Realism and International Relations

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Contents

1 The realist tradition

One might imagine that defining an old and well-established theory such as realism would be a simple task. A look at the representative sample of recent and prominent definitions in box 1.1, however, reveals considerable diversity[1] – which on further reflection should not be surprising.

Even in traditions with authoritative defining texts, such as Marxism and Christianity, different emphases and antagonistic interpretations are common. We should expect at least as much variety in realism.

Realism[2] is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions. Rather, as many commentators have noted, it is a general orientation: "a philosophical disposition" (Gilpin 1986: 304); "a set of normative emphases which shape theory" (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988: 79); an "attitude of mind" with "a quite distinctive and recognizable flavour" (Garnett 1984: 110); "a loose framework" (Rosenthal 1991: 7); and "a 'big tent,' with room for a number of different theories" (Elman 1996: 26). Realism is an approach to international relations that has emerged gradually through the work of a series of analysts who have situated themselves within, and thus delimited, a distinctive but still diverse style or tradition of analysis.[3]

[1] See Cusack and Stoll (1990: ch. 2) for a review that emphasizes this diversity. More critically, see Goldmann (1988). For further definitions see John, Wright, and Garnett (1972: 96–97), Maghroori and Ramberg (1982: 14–16), Vasquez (1983: 15–19, 26–30), Olson and Onuf (1985: 7), Cox (1986: 211–212), Ferguson and Mansbach (1988: 40–47, 102), Stein (1990: 4–7), Rosenau and Durfee (1995: 11–13), Elman (1996: 19–21), Grieco (1997: 164–168), Labs (1997: 7), Mastanduno (1997: 50).

[2] We should note at the outset that I am concerned here with *political* realism, the tradition of *realpolitik* or power politics. "Realism," however, is also a philosophical doctrine, asserting some kind of correspondence between knowledge claims and an objective external reality. For a good recent overview of the philosophical debate, see Kulp (1997). Katz (1998) offers a defense of philosophical realism that canvasses the leading objections. "Realism" is also the name of a literary school or movement that was of considerable prominence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (as well as in the mid-twentieth century, in its "socialist" variant). Political realists may or may not be philosophical or literary realists.

[3] On the idea of traditions of international thought, see Nardin and Mapel (1992) and Dunne (1993). More broadly, compare Gunnell (1979).

Box 1.1. *Representative definitions of realism*
(The following passages are direct quotations or very close paraphrases.)

1. The state's interest provides the spring of action.
2. The necessities of policy arise from the unregulated competition of states.
3. Calculation based on these necessities can discover the policies that will best serve a state's interests.
4. Success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state. (Waltz 1979: 117)

1. Politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power.
3. Power and interest are variable in content.
4. Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states.
5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.
6. The autonomy of the political sphere. (Morgenthau 1954: 4–10)

1. The international system is anarchic.
2. States inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other.
3. No state can ever be certain another state will not use its offense military capability.
4. The most basic motive driving states is survival.
5. States are instrumentally rational. (Mearsheimer 1994/95: 9–10)

1. The fundamental unit of social and political affairs is the "conflict group."
2. States are motivated primarily by their national interest.
3. Power relations are a fundamental feature of international affairs. (Gilpin 1996: 7–8)

1. The state-centric assumption: states are the most important actors in world politics.
2. The rationality assumption: world politics can be analyzed as if states were unitary rational actors seeking to maximize their expected utility.
3. The power assumption: states seek power and they calculate their interests in terms of power. (Keohane 1986b: 164–165)

1. Realists assume an ineradicable tendency to evil.
2. Realists assume that the important unit of social life is the collectivity and that in international politics the only really important collective actor is the state, which recognizes no authority above it.
3. Realists hold power and its pursuit by individuals and states as ubiquitous and inescapable.

Box 1.1 (*cont.*)

4. Realists assume that the real issues of international politics can be understood by the rational analysis of competing interests defined in terms of power. (Smith 1986: 219–221)

1. The centrality of states.
2. The world is anarchic.
3. States seek to maximize their security or their power.
4. The international system is mostly responsible for state conduct on the international scene.
5. States adopt instrumentally rational policies in their pursuit of power or security.
6. The utility of force. (Frankel 1996: xiv–xviii)

1. The international system is anarchic.
2. Nation-states pursue their own national interests defined primarily in terms of power.
3. Skepticism toward international laws, institutions, and ideals that attempt to transcend or replace nationalism.
4. Primacy of balance of power politics. (Wayman and Diehl 1994: 5)

1. Humans face one another primarily as members of groups.
2. International affairs takes place in a state of anarchy.
3. Power is the fundamental feature of international politics.
4. The nature of international interactions is essentially conflictual.
5. Humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason.
6. Politics are not a function of ethics.
7. Necessity and reason of state trump morality and ethics. (Schweller 1997: 927)

1. History is a sequence of cause and effect, whose course can be understood by intellectual effort, but not directed by "imagination."
2. Theory does not create practice, but practice theory.
3. Politics are not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics. (Carr 1946: 63–64)

1. Groups (states) consider themselves to be ultimate ends.
2. Any measure required for state self-preservation is justified.
3. Law and morality have a subordinate place in international relations. (Schwarzenberger 1951: 13)

Nonetheless, a set of recurrent concerns and conclusions marks these varying works as part of a single tradition. The definitions in box 1.1 share a family resemblance, even though no single set of elements can be found in each. Both realists and their critics agree that the realist "intellectual style is unmistakable" (Garnett 1984: 29; compare Cusack and Stoll 1990: 19; Wayman and Diehl 1994). As an American judge notoriously said of pornography, we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it.

This chapter attempts to orient the reader to the realist style, tradition, or approach in four complementary ways: a brief definition; a simple, two-dimensional typology; short summaries of six paradigmatic realist theories; and an overview of the development of realist thought in the twentieth century.

A definition

Realism emphasizes the constraints on politics imposed by human nature and the absence of international government. Together, they make international relations largely a realm of power and interest.

"Human nature has not changed since the days of classical antiquity" (Thompson 1985: 17). And that nature, according to realists, is at its core egoistic, and thus inalterably inclined towards immorality. As Machiavelli puts it, in politics "it must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers" (1970: Book I, ch. 3).

Some realists, such as Reinhold Niebuhr (1944: 19) and Hans Morgenthau (1946: 202), see Machiavelli's claim as largely descriptive. Many, like Machiavelli himself, contend only that there are enough egoists to make any other assumption unduly risky. All, however, emphasize the egoistic passions and self-interest in (international) politics. "It is above all important not to make greater demands upon human nature than its frailty can satisfy" (Treitschke 1916: 590). "It is essential not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a recent heresy and a very disastrous one" (Butterfield 1949: 47).

Most realists also recognize that "men are motivated by other desires than the urge for power and that power is not the only aspect of international relations" (Spykman 1942: 7). Thus Niebuhr couples his harsh doctrine of original sin with an insistence that "individuals are not consistently egoistic" (1944: 123). He even argues for "an adequate view of human nature, which does justice to both the heights and depths of human life" (1934: 113). Likewise, Morgenthau argues that "to do justice and to receive it is an elemental aspiration of man" (1970: 61). Kenneth

Thompson even contends that "man is at heart a moral being" and emphasizes "the insatiable quest of man for justice" (Thompson 1966: 4, 75; compare Carr 1946: 145).

Nonetheless, realists characteristically give *primary* emphasis to egoistic passions and "the tragic presence of evil in all political action" (Morgenthau 1946: 203). And because these passions are ineradicable, "conflict is inevitable" (Niebuhr 1932: xv). "It is profitless to imagine a hypothetical world in which men no longer organize themselves in groups for purposes of conflict" (Carr 1946: 231). Whatever their other disagreements, realists are unanimous in holding that human nature contains an ineradicable core of egoistic passions; that these passions define the central problem of politics; and that statesmanship is dominated by the need to control this side of human nature.

Realists also stress the political necessities that flow from international anarchy.[4] In the absence of international government, "the law of the jungle still prevails" (Schuman 1941: 9). "The difference between civilization and barbarism is a revelation of what is essentially the same human nature when it works under different conditions" (Butterfield 1949: 31; compare Schuman 1941: 9; Spykman 1942: 141). Within states, human nature usually is tamed by hierarchical political authority and rule. In international relations, anarchy not merely allows but encourages the worst aspects of human nature to be expressed. "That same human nature which in happy conditions is frail, seems to me to be in other conditions capable of becoming hideous" (Butterfield 1949: 44).

The interaction of egoism and anarchy leads to "the overriding role of power in international relations" (Schwarzenberger 1951: 147) and requires "the primacy in all political life of power and security" (Gilpin 1986: 305). "The struggle for power is universal in time and space" (Morgenthau 1948: 17). "The daily presence of force and recurrent reliance on it mark the affairs of nations" (Waltz 1979: 186). "Security" thus means a somewhat less dangerous and less violent world, rather than a safe, just, or peaceful one. Statesmanship involves mitigating and managing, not eliminating, conflict.

The "negative" side of this "positive" emphasis on power and interest is skepticism over moral concerns in international relations. Ethical considerations and objectives, realists typically argue, must be subordinated to

[4] Throughout I use "anarchy" as it is ordinarily used in the international relations literature; that is, in the literal sense of absence of rule, lack of government. As we shall see in greater detail in chapter 3, anarchy does *not* imply chaos, absence of order; it is simply the absence of "hierarchical" political order based on formal subordination and authority. Thus Hedley Bull (1977) describes international relations as taking place in an "anarchical society" of states.

"reason of state" (*raison d'état*). Realism "justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing" (Niebuhr 1932: xi). "Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states" (Morgenthau 1954: 9). "Other criteria, sadder, more limited, more practical must be allowed to prevail" (Kennan 1954: 49).

A typology

As a first approximation, we can distinguish subgroupings of realists, thus defined, along two dimensions: the relative emphasis they give to the core propositions of egoism and anarchy and the stringency of their commitment to a rigorous and exclusively realist analysis.

Structural realists give predominant emphasis to international anarchy. For example, John Herz argues that international anarchy assures the centrality of the struggle for power "even in the absence of aggressivity or similar factors" (Herz 1976: 10; compare Waltz 1979: 62–63). Contemporary structural realists are also often called "neorealists," in an effort to emphasize their "newness" and the differences from most earlier realists arising from their strong structuralism.

Biological realists emphasize a fixed human nature. For example, Morgenthau argues that "social forces are the product of human nature in action"; "the social world [is] but a projection of human nature onto the collective plane"; political problems are "projections of human nature into society" (1948: 4; 1962a: 7, 312). Such realists "see that conflict is in part situationally explained, but . . . believe that even were it not so, pride, lust, and the quest for glory would cause the war of all against all to continue indefinitely. Ultimately, conflict and war are rooted in human nature" (Waltz 1991: 35). "The ultimate sources of social conflicts and injustices are to be found in the ignorance and selfishness of men" (Niebuhr 1932: 23).

Although such theorists are often called "classical" realists, this label tells us nothing about the substance of their orientation. The category "classical" is a residual: those who are not structural (neo)realists. The label biological, by contrast, is substantive and positive, pointing to their emphasis on human nature. And by refusing to define categories in terms of the currently dominant structuralist turn, it maintains neutrality between competing approaches to realism.

It is easy, and dangerous, to overemphasize the differences between biological and structural realism. Structural realists, as we will see in some detail in the next chapter, must make motivational assumptions about states and individuals. For example, Christian saints and Hobbesian

egoists will behave very differently in an environment of anarchy. Conversely, most biological realists recognize at least quantitative differences in behavior in anarchic and hierarchic structures. For example, Morgenthau gives considerable attention to the structure-induced patterns of behavior of the balance of power (1954: chs. 11–14, 21).

Nonetheless, the difference in emphasis does distinguish structural realism, especially in its contemporary neorealist forms.[5] Furthermore, principally structural theories are likely to make greater allowances for change and for non-realist "hedges," because anarchy is more susceptible to amelioration than human nature. "The essential nature of man may not be altered, but human behavior in general is sometimes improved, by the establishment of an order of things which has the effect of reducing temptation," and in some instances "a healthy disposition of forces can be attained for long periods which, so to speak, makes human nature better than it really is" (Butterfield 1960: 25; 1949: 33).

This reference to "hedges" leads to the second dimension of variation in realist theories to which I want to draw attention.

Radical realists adopt extreme versions of the three realist premises of anarchy, egoism, and power politics. The Athenian envoys at Melos in Thucydides' *History*, discussed in the following section, advance such a view. One rarely, however, encounters a (consistently) radical realist.

Strong realists adopt realist premises in a way that allows only modest space for politically salient "non-realist" concerns. They also tend to present realism as a positive theory of (international) politics or statesmanship. Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz are exemplary strong realists.

Hedged realists accept the realist definition of the "problem" of international politics – anarchy and egoism – but show varying degrees of discomfort with the "solution" of power politics.[6] For example, E. H. Carr argues that "we cannot ultimately find a resting place in pure realism" (1946: 89). Herz similarly notes that "the human cause will be lost if the liberal ideal is forgotten, even as surely as it is lost if left to the utopian Political Idealist" (1951: v; compare Niebuhr 1944: 126).

[5] A more "scientific" approach (and a related emphasis on explanation rather than prescription) also gives most neorealist writings a very different "feel." This is evident, for example, if we compare Morgenthau's discussion of the balance of power (1954: chs. 2–4, 9–12) with Waltz' (1979: 118–122). Furthermore, neorealist structuralism typically presents hierarchic domestic politics and anarchic international politics as qualitatively different realms that must be studied with logically incompatible theoretical frameworks (Waltz 1979: chs. 5, 6). In sharp contrast, many earlier (principally biological) realists – notably Morgenthau and Niebuhr, not to mention Machiavelli and Thucydides – wrote about both domestic and international politics.

[6] Michael Doyle (1990) uses the label "minimalist" to describe something very much like this position. He then fills out his typology with "fundamentalist" and "structural" realism, to refer to roughly what I call biological and structural realism.

Hedged realism gradually merges into views that are fundamentally something else. At some point, (non-realist) "hedges" become as important as the (realist) "core," making it misleading to label the resulting position or argument "realist." Where that point is, and its implications for realist approaches to international relations, will be a recurrent theme in chapters 4–6.

Six realist paradigms

The preceding sections attempted to distill something like an "essence" of realism. The remainder of this chapter is more faithful to the vision of realism as a less precisely defined tradition or orientation. This section provides brief summaries of six paradigmatic models that have helped to shape that tradition.

The idea of paradigms is especially appropriate for thinking about the development and transmission of traditions. One learns a tradition not by memorizing a set of propositions but by studying and applying classic models. Students are encouraged to think and work "in the style of" the classics, which provide "a series of points that serve to structure debate within the tradition and between it and other approaches" (Cusack and Stoll 1990: 53). This section summarizes six such paradigms, drawn from Golden Age Athens, sixteenth-century Florence, seventeenth-century England, and twentieth-century America. Although others might have been chosen, together these six present a good indication of the range of views that are characteristically labeled realist.

We begin with Thomas Hobbes, who perhaps most closely fits the definition of realism offered above. We then look at Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, the leading biological and structural realists of the past half century. Our fourth paradigm is the game theory model of Prisoners' Dilemma, which offers a still different route to characteristic realist conclusions. Finally, we look at Thucydides and Machiavelli, who (along with Hobbes) are generally considered to present the most powerful expressions of realism in the Western tradition of political theory.

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century English polymath, is said to have enjoyed telling people that he was born in fear, his mother (allegedly) having given birth prematurely on hearing the news of the invasion by the Spanish Armada. His mature political views were deeply influenced by the violent disruptions of the English Civil War of the 1640s. Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, published originally in 1651, presents a

fine example of a strong realism that gives roughly equal weight to egoism and anarchy. Assuming only that people are naturally equal, that they are driven by competition, diffidence, and glory, and that they interact in the absence of government, Hobbes draws the famous conclusion that the natural condition of man is a state of war.

Hobbes begins with natural equality, which he demonstrates in typically "realist" fashion: even "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others" (par. 1).[7] If some were much more powerful than others, social order might be forcibly imposed. Rough equality of capabilities, however, makes this anarchic world one of inescapable and universal danger – given Hobbes' account of human nature.

"In the nature of man, we find three principall causes of quarrell. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory" (par. 6).

Competition "maketh men invade for Gain" (par. 7). Because we are all equal, each of us expects to have (at least) as much as anyone else (par. 3). In a world of anarchy and scarcity, to acquire anything of use is to tempt others "to come prepared with forces united, to dispossesse, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty" (par. 3).

"From equality proceeds diffidence" (par. 3), fear, and "from diffidence warre" (par. 4). In the absence of government "there is no way for any man to secure himselfe, so reasonable, as Anticipation" (par. 4). The best defense is a good offense; "by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can" (par. 4).

As if this were not bad enough, men are also vain, driven by a desire for glory. This leads them to fight over "reputation," "a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue" (par. 7).

Whether for safety, reputation, or gain, men will "endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another" (par. 3). Although fighting may not be constant, the threat of force is ever present (par. 8). Any dispute may at any moment degenerate or erupt into violence. "During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man" (par. 8).

Such a condition, beyond its insecurity and obvious material shortcomings, precludes pursuing "higher" human aspirations. There can be "no Arts; no Letters; no Society" (par. 9). Furthermore, "the notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place" (par. 13).

[7] All otherwise unidentified references in this subsection are to chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, by paragraph in the C. B. Macpherson edition (Hobbes 1986).

Hobbes summarizes these sad circumstances with one of the most famous passages in the history of Western political thought: "And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (par. 9).[8]

Men, of course, are not *only* competitive, fearful, and vain – even if such a simplified model does continue to provide grist for the mills of many feminist comics. Hobbes recognizes "passions that encline men to Peace" (par. 14). He also recognizes that we possess reason, which "suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement" (par. 14). We want something better. We can even figure out rules of coexistence and cooperation. But without a government to enforce those rules, we remain condemned to war. Without the restraints of superior power, men cannot control their impulses to take from others, to react with excessive fear, or to demand greater respect than others are willing to give freely.

To imagine a pre-social state of nature is to engage in a thought experiment that strips away social artifice to reveal a fixed, constant core of human nature. Human nature, for Hobbes, cannot be changed. Competition, diffidence, and glory may be controlled by superior power – which taps in another way the core motive of fear. But they cannot be eliminated.

Given our nature, we put our natural freedom to destructive, even self-destructive, use in the absence of government. The task of politics thus is to replace anarchic equality with hierarchical political authority, a "common Power to feare" (par. 11), a superior "power able to over-awe them all" (par. 5). But international relations remains a domain of anarchy, a state of war, in which "Kings and Persons of Soveraigne authority . . . [are] in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another" (par. 12). Barring world government, there is no escape from this state of war.

Hans Morgenthau

Hans Morgenthau, an American refugee from Nazi Germany, was one of the leading realists of the 1950s and 1960s and perhaps "the purest as well as the most self-conscious apostle of realism" of his generation (Parkinson 1977: 163). Most would agree with John Vasquez (1983: 17) that "Morgenthau's work was the single most important vehicle for establishing the dominance of the realist paradigm" in the study of international relations, especially in the United States.

[8] In Hobbes' vision, we are so constituted that the only possible good thing we could say about such a life, namely, that it is short, in fact is the "worst of all" (par. 9). We cling desperately even to such a miserable life. As Woody Allen put it more humorously, the food in that restaurant is terrible – and the portions are so small!

A prolific academic and journalistic writer, Morgenthau became best known to students of international relations for his succinct statement of the "principles" of realism in the first chapter of his book *Politics Among Nations*.[9] These principles, presented in sharp, vigorous, accessible prose, summarize a simple yet wide-ranging philosophical, theoretical, and political world-view.

1. "Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature" (1954: 4).
2. "The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power" (1954: 5).
3. Power and interest are variable in content across space and time (1954: 8–9).
4. "Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states" (1954: 9).
5. "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe" (1954: 10).
6. "The difference, then, between political realism and other schools of thought is real and it is profound . . . Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere" (1954: 10).

Morgenthau's strong biological realism will make him a central figure in chapter 2. And in chapter 6 we will have occasion to examine his impassioned warnings against a moralistic foreign policy.

Kenneth Waltz

Kenneth Waltz' 1979 book *Theory of International Politics* was for a decade the most influential theoretical work in the academic study of international relations, the central text of contemporary neorealism. Today it remains a touchstone for both realists and their critics. Waltz presents an excellent example of strong structural realism.

"Despite wide variations in the attributes and in the interactions" of states and other international actors, Waltz is impressed by "the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia" (1979: 67, 66). These similarities, he argues, arise from a persistent structure of international anarchy.

Political structures are defined and distinguished first by their ordering principle: political actors ("units") either are or are not arranged in hierarchical relations of authority and subordination. International rela-

[9] This chapter first appeared in the second edition of 1954 and has remained essentially unchanged in all later editions.

tions is a domain of anarchic (non-hierarchic) political structures (1979: 88–99). Order is not imposed by higher authority but arises from the interactions of formally equal political actors. The differing constraints, opportunities, and rules of anarchic and hierarchic structures lie at the heart of the conventional distinction between comparative and international politics.

Political structures are also defined by the differentiation of functions among their units. "Hierarchy entails relations of super- and subordination among a system's parts, and that implies their differentiation" (1979: 93). A standard civics text example is the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

In anarchic orders, however, Waltz argues that each state is a separate, autonomous, and formally equal political unit that must count ultimately on its own resources to realize its interests. In anarchic environments, "each unit's incentive is to put itself in a position to be able to take care of itself since no one else can be counted on to do so" (1979: 107). All important functions thus must be performed by each and every state. There is little international division of political labor, no sharp differentiation of functions among states (1979: 93–97).

The principal differences between states, Waltz argues, "are of capability, not function. States perform or try to perform tasks, most of which are common to all of them; the ends they aspire to are similar" (1979: 96). States differ not so much in what they seek to achieve, but in their capabilities to achieve ends that are largely shared. "National politics consists of differentiated units performing specified functions. International politics consists of like units duplicating one another's activities" (1979: 97).

The third defining feature of a political structure is the distribution of capabilities among its units. If all international orders are anarchic and there is no significant differentiation of functions among states, international political structures can be distinguished from one another simply by the distribution of capabilities among actors. Historically, this means that international political structures are defined by the changing fates of great powers (1979: 72, 94). More abstractly, international orders vary according to the number of great powers. Waltz emphasizes the difference between bipolar systems, dominated by two superpowers, and multipolar systems, where there are three or more great powers (1979: chs. 7–8).

"If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it" (1979: 117), because it conceives of states simply as concentrations of power competing in an anarchic environment. Waltz argues that balance of power politics prevails whenever "two or more states coexist" in an anarchic order "with no superior agent to come to the aid of states that may be weakening or to deny to any of them

the use of whatever instruments they think will serve their purposes" (1979: 118).

The central conclusion of balance of power theory is that states in anarchy "balance" rather than "bandwagon"[10] (1979: 126). In hierarchic political orders, Waltz argues, political actors tend to "jump on the bandwagon" of a leading candidate or recent victor, because "losing does not place their security in jeopardy" (1979: 126). But in anarchy, to jump on the bandwagon of a rising power is to court becoming prey to that power not too far down the road. A state must always be concerned with its *relative* power. The power of others – especially great power – is always a threat, never a lure. Weak states may have no alternative but to guess right and hope that early alignment with the victor will ensure their survival and (at least some) other vital interests. Only foolhardy great powers, though, would accept such a risk. Rather than bandwagon, Waltz argues, they will "balance" against the growing power of another state.

Structural pressures to balance explain central yet otherwise puzzling features of international relations. Consider the American–Soviet alliance in World War II. A common enemy brought together two countries with intense internal and historical differences that had made them the harshest of rivals for the preceding two decades. After the war, though, they again became almost rabid rivals – but not, in this version of the story, because of internal or ideological differences, but because of the distribution of capabilities. Wherever two dominant powers face each other, each is the only real threat to the security of the other, and they cannot but be enemies. Each must, whatever its preferences or inclinations, balance its power against the other.

Waltz' structural realism does not deny the existence, even the importance, of internal differences among states. It does, however, attempt to "abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities" (1979: 99), in order to highlight the ways in which the distribution of capabilities in an anarchic order shapes relations. "One may behave as one likes to. Patterns of behavior nevertheless emerge, and they derive from the structural constraints of the system" (1979: 92). States "are free to do any fool thing they care to, but they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not" (1997: 915). Or, as John Mearsheimer puts it, "in the final analysis, the

[10] The metaphor of bandwagoning is from American electoral politics. When a candidate begins to look like she will win, there is a strong tendency for neutrals, undecided voters, and even opponents to side with her, in order to share in her victory. In the language of a simpler era of campaigning, dominated by parades rather than television, they will "jump on the bandwagon." "Bandwagoners" attempt to increase their gains by siding with the stronger party.

system forces states to behave according to the dictates of realism, or risk destruction" (1995: 91).

The Prisoners' Dilemma

Contemporary social science has been strongly influenced by the pursuit of rigor and formalization, whether through mathematics, statistics, or formal logic. Game theory, which originated in economics after World War II, is a formalization that has had considerable popularity in the study of international relations over the past two decades.[11] It seeks to model the dynamics of strategic interactions in which an actor's behavior depends in part on the anticipated behavior of others. One particular game – Prisoners' Dilemma – offers a striking realist paradigm.

The game of Prisoners' Dilemma The simplest game theory models involve two rational actors, each of whom has available two strategies, one of which is fundamentally cooperative ("cooperate") and the other of which is essentially competitive ("defect"). The four possible outcomes in such two-by-two games are summarized in figure 1.1. The payoffs to each player are recorded in the cell representing the intersection of their chosen strategies, the first payoff being that for the player at the left ("row"), the second for the player at the top ("column"). A particular game is defined by the relative preferences of each of the players for these four possible outcomes.

There are two common ways to label these payoffs. The most general uses the labels D (defect) and C (cooperate), and simply records the paired choices of row first and then column. In other words, working clockwise from the top left in figure 1.1, CC (both cooperate), CD (row cooperates, column defects), DD (both defect) and DC (row defects, column cooperates). Another common set of labels is R, for reward (from mutual cooperation); T, for temptation (defection in the presence of cooperation); S, for sucker (losing as a result of cooperating when the other defects); and P, for penalty (from mutual defection).

These labels derive from one of the most interesting of the seventy-eight possible two-by-two games: Prisoners' Dilemma (PD), named for a story commonly used to elucidate its logic. Two thieves are apprehended by the police and taken in, separately, for questioning. Each is offered a favorable plea bargain in return for a confession and testimony against the other. But without a confession the authorities can obtain a conviction only on a lesser charge.

[11] See, for example, Snyder and Diesing (1977) and Oye (1986).

Figure 1.1. A generalized two-by-two game.

	Player 2 ("column") Cooperate	Defect
Player 1 ("row")	CC R, R	CD S, T
	DC T, S	DD P, P

R = "reward" (CC)
T = "temptation" (DC)
S = "sucker" (CD)
P = "penalty" (DD)

The preference ordering of both players in a PD game is T>R>P>S: temptation (confessing) is preferred to reward (mutual silence), which is preferred to penalty (mutual confessing), which is preferred to the sucker's payoff.[12] Giving in to temptation – defecting (confessing) while one's partner cooperates (remains silent); that is, accepting the plea bargain – provides the greatest gains. But above all else the players in this game want to avoid getting suckered, sitting in prison, for a long time, due to the treachery of one's "partner." If we plug these (ordinal) preferences – temptation is most highly valued (4) and sucker least valued (1) – into the general game outlined in figure 1.1, we obtain figure 1.2.

The dilemma of these prisoners appears when we ask whether their rational strategy is to defect (confess) or to cooperate (remain silent). If they cooperate (CC), each gets their second best outcome (the top left cell, with the "reward" payoffs of 3,3). But cooperating risks getting suckered. Therefore, assuming substantial (but not wild) aversion to risk, each will choose to defect *even though both know that they both could be better off by cooperating*. Mutual defection is the clear solution to the dilemma, the only strategically sensible outcome. But it leaves both players in a suboptimal position.

Instrumental and substantive "rationality" conflict. The instrumentally rational strategy of defection is substantively crazy: it leaves both players

[12] Using the more general labels, DC>CC>DD>CD.

Figure 1.2. Prisoners' Dilemma.

$T > R > P > S$
$DC > CC > DD > CD$

		Player 2 ("column")	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 1 ("row")	Cooperate	CC 3, 3	CD 1, 4
	Defect	DC 4, 1	DD 2, 2

worse off than they could be if they cooperated. Yet the preferences of these actors in this structure of interaction preclude any other outcome.

The dilemma might be evaded, or made less severe, if the players could make a mutual cooperation pact and establish some mechanism to enforce it, increasing the likelihood of cooperation by reducing the risk of being suckered. Working from the other direction, increasing the payoffs of mutual cooperation (R) or decreasing the costs of mutual defection (P) would augment the incentives to cooperate even in the absence of enforcement. This might occur in a well-established criminal partnership, which saw this particular interaction as only part of a stream of potentially profitable interactions. An even more radical solution would be to alter the preferences of the players; for example, through a code of honor among thieves that made giving in to temptation no longer the preferred outcome. But unless the structure of interaction or the preferences of the actors can be altered, the dilemma is inescapable.

Realism as PD Realism can be seen as a theory that presents Prisoners' Dilemma as the central feature of international relations. The preference ordering T>R>P>S is a good example of realist egoism and amoralism. International anarchy, it is often argued, precludes enforceable agreements to cooperate. Therefore, international relations are often marked by insecurity, competition, and conflict *even where there are strong incentives to cooperate*.

A variant on PD, with special application to international relations, is

what John Herz (1951: 4) first called the "security dilemma." Glenn Snyder's recent restatement of the logic is especially clear.

> Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous; and so on in a spiral of illusory fears and "unnecessary" defenses (1997: 17).

As Robert Jervis puts it in a classic discussion of the concept, the dilemma arises because "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others" (1978: 169).

Herbert Butterfield expresses much the same idea in terms of "Hobbesian fear."

> If you imagine yourself locked in a room with another person with whom you have often been on the most bitterly hostile terms in the past, and suppose that each of you has a pistol, you may find yourself in a predicament in which both of you would like to throw the pistols out of the window, yet it defeats the intelligence to find a way of doing it (1949: 89–90).

Anarchy can defeat even our best intentions – which realists tend to see as rare enough to begin with.

A PD formulation of realism does not require assuming either a fixed human nature or a world populated exclusively by consistently egoistic amoralists. In the absence of government, the presence of several unscrupulous actors can force even individuals who would prefer to follow the counsels of reason or their "better" impulses to be "nasty" rather than "nice." For example, those who kept their word would fall victim to less scrupulous neighbors. To return to Hobbes' language, even those capable of mastering their desires for gain and glory will, in an environment of anarchy, be reduced by fear to treating everyone else as a potential enemy – or they will perish or be subordinated to the will of others.

As Georg Schwarzenberger puts it, "the law of the lowest level operates in such a society" because even those who would prefer peace and cooperation "cannot avoid contact with the wholesale addicts to the rule of force." "However restrained a State may be in the conduct of its foreign affairs, it must be suspicious of the intentions of other States whose rulers may be more inclined, and in a better position, to use their power for expansionist ends." "Every generation has its potential or actual black sheep which prevents the others from grazing in peace" (1951: 14, xxi, 156, 15).

Prisoners' Dilemma also usefully emphasizes the political distance between desire and achievement. Mutually destructive competition may not be avoidable even when all parties prefer a cooperative outcome.

Without insurance schemes or other mechanisms that allow actors to risk cooperating, and without a procedure to achieve agreement on how to divide the benefits of cooperation, we may remain locked in a cycle, even a descending spiral, of competition.

Thucydides' Athenian envoys

Realism can be found in ancient as well as modern sources. Probably the most famous text in the realist tradition is the Melian Dialogue (V.85–113)[13] in Thucydides' *History* of the Peloponnesian wars between Athens and Sparta at the end of the fifth century BC. The arguments advanced by the Athenian envoys at Melos are so rigorously realist that they provide one of the few examples of a sustained, consistently radical realism.

Athens, seeking to add the neutral island of Melos to its empire, sends envoys to encourage the Melians to surrender (V.84), in order to save the time, expense, and suffering of a siege. Presenting themselves as sensible men of the world, the Athenians forbid the Melians from even talking about the "specious pretenses" (*onomata kala*, fine phrases; literally, beautiful or noble names) of right and wrong (V.89). Instead they restrict discussion to the safety of Melos (V.87) and "the real sentiments of us both," namely, power and interest. "For you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is in question only between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (V.89). The (weaker) Melians protest but have no choice but to carry on within these terms of reference.

Freedom, the Athenians argue, is the fruit of power (V.97). For Melos to hold out for independence would be to misjudge the situation, with tragic consequences, "the contest not being an equal one, with honor as the prize and shame as the penalty, but a question of self-preservation" (V.101). "Expediency goes with security, while justice and honor cannot be followed without danger" (V.107). And this, the Athenians contend, is simply the way of the world.

> Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do (V.105.2).

[13] All otherwise unidentified references in this subsection are to Thucydides' *History* by book, chapter, and, where appropriate, section. Translations are from the revised Crawley translation (Thucydides 1982) except for those identified as "[Smith]," which are by C. F. Smith in the Loeb edition (Thucydides 1919–23).

The Melians nonetheless decide to fight for their independence, whatever the odds or the costs (V.112). The Athenian siege succeeds. The Melian men are killed, their women and children are sold into slavery, and a colony is sent from Athens to repopulate the city (V.116).

A very similar logic is evident in the very first speech given by an Athenian in Thucydides' *History*, just before the outbreak of the war, at the congress of Sparta's allies held in Lacedaemon. The Athenian envoys, trying to justify their empire, argue that "those who may use might have no need to appeal to right" (I.77.2 [Smith]). Although they claim "fair title" to the empire (I.73.1, 76.2), they admit that what began as "leadership [*hegemonia*] over allies who were autonomous and took part in the deliberations of common assemblies" (I.97.1) has become coercive rule (*arche*, empire).

> It was not a very remarkable action, or contrary to the common practice of mankind, if we accepted an empire that was offered to us, and refused to give it up under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest. And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger (I.76.2; compare I.75.3).

They even accuse their enemies of self-serving hypocrisy. "Besides, we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position, and so you thought us till now, when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice" (I.76.2).

Like the other paradigms we have considered, Thucydides' Athenians appeal to law-like regularities that make international politics a domain of power and necessity. They are of special interest because they emphasize the conflict between the demands of justice and those of power.

The careful reader will note that I have talked not about Thucydides' views but rather of the arguments of the Athenian envoys at Melos and Lacedaemon. Although these and other parts of Thucydides' *History* support a realist reading, there are also substantial hedges. In fact, in chapter 6 I will suggest that the hedges are more important than the alleged realist "core." Nonetheless, the Melian Dialogue is an important touchstone in the realist tradition.

Machiavelli

Among realists of an earlier century, perhaps none stands out more prominently than Niccolò Machiavelli, the great sixteenth-century Florentine diplomat, historian, theorist, and playwright. Even today, one of the first words likely to come to mind when one mentions realism or political amoralism is "machiavellianism."

Machiavelli regularly expresses a low opinion of human nature, which

in one poem he characterizes as "insatiable, arrogant, crafty, and shifting, and above all else malignant, iniquitous, violent, and savage" (1965: 736). "One can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain" (P17[3]).[14] "Men never do good unless necessity drives them to it" (DI.2[3]; compare P23[3]). "All do wrong and to the same extent when there is nothing to prevent them doing wrong" (DI.58[4]; compare DI.Preface[3], 40[9], 46[1], DIII.43[1]).

In such a world, power and security must be paramount concerns. "A prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war" (P14[1]). Although well-ordered states rest on both "good laws and good arms . . . because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws, I shall leave out the reasoning on laws" (P12[1]). Even in religion, Machiavelli observes that "all the armed prophets conquered and the unarmed were ruined" (P6[4]).

Machiavelli also tends to subordinate all other considerations to political success. "Men judge of actions by the result" (DIII.35[1]). "So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone" (P18[6]; compare P3[12]).

We should also note Machiavelli's love of the dramatic act of political violence. Consider Cesare Borgia's removal of his henchman Remirro de Orca, who had successfully pacified the Romagna, but at the cost of great bloodshed and hatred. Borgia had Remirro "placed one morning in the piazza at Cesena in two pieces, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife beside him. The ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied" (P7[4]). The ancient Roman love of liberty, Machiavelli notes with admiration, was closely associated with "sacrificial acts in which there was much shedding of blood and much ferocity; and in them great numbers of animals were killed. Such spectacles, because terrible, caused men to become like them" (DII.2[6]; compare DIII.49[2,3], P17[5]).

The praise of such exemplary violence reflects more than personal psychological peculiarities or the habits of a more violent age. For Machiavelli, the evil and egoistic passions at the core of human nature often can be repressed only by force, and at times only by ferocious cruelty. In Machiavelli's world, even the good must "know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity" (P18[5]).

[14] Most citations of Machiavelli are incorporated into the text as follows: P = *The Prince*, by chapter and paragraph in the Mansfield translation (Machiavelli 1985); D = *The Discourses [on the First Ten Books of Livy]*, by book, chapter, and paragraph in Crick's revised Walker translation (Machiavelli 1970).