

PSC/IR 106: A Quick Introduction to the History of IR Theory

William Spaniel

williamspaniel@gmail.com

wjspaniel.wordpress.com/pscir-106

Agenda

- Past paradigms
 - Realism
 - Liberalism
 - Constructivism
- The current “paradigm”
 - Rational choice theory
 - Frames conflict as a bargaining problem

Overview

- The origins of IR theory are old (Thucydides).
 - But IR theory as a discipline begins relatively recently (post WWII).
- IR theory started with many different schools, or “isms.”
 - Realism, neorealism, liberalism, neoliberalism, constructivism.
 - Good news: era of “isms” is over.
 - But scholars still address old theories.

Disclaimer

- If I were god of the IR universe, we would not be doing this.
- We'd just skip to what political scientists actually do now.
- But we're stuck in the world in which we live.
 - Which means people who go into government jobs after undergrad only know theories that are 30 years old.

Types of Realism

- Realism

Types of Realism

- Realism
- Neorealism

Types of Realism

- Realism
- Neorealism
- Offensive realism

Types of Realism

- Realism
- Neorealism
- Offensive realism
- Defensive realism

Types of Realism

- Realism
- Neorealism
- Offensive realism
- Defensive realism
- Structural realism

Unifying Features of Realism

- States are security maximizers.
- Power matters.
- States are “billiard balls” —they are all the same, except some have more power than others.
 - Institutional features *don't* matter.
 - Democracy!
 - Trade!
 - State ideology!

Realism on War

- Power matters, so power must some how lead to war.
- But what are the causal mechanisms?

Realism on War

- Power matters, so power must some how lead to war.
- But what are the causal mechanisms?
- *South Park Gnomes*
 - In *Gnomes*, a group of gnomes steals everyone's underwear.
 - One child witnesses them, but no one believes him.
 - The gang stays up one night to catch them.



PHASE 1

PHASE 2

PHASE 3

Collect
underpants



Profit





PHASE 1

PHASE 2

PHASE 3

Power

?

War



Power

- Power is a constant.
 - Well, sometimes. Power also shifts. Realism is actually quite helpful here, and it continues to influence current research.
- We cannot explain variation with a constant.
- Power cannot directly cause conflict.

The Moral

- We are interested in causal mechanisms in social sciences.
- Power somehow relates to war, but we need to know exactly how power leads to fighting.
- Realism does not help us here.

Catchphrases of Realism

- Anarchy
- Self-help.
- “It is a well-known fact that states balance.”

Neoliberal Institutionalists

- Despite anarchy, states cooperate a great deal.
 - Most states most of the time are not fighting one another.
- Realism does not explain this.
- International institutions matter.
 - United Nations, IMF, World Bank
 - Coordinate behavior and allow states to achieve more desirable outcomes.

Neoliberal Institutionalists

- Domestic institutions also matter.
 - Regime type (democracy, autocracy, dictatorship) effect outcomes; democracies might not behave in the same way as autocracies do.
- Democratic peace theory.
 - Democracies (allegedly) tend not to fight other democracies.
 - Probably not accurate.

Neoliberal Institutionalists

- Trade matters.
 - Important finding from economics: trade allows two states to collectively produce more goods than they could alone.
 - States cannot trade with each other if they are busy killing each other.
 - McDonald's peace theory
 - We should study this.
 - States that trade together tend not to fight each other.

Neoliberal Institutionalists

- Neoliberal institutionalism has withstood the test of time much better than realism.
 - But states still fight each other. We need to explain this.

Constructivism

- “Anarchy is what states make of it.”
 - States live in a world of anarchy. They can do what they want to. As such, if they want to live in a world of peace, they can make it so.
- Theory predicts everything and therefore tells us nothing.

Rational Choice Theory

- Dominant paradigm begins in 1995.
- Conflict in international relations can be framed as a bargaining problem.
 - War is politics by other means. (Clausewitz)
 - States have various ideal outcomes and capabilities to achieve them.
 - But conflict inhibits trade and causes loss of life.