resort to force to protect or pursue their interests in the absence of an international governing body. As Waltz claims, states continually seek to maximise their power. Power is thus a key concept in realist analysis because it is the basis of state behaviour. Moreover, the combination on the power and rationality assumptions provide the analyst with a state's utility function, from which inferences about state behaviour can be made. As Keohane notes:

The Realist definition of interests in terms of power and position is like the economist's assumption that firms seek to maximize profits: it provides the utility function of the actor. Through these assumptions, actor characteristics become constant rather than variable, and systemic theory becomes possible (1986:167).

Keohane has acknowledged the importance of the realist focus on power and interests as contributing to an understanding of how nations deal with one another (1987:127). As Morgenthau has stated, «International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim (1968:97).

The realist notion of power suffers from a number of ills, first among them being definitional ambiguities. As the literature lacks consensus, power is defined both statically and dynamically: statically, as the sum of a nation's capabilities, or as capabilities relative to those of other states; and dynamically, in terms of a state's willingness to use these capabilities, and its influence over other states (Viotti & Kauppi 1987:44). Morgenthau differentiates between political power and national power, where the former is "a psychological relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised", and the latter is a function of geography, natural resources, military preparedness, industrial capabilities, population, and so forth (Morgenthau 1968:27).

The difficulties of defining power are compounded by the difficulties of measuring it. If power is the sum of a nation's capabilities, then how does one weigh each capability? Which is more important, military or economic power? Moreover, how does one compare these capabilities to those of other states? Although some methods of measurement have been suggested, there is yet to develop any sort of consensus on the matter.
There also exists confusion over whether power is an end or a means. Morgenthau claims it is both: power may be an end in itself or a means to achieve such ends as economic, political, territorial, religious, and so forth (1968:97). This, however, contributes little to an understanding of how nations formulate foreign policy goals, or how that power is translated into a certain goal.

The fungibility of power is highly problematic for there is no theoretical mechanism for the translation of acquired power in one area to the accumulation of power overall, or to the attainment of specific goals. For reasons of parsimony, realists often claim that power is homogeneous and fungible. In his book, *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz asserts:

States, because they are in a self-help system, have to use their combined capabilities in order to serve their interests. The economic, military, and other capabilities of nations cannot be sectored and separately weighed. States are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on *all* of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (1979:147).

Power fungibility is necessary for parsimony, as Keohane notes: «on the basis of a single characteristic of the international system (overall power capabilities), multiple inferences can be drawn about actor behavior and outcomes» (1986b: 167).

But the fungibility claim can be easily disproven through examination of such events as the American experience in Vietnam or Arab control over oil production. In both cases the loser in the struggle was the greater power of the two. According to the fungibility assumption, the greater power should prevail based on its ability to translate power from one issue area to another. Yet this is infrequently the case (Keohane 1987: 147-149). Thus Keohane suggests two possible solutions to the problem.

(1) Assuming fungibility of power, discrepancies between power resources and outcomes can be explained by determining a motivational component. That is, where the weaker party triumphs, it may be able to explain this according to the relative importance attached to the issue by both sides. But
this is degenerate, that is, must be done after the fact. Thus, to «use this insight progressively rather than in a degenerate way, Realist theory needs to develop indices of intensity of motivation that can be measured independently of the behavior that theories are trying to explain» (1987: 149).

(2) Alternatively, the fungibility assumption could be relaxed, in which case the result would be that certain states possess greater power in certain issue-areas than other states, though the former may be overall weaker than the latter. With this method it becomes easier to determine a state's relative strength as well as its goals.

The assumption that states seek to maximise power is also questionable. Waltz asserts that states «at a minimum, seek their own preservation, and at a maximum, drive for universal domination» (1979: 118). The maximisation assumption is necessary to the parsimoniousness of the theory, for «if we assumed only that states 'sometimes' or 'often' sought to aggrandize themselves... we would have to ask about competing goals, some of which would be generated by the internal social, political, and economic characteristics of the countries concerned» (Keohane 1986b: 174). This would be in opposition to realism's claim that states' actions are determined by systemic forces, not domestic ones. In this case, realism would be demoted to the status of a partial theory.

Central to the notion of power is the concept of the balance of power, a term which has been widely criticised for its ambiguous usage. The term generally refers to an equilibrium among states, yet the literature is unclear as to whether this equilibrium is an inherent characteristic of the state system arising as a result of systemic forces or whether it can be manipulated by statesmen. Adherents of the first view have been labeled determinists, while those theorists advocating the second are referred to as voluntarists.

On the determinist side, one finds such theorists as Morgenthau and Waltz, although neither are particularly clear about the issue. In Politics Among Nations, Morgenthau states:

The aspirations for power on the part of nations, each trying either to maintain or overthrow the status quo leads of necessity to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it (1968: 161).
Although Morgenthau initially reveals a determinist attitude, in the same breath he asserts that statesmen will pursue policies aimed at preserving the balance of power, thereby giving credibility to the voluntarist argument. For his part, Waltz states that an equilibrium will inevitably result from the interactions of states who are motivated by considerations of power. He states that the balance of power theory «is built up from the assumed motivations of states and the actions that correspond to them. It describes the constraints that arise from the system that those actions produce, and it indicates the expected outcome: namely, the formation of balances of power» (1979: 118). Thus Waltz argues that a balance of power is a systemic tendency over which statesmen have little control.

On the other hand, the mechanistic quality of this theory has been criticized by those who believe that statesmen do play a role in affecting international events. Such theorists as Kissinger belong to this group, whose members claim that statesmen deliberately choose to pool their capabilities to repel the advances of a state or group of states which threaten international stability. The balance of power in this sense is a tool wielded by statesmen to prevent to dominance of any one nation over another.

The debate between these two interpretations is exacerbated by further competing claims regarding the nature of the balance of power. Ernst Haas has outlined eight distinct meanings of the term, and Martin Wight has discovered nine (Waltz 1979: 117). Inis Claude, in his book Power and International Relations refers to the balance of power as an equilibrium; a disequilibrium (balance in one country’s favour); the current power configuration; a policy (the policy of balancing); a struggle or competition for power; and as a system (1962: 13-21). The result of this unresolved debate is that one of the most central components of realist theory is a deplorably ambiguous and therefore virtually useless term.

Closely related to power is the realist assumption that on the international agenda, security issues are primary. Since the pursuit of power has been posited by realists at the main goal of states, security against this challenge must thus also be advocated. The argument then proceeds that security against threats from other states is necessary for a state to survive and offer benefits to its citizens. Security is thus a prerequisite to all other goods. Critics charge that realists wrongly ignore other goals of states and that military-security issues no longer dominate the agenda of international politics.
The realist response to this accusation is twofold: first, that realism does not ignore the existence of other goals but rather places them behind that of security; second, that it is the relative security of the past forty-five years that has led to an increase in the importance of other pursuits, be they economic, ecological, moral or the like. But in order for these goals to receive attention, security must be first assured. Security remains an issue of primacy, but because it is not immediately threatened it only appears to be of lesser importance; in other words, realists would argue that states in the 1980s take their security for granted. This argument does little to answer the challenge posed to this assumption; the realist neglect of issues other than military-security ones remains an unanswered criticism of realism.

The importance accorded to structure by the realist school which has been touched on briefly will now be dealt with in a more thorough manner. Although the emphasis on structure can be seen in most realist writings, it is more common in modern realism, which has also been called structural realism or neorealism. Kenneth Waltz can be seen as one of the most influential writers on this subject, and certainly his book *Theory of International Politics* has been the source of lengthy debates. Although Waltz’s explanation of structure and its effects is highly complicated, a simplified description will suffice for our purposes of analysis. For Waltz structure is the key to any useful theory of international relations. He states that: «the structure of a system is generated by the interactions of its principal parts», which in this case are states. (1979: 72). Although it cannot be seen, the structure works as a constraint on states’ actions affecting state behaviour «through socialization of the actors and through competition among them.» In this case, when states A and B interact, each «is not just influencing the other; both are being influenced by the situation their interaction creates» (1979: 74). Thus structure is important because the situational context, through constraints and incentives, affects state behaviour. In this sense structure can be seen as an intervening variable between states’ actions and their outcomes.

For a good systemic theory (as Waltz proposes to give), system-level and unit-level variables must be clearly delineated. To distinguish between the two, «[d]efinitions of structure must leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units, their behavior, and their interactions» (1979: 79). This achieves a positionel picture of society which does not include states’ attributes or behaviours. Structure is defined according to the arrangement of states in relation to one another, which is determined by power capabilities. As Waltz
notes: «The units of an anarchic system are functionally undifferentiated. The units of such an order are then distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks» (1979: 79).

The notion of structure, like that of power, is plagued by a great number of definitional ambiguities: is structure created by interstate relations, or by the distribution of capabilities? Waltz claims to describe structure without reference to the characteristics of the units, yet are capabilities not a characteristic? To this query waltz replies,

Although capabilities are attributes of units, the distribution of capabilities across units is not. The distribution of capabilities is not a unit attribute, but rather a system-wide concept (1979: 98).

His response is murky as he does not explain how the distribution of capabilities is a systemic attribute.

Furthermore structure is also found to be an incomplete indicator of state behaviour. Snyder and Diesing's attempts to explain state behaviour through the application of game theory within an explicit structural context have proven that structure is not enough to determine states' behaviour (Keohane 1987: 141). Although structure affects states' actions, variables internal to states—like problems of perception and group decision making—are also important. But realism fails to deal with such factors. This compartmentalisation of domestic and international environments robs the theory of its explanatory and predictive power.

This problem has been dealt with to some extent by realists such as Waltz and Gilpin who recognise that interests cannot always be derived from the position of states and their capabilities. They have thus retreated to what Keohane terms a «fall-back position»; «that is, given state interests, whose origins are not predicted by the theory, patterns of outcomes in world politics will be determined by the overall distribution of power among states» (1986b: 183). In this way the realists have attempted to patch up one of the greatest weaknesses in their theory by stating that they are not responsible for it.

Recognising the importance of systemic theory to understandig international politics yet finding Waltz’s contribution unsatisfactory, Keohane proposes a number of revisions. First, he recommends that greater attention be paid to the domestic factors internal to states by incorporating «better theories
of domestic politics, decision-marking, and information processing, so that the gap between the external and internal environments can be bridged in a systematic way» (1987: 153). Such an integration between international and domestic structural theories would greatly increase the theory's predictive powers.

Secondly Keohane suggests that rather than one overarching structure (as Waltz proposes) there exists a number of structures determined by issue-area. This proposal would also require the acceptance of his earlier stated belief that power is essentially infungible. Thus while system and structure are important to international relations theory, realism's treatment of these concepts is incomplete.

As a final note, it is appropriate to address realism's lack of normative content, or its «ethical poverty» (Melakopides 1989). For most realists, moral considerations play little if any role in international politics. The application of ethics to politics is seen as a trifling if not dangerous notion which may lead statesmen awry by painting a picture more bright than reality; for although reality may be less than the desired state of affairs, we are nonetheless forced to deal with this reality. Realists cite the mistakes of the interwar period as an example of the dangers of idealism.

It is this very notion that is at the heart of realist criticism: an acceptance of the status quo to the point of rejecting any alternatives makes realists guilty of propounding a self-fulfilling prophecy. Realism envisions the world system as unchangeable, almost as if the current system of international organisation is the 'proper' or 'true' situation. By focusing on the nation-state as the main actor, realism perpetuates the state system. As Viotti and Kauppi note:

By describing the world in terms of violence, duplicity, and war, and then providing advice to statesmen as to how statesmen should act, such realists are justifying one particular conception of international relations (1987: 61).

Realism fails to provide alternatives to the current dismal situation. Although realism raises the question as to how peaceful change may occur, it does not attempt to answer it but rather seems content with formulations for its continuance.

From their earliest writings realists have attempted to deny the role of ethics in politics. As Thucydides notes, « in international politics only the
weak resort to moral argument» (quoted in Smith 1986:7). Morgenthau and Neibuhr assume that «there is a tragic and uncloseable gap between ethics and politics... [The] tension between the two aspirations, for power and for virtue, is an ‘irresolvably’ tragedy» (Hare & Joynt 1982: 34). The separation of politics and morality insisted on by such theorists is their fatal mistake: for the two planes are uncontrollably intertwined. Every time a statesman makes a choice, he is exercising his value judgement by choosing one path or alternative over another. As Michael Banks points out: «Factual statements blend in with value judgements; preferences intrude despite the best efforts of scholars to maintain their objectivity» (1984: 4). According to Keohane, realism’s inability to recognise this value choice is based on its utilitarian, «positivist commitment to technical rationality and the dichotomy between scientific knowledge and values» (1986a: 19). This dichotomy, as argued above, is unnatural; thus one of realism’s major philosophical underpinnings loses its credibility.

The criticisms of realism as outlined in this paper are multiple; but many of them could be rectified through minor revisions and methodological adjustments — all except the final consideration. The absence of normative thought in realist theory condemns the world to pessimism and conflict. Axel Dorsch and Gregg Lagare address the issue as follows:

insofar as perception ‘creates’ the world we live in, the realist worldview may act to create the type of world in which policy-makers, journalists and citizens claim they must operate. While on one level it is arguable that the power politics view of the world is only an acknowledgement of the reality ‘out there’ in another sense this argument is inadequate because the worldview itself has a role in creating that reality through its effect on the interpretations, norms and expectations that people form of world events. It also heavily affects the discourse and language used in discussions of international politics and foreign policy (1986: 8).

A way out of the trap must be found. Realism alone will not provide the solution; at the same time, normative theory without a realist base will not succeed either. It is at this point that we can evaluate realism’s contribution to debate on theory, discussed above. Realism asks valuable questions necessary for the formulation of a workable theory of international relations. Where
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it fails, however, is in its inability to answer any of these questions. This is the realm of normative theory, which through the use of 'ought' propositions enables us to create at least some tentative ways out of the 'trap'. The two theories are not mutually exclusive, as some have claimed. Rather, they complement each other. Advocates of both paradigms must remember that «peace and power are closely linked» (Dorscht & Lagare 1986: 6).

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