

Classical Realism and Human Nature

ANTHONY CLARK



WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this paper for Professor Nincic's International Relations Theory class during my senior year. We had to focus on a specific theory, so I chose realism: but I wanted the paper to have a broader application. Because the focus of my argument is human nature, a concept included in many theoretical points of view, I was able to expand my argument beyond realism. I intend it to be applicable to all theoretical approaches we take in political science. The United States is highly polarized, which has stopped our government from legislating. This essay claims that this polarization is caused in part by an insistence on clinging to ideology rather than considering data and experience in our approach to public policy. Despite being an explicit attack on realism, this essay is primarily a rejection of all dogmatic political theories that claim to assert special knowledge about the human condition.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: International relations, like virtually all political life, is jointly driven by the pursuit of tangible interests and by mentally-rooted visions of the public good. That interests and values operate in tandem and are at times hard to disentangle is generally recognized, but any attempt to grasp what lies at their source—what determines the types of interests and values behind our political activities—must start from some conception of human nature, and it is here that thinking has historically diverged. Major Renaissance and Renaissance-inspired figures like Machiavelli and Hobbes argued that human nature was fundamentally egotistic, manipulative, and potentially violent, while the only acceptable form of government

would rest on the proper management of power by those who understand the limits of the human character. By contrast, leading figures of the Enlightenment, such as Locke and Kant, were convinced that human nature, reflective of reason, could elevate political life to a higher plane, one consistent with democratic agency. At the level of international relations, the former conception, espoused by thinkers as historically distant from each other as Thucydides and Morgenthau long held sway, but it is increasingly being challenged. “Classical Realism and Human Nature” provides an intelligent and insightful discussion of the debate.

– Miroslav Nincic, *Department of Political Science*

A common practice in theorizing about politics and international relations is to make predictions based on some understanding of human nature. Since our political institutions are reflective of our values and norms, developing an understanding of what we are in essence ought to help us predict how our governments and organizations will interact. Thus, our conceptions of human nature have logical extensions which lead to predictions about human action; around these we can frame public policy. Within the field of international relations, classical realism is one paradigm used to justify certain predictions about human affairs and to posit policy positions to regulate those affairs. Classical realism articulates a rather cynical view of human nature that leads the realist to conclude that power is the only concern for states interacting on the international level and that states are the only relevant actors. This assumption that human nature necessitates a drive for power fails to account for the existence of genuinely peaceful people, and it overlooks increases in peace both within countries and between them. Further, we ought to be skeptical of any theoretical framework that asserts a universal motivation for human action; ultimately, there is no strict, definable human nature that pushes human action in a specific direction. Under these two observations, classical realism’s theoretical approach to international relations falls apart.

Realism's Assumptions

According to classical realists, the lack of a central authority to maintain peace is cause for concern because a natural drive for power and glory will motivate humans to violence. Thomas Hobbes elaborates in *Leviathan* that “in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory” (83). He continues by asserting that “during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war” (84). This natural drive for power that all humans have exists in states as well. Hans Morgenthau, another well-known classical realist, asserts that “both domestic and international politics are a struggle for power . . . the tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations” (Viotti and Kauppi 51). On the international level, anarchy allows powerful states to do whatever they want to do. In the words of Thucydides, “the strong do what they will; the weak do what they must” (Viotti and Kauppi 44). Thus, war can be summed up as a necessary byproduct of an inherent violent nature in humans that will inevitably be exerted outward against others within a system of anarchy. This helps cultivate security dilemmas because no one can be trusted to leave you alone if they have the power to take what you have while facing no consequence from an authority.

On the international level, under a classical realist understanding, states strive to gain power. It is important to understand precisely what power is. Put simply, power is the ability to get what you desire when you desire it. Power is a social construct, meaning it is measured relative to your standing among other people. Thus, when a state gains power, it does so at the expense of other states. If it benefits the powerful state to engage in conquest, it ought to be expected to do so. Powerful states will also try to shape the international community in a way that will preserve their standing and protect their interests, which sometimes requires them to engage in warfare to prevent other states from rising. Realism also places emphasis on the notion that states are rational actors, and thus it assumes that state behavior will be predictable if one understands the nature and distribution of power. The inherent drive for glory, dominance, and security articulated

by Hobbes and Morgenthau leads to violent behavior and an inability to trust other people; because states are collections of individuals, they reflect the natural inclination that humans have toward violence, and the global community therefore resembles Hobbes' state of nature, according to classical realism. However, this conception of human nature and its assertion of how people and states are expected to interact is highly problematic.

The Success of Modern Societies

First, classical realism assumes an inherent drive to power that exists in all humans. This does not account for the existence of pacifists who detest the use of violence. A realist could argue that the pacifist is merely repressing a natural drive for power, but this view is cynical and accusatory; there is no reason to assume that people who advocate for peace are being dishonest. Throughout the history of the United States periods of war have been met with strong domestic opposition from peace movements. The fact that some people may be inclined to violence does not mean that everyone has the same nature. Some people are genuinely peace loving and docile, and this gets reflected in domestic arguments that concern foreign policy. Democracy gives people an outlet to express their views, and the fact that so much of our political dialogue is expressed in moral terms seems to contradict the argument that humans are somehow naturally violent or destructive toward each other; at least in modern society, people are genuinely concerned with the well-being of others and this fact is further reflected in the existence of welfare and foreign aid policies. Our desire to see others do well and our ability to feel empathy are at odds with classical realism's view that human life is a zero-sum game where we are constantly, and violently, struggling against each other for more power.

Following from the previous observation, if we really have some natural drive to violence then we would not have been able to establish relatively nonviolent societies in modern times. Steven Pinker notes an overall reduction of violent crime within human societies as classical liberalism and democratic values became the norm across the globe. He writes:

so holding many factors constant, we find that living in a civilization reduces one's chances of being a victim of violence fivefold . . . Modern Western Countries, even in their most war-torn centuries, suffered no more than around a quarter of the average death rate of non-state societies, and less than a tenth of that for the most violent one (51-52).

To account for this, classical realists should give us an explanation of why our natural drive for violence would suddenly turn off after the Enlightenment; because they fail to do so, the logical structure of classical realism no longer holds. Moreover, if people are inherently aggressive then placing power into the hands of a government ought to create a bureaucratic system wherein powerful rulers can act violently toward the people they rule over. There are absolutely repressive regimes, but classical realism offers no mechanism to account for the existence of benign governments. If human nature is inclined toward violence and glory, then giving humans power over others would necessarily lead to totalitarian regimes anywhere government exists; that simply has not happened.

The Success of International Organizations

A realist could respond to this argument by making the case that violence would be outsourced; a government wants to stay in power, and violence against its own people would work against this desire, so states instead seek glory through war with other states; the lack of a central international authority allows for violent people to use the state as an apparatus of exercising their violent nature on the global level, which in turn allows them to act with restraint domestically. However, with the rise of institutionalist understandings of international relations, this argument that realists could make regarding states does not hold. Today, states have expanded their interconnectedness through international organizations such as the United Nations and economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization. The European Union is another example of the effectiveness of interstate cooperation, and it's difficult to imagine another war occurring between the Western European states. Han Dorussen and Hugh Ward point out that "the network of IGOs enhances the transmission of information between states and thus allows them to avoid conflict as well as encourages third parties to act

as intermediaries and to do so more effectively” (207). The treaties that are created within these institutions make it hard to foresee any serious interstate conflicts, and the classical realist conception of human nature does not allow for this kind of consensus. If humans really are naturally violent and uncooperative, then any sort of consensual relation ought to be broken as soon as a state has enough power to do so.

Further, the creation of cooperative organizations should not occur in the first place since humans supposedly do not trust each other; if you cannot trust someone, then any agreement with them is irrational and would not be broached. The success of our international institutions in incentivizing diplomacy over violence, and the rarity of war, seems to be further evidence against the realist argument that humans are violent and untrusting by nature. Nathaniel Beck, Gary King, and Langche Zeng amassed and analyzed a data set in their paper where they argued for a certain statistical system to be used in international relations research. In writing this paper, they made a particularly interesting observation. The data set they used “contains 23,529 dyad-years between 1947 and 1989” and they find that “[militarized interstate disputes] are rare, occurring in only 976 (4.1%) of dyad-years” (28). This observation particularly undermines the realist world view. If all states are in a constant struggle for power, then interstate war really ought to occur at a rate higher than 4.1%.

Culture and Individual Agency

Classical realism makes its biggest mistake when it attempts to articulate any conception of a universal human nature. Political theorists sometimes use human nature to justify their philosophical positions, but any theory based on a theorist’s opinion of human nature should be approached with skepticism. Humans are free agents and react to stimuli in unique ways. That we have a desire for reputation, security, and other values posited by classical realists such as Thomas Hobbes cannot be disputed. However, the way we channel those desires into specific actions is unique to each person and classical realism does not account for this. Some people do adopt violence as a means but those people are not representative of the entire species. Also, people have different priorities. The desire for reputation may not mean much to people living under modern capitalism; the market economy provides us with a peaceful

means of satisfying a lot of our needs, and it also provides us with ways to keep ourselves entertained and busy so that we do not have any desire to act violently toward each other. We no longer have to steal to acquire property, and the existence of the modern states means we no longer have to arm ourselves to take justice into our own hands or protect that property. If violence is ingrained in our very essence, then we should not be able to keep ourselves focused on menial material objects or entertainment. There are certain things that we are biologically wired to pursue; violence is not one of them. Further, if people in modern times do have a need for something like Hobbes' concept of reputation, it typically manifests itself peacefully. Today's culture emphasizes self-restraint and we tend to appreciate people who are seen as sympathetic, kind, and in control of their desires and emotions; cultivation of a positive reputation may have led people to be violent in Hobbes' time, but that is no longer the case.

As stated, we humans have free will, but our motivations are further shaped by the cultures we live in. Shalom Schwartz writes:

within cultural groups there is individual variation in value priorities due to the unique experiences and personalities of different individuals. However, the average priorities attributed to different values by societal members reflect the central thrust of their shared enculturation. Hence the average priorities point to the underlying, common cultural values (26).

Individuals who are molded in a specific way by culture gain access to political office and retain those cultural values while interacting with leaders from other countries. Classical realism fails to account for this effect of culture on individuals and states. Some cultures may be violent war cultures, but others have been (and are) peaceful. Classical liberalism has created democratic societies that culturally value peaceful solutions to problems that appear within society, and this cultural drive for peaceful relations carries over onto the international level in the form of diplomacy. David Sobek, M. Rodwan Abouharb, and Christopher Ingram point out that a "joint respect for human rights decreases the probability of conflict. This relationship is maintained even when one controls for the effect of democracy and its influence on the human rights record of states" (1); in other words, if a state values human rights at home – regardless of its political structure - it will channel that value in its interactions abroad as

well. What begins as a cultural phenomenon – such as valuing peaceful interactions and diplomatic solutions to problems - gets adopted by the state and influences how it behaves; culture helps drive individual behavior which in turn drives state behavior. This observation is in direct conflict with the classical realist position that states are the only factors that matter in international relations, that their actions are rational and predictable, and that they naturally act aggressively toward each other. The state itself is an artificial apparatus that reflects the values and drives of the people who administer it. Having peaceful government officials will translate into peaceful foreign policies.

Classical realists could respond that our natural inclination to violence is purposefully repressed. Yet there is simply no evidence to suggest that individuals within nonviolent societies are actively and consciously repressing violent natures. Culture itself will create people with dispositions in line with that culture; a hierarchy that values violence will produce a violent population, but a culture that emphasizes peace will produce a population inclined toward nonviolence. If there's anything to learn from studying culture, it's that ethical values and the institutions they underlie are highly varied throughout human societies. Most people are not anarchists, for instance, but there have been occurrences of successful anarchist societies. In revolutionary Catalonia and Barcelona, anarchists and socialists successfully created worker cooperatives and essentially abolished the private ownership of the means of production (Chomsky, Ch 3). This system was peaceful and cooperative, and it worked well up until Franco took over and brought the collectives under state control. If all humans were driven only by a naturally violent disposition, then the experiment in Spain should not have been successful. Furthermore, if liberal democracy itself is necessary for peaceful affairs between people, then this experiment in Spain would have failed on its own because the system established by the revolutionaries was not a liberal democracy. From this observation, it would appear that peace itself is a value that can be embodied in various institutional and societal structures. There seems to be no necessary condition for nonviolent interaction between individuals and states other than a cultural or individual inclination toward peace; political structure seems to be irrelevant both domestically and on the international level.

The reason so many countries currently exist is because each nationality views itself as being fundamentally distinct from all others.

The fight for a Palestinian state, the Scottish independence movement, and the Catalan independence movement are further evidence that people who view their cultural values as being different have a desire to establish their own nations based on those values. The United States is also evidence of this point; revolutionaries took the classical liberalism of John Locke and used it as the foundation for a new government. The American experiment with limited government has produced a distinct culture, and even though liberal democracy has taken root in other countries, the United States still practices a unique form of government with a distinctly individualist philosophy as its ground; this is reflected in the differences between economic policy in the US and economic policy in other countries. (Those other countries, such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, and Britain, tend to rely on higher taxes for more social spending). This sort of variation in values and the willingness to fight for statehood based on perception of uniqueness makes it impossible to articulate a definable and universal human nature. Humans are social beings and human societies inevitably create cultures, but those cultures are too varied to yield any universal trend. Perhaps we can understand human nature simply as being inclined toward the creation of culture, but that does us no good in creating logical frameworks that describe human motivation in an all-encompassing manner. If the creation of cultural values is an inherent human drive, it tells us nothing specific about what those values will encompass and is therefore useless in creating a complex theory of politics and international relations.

None of this is to say that the world has successfully eradicated violence, or that it's even possible to do so. As long as more than one person lives on the planet there will be some sort of conflict. What is important is to discern why violence occurs so to understand how we can move toward more peaceful relations. Hans Morgenthau and other classical realists all adhere to the view that violence is ingrained in our very essence. The above arguments seem to contradict that assertion. Most of the conflict we see today, and certainly the bloodiest conflicts that have occurred throughout history, are those driven by ideology or religion, both of which are reflections of culture. Thus, violence appears to be - in part - culturally motivated; the asserted motivation of hostile non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, is more evidence of this point. These groups see themselves as being fundamentally different from societies

that have different religious and cultural values, and that difference is perceived as hostility. Also, there will always be individuals who do enjoy violence, and forms of entertainment that are inherently violent are quite popular. None of this contradicts the arguments I proposed above; the classical realist argument is that humans are violent by nature, and that does not appear to be accurate because the claim is too general.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite having rich historical roots in authors such as Thomas Hobbes and Thucydides, classical realism has premises based on antiquated observations and it no longer serves as a relevant theoretical account of personal or international relations. Classical realism asserts a selfish, violent human nature then adopts an understanding of state behavior based on that assertion. The establishment of peaceful societies and institutional successes on the international level, such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, European Union etc., is evidence against realism's view of human nature. Because realism uses its claim about human nature as a foundation for other conclusions, if realism loses the argument on human nature then its logical extensions also become questionable. Ultimately, any theory of human nature that is universal is flawed because of the high amount of variation between and within human societies.

Theoretical frameworks are only useful insofar as they are empirically evidenced, and for that reason political theorists ought to stick with what can be measured and observed. There is an important role for creating narratives to describe the world around us, but those narratives are only useful insofar as they are utilized to make sense of empirical research rather than being asserted as objective truths in-themselves. The insistence to cling to ideology and narrative has negative effects on governing, particularly here in the United States. American voters have become more extreme - especially those on the right, though with the rise of the Bernie Sanders wing in the Democratic Party, the left certainly has become more ideologically driven as well - and politicians have followed. This has led to an inability to pass meaningful legislation when the government is not under the control of a single party. It has also led to an atmosphere where we no longer accept a complex reality; instead of judging individual policies on their merits and results, the

public tends to look at policy through a partisan and/or ideological lense. Voters on either side of the aisle point to the other as the sole reason for any problems we as a society face, and ideology is a large driver of this. Until we take a more data-driven and nuanced understanding of policy, we will continue to see Congress fail to act in any meaningful way.

Works Cited

- Beck, Nathaniel, Gary King, and Langche Zeng. "Improving Quantitative Studies of International Conflict: A Conjecture". *The American Political Science Review* 94.1(2000): 21–35. Web.
- Chomsky, Noam. *On Anarchism*. New York: New, 2013. Print.
- Dorussen, Han, and Hugh Ward. "Intergovernmental Organizations and the Kantian Peace A Network Perspective." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52.2 (2008): 189-212. Web.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. John Gaskin. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011. Print.
- Schwartz, Shalom. "A Theory of Cultural Values and Some Implications for Work." *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 48 (1999): 23-47. Web.
- Sobek, David, M. Rodwan Abouharb, and Christopher G. Ingram. "The Human Rights Peace: How the Respect for Human Rights at Home Leads to Peace Abroad". *The Journal of Politics* 68.3 (2006): 519–529. Web.
- Viotti, Paul R., and Mark V. Kauppi. *International Relations Theory*. Boston: Longman, 2012. Print.