

**Critically assess the debate between the 'idealist' and the 'realist' in international relations theory. Which school is more relevant to the study of the Cold War?**

All the world's a stage, and all the statesmen, states, International Government Organisations, Non-Government Organisations and MultiNational Corporations merely players.

Adapted from Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii. 139

World War I caused an estimated sixty million civilian and military casualties.<sup>1</sup> Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, proposed that the political theory of realpolitik should also be listed as a casualty of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Wilson contended that the theory which emphasised a balance of power based on collective security and secret negotiations and alliances was an archaic and inadequate basis for modern government and governing. This system contained structural defects which had led to the carnage and devastation of the war. These defects had been exacerbated by the self seeking and selfish behaviour of individual politicians such as the Kaiser.

Wilson proposed a Fourteen Point peace plan that aimed to remove these flaws.<sup>3</sup> International law and the establishment of an international regulatory organisation would simultaneously enshrine and ensure the maintenance of the peace by law process. Moreover, the basis of the plan resided in Wilson's faith in human reason, individual liberty and the value of social openness and public opinion.<sup>4</sup> Hence the plan emphasised the right to national self determination, free trade and maritime movement. His vision offered a panacea for the ills of a war weary world.

Yet Wilson's idealism was attacked from the start by both realpolitik and real politicians. Both David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau are criticised for continually undermining the peace process to ensure their respective nation's national interest was maintained.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of realism were no less strident in their opposition to idealism. Critics such as E.H.Carr and Hans J Morgenthau argued that idealism was philosophically flawed and therefore could not be used as a theory of international relations.<sup>6</sup>

Realism offered an alternative explanation for international events. The theory outlined that inter state relationships in the inter-war period, like any other period in history, had been afflicted or based on the possibility of conflict. All matters and relationships were a function of power, particularly military power. Idealism's faith in Bentham's Enlightenment values was at best utopian and at worst inaccurate and therefore dangerous.

Halliday has argued that Realism represents the most relevant theory to the Cold War era, at least until the 1960s when it was challenged by behaviouralism.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, Realism's advocacy of the balance of power as representative of international relations readily accords with the bipolar nature of the world which evolved after World War II. Realism, however, has been criticised for its overemphasis of the role of the nation- states within the international system. Realism contends that states, particularly the more powerful states, are not only crucial but perhaps the only true actors on the world stage.

Moreover, power has also proved a concept hampered by time and space. Pure military power such as that possessed by the United States at the end of World War II has not always provided the solution to international conflicts or crises. Despite these problems, Realism remains relevant to a period if not dominated by power at least strongly effected by it. So, does idealism have a place in the study of such an era?

Carr argues that all such studies must be a synthesis of theory and practice.<sup>8</sup> In this case a combination of Idealism and Realism. Both these theories have their place in a study of the Cold War because as Carr states "Politics are made up of two different elements - utopia and reality".<sup>9</sup> A failure to consider both areas would render any study incomplete. Therefore, this essay will attempt to distil the relevant aspects of both theories in order to apply the synthesis to the Cold War.

An early expression of the future aim of idealism was made by Woodrow Wilson when defending the American right to enter the war. He claimed America should fight for "the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples."<sup>10</sup> In the post war world Wilson was to distil this political objective into Fourteen Point plan for peace. The plan revolved around the right to national self-determination, individual liberty and free trade.

A lasting peace would be constructed around the elimination of war. Idealism argued that war was caused by defects in the process of realpolitik. These defects included the failure to contain the ambition of states and the selfishness of individual politicians. Consequently, the inter war years witnessed numerous activities designed to counter the possibility of war.

The centrepiece of this approach was the establishment of the League of Nations.<sup>11</sup> The aim of this international organisation was to control and moderate individual states actions against other states. This early attempt at 'international government' was supported by the initiation of international treaties aimed at limiting weapons, maintaining collective security and renouncing the use of war as an instrument of national policy.<sup>12</sup>

The philosophical basis for Wilson's peace by law vision lay in a reinterpretation of Jeremy Bentham's ideas from the previous century. Essentially, Wilson placed his faith in the power of human reason, individual liberty, public opinion and social openness. The latter points were reflected in Wilson's rejection of the secret negotiations and alliances that had been a feature of the realpolitik system.<sup>13</sup> However, the cornerstone of the argument lay in the reliance on the power of human reason to identify and thereby prevent a return to the Machiavellian politics of the previous generation.

Human reason allows man to understand, interpret and control the natural and social world. Ideas such as justice and rationality can thus be understood and applied. For example, the application of justice is based on the ability to be rational. Moreover, justice may be equally applied to everybody on behalf of everybody. Thus, the individual and collective interest is not only complementary but served by the application of rationality. Rational thought can be applied to the political order. In Enlightenment and Wilsonian terms this produces a just

political order centred on "the materialist vision of an industrialised, mass-producing society of wealthy, educated inhabitants as the pre-condition for a good life, a just society and a peaceful world."<sup>14</sup>

This idyllic idealistic vision of man and the world order foundered on the rock of reality and realism from the outset. Man and reason were presented as the solution to the ills of the world. Such a view concluded that man remains more than a rational being. Knutsen points out the anti-Enlightenment disciples noted that man never relies solely on reason alone, emotions, passions and a range of other factors of the human condition invariably effect and impact upon reason and man.<sup>15</sup> While Rousseau demonstrates that reason may not be as rational as Bentham, Spinoza and Wilson believe.<sup>16</sup>

Rousseau provides the analogy of a stag hunting party that has agreed to co-operate in order to overcome a shared hunger. One of the hunters opts to grab a passing hare but simultaneously permits the stag to escape. Self interest has prevailed over the common good. Spinoza would have stated that the man's reason was defective. Rousseau concludes that the man's action is motivated by both passion and reason. However, the reason is both rational and irrational: rational in that by satisfying his immediate need he prevents any irrational acts by his companions from effecting his own interest and, irrational as his long term interest and possibly ultimate survival must depend on the co-operation which he has forsaken by his actions.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly states within the international arena suffer from the same dichotomy of rational and irrational thought and actions. Unable to trust in the rationality of their neighbours, states base their actions on self interest and use 'reason' to justify their actions. Examples of such behaviour litter the history of the post World War I era; Hitler's use of lebensraum to justify the annexation of other nation's sovereign territory and the US Congress' failure to endorse the American ratification of the League of Nations.

These challenges to the philosophical notions underpinning idealism were further manifested in the defects inherent in the theory's piece de resistance - the League of Nations. Little allowance was made for the existence of power within the philosophical architecture. Admittedly, the final framework provided some limited recognition that power was crucial to the new structure. Thus, the victorious Great Powers were offered a permanent seat on the Council of the League. Unlike the optimistic Kellogg-Briand Pact the League sought to reduce the occasions on which war might be resorted to rather than attempt to prohibit it altogether. Yet aside from expressing moral abhorrence or proposing some vague sanctions the Covenant made no provision for real action against any aggressor nation. Nor did it provide the member nations with sufficient force or power to support any action the League decided to take.

Finally, the new international order neglected to address all of its member states needs and requirements. Thus, the victorious states sat in judgement on the vanquished. One historian records that the result was a "Carthaginian peace."<sup>18</sup> Rules of the new order were subjectively applied. For example, the right to national self-determination was selectively applied; Britain enhanced her own Empire, whilst Germany was not only denuded of hers but lost 13% of her European territory and six million people were separated from the Fatherland. Germany was

also precluded from procuring its own security when its Army was limited to 100,000 men and Naval capabilities severely reduced.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, idealism's failure to recognise the harsh realities of the post war world led to its demise as a relevant theory of international relations. Its emphasis on morality and the essential goodness of man made little headway against the power politics of the inter war years. Idealism failed in its bid to impose peace on the world. From this failure grew the theory of Realism.

Realism argued that Idealism had aimed at an unattainable end of world peace through law. Carr concluded that this goal was unattainable because Idealism had not analysed reality.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the morality of Idealism lacked the power to enforce its stance and was open to the attacks of realism. Idealism was unable to parry the thrusts of realism; the power of states, state power and the passion of men. Niebuhr wrote that, "the truest religions are illusions."<sup>21</sup> And in that sense the practitioners of Idealism suffered from blind faith from the creation of the theory.<sup>22</sup>

Just as Idealism grew out of the failure of *realpolitik* to maintain peace, Realism emerged from Idealism's failure to prevent war. Idealism created legal and international mechanisms to maintain peace. Yet collective security organisations such as the League of Nations or international treaties like the Kellogg-Briand Pact lacked the power to enforce or legitimise their intentions. The failure of these mechanisms forced states to be responsible for their own security in the absence of any other authority capable of providing it. Moreover, the failure of these mechanisms seemed to reinforce the anarchical situation states faced in the international sphere. That is, the lack of government indicated a degree of disorder existed in inter state or international relations.<sup>23</sup> These last two propositions form part of the underlying philosophy of Realism.

Essentially Realism is viewed as state-centric. That is its philosophical assumptions recognise that the nation-state is central to any explanation or theory of international relations. These assumptions are that the state is the most important international actor, there is a difference between domestic and international politics and that international relations is characterised by a struggle for power and peace and, hence, power is an essential element of international relations.<sup>24</sup>

Realism's assumption that the state was the most important actor was derived from an analysis of events of the inter war years. During these years the Great Powers and later the emerging powers of Germany, Japan and Italy dominated the international scene. Actions such as the Japanese annexation of Manchuria, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the continued German territorial expansion into Eastern Europe suggested the validity of this claim.

These actions were viewed as rational acts of the respective states' desire to maintain or increase their power in the maelstrom of international relations. As stated, anarchy predominates the international landscape. States dealt directly with each other in the absence of either an overriding structure or body to impose order. In such an environment conflict between Powers became more likely. Lenin believed conflict to be inevitable.<sup>25</sup> Peace was only possible where a balance between the various factions could be created and precariously preserved. During this

struggle for power it became evident that a states' foreign policy was the expression of a states power and intentions.

The dominance of foreign policy over domestic issues relates to the concept of sovereignty. Unlike the anarchy of international relations a state is capable of imposing order on its subjects through regulations and control. Such authoritarian measures are legitimised by the state's ability to provide or guarantee the physical security of the nation. The maintenance of this security could only be achieved through the generation of sufficient power to protect the state. Thus, power became the focus of the national interest. The production, appearance and sometimes the projection of power became the very essence of the state. Thus, domestic policy is appropriated by the national interest in order to attain the necessary power to achieve foreign policy objectives.

The first years of the Cold War gave credence to the theory of Realism. The two Superpower states, America and Russia, established a balance of power centred around the military forces of the Warsaw Pact and NATO. The world and particularly Europe became a grand stage in which each of the two actors used power as the script in their struggle for the lead part.

The American audition for the role was encapsulated in the Truman Doctrine. This Presidential edict outlined the American position for the forthcoming struggle. This position would at worst maintain the established balance of power by rendering assistance to peoples threatened by Soviet expansionism and aggression. It has been suggested that the Truman Doctrine was closely allied to the policy of containment. George Keenan explained how this policy or preservation of the balance of power operated:

The Soviet pressures against the free institutions of the Western World is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and manoeuvres of Soviet policy.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviet rendition for this part was offered by Stalin and his reinterpretation of Lenin's beliefs as 'Socialism in One Country'.<sup>27</sup> Stalin argued that the world was divided into two mutually antagonistic blocs - Socialism and Capitalism. The USSR must create a militarily and economically powerful nation to resist the capitalist encirclement. Again, a balance of power would provide the avenue to peaceful coexistence. This balance would be produced by the establishment of a strong Soviet nation.

Hence, Realism's demonstrated relevance to the emerging post war world gave it the edge in the theoretical struggle for power. However, in this era of power Idealism had not perished. One of the key elements of Idealism was its faith in individual and international morality.

A preference for principle, not power, was established at the conclusion of World War II. Firstly, the United States gave it's weight to the creation of the United Nations. This international organisation was a restructured attempt to establish collective security by law. The President's Advisory Committee on Post War Foreign Policy stated that the vital interests of the United States lay in following a 'diplomacy of principle'.<sup>28</sup> However, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry witnessed

by the creation of Soviet satellite states in eastern Europe, blockade of Berlin and problems in Poland precluded any effective use of collective security through the United Nations and led to the temporary decline of Idealism.

Thus, this early period of the Cold War primarily produced an international system based upon a basic balance of power model. This new bipolar world was marked by periodic and repeated attempts to affect the balance of power by the heads of the two rival factions, the USA and USSR.

Both the bipolar world model and Realism were underpinned by the belief that power nominally military strength provided the language by which states conversed in the world. In the growing multipolar world other factors such as economic strength, moral and ideological example became key ingredients in the recipe for power. This shift in the structure of the world and the definition of power was signified by the growth of alternative power centres within the international arena such as Japan, the re-emergence of Western Europe, China and the Third World.<sup>29</sup> The failure of American military power in Vietnam appeared to signify this shift in the world structure.

This failure led to questions about the direction of American foreign policy and the requirement for enormous expenditure on a sophisticated military arsenal.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly as the concepts underpinning Realism, such as power and the dominance of foreign policy in achieving or maintaining the balance of power, were readjusted to acknowledge the changes evident in reality the relevance of Realism was similarly challenged.

One of the challenges to Realism centred on its belief that the state represented a unitary actor on the international scene. Critics noted that domestic policy was as much an internal battle as foreign policy was an external struggle.<sup>31</sup> A range of influences existed to threaten the state's ability to control the domestic front. These influences included political lobby groups, opposition parties or factions and differences between the executive and legislature. Nor was the challenge limited to internal reappraisal.

Another challenge to Realism came from the growth of non-state activity. The growth of organisations external to the state threatened the assumption that states were the only actors. These organisations could be classified as International Governmental Organisations (IGO), Non Governmental Organisations (NGO), MultiNational Corporations (MNC), transnational movements such as religion and even nationalism. The latter particularly in the Soviet bloc where ethnic and nationalist tensions remained ever-present. Some of these actors such as MNCs also threatened the ability of states to regulate their domestic situations.<sup>32</sup>

MNCs possess the capacity to transfer manufacturing plants to the cheap labour markets of the Third World. These profit based relocations often entail the simultaneous closure of less financially productive factories. These factories are typically located in First World countries even the MNCs base or home nation. Such movements invariably impact on local employment and economies. States were therefore less able to control their domestic affairs and thereby guarantee their own security and power.

As Realism was challenged Idealism in the form of morality once again reappeared. President Nixon sought to establish a stable framework of international relations. This framework would reflect "the contributions and . . . aspirations of nations" and promote "social justice and human dignity."<sup>33</sup> The latter theme would be expanded upon by President Carter, with his emphasis on human rights.

During most of the Cold War Realism offered the most relevant theoretical tool for the dissection, analysis and understanding of international relations. Realism emphasised a state-centric and power based approach to international relations. Such an approach aptly explained the bipolar struggle for power between the Superpowers that erupted in the first decade after World War II. The recognition of the influence and power of international organisations, coupled with a reappraisal of the internal constitution of states, produced a reassessment of international relations theory and its application to the Cold War.

Amongst other theories Idealism offered to redress this theoretical balance of power. Idealism proposed that morality and law were fundamental in the application of international relations and the concomitant pursuit of peace. Thus, Presidents Truman, Nixon and Carter aimed to colour their policies with an element of principle and morality. Increasingly arms control, summit meetings and human rights became fundamental to the international relations scene.

Furthermore E.H. Carr, one of the first exponents of Realism, acknowledged that the theory and practice of international relations should remain a mix of Realism and Idealism, morality and power. Idealism, he argued, was unattainable without the use of power. Whilst Realism without morality was a naked struggle for power.<sup>34</sup> One of the laws of physics states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Such a law, while not rigidly applying, would provide a valid description of the struggle for power in international relations theory. Consequently, just as the Idealism of the inter-war years was a repudiation of the realpolitik of the previous era it was more than likely that the theory of Realism would provide the more relevant explanation of the Cold War.

## End Notes

1. Cosgrove, J.J. & Kreiss, J.K. *Two Centuries: An Outline of History from 1789 - 1953*, Pitman, Carlton, 1982, pp.301-303. Kennedy, P.M. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Random House, New York, 1989, p.278.

2. The theory of Realpolitik was constructed by Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. Carr, E.H. *The Twenty Year Crises 1919 - 1939*, Macmillan St Martin's Press, London, 1946, Chapter 5, investigates the Realist critique and opens with an examination of the contribution to the theory by Machiavelli. This is supported by Waltz, K.N. *Man, The State and War*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, p. 210-216. Knutsen, T.L. *A History of International Relations Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992, 158-159, suggests that Bismarck was one of the first major contributors to the practice of the concept.

3. **Cosgrove & Kreiss, op.cit.,pp.329-330**, provides a copy of the Fourteen Points.
4. **Knutsen, op.cit.,pp.134-136, p.197**, indicates Wilson offered an updated version of Jeremy Bentham's Enlightenment values from the previous century.
5. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Premier of France respectively.
6. **Carr, op.cit.**, and **Morgenthau, H.J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A. Knoff Publishers, New York, 1996.**
7. **Halliday, F. *Rethinking International Relations*, Macmillan, London, 1994, p.11.**
8. **Carr, op.cit.,p.13, p.93, p.97.**
9. **ibid., p.93.**
10. **Knutsen, op.cit.,p.187.**
11. The League was created and dominated by the victorious powers. The League was perhaps critically weakened when the United States Congress failed to endorse American involvement in the organisation.
12. These treaties included the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 which renounced war, the Locarno Pact of 1925 which attempted to rebuild friendship between Germany and France and, the Washington Conference of 1921-22 which provided a measure of arms control. Brief summaries of these treaties can be found in **Cosgrove & Kreiss, op.cit.,p.410, p.432.**
13. Lenin not only rejected secret diplomacy but made public all the duplicitous deals completed by European governments during the war.
14. **Knutsen, op.cit.,p.206.**
15. **loc.cit.**
16. **Waltz, op.cit., p.165-167.**
17. **ibid.,p.162-170.**
18. **Cosgrove & Kreiss, op.cit.,p.322.**
19. **ibid., p.322-324.**
20. **Carr, op.cit., p.5.**

21. Niebuhr, R., *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1932, p.81.
22. Carr, op.cit., p.5-9.
23. James, A. "The Realism of Realism: the state and the study of International Relations" in *Review of International Studies Vol 15 No 2* (July, 1989), pp. 216-223.
24. James, op.cit., p.216-217.
25. " We live not only in a state, but in a system of states, and the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with the imperialist states for a prolonged period of time is unthinkable. In the meantime a series of frightful collisions will occur." Lenin, March, 1919 quoted in Nathan, J.A. & Oliver, J.K. *United States Foreign Policy and World Order*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1974, p.22.
26. Papp, D.S. *Contemporary International Relations*, Macmillan, New York, 1988, p.177.
27. Northedge, F.S., (ed), *The Foreign Policies of the Powers*, Faber and Faber, London, 1974, p.86
28. Papp, op.cit., p.176.
29. *ibid.*, p.121.
30. Kennedy, op.cit., p.384.
31. James, op.cit., pp.218-219.
32. Papp, op.cit., chapters 3,4 and 5.
33. Richard Nixon quoted in Nathan & Oliver, op.cit., p.398.
34. Carr, op.cit., p.93.

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