

Which Theory Can Explain World Politics Better? ——Comparison Between Realism and Liberalism

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Abstract: The realists and liberalists understand the world from different perspectives and tend to explain the whole world in a divergent way. Here comes the eternal question of the academic circle. Who can explain the world better, realists or liberalists? This question is significant because it helps us to comprehend how world politics function and the current political dilemmas better. We argue that realism can explain history better than liberalism. Constant competitions were always presented through the frequent conflicts between countries. It is an irreversible and most unpreventable nature of the world. Through studying the theories, we are able to examine the world more systematically and logically. The classifications of the subject rationale the complicated and distinct historical events. Moreover, following the steps and various ideas of former scholars allows us to develop our own understanding of the world and determine our perspective.

Keywords: world politics, realism, liberalism

1. Introduction

International relation is an extensive concept composed by a complex series of political elements. Through it, political science scholars have developed their own understanding of the world. Each of them observes the world differently but the most influential theories that divide world politics scholars today are realism and liberalism. Both theories have gained followers by generations. The realists and liberalists understand the world from different perspectives and tend to explain the whole world in a divergent way.

Here comes the eternal question of the academic circle. Who can explain the world better, realists or liberalists? On one hand, realists believe in the tenaciously competitive nature of the world along with the possibility of wars. On the other hand, liberalists presume that based on certain prerequisites, states can achieve a rather friendly relationship with lesser worrisome wars.

This question is significant because it helps us to comprehend how world politics function and the current political dilemmas better. Through studying the theories, we are able to examine the world more systematically and logically. The classifications of the subject rationale the complicated and distinct historical events. Moreover, following the steps and various ideas of former scholars allows us to develop our own understanding of the world and determine our perspective.

We argue that realism can explain history better than liberalism. Constant competitions were always presented through the frequent conflicts between countries. It is an irreversible and most unpreventable nature of the world.

We will first explain the main ideas of realism and liberalism: provide some classic theories of the idealisms. Then we will compare the two theories by interpreting famous historical events since the 1900s, to observe whether the logic of the idealisms apply to them. Finally, we conclude the paper by reiterating the argument and present the implications of it through a modern-day event.

2. Realism

Realism is a world politics theory that stresses on the competitive nature of international relations. The motive behind such tension is the countries' search for power, the welfare of their own people always comes first. Realism mainly consists of three theories, structural realism, offensive realism and contingent realism.

Structural realism is pessimistic about the prospects for international cooperation. The most essential goal of a state is to survive in this competitive world and there is never guarantee for absolute security. Any cooperation that emerges under anarchy will be tenuous and unstable. The anarchy situations force the states to compete with each other to gain more power. International politics was not remade by the forces and factors that some believe are creating a new world order [1].

The offensive realism claims that states can never be certain about the intentions of others and they have to gain more power and become stronger to live [2]. As a result, the competition between states is not avoidable.

The contingent realism admits the existence of cooperation but it takes the cooperation as a way of self-help instead of establishing real friendship. To protect the states themselves, they have to cooperate with each other. States seeking security should see benefits in cooperative policies that can communicate benign motives [3]. The cooperative situation can be changed quickly when the balances among the countries change.

3. Liberalism

Liberalism is a theory that is often seen as the opposite of realism. However, they are not fundamentally distinct from each other. Liberalism also recognizes the competitions between nations, but it has a rather positive perspective compared to realism. It believes that under certain circumstances, it is feasible for the world to achieve peace. It claims the interests of states could be central and identical. Thus, they are likely to cooperate because it could attain the maximum profits for them.

The institutional theory claims that international organizations is a solution to the war since they are a powerful force for stability [4]. The establishment of institutions can reduce the possibilities of conflicts and promote cooperation while reducing transaction costs.

Economic interdependence theory indicates the lower possibility of war under high value trading between countries [5]. The logic is that if the trades between countries provide them great benefits, then it is more likely for the interdependent states to continue trading or negotiating when facing a conflict than going to war with each other. In this situation, war only represents expenditures and casualties. Thus, it is regarded as a nonessential decision under economic interdependence theory.

The democratic peace theory states that democracy as a political system could substantially reduce the likelihood of war [6]. Proponents of the democratic peace thesis write as though the spread of democracy will negate the effects of anarchy [7]. Democracy is a form of government that emphasizes the involvement of ordinary citizens in political decisions. War does not benefit citizens and even

seek labory from them. Democratic countries also have mutual respect for each other. Therefore, it is hard to initiate a war between two democratic countries.

4. The comparison between Realism and Liberalism

Throughout history, it is apparent that competitions are constantly present throughout the world. However, war is not often presented. During the absence of wars, liberalism claims that the world has achieved peace, but realism would rather name them as temporary compromises. One event then leads to some distinct perspectives. Although both theories interpret peace through their logic, realism interprets many events more thoroughly and it is difficult for liberalism to explain the times of war. In the discussion of history, realism has a greater advantage than liberalism and we will examine some of the most remarkable historical events or periods since 1900 to support our point.

Treaties often generate temporary compromises rather than long-lasting peace. Countries often create treaties to ensure their harmony with the others. The realists think countries always place their own desire as their first concern. The treaty would be an indication for the accordance of one country's aim with another and transitory partnership could be achieved under the temporary goal. Nevertheless, from the liberalist perspective, a treaty would be evidence of cooperation between nations. It serves the goal of peace and friendly relationships.

The Treaty of Versailles is a classic example for explaining the views of realist and liberalist. It is one of the most significant treaties of the modern era. The treaty, signed in June 1919, at the end of WWI, created conventions between the victorious Allies and Germany. It held Germany in responsibility for the great costs and casualties of the war. As a result, the Allies compelled Germany to compensate with a massive number of payments and render its territories among the allies as penalties. The Allies would also supervise and restrain Germany's military actions.

Besides, the League of Nations had been established after WWI on January 10, 1920. All the countries had been scared by the terrible losses of WWI and hoped that the establishment of the League of Nations could prevent the severe results of the modern war. The League of Nations had set up diverse regulations covering collective security, arbitration, and judicial settlement to reduce the possibilities of wars. However, Realists have noticed that whether institutions have strong or weak effects depends on what states intend. Strong states use institutions, as they interpret laws, in ways that suit them, so are the institutions set up by the League of Nations [8].

Twenty years of peace or period without major conflicts followed. Liberalism interprets the period of time as an archive of peace. The treaty satisfies many countries' needs. The existence of the League of Nations solved some conflicts. The related countries reached a consensus under it. The Allies attained the compensation they desired for and Germany settled under the terms. Although competitions existed, such as Italy's enragement of the modest portion of benefits they gained, the liberalist could still claim the European countries attained a rather friendly relationship and a time without war.

From another view, the realists concern more about the hidden hazard rather than the seemingly peaceful relationships. The Foch of France, Marshal Ferdinand, had once complained about the treaty, he stated that "this is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years." [9] Since the Treaty of Versailles, the relationship between the other Ally countries, Italy and Japan has worsened. Germany was also not content by the limited power they possessed. Merely after twenty years, the second world war came, all the dissatisfactions and conflicts between countries have come under the light. The Treaty of Versailles was not a sign of peace, but rather a temporary compromise. All countries had the same goal of ending WWI, but after years, their goals changed. Some still wished for peace and others sought opportunity for a great empire. As realism says, competitions and conflicts never cease.

Liberalism could well interpret the happening of peace, but it is hard for it to explain times of war. Under the logic of economic interdependence theory, war should not happen when the trading level

between countries is high. However, it can hardly give reasons for a few examples. Despite active trading in 1913-14 in Germany, the political leaders of the country still initiated WWI [10]. Their expectation of future trading was negative. Though the trading during the period was beneficial, they did not think it could last. In their opinion, the profit they could gain from a war outweighs trade. In addition, right before and during WWII, Germany and Japan's economy were highly dependent, they relied on other countries for critical raw material such as oil [11]. However, they thought letting other countries have the decision over their material was extremely alarming. In this case, economic dependence would only be a threat to Japan and Germany. They always assume the worst outcome in terms of relations with other countries.

5. Conclusion

From the comparison, we concluded that realism is a better match with the historical events. Just as the Waltz said, "The realist theory will never die. Every time peace breaks out, people pop up to proclaim that realism is dead. That is another way of saying that international politics has been transformed. "The world, however, has not been transformed." [12]

The Treaty of Versailles was not a sign of peace but a compromise that had many underlying problems. Economic dependence has also proved to be a risk that Germany and Japan were bearing before the occurrence of WWI and WWII. As we could say, based upon the historical evidence, it is too ambitious to claim, like liberalism, that the world and countries could obtain a long-lasting peace and friendship. Moreover, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine that initiated at the end of February further emphasizes the competitive nature of the world. There are multiple elements that caused the war, but one of them could be Russia's over reliance on the transport of oil supplies through Ukraine. Furthermore, the United Nation, an organization many had placed hope upon, has failed to insert substantial impact on the war. The nature of this world is always competitive, Russia would always seek for its maximum benefit and so as the other countries.

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