

Realism and Structural Realism

From the *Cycle News Hour*, you're listening to *Power Play*. *Music cue* In this segment, we'll be learning all about political theory, explicating and demystifying this seemingly inscrutable science. Today we'll be covering the bluntly-named theory of realism and its intellectual brainchild, realist structuralism. *beat* Wait—I, yeah, I know, don't...turn this off just yet, I promise we'll keep it interesting. I'm Cameron Lallana and thank you for tuning in.

Music fades

Before we get going, let's do a little bit of house-cleaning. For those of you who are already acquainted with political theory, this might be somewhat basic, but a little review has never hurt anyone. In its ideal form, academic political science is a descriptive discipline, not a prescriptive one. Newcomers to the study, upon learning about the various approaches to understanding international or domestic realms, sometimes make the mistake of choosing one theory that makes sense to them and then assuming that its tenets are not only universally true, but also how states *should* act. Academic theory, though, is not some secret knowledge of the natural ways of the world. It is a body of work wherein social scientists have attempted to explain various phenomena—such as hot war, cold war, alliance, competition, etc.—by identifying which features of our world affect those things. Disagreements over *what* features are relevant or how much of an effect they have—well, that's the basis of different theories. Nothing more, nothing less. This isn't to say that academics can't or don't have opinions about how things *should* be—you'd be hard-pressed to find a group of people who have more thoughts about the issue. The thing is: there's a hard difference between writing a policy recommendation and writing academic papers. The latter needs testable hypotheses and replicable outcomes; the former uses those conclusions to predict how states or other groups may act, then recommends decisions based on those assumptions. Okay, got it? Good, let's talk about realism in International relations.

Music change

If you were to go to any university-level politics class and ask the question, “what is the definition of a state?” I would bet you would almost invariably get an answer along these lines: a state is a political entity in a definite geographical area with a monopoly on legitimate violence. Here and there, some people might add that a state must be able to collect taxes or that it must have international recognition, but these will almost always be an afterthought to a state's monopoly on legitimate violence. In real life, you see this in the form of police and military forces.

Obviously, the police receive their authority by virtue of being associated with the state. Legally, you can't just pick up a gun and start arresting people on a whim. If you want to arrest people on a whim, you have to get hired by your local PD first.

In normal political theory, this tenet is the springboard for a great deal of thought. An academic might interrogate its logical conclusions. For example, *what* constitutes acceptable forms of state violence and *who* is it acceptable for the state to do violence against? More commonly, though, it's just part of how we understand states. If a state actor can't eliminate internal opponents who seriously challenge that monopoly on violence, then it runs the risk of becoming a failed state, unable to govern in its own territories.

International relations is also deeply preoccupied with the state's ability to do violence. Similar to domestic politics, violence, the threat of violence, or the promise of protection is considered to be a main tool in state-to-state relations. IR, though, adds an extra dimension: in the international arena, the important thing is relative ability to do violence. That is, a state actor's ability to do violence only gains meaning when compared to the violence ability of another state. Which state has more? Which has less? Those questions are more relevant to scholars of IR and, especially, realists.

Don't be fooled by the name, realism isn't more *realistic* per se: what it is is more narrowly focused power and competition, which it considers essential to understanding state interaction.

Students, just learning about political realism, are often forced to read an excerpt from Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War known as the Melian Dialogue. In the dialogue, Athenian negotiators demand that the island of Melos join their war against Sparta or suffer destruction. When the Melians ask why they cannot be neutral, the Athenian negotiators utter this famous line as part of their response: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

At risk of being reductive, you could consider this realism boiled down to a single statement. Only by way of strength, which could also be called power, can a state assert itself. It's perhaps worth noting that in the face of the Athenian threat, the Melians chose to fight back. This proved to be a fatal decision: after defeating the Melian army, the Athenians killed every man on the island, then sold the women and children into slavery.

This maxim, however, is inadequate for comprehensively understanding realism. If we want to see how this theory of power and the modern state system intersect, we're going to have to jump forward more than 2,000 years to the mid-1900s.

1937: less than two years before the start of World War 2, a Jewish-German lawyer and professor would emigrate to the United States in order to escape the ever-increasing anti-semitic discrimination of Nazi Germany. His name was Hans J Morgenthau and probably had no idea then that his ideas would be foundational in modern realist theory.

Over the course of his lifetime, Morgenthau would author nine books along with dozens of journals articles so this following explanation is necessarily imperfect. You can't really condense fifty years of work into a few minutes, but I'll try my best to cover the essential features of it.

As a young man growing up in the German city of Coburg, Morgenthau showed a strong intellectual kinship with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. This influence is readily apparent in Morgenthau's evaluation of human psychology: at its most basic, he believed that human behavior could be divided into two categories: first, the pursuit of pleasure; and second: the avoidance of pain. Furthermore, he posited that humans would pursue pleasure to the greatest degree possible and avoid pain to the greatest degree possible. We'll call this the "boundless pleasure principle." It is these psychological features that cause friction among people in society, he believed.

In Morgenthau's own words, quote, "wherever people live together, their basic drives come into conflict. As a result, there are not only continuous reassessment of relative rank and strength, but there is also unceasing competition for all kinds of objects."

This sort of Hobbesian state-of-nature, Morgenthau argued, was mitigated by the existence of the state. Through a combination of what he called "norms and sanctions," but what we'll call "laws and law enforcement," the boundless pleasure principle could be restricted to such a degree that functional society is then able to form.

So why is this important? Basically, because states were created and run by humans, Morgenthau believed that they act in much the same way. While a human tries to gain the most pleasure possible for—let's call it obvious reasons, a state endeavors to gain as much *power* as possible in order to sustain itself.

Okay, let's take a quick break from Morgenthau here so I can tell you a story. It's called 'The Parable of the Tribes.' This is an excerpt from an article of the same name by Andrew Schmookler.

Imagine a group of tribes living within reach of one another. If all choose the way of peace, then all may live in peace. But what if all but one choose peace, and that one is ambitious for expansion and conquest? What can happen to the others when confronted by an ambitious and potent neighbor? Perhaps one tribe is attacked and defeated, its people destroyed

and its lands seized for the use of the victors. Another is defeated, but this one is not exterminated; rather, it is subjugated and transformed to serve the conqueror. A third seeking to avoid such disaster flees from the area into some inaccessible (and undesirable) place, and its former homeland becomes part of the growing empire of the power-seeking tribe. Let us suppose that others observing these developments decide to defend themselves in order to preserve themselves and their autonomy. But the irony is that successful defense against a power-maximizing aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power, and if the threatening society has discovered ways to magnify its power through innovations in organization or technology (or whatever), the defensive society will have to transform itself into something more like its foe in order to resist the external force.

I have just outlined four possible outcomes for the threatened tribes: destruction, absorption and transformation, withdrawal, and imitation. *In every one of these outcomes the ways of power are spread throughout the system.* This is the parable of the tribes.

That was an excerpt from the article “The Parable of the Tribes,” by Andrew Schmockler, originally published by the Context Institute.

So while human beings may live in a society where a *state* can restrict expansionary behavior, there is no such superpower for a society of states. A nation can’t call 911. In such an anarchic system, the only rule is self-help. In order to survive, a state must continually re-assert itself either to maintain power or to gain more power.

For some of the more critical among you, you might be thinking, “well, what about international law? Even if there isn’t a world government, we can still create norms and sanctions that will be enforced by the community of the world?” Well, if that’s in your mind—very astute! And very liberal of you! And no, I don’t mean liberal as in a conservative-liberal dichotomy—liberal theory in IR refers to an understanding of the world that places greater importance on inter-state institutions such as the UN as well as non-state actors. But we’ll talk about liberal theory another time. In response to that, though, Morgenthau would argue that powerful states are incentivized to enforce international law according to self-interest. For example, although former General-Secretary Kofi Annan pronounced the US’s 2003 invasion of Iraq to be illegal under

international law, there were no states who had sufficient power to enforce sanctions based on that. Conversely, Iraq's 1994 invasion of Kuwait was not only condemned by the UN but was also repelled by a military coalition led by the US. How could it be otherwise, Morgenthau might ask? The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

Okay, let's go through it in short.

1. The world is anarchic. There is no supranational power that can successfully and evenly restrict state behavior without infringing upon basic sovereignty of nations.
2. States are rational actors who seek to survive in this anarchic system.
3. Therefore, the relationship between any two states is essentially conflictual. They will both want to be the stronger state.

This basic chain of events creates an endless struggle for power. If you're familiar with Nietzsche, you probably see his influence in this worldview.

Okay, let's pause. That was a lot, sorry. If you're new to this, you might be thinking "wow, political theory is kind of a downer" and, yeah, welcome to IR. Hans Morgenthau was a Jewish refugee of Nazi Germany, he did not have a bright and sunny view of the world. He was very frank, even about his own study, once remarking, quote, "political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil."

So that's realism. And while it is a very important foundational theory, it's...well, it's just that: foundational. Modern academics, even adherents of realism, don't simply accept Morgenthau's assertions: using modern knowledge and data, they add to it; using that same information, they argue *against* other features of classical realism. When presented with new issues such as evolving international markets in a globalized world, they use the basic lens of realism to try to understand it and its consequences.

Today, if you were to take a class on, say, the study of war, your professor probably wouldn't be handing you a copy of Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*. It's much more likely that you would be assigned readings by Kenneth Waltz, the progenitor of neorealism, also known as realist structuralism.

In the years following World War 2, while Morgenthau was beginning to more fully articulate his political theories, Kenneth Waltz was at Columbia University, pursuing a graduate degree in...well, economics, actually. You might be noticing a trend here, of people who didn't initially study political science becoming trendsetters in the discipline. And, for the record, I started my academic career studying English so there's so there's *half-beat, sibilant s* still hope for me.

After teaching for a little bit and serving during the Korean War, Waltz got his Ph.D. from Columbia. Following that, he taught across the US and the world, published more articles than I can possibly list, and redefined realist theory forever. His most influential book is the prosaically-named *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979, which comprehensively outlined his theory of state interaction called neorealism or realist structuralism.

And, yes, realist structuralism does sound like a particularly uninteresting form of architecture, but I promise you, this name is actually a decent representation of the theory itself. For the rest of this report, I'm going to call "realist structuralism" just "structuralism" to better differentiate it from "realism."

Naturally, the question occurs to you: how *does* structuralism differ from realism? 1) Waltz does not think that states endlessly seek power. And 2) Waltz believes that state behavior is affected not only by other states alone but also *how* states create order.

Okay, let's go over both of these in a little more depth. First: states do not seek endless power. Waltz and Morgenthau agree that all states share the same basic goal: to survive. But while Morgenthau believes states gain as much power as they can to survive, Waltz argues that they actually prioritize *security*. What is security? Well, it's anything that allows a state to survive. Security might mean an alliance with a greater power; it might mean working with other weak states; it might be developing new weapons; it might be decommissioning weapons that are provoking an opponent. Power is still useful, Waltz says, but it's merely a tool in the service of security. Attempting to gain too much power might make a state a target that it otherwise would not be.

Take the example of nuclear weapons. If we accept the logics of classical realism and deterrence theory, which is to say that two sides possessing nuclear weapons will not directly attack each other because that would ensure mutual destruction, then we would assume that *all* states would seek nuclear weapons for the sake of peace. Reality, however, does not bear this out. The majority of states do not seek out nuclear weapons and, in fact, some states do not acquire nuclear weapons despite ample opportunity to do so. There's actually a whole subsection of IR that investigates this sort of thing, Nuclear Proliferation and Nonproliferation. Some of their research actually shows that, during the process of obtaining nuclear weapons, a state's likelihood of engaging in conflict actually spikes dramatically, if only temporarily.

Showing that research to Waltz probably wouldn't surprise him in the least. Any state with nuclear weapons has an absolute advantage over non-nuclear states. Such excessive strength might, quote, "prompt other states to increase their arms and pool their efforts against the

dominant strength.” Endquote. So when the US got the bomb, the fact that its main competitor, the USSR, would not only also develop nuclear weapons but would go on to try and create an even more powerful weapon is a totally logical progression. It made sense for them to match a competitor. A smaller state, immediately surrounded by opponent states, might not want to invite that kind of attention.

In short, security is risk-management, essentially. It moves the theory away from Morgenthau’s more abstract, Nietzschean idea of power. Waltz rejects the realist idea that a state’s innate lust for power is a blanket explanation for the existence of warfare.

Second: states are affected by *how* states are ordered. In the article ‘The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,’ Waltz says that many IR theorists, especially Marxists and Liberals, quote, “link the outbreak of war or the prevalence of peace to the internal qualities of states. Governmental forms, economic systems, social institutions, political ideologies—these are but a few of where the causes of war have been found,” endquote. He calls this unit-level analysis. And while Waltz does not dispute the usefulness of unit-level analysis, he does claim that it’s not enough. Warfare is as old as time—but all the reasons above, well, they’re practically infants in the crib. So warfare must be the outcome of forces placed *upon* states, from the way that states arrange themselves. Waltz calls that a ‘structure,’ and looking at structure is called a systems-level analysis.

Now, that’s a bit confusing, so let me give you a solid example: prior to World War 1, we lived in a multi-polar world. There were a plethora of powerful states that acted more or less as equals: Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, Imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian empire and so on. If we took a unit-level analysis of this, we might look at the internal features of a particular state. Think of military technologies being developed, such as the Maxim machine gun, that changes a country’s military strategy. A systems-level analysis might instead look at the relationship between these states. Think of analyzing the antagonistic relationship between Germany and France or how that relationship might have affected British decisions in the European political sphere. In a multipolar world, a state knows how it acts toward one state will be watched carefully by all of their rivals and allies.

One or the other isn’t enough to explain war—Waltz argues that you need the generalities of systems-level incentives and the particulars of unit-level knowledge for that.

Using a systems-level analysis of the pre-World War 1 world, Waltz characterizes great-power politics as such: “Interdependence of parties, diffusion of danger, confusion of responses.” Endquote. In such a system, war can happen by accident—through miscalculation or mistake.

These reasons don't explain the Great War, but they do provide a framing and explanation for the *particulars* that led to the conflict.

The bi-polar world post World War 2, however had a different set of characteristics. Today, in a unipolar world, the characteristics are yet still different. This produces a different environment with different incentives to act in different ways. Polarity is only one form of system you could look at, and it's constantly changing.

So warfare? Well, it's not just a pissing contest. It's caused by states responding to both domestic and international pressure and incentives. It's what enemies you have, how they act, what weapons they possess. Your state is a threat to them, too, so they're responding to the exact same set of characteristics.

I'll end with another excerpt from Waltz "Origins of War," in which he is speaking on the Cold War.

Wars, hot and cold, originate in the structure of the international political system. Most Americans blame the Soviet Union for creating the Cold War, by the actions that follow necessarily from the nature of its society and government. Revisionist historians, attacking the dominant view, assign blame to the United States. Some American error, or sinister interest, or faulty assumption about Soviet aims, they argue, is what started the Cold War. Either way, the main point is lost. In a bipolar world, each of the two great powers is bound to focus its fears on the other, to distrust its motives, and to impute offensive intentions to defensive measures.

There you go. That's structuralism. If you don't quite get it, don't worry. You've just gotten the abridged version of a textbook's worth of information, simplified to near reductive degree. Don't feel bad.

If you're interested in learning more about what we've talked about today, the texts I relied most are "Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography" by Christoph Frei, "The Parable of the Tribes," by Andrew Schmoekler, and "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," by Kenneth Waltz.

For the two of you who are still listening, thank you. I'm Cameron Lallana, you're listening to the Cycle News Hour, and this has been *Power Play*.

