

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 6
Realism

1. As a departure point from my assertion in the syllabus that *most* of realism is ambiguous, tautological, or wrong, let's distinguish the characteristics which are

- True by definition
- Based on untestable assumptions (e.g. concerning "human nature" and the like)
- Based on assumptions that might be tested but haven't been
- Based on consistencies of human behavior about which there is strong support in the history record
- Based on ambiguous terms that are readily modified to fit all sorts of behavior, but which have no predictive value
- Based on assumptions that are in fact normative—that is, assertions about what *should be*— even though they are presented as if they were positive (*what is*)

Note that almost all theories of political—or any—behavior consist of a mixture of these components; realism is not unique in this regard. Also the point of comparison on this is whether, in trying to explain and/or predict human behavior, the characteristics of realism are better or worse than any other competing theories.

2. To what extent is modern realism—the version that arose in the 1940s as a response to the failures of idealism—actually based in the earlier literature (Thucydides, Machiavelli, etc), and to what extent is it actually a new theory tuned to 20th century circumstances that, like any adept aspirant to a throne, claimed nonetheless to have an ancient pedigree? To what extent is it a 20th century theory based on 19th century experience?

3. What is "political violence?" To what extent does a Clausewitzian definition of war give us a useful criterion for identifying a category type of behavior that we can generalize about across time and culture. In particular, is there a distinction in terms of *behavior* (not just legitimacy) between organized *criminal* violence and *political* violence? You may want to specifically address the applicability of the definitions to the actions of 21st century militarized nonstate actors such as al-Qaeda, international drug gangs, and local warlords in failed states.

4. How closely is realism linked to the assumption that the critical distinguishing characteristic of sovereignty is a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. I.e. can one have a realist theory that solely (or mostly) involves non-violent methods of force (e.g. economic sanctions and agreements). [Obviously this gets into the neo-realism issue in a big way]

[Case in point: consider the IMF structural adjustment programs. By threatening to withhold loans, the IMF can—and does—force a state to restructure its system of tariffs, taxation, currency controls, and subsidies. Structural adjustment clearly satisfies Robert Dahl's criterion of power being "A causes B to do something B would not otherwise do", and does so on non-trivial policies. But it involves neither the use, nor the threat of the use, of violence. Leaving aside the fact that the IMF is an IGO, would could realism be extended to such activity? Same question with respect to NGO activities such as the pressure on the apartheid regime of South Africa.]

5. Same question above with respect to the nation-state. Is it coincidence that the first post-classical theorists of realism wrote at about the same time that the nation-state was coming into being? Conversely, to what extent have aspects of the nation-state—particularly the emphasis on the monopoly on the legitimate use of force—been linked to realist theory?

6. Why do more than 2000 years pass between the earliest realist writers (Sun-Tzu and Thucydides) to where it was picked up by Machiavelli and Hobbes. What does this say about this as a universal description of human behavior? Or did we just happen to have 2000 plus years of idiots?

7. How tightly interlinked are the concepts of "balance of power" and realism? Since there are lots of balance of power theories, do some of these theories fit realism better than others? How many of these differences are due to distinctions in the meaning of "power" and how much is due to distinctions in the meaning of "balance?" Are there useful concepts of the "structure" of the international system that are not readily subsumed by the concept of "balance of power." [again, neorealism will be relevant here...] In constructing an answer to this, be sure to distinguish between the *descriptive* and the *prescriptive* applications of balance of power.

8. Most U.S. decision-makers since 1942 have *talked* a realist line. Have they followed it? What about other major powers? To the extent that there have been departures from this, have these been systematically guided by some other theory (e.g. liberalism or idealism), or just random?

More generally, to what extent has there been a divergence between the academic approaches to realism and the applications of realism in U.S. policy (or the policies of other powers if appropriate). To the extent that the two have changed in the post-WWII period, to what extent have they been complementary (and when this is the case, which was the first-mover), and to what extent have they gone in divergent, or even contradictory, directions? Where do the formal theories arising out of politically-oriented think tanks, notably "neo-conservatism" fit in this?

9. How will our understanding of realism change if the current unipolar system persists? Conversely, does realism provide any guidance on how that system might change? Unambiguous guidance?

10. Same question with respect to the democratic and liberal peace theories: to what extent have democratization and economic globalization invalidated the core premises of realist theory?

11. Agree or disagree: "According to realist theory, a persistent failed state is about as likely as a genuine \$100 bill remaining undisturbed on a busy sidewalk." That is, failed states should attract attackers who will impose order.