

Approaches to the Study of International Relations

Approaches to the Study of International Relations – Realism, Idealism & Marxism

Theories and Perspectives

- 'Theories' and 'Perspectives' are used to explain different ways of looking at International relations (IR).
- Theory is an abstract set of thinking about how to understand reality.

Building Blocks

- Variables – what are you studying?
- Relationship – how do the variables relate to each other
- Underlying Assumptions – what makes the relationship develop

International Relations - Origins as a Discipline

- Failure of the Concert of Europe
- Rise of America and idealism
- First World War and need to avoid war

Idealism (Inter-War Period)

- Main Unit of Analysis – State
 - States control borders, force and people
- Underlying Assumptions
 - Nature of State: essentially good
 - Collaboration possible and highly valued
 - What causes war? Lack of knowledge
- Policy Decisions
 - League of Nations – similar to Greek city-state where members can express themselves, set up to maintain global peace
 - Codification of International Law – existed prior to League of Nations, but was more customary than clearly written and established
 - Mediation between countries

Realism

- E. H. Carr wrote the book 'Twenty Years Crisis' – attributes WWII and the inter-war period to students of International Politics having a passion for peace & wishing for peace, rather than understanding the realities of the situation
- Idealism was too focussed on wishing as opposed to the reality of the world
- Need to understand the world
- Prescriptions based on facts and not wishes

Main unit of analysis – remains state. Underlying assumptions were based on:

- Nature of state: Bad/Evil
- States are not guided by a need for collaboration as a given

- Maximisation of National Interest – desire to compete with one another comes before desire to collaborate
- Maintain a Balance of Power (strictly speaking, balance of power is often how I see fit)

Realism – What causes Wars?

(Im)Balance of Power

- Inability of states to appreciate their limits
- War a natural phenomenon
- Countries form alliances as a way to prevent conflict – view the balance of power and try and use it to one's own advantage

Neo-Realism – Structural Realism

'The anarchical international system is mostly responsible for state conduct on the international scene. In other words, the structure forces the state to behave in certain ways.' – Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics

Liberal Internationalism

1972 Keohana and Nye's *Power and Interdependence*

- The end of the Cold War reveals limitation of neo-realism to explain changes (within states and without)
- Collaboration possible in a globalised world

Similarities and Differences Summary: Idealism and Realism

- Both use states and the actor as main unit of analysis
 - Common interests
 - International Organizations as the space for discussion and mediation
- vs.
- National Interest
 - International Organizations as the site for mediating national interests
 - Re-assertion of ideas after some decades

Marxism and Neo-Marxism

- Unit of analysis
 - Economic Classes
 - Bourgeoisie (control the means of production) and Proletariat (labour forces who create economic payoffs for the bourgeoisie)
- Underlying assumption
 - Economic relationships underpin the way the world works
 - With political superstructures
- Application to the International System
 - States continue to be the actor, the main unit of analysis → look at the rich and the poor through that, with the bourgeoisie exploiting the proletariat
 - Interests of the bourgeoisie acts = the global guide (rich, powerful, dominant states at the centre)

- The poor states = periphery of the international system
- Relationship shaped by exploitation of poor by rich
- Marked by cross-state alliances between the bourgeoisie at the centre and the bourgeoisie at the periphery → mutually beneficial collaboration in order to maintain position
- Proletariat at the centre don't cooperate with proletariat at the periphery because their lives are better than those at the periphery and they understand that their standards of living rely on the exploitation of that periphery by the bourgeoisie at the centre
- Change in international system can only come through world revolution
- End of the approach with the demise of the USSR?

Constructivism

- Onuf (1980s), Alexander Wendt (1990s)
- Debates on true nature of constructivism: Methodology or approach?
- Does it subsume feminist view of international politics?
- Core Beliefs - International politics is shaped by:
 - Persuasive ideas – how can countries communicate and react to ideas?
 - Collective values
 - Social identities
- Key Actors
 - Promoters of New ideas
 - Transnational activism networks
 - Non-governmental organizations
- Main Instruments
 - Ideas
 - Values
- Does not explain:
 - Which power structures are needed in the world
 - Which social conditions allow for change in values
- It all depends on your point of view and location in the world! (e.g. approach to nuclear power, jihad etc.)