

CAN REALISM EXPLAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN GLOBAL POLITICS?

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the question of whether realist IR theory can explain the importance of non-state actors in global politics, through the exploration of the ability of a variety of realist schools of thought to explain the role, and thus the importance, of domestic political actors, financial institutions and the structure of global economy more generally, and international institutions. It initially touches upon the fact that, while some realist schools of thought have a much clearer conceptualisation of the roles of non-state actors in global politics, other realist scholars often employ explanations from other theories and blend it with their understanding of realist theory. It then includes an acknowledgement that neoclassical realist scholars have, however, made a concerted effort to include considerations of domestic-level actors in influencing the course of international politics. It mentions that, on the contrary, for neorealists such as Mearsheimer, politics and economics are treated as separate entities and so an understanding of the importance of financial institutions is not of concern to realists of this school. Finally, it contends that structural and classical realists have varying understandings of the importance of international institutions. This general lack of coherence among the variations of realism is found to be an indication of the fact that realist theory at its core is so state-centric that its theorists struggle to come to terms with a clear conception of non-state actors' role in global politics.

KEYWORDS: *Realism; non-state actors; neorealism; state centrism; international organisations; global economy*

INTRODUCTION

Different kinds of non-state actors possess varying degrees of power and they serve diverse functions. Therefore, this essay will discuss three categories of non-state actors- domestic actors, economic institutions, and international organisations.

The essay begins by examining how realists do not address the intersection of domestic and international politics in terms of political movements. It will then turn to the problem of a lack of consensus within the realist schools concerning the extent to which economics, and thus financial institutions, are relevant to realist analyses of international politics. Finally, it will examine the differing views of the schools of thought within realism regarding the importance of international institutions in global politics, and thus how they fail to provide a clear, coherent approach.

DOMESTIC ACTORS

Neoclassical realists have striven to argue that explaining the importance of individual domestic actors is of vital importance to ensuring that realism persists as a relevant comprehensive theoretical paradigm (Schmidt, 2004: 430). They insist that systemic factors are not enough to explain global politics, and that instead realism must supplement those with theoretical considerations on the micro level. However, these considerations are, for neoclassical realists, intrinsically linked with the behaviour of the state. Schmidt (2004), for example, does not consider how domestic actors might also be linked to transnational movements, isolating them in their involvement with state actions. One must be cognisant of how interconnected domestic and international revolutions can be. In fact, states do monitor not only the foreign policies of other states, but also their own domestic developments, as well as global trends emerging through international movements, which all affect the state of global politics.

Gilpin invokes the idea of realism's understanding

of global politics as being characterised through group mentality. He acknowledges changes within the state as being the result of the development of “a coalition of coalitions”; i.e., domestic non-state actors may be able to influence a particular society's foreign policy and security discourse (1981: 18-19). While this is a valid point, this idea could be expanded to include the fact that domestic developments may not often remain so and can transform into global trends in political thought, thus impacting the international political landscape in a more meaningful way. This oversight is likely a result of the tendency of realist scholars to not only disregard the impact of the domestic sphere on international politics, but also to separate the realms of domestic and international, demonstrating realism's narrowness and rigidity regarding non-state actors in global politics (Rosenberg, 1990: 292).

GLOBAL ECONOMY

This rigidity is not only limited to the domestic/international divide, but it also concerns the different kinds of power that are sought, or balanced against, in international politics. The separation of the domestic and the international can transcend into other territories, such as the economic realm. The separation of domestic and international politics can cause realists to disregard ‘domestic non-state processes’, such as economic trends, which can have consequences on an international scale. For example, some realists, such as Mearsheimer (2001), explicitly separate politics and economics. These assertions allow us to piece together how realists understand the role of non-state actors within the economic realm, such as financial institutions and international institutions that govern the economic sphere. If neorealists like Mearsheimer treat economics as a separate entity to global politics, how can it be argued that realism in its most fundamental form could explain the role of non-state actors in the economic sphere? Carr also failed to explain the importance of non-state actors

in the economic realm, asserting that governments have a monopoly on the control of the flow of capital, neglecting the roles of financial institutions and international organisations (Rosenberg, 1990: 288). In this regard, Rosenberg further argues that realists generally see the economy as the domain of state control, rather than a global structure which is maintained and altered by a variety of different actors within it, and which influence each other's behaviours (Rosenberg, 1990: 287).

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The most comprehensive and detailed understanding of non-state actors within a realist framework is provided regarding international organisations; however, the different schools within realism have been unable to build a consensus on their importance within global politics, both across schools and within them. At the foundational level, many structural realists argue that international institutions limit state's behaviour in attempting to reach their desired objectives; whereas classical realists see international institutions as playing both an inhibiting and empowering role (Schweller and Priess, 1997). Classical realists assert that powerful states may be more inclined to pursue more ambitious objectives - especially in controlling regional as well as global structures - as a result of the configurations that international organisations provide, which allows them to become more hegemonic than would be possible without them (Schweller and Priess, 1997: 3). However, the two schools of thought also differ on how institutions play a role in a bipolar system. Schweller and Priess (1997: 12) argue that only classical realism could explain the tenacity of seemingly outdated institutions in a bipolar system, e.g., the persistence of NATO in the 1990s. They argue that when the circumstances that have called for the establishment of an international institution in the past are no present, the institution may begin to deteriorate. But this may not be the case if the

has formed a collective mentality or identity through the formulation of the institution (Priess, 1996). In these circumstances, the institution will have concentrated itself on more general threats that may arise in the future, transcending the circumstances from which it was born (Schweller and Priess, 1997: 3). However, structural realists contend that all institutions are likely to disintegrate at some point, depending on the structure of global politics of the time (Schweller and Priess, 1997: 3), signifying that structural realists do not necessarily see international institutions as a centrepiece of global politics. It also points toward their view of international institutions being so numerous in today's international politics as only a facet of the current era of global politics.

The realists that argue that international institutions are not so important are thus more likely to be structural realists. For example, Waltz (1979) asserted that institutions are not intrinsically important and that they have a limited effect on states' foreign policy. Mearsheimer (1994: 7) has gone further, declaring that there is no evidence that international institutions have an independent effect on state behaviour. Therefore, they do not necessarily create an atmosphere of stability. He argued that this is because powerful states manipulate these institutions, and would thus coerce weaker states in much the same way as they would if international institutions simply did not exist (Mearsheimer, 1994: 7). He also advanced the need for neorealists to provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate instances of cooperation would not transpire without the existence of international institutions (Mearsheimer, 1994: 78).

Some structural realists would also argue that international institutions are only as important as states allow them to be. If a powerful state does not recognise international institutions as furthering their agenda, then they will be abandoned, and other routes will be taken to fulfil their objectives (Glaser, 2003: 411). Glaser uses the example of the United States circumventing the UN when it had

decided to intervene in Kosovo. The United States had initially sought its approval but, when this proved unsuccessful, turned to NATO. In other words, as international institutions do not make up a formal global government, states may well opt to completely evade their approval. Thus, for some structural realists, international institutions are not important actors in and of themselves, they are merely another vehicle through which existing relations are expressed or confirmed (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999: 41).

However, other, modified, structural realists see international institutions as important for four reasons: firstly, they promote stability and peace, preventing the ascendance of hostile, militaristic powers (Snyder, 1991: 136-137). Secondly, for some states, the ability to be accepted into international institutions may be granted if they agree to moderate their militarism and hypernationalism (Hopf, 1992: 138-141). Thirdly, international institutions help to contain nuclear proliferation and to allow better access to deterrents for states in the process of building up their nuclear capabilities (Hopf, 1992: 134-137). Fourthly, international institutions allow less powerful states to become more influential by having an avenue through which to air their concerns and be heard (Grieco and Wallerstein, 1993: 355-338). Therefore, modified structural realists view international institutions as an important medium through which changes in the structure of global politics can be brought about, specifically providing a more level playing field for states of differing potencies.

Classical realists would agree with modified structural realists that international institutions are important in that they adjust global political structures and how states interact with one another (Schweller and Priess, 1997: 10). On the other hand, several prominent classical realists came to view international institutions as the protectors of the international status quo, managing and sustaining the post-Second World

War order (Schweller and Priess, 1997: 12). Schweller and Priess (1997: 11) argue that classical realists such as Carr and Morgenthau accepted that the role of international organisations established following the Second World War aimed to set and maintain a world order that was favourable to the interests of the victors of that war, and actively sought to exclude the interests of the defeated or weak states. Morgenthau especially expressed the point that these institutions were tied to international law, not only setting the norms but also formal rules of international politics (Morgenthau, 1985: 53-54). Therefore, in the analyses of classical realists, international institutions are vital to examine modern international relations as a result of their significance in establishing a global status quo.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, realism generally does not provide a definitive understanding of the importance of non-state actors in global politics. This is because it lacks analyses of the interconnectedness of state behaviour with domestic and international political movements and trends. Some realists also fail to explain the importance of financial institutions because of the separation of economics and international politics. The differing schools of thought within realism neither agree on international institutions' importance to the course of global politics, nor on the ways in which they might be significant. Structural realists see international organisations as having a limited impact on the state of global politics as the international political structure is constructed despite them, and states may choose to bypass them if it suits their interests. Modified structural realists understand the role of international institutions to be much more important, as they have asserted that international institutions have a power balancing effect. Classical realists argue that the role of international institutions is primarily to maintain the global political status quo of powerful states. The fact that these analyses of international institutions vary so widely indicates that realism does not have enough

of a coherent framework from which realist scholars can approach the question of the importance of non-state actors.

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