

“Is neorealism really an improvement over classical realism?”

The neorealist theory of international relations depicts an anarchic world where states are compelled to act in a certain manner because they are part of an anarchic international system. Although neorealism provides an appealing exposé for the study of international relations, I argue it raises more questions than the answers it provides.

Classical realists believe that states are the main actors in international relations and they are power maximizers. As Morgenthau explains, states will struggle for power because they are managed by policy makers and such is the nature of men. Other institutions and organizations are considered to play a small role but only within a state-centric framework. States define international order as anarchic because there is no central government to quell men's search for power and their thirst to dominate others. In this eternal struggle peace is achieved through the balance of power, where states try to prevent one state from dominating all the others.¹

Neorealism surfaced during the Cold War as a response to the perceived shortcomings of classical realism. The theoretical approach proposed by Waltz highlights the importance of structure and draws its arguments by applying the analogy of a perfect market to international politics. An approach Waltz claims to be more scientific than the one of classical realism, which he considers to be “reductionist”. He argues so because it focuses on the subjective decisions of policy makers, as key in shaping the international sphere. A perspective that excludes the possibility of a structural analysis where the system is perceived to be independent and therefore playing an active role in determining state behaviour.²

In a world still seen as anarchic, Waltz separates the internal circumstances of states from the external ones and claims that the international system is autonomous. International order is shaped by a global structure, which is created by the interaction of states and then forces them into a certain *modus operandi*.³ Whereas in Morgenthau the analysis of world politics focused on his view of

1 H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948)

2 K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979) pp. 61-64

3 K. Waltz, “Realist thought and Neorealist Theory”, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 44, 1990, pp. 29-30

human nature, Waltz emphasizes the importance of the system in directing their actions.

The introduction of the third image analysis, as the most important aspect to look at international politics, is defined by three ordering principles: anarchy, the function of units and the distribution of capabilities.⁴ Anarchy for neorealists is slightly different than for classical realists. As Shimko notes it, if for Morgenthau anarchy was important but merely circumstantial, for Waltz it is one of the defining elements of the system and acts as a “causal” force. The concept of anarchy also differs in the sense that classical realists believe states search for power and most neorealists tend to advocate that states fight to survive. The outcome in both cases is an anarchic world but their origin is fundamentally different.⁵

The units that compose the system are deemed to be similar and perform similar actions in the international sphere; and internal politics have no place in differentiating states. Although states perform the same functions they are distinguished from each other by their capabilities. The distribution of capabilities, seen mainly as military power, has the capacity to change the systemic order. As states' military power changes so does the international system.⁶

The ideas put forward by neorealists seem to provide an edge over classical realism, not only in the sense that they accommodate a more full-fledged theory that, as Waltz points out, was not possible with classical realism;⁷ but also because there is an evolution from the apparent subjective and traditional views of Morgenthau to a more objective and scientific theorisation.⁸

It seems that neorealism was able to provide an answer to the flawed reasoning of classical realists but, a more thorough analysis shows something different. One of the key points where this stands out is in the concept of power. For Morgenthau statesmen act “in terms of interest defined as power”⁹. This idea of politics should not be seen as a limited short-term objective for states and policy makers but, as Rosenberg explains, that the actions and interactions of states need to be

4 J. Baylis et. al., *The Globalization of World Politics: An introduction to international relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 86-99

5 K. L. Shimko, *Realism, Neorealism and American Liberalism*, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 54, nr. 2, 1994) pp. 293-294

6 J. Baylis et. al., pp. 86-99

7 K. Waltz, *Realist thought and Neorealist Theory*, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 44, 1990, pp. 26

8 K. L. Shimko, pp. 295-296

9 H. Morgenthau, op. cit.

perceived as a response to a certain balance in the distribution of power.¹⁰ As we have also seen, under Morgenthau's perspective, states' strive for power, generating a competitive environment. The only way to maintain international order is through a "balance of power" where "no one state or coalition is in position to dominate all the others."¹¹ However, this assumption implies, as Rosenberg argues, that we look at the world as nothing more than a collectivity of states and that internal politics produces no effects in how states interact with each other. It is at this point that Morgenthau's argument becomes circular and loses some of its strength. If world politics deals only with security issues, and power is seen only in terms of military capacity, the idea of politics as "interest defined as power" becomes undeniable.¹²

Neorealism tries to answer this problematic with the introduction of the international system as the prime director of state behaviour. However, the mechanical structure introduced by Waltz only sees power as military capacity and fails to account for transnational power: the system continues to be a mere group of interacting states. Since for neorealists international politics only has to deal security issues, the argument becomes circular again in the sense that Waltz's structure is only applicable to a system that only regards military power.¹³

Neorealism also provides few changes as far as the concept of anarchy is concerned. It is true that it assumes a conducive role in the international system, instead of a permissive one, but no greater development is introduced in this area. Waltz sees anarchy in the international realm as the lack of a central power that can exercise force, the same way states exercise it inside their own internal sphere, which leads to competition among equal sovereign actors.¹⁴ The problem with Waltz's concept of anarchy, as Milner argues, is that it collides with one of the ordering principles of his theory for the international system: the idea that states' capabilities are a differentiating factor.¹⁵ If states have different capacities they do not compete on equal grounds and do not assume the same

10 J. Rosenberg, *What's the matter with realism?*, Review of International Studies, vol. 16, 2009, pp. 290

11 J. Baylis et. al., pp. 86-99

12 J. Rosenberg, pp. 294-295

13 *ibid.*, pp. 295-296

14 K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979) pp. 88-112

15 H. Milner, *The assumption of anarchy in international relations theory: a critique*, Review of International Studies, vol. 17, 1991, pp. 77-78

posture towards each other. Waltz's third ordering principle leads us to conclude that states perform different functions and that there is a separation between small powers and great powers, with the latter assuming a more important role. These differences suggest that the world cannot be seen as a perfect market where there is a competition between similar players but more like a monopolistic or oligopolistic one, where one or more units have risen above the rest.¹⁶ As Milner concludes, these types of markets are characterized by instability, balance between the dominant actors and strategic interdependence, which seem to “function more like the international system than perfect markets”.¹⁷ This different perspective provides a less narrow view of the international system and the idea of “strategic interdependence” suggests a more intricate network of communication between actors, and is dependent on norms and practices that need to be established not only in the international sphere but also at a national level. The excessive importance given to the concept of anarchy leads neorealists to the “radical separation between domestic and international politics”, which can be dangerous in such a state-centric theoretical approach.¹⁸

Neorealists see the state as an uncontested actor, around which their theory is constructed, and offer no reasoning for its formation. As Ashley puts it, for neorealists:

*“The state must be treated as an unproblematic unity: an entity whose existence, boundaries, identifying structures, constituencies, legitimations, interests, and capacities to make self-regarding decisions can be treated as given, independent of transnational class and human interests.”*¹⁹

In this paradigm, states simply exist, with no theoretical explanation for how or why they are formed; or why they are the sole actors of the international system. An assumption that for neorealists requires no defence but that is problematic because it draws away from their proposed objectivity. Despite criticising classical realism's traditional approach, neorealists seem not to mind the “metaphysical commitment” they make to the state-as-actor assumption that “exempts it from scientific criticism”²⁰

16 *ibid*, pp. 84

17 *ibid* pp. 84-85

18 *ibid* p. 85

19 R. K. Ashley, *The poverty of neorealism*, International Organization, vol. 38, 1984, p. 238

20 R. K. Ashley, p. 239

If in classical realism the notion of the state as the main actor was already problematic - because it excludes other institutions from intervening in international relations (one need only to look at the September, 11 attacks in the US to recognize their importance) - seen through the scope of neorealism the problematic extends further. According to classical realism, *raison d'etat* is the guiding principle for state behaviour and the interests of statesmen are those that maximize the state's power and influence, in order to preserve its "health and strength"²¹. Statesmen are encouraged to pursue their interest with respect towards the international order and with ethics and morals under consideration. The reasoning of Meneicke suggests that the preservation of the state and its political structure - *ergo* its identity - play a role in defining its behaviour, even if a slight one. In neorealism, the state's identity is not taken into account by the proposed structuralist analysis. As Ruggie mentions, "change" at a unit level is unaccounted for.²² Differentiation between states is only understood in relative terms – state's capabilities are only seen in relation to those of other states. Ashley picks up on Ruggie's work and explains that his argument is not recognized by neorealists because the "identity of the state" is taken for granted and seen as "unproblematic".²³ As Ruggie concludes: "only structural change can produce systemic change"²⁴. In sum, even though units define the system, only an alteration in their relative capabilities can generate a change in the reigning structure. Internal change continues to play no role in this analysis.

The state-as-actor problematic was one that was most emphasized with the failure of neorealism to predict and explain the end of the Cold War, one of the most important events in world politics of the last century. The work of Kratochwil is very helpful in understanding this failure as he points to three different areas where neorealism was "embarrassed", mainly due to its incapacity to account for changes within the state, other than those that concern military capabilities.²⁵ If we look at the Soviet Union's military capacity before, during and one year after the

21 F. Meneicke, *Machievelism: The Doctrine of Raison D'Etat and its Place in Modern History* (New York: Transactions, 1997) pp. 1-2

22 J. G. Ruggie, *Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis*, World Politics, vol. 35, 1983, p. 273

23 R. K. Ashley, p. 241

24 J. G. Ruggie, p. 285

25 F. Kratochwil, *The embarrassment of changes: neo-realism as the science of Realpolitik without politics*, Review of International Studies, vol.19, 1993, pp. 63-64

events of the *perestroika* and the *glasnost*, we find that there was no decrease in the USSR's capabilities that could account for such a systemic change in the international realm. Defence spending did not increase in the 1980s and even if we accept the argument of economic pressure on the Soviet Union, there is no explanation in Waltz's theory for why and when such transformation occurred.²⁶ The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany all derived from a turning point in the Kremlin's domestic politics, with change coming from inside the USSR rather than as the outcome of structural pressures on the country, as neorealists would suggest.²⁷ The third and last argument made by Kratochwil is that realist US foreign policy makers had already predicted that a change in the international system, that was in place during the Cold War, would only occur through "domestic change". Neorealism's scientific perspective of international relations failed where practice and experience were successful.²⁸ The issue is also referred to by Ashley when he argues that neorealism denies the importance of practice, adding that "people are reduced to some idealized homo *oeconomicus*, able only to carry out, but never to reflect critically on, the limited rational logic that the system demands of them."²⁹

Kratochwil argues that the events that took place in 1989/1990 are better explained by a legitimization crisis in communism that made the Soviet Union look at Western European success in maintaining peace. The reunification of Germany can, therefore, be perceived as a move that the USSR saw would "serve its own security interests better than a Germany wandering between East and West".³⁰ Although these events cannot be comprehended through the scope of neorealism, the interest approach of classical realists could have been able to predict such a move.

The neorealist approach to international relations does indeed provide an additional analytical edge over classical realism in the sense that it introduces the systemic influence on state actors. However it focuses too much on a third image analysis and disregards the actions of states and statesmen.

26 *ibid.*, p. 73

27 *Ibid.*, p. 73-74

28 *Ibid.*, p. 73-74

29 R. K. Ashley, p. 258

30 F. Kratochwil, p. 74

Although classical realism cannot be seen as a credible theoretical alternative to neorealism because of the many flaws it contains, it does provide some insight on the first and second image reasoning. Neorealism chose not to answer some of the more problematic issues in realist thought, such as the concepts of power and anarchy, and is still unable to provide a theoretical explanation for the state as the main actor approach. It is an improvement over classical realism but one that needs further development in order not to repeat failures such as the incapacity to predict or explain the end of the Cold War.

