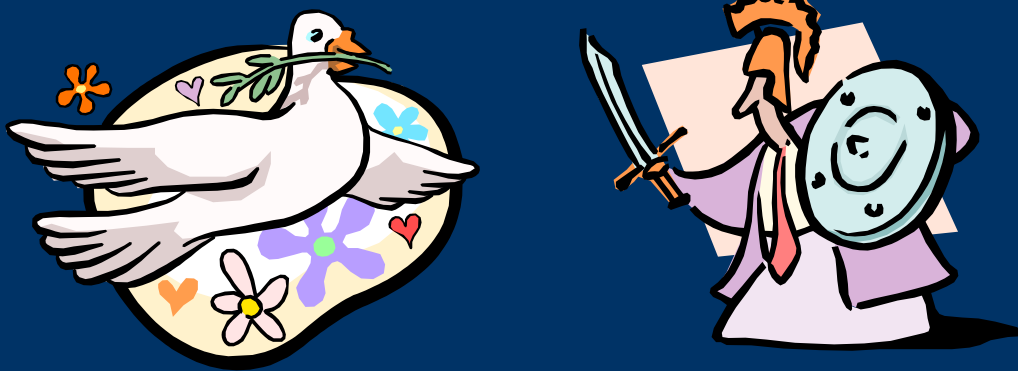


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International Political System - Essay 2



"There can be no unified approach to international relations, since there is no single understanding of the 'international'." Discuss, exploring at least three different theoretical understandings of the 'international'.

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Approaching the ‘international’ in a unified way – possible or not?

At its most simple, the statement that “there can be no unified approach to international relations, since there is no single understanding of the ‘international’.” contains two thoughts, linked by inference to each other. There is the assertion of the impossibility of a unified approach to international relations as a field of study, and the suggestion that the main (or perhaps sole) cause for this is the many theoretical explanations of what the ‘international’ actually is. There is an underlying proposition that if a theory of the ‘international’ potentially excludes or ignores a key element of another theory, the two theories cannot exist in tandem in a single approach to international relations.

This paper will begin by examining how different versions of the ‘international’ lead to very different understandings of how and why events occur in the international arena, and how different theories can have totally different explanations for events. This will be explored by looking at three different versions of the ‘international’ in our discussion: realism, rationalism and revolutionism.¹ Perhaps the most significant support for the argument against a unified approach to international relations -from an academic perspective- is the way that different theories lead to very different predictions of future events. Multiple predictions for future events, or multiple -and occasionally contradictory- explanations for current events would appear to logically preclude a single approach to international relations.

However, this paper will ultimately suggest that we can approach international relations in a unified way without subscribing to any one theoretical conception of the field, and that variety in understanding the ‘international’ need not hinder a unified

¹ Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996), 7.

approach to international relations. It proposes that each theory can be seen as beneficial in explaining different aspects of international relations as a whole, and that diverse understandings exist as a necessary aspect of research in a complex field with multiple actors and levels of possible analysis. By adopting an approach that has evolved out of behaviouralism the academic can understand the study of international relations to be one of examining processes, and different theoretical understandings of the ‘international’ as individual types of processes at work.

Wight, a lecturer in the London School of Economics, proposed that there were three traditions (or approaches) in international relations. He called them realist, rationalist and revolutionist, though they have also been referred to as Machiavelian, Grotian and Kantian², realist, pluralist and structuralist³, state-centric, multi-centric and globalist⁴ and conservative, liberal and radical⁵. Whatever the terms used, the agenda for each of the three approaches remains the same. Realism emphasises power, rationalism stresses cooperation, and revolutionism has a quest for global transformation.⁶ One was obsessed with international anarchy, another with diplomacy and commerce, and the third with a society of states.⁷ Thus the ‘international’ is understood in three ways: “for the realist [...] it is not a society, rather an arena [...]; for the rationalist [...] it is a society but different from the state [...]; and for the revolutionist [...] it is a state (or ought to be).”⁸ We will examine each of these theories in turn.

² Ibid, xi.

³ Geoffrey Stern, *The Structure of International Society: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1995), 11.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁷ Wight, 7.

⁸ Ibid, 48.

Realism, described perhaps too enthusiastically by Hall as “the most elegant and powerful theory of peace and war”⁹, starts with the ‘critical proposition that the world is made up of states that exist in an environment of anarchy’.¹⁰ This anarchy is not a lack of international order – for there are ‘rules of the game’¹¹ dictating how states treat each other – but a lack of “central authority to enforce rules and ensure compliance with norms of conduct”.¹² The lack of an overarching world government means that each state faces a “security dilemma which inhibits trust and limits cooperation”¹³, and means that each state can ultimately only rely on itself. The state is therefore a selfish actor that uses power (military and otherwise) as either an end in itself or to ensure its survival and enhancement.¹⁴

Power is very important to realists, as they believe that only ‘concrete power’¹⁵ can settle issues and disputes. A typical definition of power might describe it as “the ability of any actor on the international stage to use tangible and intangible resources and assets in such a way as to influence the outcomes of international events to its own satisfaction”.¹⁶ This is reflective of the realist belief that states exist in a fundamentally “asocial society, in which the recourse to violence is normal”¹⁷, and of their core pessimism about human nature. As Wight said, realists see “human nature as plain bad”.¹⁸

⁹ John A. Hall, *International Orders* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁰ K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, 7th ed. (London: Prentice-Hall International, 1995), 5.

¹¹ Joshua S. Goldstein, *International Relations*, 3rd ed. (New York; Harlow: Longman, 1999), 76.

¹² *Ibid*, 77.

¹³ Stern, 39.

¹⁴ Stern, 11.

¹⁵ Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, edited by Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995), 27.

¹⁶ Steven J. Rosen and Walter S. Jones, *The Logic of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, 1980), 203.

¹⁷ Hall, 9.

¹⁸ Wight, 1996: 25.

If the realist approach to international relations could be described as selfish states fighting for survival in a sea of anarchy, rationalism could be typecast as a concern with cooperation, interaction and interdependence. While rationalism does not deny that anarchy – between states or otherwise – could exist, it emphasises that “there are also all sorts of bonds and institutions between individual states”.¹⁹ Rationalists would propose that “the main characteristic of the international system is its interdependence”,²⁰ and that actors in the system would prefer to exist in an international regime²¹ sharing collective goods²² and collective security²³ than in the aforementioned sea of anarchy. The ration choice of cooperation over competition is the key tenet of the theory, with states (or any other actors) limiting their immediate desires “for the long term good of themselves and of the society of which they were but a part”.²⁴ Anarchy is restrained by common interests and common obligations²⁵ because rational actors use common sense (sic) and “take the world as it is and improve it”.²⁶

Ultimately rationalism encompasses “a far broader framework than inter-state relations”²⁷ as imagined by realism, for it considers three levels of analysis simultaneously: the human, the state, and the international system.²⁸ Even neoliberals, who concede to realism the assumption of the state as a primary actor pursuing self-interest²⁹, hold that cooperation is possible, and demonstrate this

¹⁹ Holsti, 7.

²⁰ Ibid, 9.

²¹ Goldstein, 107.

²² Ibid, 106.

²³ Ibid, 111.

²⁴ Stern, 12.

²⁵ Wight, 1995:289.

²⁶ A. J. P. Taylor in Wight, 1996: 29.

²⁷ Stern, 26.

²⁸ Ibid, 28.

²⁹ Goldstein, 109.

through the *Prisoners' dilemma*.³⁰ The reason for rationalists' rejection of realist assumptions of self-help lies in their different conception of human nature. The rationalist, unlike the realist, does not see humans as "plain bad"³¹ but as something less tangible: rational creatures seeking the greatest benefit (over the long term).³²

If there is a gap between realist and rationalist conceptions of the 'international', there is a sizable gulf between realist and revolutionist understandings. Unlike realists, revolutionists are "optimistic and perfectionist about human nature"³³ and seek an "ideal but realisable society".³⁴ Revolutionists believe that the "residual attachment to 'outmoded' notions of sovereignty, territoriality, ethnicity and the like would erode"³⁵ and people would come to think of themselves as inhabiting what McLuhan called a 'global village'.³⁶ The revolutionist, like the rationalist, understands there to be an international society, but they want to harden it "into a world-state, and to define and constitute it as a super-state".³⁷ There exists for revolutionists a world society that is constrained by concepts of state and nation, and that can be realised if we move beyond such limitations. It follows then that their main characteristic of the 'international' is its inherent social unity.³⁸ All societies are interconnected³⁹ by virtue of their common humanity and therefore are potentially perfectible.

³⁰ Goldstein, 105 – The *Prisoners Dilemma* is a theoretical 'game' where it makes sense to betray one another in the short term, but to seek cooperation in the long term.

³¹ Wight, 1996: 25.

³² Goldstein, 101.

³³ Wight, 1996: 27.

³⁴ Stern, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

³⁶ Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore and Jerome Agel, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968),

³⁷ Wight, 1996: 40.

³⁸ Holsti, 14.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

We have what Hedley Bull, a tutee of Martin Wight, called “blood and iron and immorality men”⁴⁰, “law and order and keep your word men”⁴¹, and “subversion and liberation and missionary men”.⁴² Realists with a state-centric selfish world, rationalists with a cooperation-orientated sharing world, and revolutionists with a social world where every member is bound inextricably to every other. All three theories have different versions of the ‘international’, and each theory conflicts with the other. It seems reasonable then to propose that there can be no unified approach to international relations, that three different theories demand three different approaches to studying the field, and that by necessity any attempt to unify them into a single approach would involve academic gymnastics. This proposition, however, can be challenged by a concept that originates in postmodern theory. “A central idea of postmodernism is that there is no single objective reality but a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives”⁴³, and that no single category can adequately explain them.⁴⁴

Stern said that “if one asks two scientists about the origins of the universe one is likely to get three answers”.⁴⁵ The reason for this lies in the theoretical necessity of “breaking up the universe into intellectually manageable parts”⁴⁶ to explain certain actions or incidents. To conceptualise events, to shrink them for manageability⁴⁷, we need to simplify them. This act of simplification means that certain theories can explain certain events quite well, but they ignore or deny the significance of others. We can either understand the conflicts between theories as mentioned above –

⁴⁰ Wight, 1996:xi.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Goldstein, 131.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁵ Stern, 41.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, 195.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 196.

supposing them to be mutually exclusive – or, as the inevitable consequence of using multiple theoretical tools, to explain a huge array of experiences and interactions. Indeed, it is possible that “realism and institutionalism – or any other theory or approach – are not potential substitutes for one another. They are “competing” approaches only in the sense that they focus on different forces and thus may provide “better” or “worse” – or at least different – insights in particular cases”.⁴⁸

If this were so then “all available epistemologies and methodologies have something to offer”⁴⁹ as long as we do not regard any single one as central to our approach towards international relations. Where traditional international relations theory endeavoured to identify the significant units of the system and to then identify the significant interactions between them⁵⁰, there is a completely different way of understanding international relations if we try “starting from the interactions and not the units”⁵¹. As Rosenau said:

“If we can construct the outlines of a world in which the course of events is sustained by processes rather than actors, we need not fear that our paradigm will be rendered obsolete by the declining capacities of governments, the advent of new issues initiated by new organizations, the fragmentation of authority, or the growth of interdependence”⁵²

When the analysis of processes is taken to be central to our approach of international relations, realism, rationalism and revolutionism become tools to analyse various (and different) processes at work. Their different understandings of the ‘international’ –

⁴⁸ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131.

⁴⁹ James N. Rosenau, *The Study of Global Interdependence: Essays on the Transnationalization of World Affairs* (London: Pinter, 1980), 133.

⁵⁰ Charles Reynolds, *Theory and Explanation in International Politics* (London: Robertson, 1973), 203.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 203.

⁵² Rosenau, 144.

and the different conceptions of the ‘international’ presented by any other theory – are merely reflective of the different imperatives of each process.

It is thus possible to conclude that a unified approach to international relations is possible. By regarding the prime unit of international relations to be the processes of interaction instead of the agents of interaction, we can establish a common framework from which each existing theory offers useful tools of analysis. Different understandings of the ‘international’ are simply reflective of the examination of different processes at work, and present no grounds for conflict between theories. Each theory merely provides a set of tools to examine a certain process, and the normative decision regarding the relative worth of each process is regarded as insignificant. Of primary importance is the consideration of narrative constructions and interpretations of processes, and the application this understanding can have in unravelling the larger intertwined processes of international relations as a whole.

This paper is by no means exhaustive. It is limited in scope by the size restrictions inherent in a short essay. It is hoped, however, that the reader now has a clear understanding both of the conflicts between different understandings of the ‘international’ – if only from three theoretical approaches – and of how such conflicts might prove largely irrelevant in a more general approach to the study of international relations.

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