

# CLASSICAL REALISM, LIBERALISM, MARXISM: REVISITING THE MAINSTREAM APPROACHES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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## Abstrak

Artikel ini membandingkan karakter mendasar dari tiga paradigma arus utama (mainstream) dalam kajian hubungan internasional, yaitu realisme klasik, liberalisme, dan marxisme. Perspektif dunia dalam realisme diibaratkan sebagai tatanan bola billiard, bahwa negara bangsa menjadi aktor utama. Negara mencoba untuk memenuhi kepentingannya menggunakan power yang dimiliki. Power sebagai sebuah kapabilitas negara untuk bertindak. Setiap negara adalah berdaulat (sovereignty) dan dapat menentukan arah kebijakannya sendiri (self-determination) sehingga realisme menganggap bahwa negara adalah sebuah entitas tertinggi dalam sistem internasional. Tatanan dunia menurut Perspektif Liberalisme diibaratkan sebagai jejaring laba-laba. Liberalisme memiliki pandangan yang positif pada sifat manusia, dan yakin dengan sifat tersebut akan terjalin kerja sama yang baik sehingga tercapailah perdamaian dunia. Aktor hubungan internasional bagi Liberalisme tidak hanya negara, tetapi juga aktor-aktor lain dalam kerja sama transnasional seperti organisasi internasional, perusahaan multinasional, dan lain-lain. Marxisme memandang tata dunia saat ini seperti seekor gurita. Dalam pandangan kaum Marxis, sistem internasional merupakan sistem kapitalis yang selalu mengejar akumulasi modal. Kesetaraan dan kebebasan merupakan hal yang dijunjung tinggi, negara dikendalikan oleh kepentingan kaum borjuis selaku pemilik modal. Marxis juga meyakini bahwa suatu saat revolusi politik akan mampu menghapuskan sistem kapitalis dan akan digantikan oleh sistem sosialis. Melalui upaya perbandingan dan analisis ketiga pendekatan klasik ini, penulis berargumen bahwa realisme klasik merupakan perspektif penting yang paling dibutuhkan dalam kajian hubungan internasional.

**Kata kunci:** hubungan internasional, teori hubungan internasional, realisme klasik, liberalisme, marxisme

## Introduction

As a discipline, International Relations are no stranger to debates, some scholars even highlight that the discipline is the debate itself. In this paper, I will compare and contrasts three mainstream approaches of the theories of International Relations using

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considerable terms and concepts taken from series of International Relations 'Great Debates' resources, specifically from 'The Inter-Paradigm Debate' or 'The Third Debate'. The Inter-Paradigm Debate refers to the academic debate between advocates of realism, liberalism and Marxist approaches to international relations theory. This academic debate was topical during the 1970s and 1980s. In the first part of this paper, I will highlight actors, variables, specific concepts, and level of analysis, as well as key strength and weaknesses, of classical realism, liberalism, and Marxism. It will focus on meta-scientific units where particular attention is directed to compare and contrast premises and assumptions of the competing paradigms. In the second part of the paper I will argue which of the three mainstream approaches of the theories of International relations considered to be the most valuable approach.

### **Realism: The Billiard Ball**

Classical realism as a perspective considered by many international relations scholars as one of those 'Iron Law' of international politics. The key contribution of realism paradigm is no other than their ability to illuminate the recurrence of wars and its causes in history in the forms of insights about power politics (Buzan, 1996, p. 61; Donnelly, 2000, p.159). Moreover, Rothstein (cited in Wæver, 1996, p.150) underlines that the basic image of the world according to realists is seem to become footing of many decision makers operating in a world of states, and this prevalent result is not without important cause.

Separated by nearly 2500 years, Thucydides and Hans J. Morgenthau are considered as the two most influential classical realists. During the Peloponnesian war in the fifth century, Thucydides has underlined the struggle for power in the era of conflict between Athens and Greece and demonstrates how the pursuit of national interests is characterizing War Between the States, instead of cooperation or moral principles (Lebow, 2013, pp.61 – 62; Donnelly, 2000, pp.23 – 24). However, it is not only after Morgenthau wrote the *Politics among Nations* that realism transformed into a theoretical perspective underlining military capability and other material capabilities as the essence of power. In a zero-sum game of International politics, power is a means to an end, and an end itself.

Ontologically, realist is more concerned about the world as it is, instead of how it supposed to be structured. The realist view about anarchy as the nature of this world in where power becomes the only currency is considered timeless and static. Politics are all the same for Realist with no dichotomy, be in domestic or International sphere, because in this

world all politics is driven by humans' ambition for power (Griffiths, 1992, p.18 – 19). International behavior should be analyzing based on the pursuit of national interests of states, because they act as the projection of human's anarchistic nature, and thus moral sentiments must be prevented (Hollis and Smith, 1990, p. 10). This is a method of approach that for Carr (1946, p.11) takes attitude in the *inclination to ignore what was and what is in contemplation of what should be towards every political problem*.

Michael Banks (cited in Wæver, 1996, p.153) created the billiard ball model to represent the state-centric level of analysis in classical realism theory. States is regarded as rational actor, the most basic and important, in the mechanical arena of International politics. Not only E.H Carr (1939, p.4 – 5) coined the term "Realism" for this approach, it also affirms that International relations are a science. Rossenau (1980, p.32) even further stresses a positivistic statement that state is no different from atom or the single cell organism, working based on principles of *raison d'état*. Therefore, its behavior, traits, and attributes in foreign policy can be hypo-thetically assumed or formulated with essentially the same scientific method used for discipline such as physics.

The observation of the movements of the billiard balls overtime may result in regular patterns that is similar to laws between variables of an objectified reality when subject to specifiabile initial conditions. Despite the explicit refusal from Morgenthau about the possibility of general laws in the social world, he does not entirely dismiss the idea of rational measurement tools (cited in Lebow, 2013, p.71). It should also be noted that Morgenthau's six principles of realist theory in the second edition of "*Politics among Nations*" is basically a scientific way of thinking about International relations (Hollis and Smith, 1990, p.27). Consistent with the realist ontological traits about accepting anarchy in the world as it is, it can be argued that the realist epistemology is also a positivistic one, claiming that political realms are not distinctive from their natural science counterparts (Griffiths, 1992, p.20; Hollis and Smith, 1990, p. 12).

As one of deep-rooted perspective that often presented as a 'commonsense' view of the world in International relations, realism is always challenged with abundance of criticism. The limited and simplified nature of realism is often being questioned. The blatant way of realism in seeing the anarchic world as static and historically intermittent seemed padlocked and anti-innovative (Donnelly, 2000, pp.185 – 186). Nicholson (1998, p.72 – 73) designates globalization as phenomena that can be explained properly with realism theory, and so does the spread of International human rights. The states become less significant in a globalized

world, with economic actors gaining more leverage in International politics than in Westphalian era. The world has altered in many ways and realism is not equipped to manage the changes given their rigid and stern rulings. Morgenthau's problem, asserts Donnelly (2000, p.188) is rising from his treatment of realism as a general theory that seeks 'eternal truth of foreign policy'. He seeks to establish immortal laws of how man act in the social world, which is everything that realism insights are not.

Realism also often associated as the 'coping vocabulary' for the interests of great powers like the United States of America. The trans-historical argument of realism is accused of only available to preserve hegemonic status quo. Smith and Holsti (cited in Neufeld, 1995, pp.54 – 55) argued that realism is so dominant in the field is because key elements in realism such as national interest, power politics, and the concept of balance of power are well suited to the needs of a foreign policy of the US. Realism is therefore having less concern about how to accurately mapping the 'facts' of International politics but rather how to utilize its theory in guiding 'state and nation building'. This effort to assemble the generic elements of realism into an explanatory theory applicable to real world is where realism fails, according to other critic from Rosenberg (cited in Bromley & Smith, 2004 p.7), because it often emphasizes trans-historical analysis in historically specific events and it stubbornly maintains that politics is sovereign from countless dimensions of society. Lebow (2013, p.70 – 71) adds that Thucydides as well as Morgenthau can only proposes a synthesis of agencies in old and new order in order to endure the changes that erupted from modernization without detailing how to achieve such construction.

### **Liberalism: The Cobweb**

It is more often than not classical liberalism is considered as a stark anti-thesis of realism in the matter of theoretical perspectives in International relations. It is an error notion, because classical liberalism did accept the Hobbesian world description of conflict and self-interested human nature (Hunt, 2002, p.44; Razeen, 2002, p.14). However, Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential classical liberalism analysts, emphasizes that despite the human's destructive nature, they are capable of cooperation and construction of a sustained peaceful society in a federation of states. Man are not the slave to their appetites (Russet, 2013, p.95). This ideal belief about war as senseless act and positive human virtues is the legacy of First World War and became the first approach in International relations, as noted by Hedley Bull (cited in Hollis and Smith, 1990, p.20), in discussing about the rise of analyses that the

International system that had given rise to war was capable as well to be transformed into a fundamentally peaceful world order.

In order to understand the ontological worldview of classical liberalism from that of realism, I again use the depiction of a cobweb from Michael Banks (cited in Wæver, 1996, p.153) in which they highlight the level of analysis in liberalism represents numerous interweaving relationship where the state is only a partial subject in the International arena. Human's nature that is being projected exclusively into state action in the view of classical realism, is deemed to narrow. The liberalism broadens the boundaries of agents by including International Organizations, civil society, indigenous people, multinational companies, and other economic actors in their realm of analysis (Russet, 2013, p.101 – 103) (Brown, 2004, p.515). Consequently, the dynamics of the actors involved in the cobweb are also more complex, codependent to one and another, and impossible to be operated in a 'billiard-ball' model. For liberalists, this exactly what their immediate priority is, linking together a complex array of interest groups and blurring or obscuring state boundaries in the process which in turn will create a cosmopolitan world (Little, 1996, p.67).

The distinct characteristics of classical liberalism are often associated with the works of John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. Kant's treatise about International Law has inspired Woodrow Wilson for the establishment of League of Nations, as well as the UN Charter (Brauch, 2004, p.10). In his work "*Perpetual Peace*", Kant highlights the Kantian Triangle that extends three constraints of war in a mutually reinforcing system (Russett, 2013, p.101 – 103). The first constraint is democracy, since Kant believes that democratic states will tend to operate on the principle that peaceful means to resolve conflicts has to be exhausted before retorting to violence, making this also serves as basis for Democratic Peace Theory (Jørgensen, 2010, p.68) The second and third Kantian constraints are International trade and International organizations, which strives for emergence and maintenance of order in the complex society. Mainstream modern economics constructed by liberalists, asserts Hayek (cited in Razeen, 2002, p.20 – 21), is leaning to the optimism of human's ability to master and control and construct their environment in terms of creating order of law, markets, and properties at their will, or in another word the *tabula rasa*.

The Kantian triangle or triad has been proven statistically successful in predicting relationships between states that realism fails to calculate. If two states are more democratic the risk of conflicts and violence are much lower than those of authoritarian states. In a separate study, Maoz and Russet (1993, p. 630) further analyze the separate effects of

democracy, and concluded that a stable and nonviolent regime will be less likely to contribute in International conflicts. The effects of economic interdependence created from International trade are also very strong, if two states have high financial interdependence the risk for conflict is lowered half than their equivalents whose trade dependency with one another is only average. The statistic for International organizations is weaker in comparison, but nevertheless still have similar reducing effect with the other two constraints (Russet, 2013, p.104).

Similar with realism, most scholar argue that the liberalism epistemology is also rooted in positivist attitude about society given that the Kantian variables rely on scientific methods to discover worldwide trends using a combination of theory and empirical research comparable with those of Medical researchers' epidemiological study seeking the cause of diseases (Russet, 2013, p.98 – 99). The rational intellect also played significant importance in classical liberalism scheme of things, as reason is what drives human in taking less destructive alternative measures in pursuing their self-interests (Hunt, 2002, p.44 – 45). However, several other scholars like Mises and Hayek (cited in Haar, 2009, p.135) argue that classical liberalism is against the positivism of realism and Kantianism. Classical liberals would refrain from rationalistic inclination and reject all form of determinism, in opposition to most International relations scholar overview that classical liberalism is just a strand of Kantianism. This divided perspectives on core values only proven that classical liberalism is not a simple undifferentiated doctrine, but instead have a lot of variations (Razeen, 2002, p.16; Haar, 2009, p.125).

The concept of liberalism, in the view of the classical realist such as Carr (1946, p.42-43) is impractical and dangerous in terms of liberalism methods of steering society into benevolent directions and eventually, utopias. Positive human virtues or morality can only be relative, not universal, claim Carr (1946, p.87), and that “supposedly absolute and universal principles are not principles at all, but the unconscious reflections of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time.” For realists, countless of international issues always involving question of right and wrong as the policy implications of such relative virtues are controversially debated. Kennan (cited in Donnelly, 2004, p.152) regrets that morality and justice notions are very complex and their standards do not apply to International politics. It is the other criteria for foreign policy; the sadder, more limited, and more practical ones, prevails.

Other critics for democratic peace theory revolves around the premise that democracy is a constraint of war, but it is only works best when the state has evolved into fully democracy (Russet and Oneal, 2001, p.86). Throughout the transition from autocracy into mature democracy system, state tends to be more belligerent and war prone because they usually lacking in stable governance, strong political institutions, and cultural openness, which are usually found in mature democracies. Another contradiction also found in the way democratic states are more inclined to wage war with autocratic states. This is particularly addressed to United States of America as the most warlike nation in the world, in contrary to its position as the higher level democratic state. Even if there are people mechanisms and strong political institutions in the highly democratic states that can prevent their leader from conflicts, the same system can also act in reverse forcing the liberal leaders into war in the threat of non-liberal state (Cortright, 2008, p.250).

### **Marxism: The Multi-Headed Octopus**

Among the three paradigm depictions in Michael Bank's work, the multi-headed octopus' conceptualization is the most interesting for me. It can be seen that the simplistic billiard-ball model of realism and the cobweb complex pattern represents the world image and the level of analysis of the two contending paradigms. The multi-headed octopus, however, deliver the specific concept of unjust economic structure where powerful tentacles sucking resources from deteriorated peripheries to the center (cited in Neufeld, 1995, p.47). This is one of the central theme in Marxism and one of its most important contribution to International studies as realism and liberalism were very little considering capitalism in their analysis (Brown, 2004, p.508). Marxism seeks to demote capitalism, which described as a social practice in modern life, build by historically specific class relation where capitalists control the means of production to exploit others in the pursuit of profit (Rupert, 2013, p.156). Consequently, Marxism is mainly seen as the fundamental critics of the economic interdependence concept in liberalism worldview, through their argument that the current economic system is not a positive sum game to benefit all (Jackson et all, 2012, p.186).

As the Marxism name suggests, this approach is heavily influenced by Karl Marx's works, whose idea was further developed most notably by Friedrich Engels (Tesche, 2004, p.163). Some scholar would attribute other names for Marxism as one of the contending paradigms in the 1970's Inter-Paradigm Debate, such as structuralism or more broadly radicalism. The structuralism identification would refer to the basic world image in Marxist

theory which is more structured and integrated than that of realism and liberalism, while radicalism depiction can be argued surging from the way Marxist demands revolutionary change in the whole world's economic system focusing on the supremacy of modes of production (Wæver, 1996, p.150 – 151; Neufeld, 1995, p.47).

The world in Marxism view is not based on conflict between states, in contrast with realism, but instead conflict between ruling-class interests. States are primarily driven by capitalist classes in each states, making inter-state conflicts as merely outer part of the problem, because the fundamental problem in the system is the influence of capitalist-class in the political spheres (Jackson et al, 2012, p.187). In an effort to explain relations between material reproduction and the extensive rise of capitalism, Marxism added the control of production and the state building processes to the understanding of the state system (Shapcott, 2010, p.339). State system is performing primary role in aiding capitalism, not only by complementing the system but also by constituting conditions for the possibility of capitalism expansion and surplus transfer from peripherals to the center (Teschke, 2010, p.172).

One of the exceptional concepts derived from Marx is historical materialism, which is an interpretation of history or evolution of societies that is determined by economic structure within. The dynamics of interaction between infrastructure and superstructure creates change in the structure of state, which will lead to several stages of history from predatory society to socialist state. This is why Marx considers capitalism in not entirely negative manner because he sees capitalism as progress to an emancipated, post-capitalist society (Devetak, George & Weber, 2011, pp.66 – 67). This is interesting because liberalism and Marxism seemingly have similar arguments that is both theory place inter-state relations and society in general at their center of explanations and rejected state-centric notion of realism because state is only an element in the international order. Liberalism, however, see state as people's government institutions while Marxism see a product of capitalism with particular social property relationships (Brown, 2004, p.515)

The modern state for Marxists, therefore, is itself a product of the rise of capitalism as a system based on particular social property relations. Liberalism and Marxism have a similar 'shape' as theoretical approaches – they place relations between the state and wider society at the center of explanations of the state preferences, which in turn shape international order. For both, the term 'state' is not the all-encompassing notion used by realists, but a specific element of the societies which make up international order. However, liberalism and Marxism



give very different accounts of this element and its relationship to wider society. Liberals view the state as primarily an institution of government for society

General critic for classical Marxism is that it is lacking in building abstract model like that of realism or liberalism. It is less 'neat' than that of liberalism and realism. There are no such International relations "theory" for Marx, but rather he theorizes about essential relations behind our social reality that impacting politics and International order (Rengger, 2004, p.188). Many scholars pointed out that Marx and Engels themselves never systematically answered questions about dimensions of social processes on a universal measurement (Tesche, 2004, p.164). The hazy pictures of ideal revolution in Marxism is also vague, as the possibility of revolution is tied in with historically specific social structures of the world, which means that revolution is possible only on certain social conditions. The appreciation for a historically specific condition is therefore very subjective (Sørensen, 1998, p.88).

### **Incommensurable yet Comparable**

Both Neufeld (1995) and Guzzini (2013) acquainted with the scholars' consensus about the "incommensurable and therefore incomparable" phrase in portraying the inconclusive end result of the Inter-Paradigm Debate. The "incommensurable and therefore incomparable" phrase itself derived from Thomas Kuhn's work, where he elaborates the notion that the three paradigms involved in the debate is managing the image of the world in their specific set of logic and languages, and because there is no neutral ground to compare the paradigms thus make it impossible to judge one on another (Guzzini, 2013, p.116; Wæver, 1996, p.151; Neufeld, 1995, pp.56 – 60). However, contrary to the particularly safe conclusion if the Inter-Paradigm Debate, I am leaning to consider classical realism as the most valued theory among the three for the following reasons:

### *Realism Validation*

The incommensurable conclusion for the Third Debate is challenged by Guzzini (2013, p.120 – 122) by saying that not only such conclusion does not reflect Kuhn's concept of paradigms, but it also provides a safe haven for other theories competing with realism from being scrutinized further. It can be argued that realism has survived its critics, considering one of the reasons of the rise of Inter-Paradigm Debate in the 1970's was to compete with the dominance of realism in the International relations (Wæver, 1996, p.150). The "incommensurable and therefore incompatible phrase" has validate other competing theories

of realism continued existence, as the nature of reflectivity in the Inter-Paradigm Debate has opened a way into theoretical pluralism and break the dominance of positivist orthodoxy in International relations (Lapid, 1989, p. 244). Furthermore, it should be noted that the purpose of the theoretical pluralism resulted from the debate according to Banks (cited in Guzzini, 2013, p.116) is to avoid a kind of “vacuum effect”, that stems from a strategy he called “realism-plus-grafted-on-components”, which is basically a concern of realism absorbing everything that are useful and significant from the other theoretical perspectives.

### *Realism is the Essential Negativity*

Donnelly (2000, p.193) discusses a compelling argument about negativity as a nature and contribution of realism in International relations discipline. Even if anarchy as a concept is not monopolized by realism alone, other theory across different perspectives also take anarchy as one of the defining feature in International relations, but anarchy in the realism perceptives is the absence of hierarchy which is a purely negative concept. However, it is the combination of anarchy and other negative notions in realism, such as egoism/self-interest and groupism/state interests that lead to conflicts-prone power politic dynamic, that give realism a recognizable and solid character and value. Donnelly writes that realism is best digested as a “*as a cautionary ethic of political prudence rooted in a narrow yet insightful vision of international politics.*” (Donnelly, 2008, p.159). Because realism’s main purpose is not to advise us about moralism, progressivity, and other idealistic projects but instead it wants to be what Carr (1946) dubbed as “the necessary corrective to the exuberance of utopianism”. Realism thrives to deliver the struggles, challenges, and other pessimistic analysis in International relations, but less concerned about what is worth fighting for (Donnelly, 2000, p. 194).

Many scholars criticize the overgeneralization of negative elements in realism, although Rosenberg (cited in Bromley& Brown, 2004, pp.7 – 8) avers that no matter how misjudged and flawed realism logic is, many of its determinations is a major generic facts and irreducible moments inseparable from social political life. Even if much of realism sounded like a sophisticated form of fatalism with gloomy predictions, it gave seemingly endless affirmations on current events (Buzan, 1996, p. 61 – 62). I also find it interesting that the crude realism character can pose as their weakness as well as their strength. Brown (2004, p.489) suggests that one of the reason why realism is so prominent is their heavy preference to geopolitics, that despite its narrow limitation is a general concept very common to all types of

relations in the International politics and it is sitting at the heart of International studies. Realism provides a solid starting point to construct another theory, because their core ideas can trespass cultural boundaries more easily and infuse diverse analysis. Barry Buzan depicts the negative abundance of realism in the following manner:

*My sense is that for all its limitations and difficulties, this rather bleak and rocky terrain is firmer ground than sites which may initially look more attractive, but which will not support the ambitious structures that some want to construct on them (1996, p. 63).*

### *Realism is Ethically Constrained*

As a consequence of being in the center of many debates, as highlighted by Wolfforth (2010, p.131), realism considered so influential that it is often systematically misinterpreted for the necessity of scholars from various perspectives who wants to make realism into something it is actually not. Realism is more like an image of 'pop realism', in a sense that it is widely famous but speculative (Jørgensen, 2010, p.98). The striking example of such statement is how frequent realism is being depicted as unethical because of their anarchic worldview. According to Gilpin, realism is a doctrine believed to be immoral and permissive to actions like killing, make war, and other wanton acts at its worst (cited in Donnelly, 2000, p.198). All of these accusations, however, are in contrast with what E.H Carr (1946) has argued, because "it is an unreal kind of realism which ignores the element of morality in any world order" (cited in Donnelly, 2008, p.156).

Not only Carr, Morgenthau also expresses his regret about less given attention to the ethical dimension of foreign policy in his text. It is true that Morgenthau writes his work mostly to sway America from idealistic policies, but by the mid 1960-s, he complained that the *realpolitik* has been partially overlearned by divorcing it from ethical considerations (Lebow, 2013, p.63). How certain people decide to read realism texts has brought different consequences. The concept of national interest, state, and survival, for examples, Morgenthau asserts about 'moral dignity of the national interests' since the doctrine of *raison d'état* is however an ethical principle in discussion. Classical realists are concerned about what policy is *appropriate* to be used, instead of considering whether it is appropriate to normatively evaluate foreign policy. The value of pre-emptory survival where state can abandon all moral premises is also often misunderstood. The struggle for survival is rarely happen even in realism world, and the struggle for power is too naive to be seen equal with

struggle for survival in the face of total destruction. The kind of struggle for survival realism talks about is more similar to allowing individuals to trespass law in using deadly means for self-defense in life threatening situations (Donnelly, 2008, pp.153 – 155). Kant wrote in 'Perpetual Peace' that realism damaging immorality does not even deserve a hearing because it may bring evil prophesies, but not many scholars note that this is very much the same with Thucydides opinion at the end of his sixth book (cited in Donnelly, 2000, p.199).

In conclusion, I agree with Wolfforth (2010, p.131) that it is far from exaggerating to say the study of International relations from time to time is a political debate about realism as its theoretical perspective. It is mostly by comparing and contrasting with realism that many scholars from different perspectives and approaches can describe their insights. If we take out realism insights from the international relations discipline, other perspectives that have anchored their sense of arguments on realism will either lose its legitimate ground or forced to stand on shaky terrains.

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