

POLI 212

Introduction to International Politics

Session 4– Theories of World Politics-Realism,
Constructivism and Feminism

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Session Overview

– Overview

- In this session and the next, we will look at the theories that shape world politics.
- There are two dominant theories in international politics which are Realism and Liberalism. Other theories we will discuss in this course are Constructivism, Feminism and Marxism. Both Realism and Liberalism have versions that we will also look at.
- This session specifically will look at Realism, Feminism and Constructivism.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: Realism
- Topic Two: Constructivism and Feminism

Reading List

- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. International Politics: The Beginner's Guide- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana. Chapter 2
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. World Politics: Trend and Transformation, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning. Chapter 2.
- Kelly-Kate Pease, 2003. International Organizations: Perspectives on Governance in the 21st century, 2nd edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Chapters 1-4.

Topic One

REALISM



Realism

Scholars and practitioners of international relations commonly accept that theories are very important in studying the actions and inactions of states, intergovernmental organizations, and other non-state entities in the international system.

Theories are sets of statements or hypotheses that provide explanations for real-world events or phenomena.

Theories make the effort to provide possible and probable explanations for the actions of states and major developments in international relations.

For example, theories try to explain why Hitler allegedly preempted World War II, or why some countries still spend a sizeable percentage of their GDP on defense when there are no apparent great power rivalries in the international system.



Realism (Contd.)

- Realism, also called political realism, classical realism and realpolitik, has been the dominant line of thinking by scholars in international relations. Scholars of this tradition are known as realists.
- As a theory, realism focuses on power politics or the acquisition, maintenance, and exercise of power by countries. Countries and policy actors that subscribe to realism promote power politics or how to dominate other countries in the global system.
- Thucydides (460-401 BC) is the father of realism. Fairly recent philosophers associated with realism are Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1572), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Edward Hallet Carr (1892-1982), and Hans Morgenthau (1891-1976).

Realism (contd.)

- Thucydides wrote *The Peloponnesian War* (the war covered a period of conflict from 431-411 B.C.) in which he examined the use and exercise of power by the city-states of Athens, Sparta, and Melos. He noted in the book that power is the final judge in disputes between the city-states or power determines the city-state that would emerge victorious in a dispute. According to Thucydides, the city-state that was militarily stronger subdued the weaker city-states. In this same book, the father of realism undermined the importance of alliances in the sense that it could encourage states into thinking that they were secured when in reality they were not.
- The Italian statesman from Florence, Niccolo Machiavelli, wrote *The Prince*. In the Prince, Machiavelli talks about the importance of the acquisition, the maintenance and the exercise of power by the Prince (the ruler or the monarch or state leader). He makes it clear that the most important thing is the acquisition of power and that how power is acquired is not really an important issue. For the Prince, issues about justice, morality, right, and wrong are as unimportant as they are unnecessary in the acquisition, maintenance and exercise of power.

Realism (Contd.)

- Machiavelli asked this famous question about the Prince: is it good to be feared or to be loved? He responded that, for the Prince, it is both good to be loved and to be feared, but if the Prince had to choose one it is better to be feared, because both enemies and friends would be extremely cautious in their dealings with the Prince.
- Thomas Hobbes (British philosopher) in *Leviathan* (the giant, ruler or the most powerful person) discussed the state of nature in relation to the condition of man. Using the state of nature to imply a community of people, Hobbes argues that human beings are essentially wicked, selfish, and evil creatures and that life in the state of nature is just like life in the jungle where only the strong survives.
- A famous quote from Hobbes is that, *“the state of nature is continual fear and danger of violent death and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”* Because of this state of nature, Hobbes advocates for a Leviathan or powerful ruler to be able to control the excesses of men. The reason is that human beings are selfish and evil creatures and, when left alone, they would kill one another just like life in the jungle.

Realism (Contd.)

- Scholars of realism have taken the arguments of the above listed philosophers and others to the international level, by noting that, in the international system states want to acquire and maintain power at the expense of others. They have noted that states, especially the great powers, acquire power to accomplish a number of objectives in the international system.
- These objectives may be part of a broader foreign policy to prevent other countries from becoming militarily strong.
- Just as Hobbes and Machiavelli paint a pessimistic and wicked nature of human beings, realists believe that the international system has states with leaders and people that are wicked and selfish. States that seek to control states with leaders that are wicked and selfish must have a stronger military.

Assumptions of Realism

Realism has a number of assumptions that outline the position of realists in the global system:

- The first and perhaps the most important assumption is that states are the most important actors in international relations. Realists recognize that there are several actors in the international system, yet they are convinced that only states are the most important of these actors.
- The implication here is that non-state actors are not really playing any major roles in international politics. For realists, everything about international relations is about states, not non-state actors. Hardcore realists would argue that non-state actors exist at the behest of state actors.
- How can there be an intergovernmental organization without states? Can there be an African Union without the member states of the African Union? Can there be Bill Gates without a state? Realists ask these questions to justify the relevance of only state actors in the global system.

Assumptions of Realism (Contd.)

- Secondly, states are rational actors. By rational actors realists mean that states do cost-benefit analysis before they embark on any policy. Cost-benefit analysis involves calculating the cost of an action and comparing it to the benefits of that action. Once the benefits will exceed the cost then you go ahead with that policy or vice versa. For instance, countries on the brink of attacking other countries will make the case that although we are going to have about 500 casualties; the benefits far outweigh the 500 lives because a dictator will be toppled and democracy will be promoted in that country.
- Another central assumption is that states are unitary actors. Realists argue that states speak with one voice and that there is nothing like conflicting voices from the state. We know that those who make decisions (especially decisions that affect other countries) for states may be many depending on the type of political system. Realists are saying that all of them speak with one voice. Using Nigeria as an example, according to realists, the president (Muhammadu Buhari), the foreign minister, senior officials in the ministry of foreign affairs, defense minister, and other cabinet ministers who matter in foreign policy decision making are unitary actors and that they speak with one voice.

Assumptions of Realism (contd.)

- Realists also assume that morality has no place in the international system. For realists, issues about justice, right and wrong do not play any role in the decision making of states. Thus, if a particular foreign policy by states will lead to the killing or starvation of innocent people, realists will say, as long as their goals will be met there is no problem with the starvation of innocent children and women. There have been many wars in the world and realist scholars and policymakers tend to justify them on the grounds that states do not consider the moral implications of their actions and inactions.
- A further key assumption is that states seek power both as a means to an end and as an end in itself. This means that for states everything is about power, power politics, and *might makes right*. States in the first place want to acquire power to accomplish certain goals and, finally, having the power in itself is very important in the scheme of things of states. For the latter, having the power in terms of military and economic dimensions would suggest that other states would submit to you. Power is the ability of a state to get other states to do certain things they will not do under normal circumstances.

Assumptions of Realism (contd.)

- In addition, they argue that self-help is more important than alliances. Self-help means states defending themselves rather than relying on others for their security. Alliance in realists' terms is when two or more countries combine their military strength. Here realists are not saying alliances are not good for states, but if states can provide for their own security that will be better. For realists, only when self-help is not possible should states use alliances to protect themselves. Both Thucydides and Machiavelli condemned alliances.
- What is more, realists say that the international system is conflictual and that there is no room for cooperation. States act and think in terms of how to dominate and attack other states. This has led to the international system being characterized by conflicts and only the strong survives. Also, because realists say that non-state actors are not important in the global system, they also assume that intergovernmental organizations are not really important in the global system. Generally, realists argue that institutions like the UN, the World Bank and several others do not influence the actions of states. Realists will ascribe importance to them only because great powers use them to further their ambitions in the global system.

Assumptions of Realism (contd.)

- Besides, realists assume that politics determines economics, and that economic strength of countries is important as long as it will enhance their military might. Any economic development that will not promote the military might of the state is thus not relevant in the scheme of the realists. Though realists acknowledge that the state needs a strong economy to be able to strengthen its military, they still maintain that politics is more important than economics.
- Finally, some realists note that the international system is characterized by anarchy. Anarchy implies a state of disorderliness or chaos because there is no one in control. The domestic environment has institutions such as the police to enforce the law; however, the international system does not have any such institutions. Because of this, there is nothing like an international policeman to ensure that states comply with certain directives. States can just choose to attack others and this leads to anarchy or chaos. Realists of this line of thinking make the case that states must always be ready to defend themselves against any state that wants to attack them.

Versions of Realism

- **Structural Realism and Offensive Realism**
- Structural realism and offensive realism are some of the versions of realism in international relations. Structural realism (also called defensive realism or neorealism) is largely associated with the work of Kenneth Waltz (1979) in his seminal book, *Theory of International Politics*.
- The main argument of structural realism is that the international system is anarchic because of the absence of a centralized authority. Structural realists argue that because of this anarchic situation, states must defend themselves against other states. To do this, states must strengthen their military to be ready to defend their countries at all times from aggressor states. Policymakers that believe in defensive realism do not go on the offensive. Rather, they prepare their troops to defend their countries against any country that seeks to destroy them.

Versions of Realism (contd.)

- Offensive realism, largely associated with the work of John Mearsheimer (2001) in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, takes a different dimension in that it calls on countries to be on the offensive to accumulate as much power as possible. Unlike defensive realism that requires states to defend themselves when they are attacked, offensive realism says states should look for opportunities to enhance their power at the expense of other countries.
- States could preempt wars or just attack other countries when they are not even facing any threats. The United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 following allegations that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons is clearly consistent with offensive realism. With offensive realism, once countries perceive that others are arming themselves to fight them; they take the lead in launching military attacks.

Sample questions

- What role did Thucydides and Machiavelli play in the emergence of Realism as a theory?
- What are the key assumptions of Realism?
- Distinguish between offensive realism and defensive realism.

Topic Two

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND FEMINISM



Constructivism

- In recent times constructivism has appeared as a dominant line of theorizing behind realism and liberalism. Constructivism as an approach in international politics means the world is socially-constructed, and that countries focus more on the social aspects of the world rather than the material components of the world.
- By social, constructivists imply the identities, norms (norms spearheaded by intergovernmental organizations, such as countries should protect the rights of vulnerable persons, adoption and use of technology in countries' activities, respecting international law, etc.) and interactions that influence the behavior of countries in the international system.

Constructivism (contd.)

- Moreover, by social, constructivists suggest that when you take the ultimate material capability, nuclear weapons, into consideration, their existence is not really an issue, but the social context that gives meaning to the capability of the nuclear weapons is what matters (Checkel 2008:72).
- For example, US policymakers know that Britain has nuclear weapons but that is not really a big deal, because Americans understand that through a social context of friendship pivoted on shared norms, shared history, and shared alliances.
- Nevertheless, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons will alarm the United States and other western countries because of the social context of the hostile relationship between some western countries and North Korea (Checkel 2008:72; Goldstein and Pevehouse 2007: 119-120).

Feminism

- Feminism has also received attention in the literature on international relations. Feminism takes a different look at international politics. Feminism argues that international relations have been dominated by the themes and issues that concern men to the detriment of women.
- In lieu of this, feminists have noted that issues that concern women and gender in general should be part and parcel of international relations. Feminists have noted that society has confused sex to be the same as gender.
- Accordingly, they argue that sex is a biological matter, while gender has to do with the behavioral traits ascribed to masculinity and femininity, or those socially constructed images of what a man or a woman should be and how they should behave (Shimko 2005:60; Pease 2003).
- Similarly, Niva (1998) has observed that *“gender does not refer to biological differences between men and women but to a set of socially constructed and defined characteristics, meanings, and practices associated with being a man (masculinity) and being a woman (femininity).”*

Feminism (contd.)

- In addition, society has assigned more respect and value to the traits associated with men than that of women, to the extent that a woman who shows behaviors typically associated with men is embraced as having overcome femininity.
- On the other hand, a man who displays feminine behavior will be described as soft or weak in the society. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, as prime minister of Britain, was confrontational, combative, and competitive, but she was generally seen as a great leader though these behaviors are associated with masculinity (Shimko 2005).
- Shimko (61) again argues that masculine and feminine traits are defined in opposition to one another-for example, *“if men are competitive, women are cooperative, if men are aggressive, women are peaceful, if men are rational, women are irrational, and if women are nurturing, men are emotionally distant.”*

Types of Feminism

1. Liberal or traditional feminism treats both men and women as equal, and that women are equally well equipped to serve in positions of power in their countries.
2. Standpoint feminists (also called neofeminism or essentialist feminism) note that there are differences between men and women in terms of biology. And, because of these differences, men and women approach issues from different angles.
3. Finally, postmodern feminists are of the view that *“notions of masculinity and femininity as socially constructed are important, but they see these norms as unstable and alterable”* (Shimko 2005: 63).

Assumptions of Feminism

- The first is that gender matters, and the social meanings of gender are essential for understanding international politics. Gender expands the reach of international politics to include the role of women. For instance, in times of war, women play roles that are assigned to men, such as being soldiers, guerillas, heads of states, ambassadors, and reporters. They can also be found in traditionally female roles such as mothers, nurses, prostitutes, and pacifists. Other areas where gender is significant but yet to be addressed are the relationship between sex and violence, the role of rape in war, and the dire consequences of war for women and children.
- Another assumption is that international politics is characterized by patriarchy. This means international relations is dominated by men. Take a look at those in charge of state institutions like the courts, the executive, the legislature, the police, and universities. The same applies to international organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental (including business organizations that have branches in several countries). Dominance by men in these institutions, according to feminists, has injected biases toward masculine values and behaviors. The men tend to promote policies that are consistent with their worldviews.

Assumptions of Feminism (contd.)

- Finally, international issues are ranked in gendered manner. There are issues that are considered feminine-education, health, poverty, the environment, and justice-occupy low positions on the international agenda.
- However, the themes or issues that concern men are central in the international system, and they are constantly on the international agenda. Examples are international security, acquisition of nuclear weapons, war, and defense. The international community frequently cannot raise the money to address the issues that are treasured by the feminine.

Sample questions

- State three assumptions of feminism.
- Discuss the importance of feminism.
- What is constructivism?
- How practical is constructivism as a theory in global politics?



Conclusion of Session Four

- In this session, you have been introduced to some of the theories of world politics. You should now be familiar with realism, structural realism, offensive realism, feminism, and constructivism
- The next session will introduce you to liberalism and Marxism.



References

- Joseph Nye Jr. (2007) Understanding International Conflicts: an introduction to theory and history.
- Kelly-Kate Pease (2003). International Organizations: perspectives on governance in the 21st century 2nd edition.
- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. International Politics: The Beginner's Guide- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana. Chapter 2
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. World Politics: Trend and Transformation, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning. Chapter 2
- Shimko, Keith (2005) International Relations: Perspectives and Controversies, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston USA.

