



Image from: [With the caption, "Atta Boy!," this 1918 cartoon... in Encyclopedia of War and American Society](#)

Summary Article: **Realism, Political**

from *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*

Political realism examines politics as an arena for power contestation and attainment. Regardless of whether the focus is the domestic or international sphere, the realist perspective assumes that political actors behave in ways to maximize, or at least, satisfy their self-interests. This implies that actors are capable of making rational calculations when it is in their best interest and will determine what types of political opportunities should be capitalized. A point of contention among proponents of this perspective is the degree to which power is fungible; that is to say, to what extent the power and prestige accumulated in one issue-area is actually transferable to another. Finally, there has been a great deal of theorizing among political realists regarding whether power is a means to an end, a mean, an end, or both.

A controversial issue within political realism is what even constitutes power. There are many definitions of power and the composition of these definitions varies across theoretical paradigms and levels of measurements. During the 1950s, there was significant disagreement among proponents of the pluralistic and elite perspectives in the social sciences as to whether power resides disproportionately in the hands of political leaders or in the democratic will of the community. More recently, the debate pertains to the dimensions of power, specifically the power of non-decisions.

Considering the extent of power accumulation is important because it presupposes which actors are powerful and therefore worthy of respect and benevolence, and perhaps more importantly, because power accumulation conjures the relative autonomy of political actors. Hence, if power and prestige are allocated disproportionately among the ruling elite to function as guardians of our national sovereignty, would this then lead to the relative autonomy of the same leaders we elect to represent us, or worse yet, would it result in the tyranny of the minority as is the case in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes throughout the world today?

For realists, the attainment of power and status also symbolizes security guarantees and the aspiration for a stable social order. In a world where institutions are perceived to be unreliable, institutional arrangements fragile, moral arguments normative, and actors always willing to capitalize on their aggressive instincts; realists believe that the safest bet for individuals is to secure their survival through their own means. To the extent that actors protect themselves, or at least others think they do, conflicts will be minimized because potential enemies will be intimidated, scared, and therefore hesitant or deterred from attacking first. According to this worldview, the powerful are able to deter aggression as long as they are not perceived to be weak and the vulnerable are left at the mercy of the most powerful or at the expense of the moral arguments and political alliances they manage to arrange.

Realists also believe that this condition of human nature transcends time and place. This parable is best captured in The Melian Conference. As described by Thucydides in *The Peloponnesian War*, one of the forebears of political realism, this meeting was arranged as a last minute attempt to settle the ongoing conflict between the Athenians and the Melians around 431 BC. In response to the Melians'

moral appeal to secure some sort of sovereignty, the Athenians responded: "Of the gods we believe, and the men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule whenever 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 everyone else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do." (Thucydides, tr. Gavorse 1934: 334).

In addition to Thucydides, the lineage of political realism can also be traced back to the ideas of such classic philosophers as Machiavelli and Hobbes. More recently, the theories of Marx and Weber are as influential as the classic proponents of this tradition. Marx's influence on realism is evident in his insistence on the relevance of the material conditions of social life. For Marx, political interests and power are very much determined by our class position in the capitalist division of labor. Therefore, because different classes have different interests and aspire to accumulate more wealth and power, politics is inherently contentious. Weber's realism, on the other hand, incorporates such structural issues as the nature of the economy while also fudging such intersubjective considerations as the weight of prestige, status, and even cultural values, in society. Hence, the dialogue between Marx and Weber opens new lines of arguments with regards to the objective versus the subjective basis of power.

A third dimension of the realist debate is whether the desire for self-preservation is inherent in human nature, as traditional realists proposed, or simply an organic response to the natural condition of anarchy as neorealists or structural realists conceived. While agreeing with the core assumptions of the realist paradigm, neorealists like Kenneth Waltz assert that it is empirically difficult to substantiate and verify human intentions. Therefore in order for realism to conform to scientific empiricism, it must base its theories on verifiable independent variables such as the anarchical features of world politics which can be effortlessly operationalized. Even for some neorealists, the assumption of a conservative calculation for self-preservation is among the most troublesome principle of structural realism. This principle assumes that nations desire sufficient power to guarantee their defense. However, as John Mearsheimer has argued, nation-states not only seek self-preservation but also have an interest to continue accumulating more power at the expense of their opponents. The security dilemma, or the notion that the more power actors attain, the more insecure they feel, is one of the primary reasons why nation-states take an offensive posture designed to secure their great power status.

Historically, the intellectual development of political realism benefited from the menacing rise of nationalism resulting from the tumultuous social conditions and political changes occurring in the late nineteenth and early half of the twentieth centuries. The impact of the accumulation of wealth resulting from monopoly capitalism, the development of mass production, the decline of the British Empire and the rise of American hegemony, and the deepening economic crises of capitalism, particularly the Great Depression, are pivotal events that facilitated the appeal of realist ideas among academics, practitioners, and policy pundits alike.

Although political realism has been around for a long time, its greater impact has been felt in the field of world politics. In fact, it is fair to state that political realism contributed to the development and institutionalization of this academic field above any other perspective. In the realm of international affairs, E. H. Carr's *Twenty Year Crises* and Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* are considered two of the most influential exponents of political realism. The appeal of these and other realist books, certainly contributed to the institutionalization of the field as a branch of political science. Both of these

authors argued against the tenuous appeasement policies of the interwar period and the failure of Wilsonian liberal institutionalism to deliver peace, arguing instead for robust policies in favor of the national interest. The timing of these arguments could not be more opportunistic and they resonated well with the outbreak of World War II and the Soviet-American Cold War.

Today, globalization poses one of the most effective academic and intellectual challenges to political realism. In a globalized world, power is more fungible across issue-areas. As a new division of labor restructures the industrial capacity of developed and developing nations alike, transnational threats have become more menacing and have forged the need for more international cooperation. The nation-state is no longer the only important actor in the world; there are a multiplicity of issues for consideration in the international agenda, and there is more evidence of issue-linkages than ever before in human civilization. Traditional assumptions about how to fight, deter, or contain adversaries have been made tenuous by the outbreak to centralized and stateless terrorist networks. In short, our world is more interdependent than realists envisioned.

Finally, political realism is rooted in canons associated with a modern, positivist social science paradigm. As such, it has been vulnerable to intellectual attacks and numerous challenges by preeminent postmodernist interpretations and deconstructive arguments. One point of contention has been the extent values espoused by realism are social-constructed to legitimize the persistent hierarchical organization of politics among nations. Poststructuralists would argue that the veil of self-worth and opportunities to rise and challenge dominant players in the international arena, also serve to hide the pitfalls of domination, colonialism, and the ugly historical legacy of exploitation and inequality.

SEE ALSO: Globalization; Globalization and Inequality; Liberalism; Nation-State; Political Globalization; World Society Theory.

Reference

- Thucydides (trans. Gavorse, J.) (1934) *The Peloponnesian War*. The Modern Library of New York New York.

FURTHER READING

- Cox, R. (1996) *Approaches to World Order*. Cambridge University Press New York.
- Keohane, R. (1986) *Neorealism and its Critics*. Columbia University Press New York.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Norton New York.
- Ritzer, G. (2010) *The McDonalidization of Society*, 6th edn. Pine Forge Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Thompson, K. (1960) *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics*. Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ.
- Waltz, K. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Reading, MA.
- Wendt, A. (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press New York.

Enrique Pumar

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Pumar, E. (2012). Realism, political. In G. Ritzer, *Blackwell encyclopedias in social sciences: the Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of globalization*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/political_realism

 Wiley ©2012

 Wiley ©2012

APA

Pumar, E. (2012). Realism, political. In G. Ritzer, *Blackwell encyclopedias in social sciences: the Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of globalization*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/political_realism

Chicago

Pumar, Enrique. "Realism, Political." In *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, by George Ritzer. Wiley, 2012.
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/political_realism

Harvard

Pumar, E. (2012). Realism, political. In G. Ritzer, *Blackwell encyclopedias in social sciences: the Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of globalization*. [Online]. Hoboken: Wiley. Available from:
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/political_realism [Accessed 23 May 2019].

MLA

Pumar, Enrique. "Realism, Political." *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, George Ritzer, Wiley, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/political_realism. Accessed 23 May 2019.