

What Do We Mean by Realism? And How— And What—Does Realism Explain?

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Certainly, one would think, we know what we mean when we call an action, outcome, argument, or explanation “realist.” In IR we do it “all the time,” so we *must* know. Right?

Often, I want to suggest, only sort of. This essay tries to sort out and clarify some of the principal senses of “realism” and how (and what) realism explains.

“DEFINING” “REALISM”

Consider the following “definitions” (presented in more or less heavily elided quotations or close paraphrases).

1. The fundamental unit of social and political affairs is the “conflict group.”
2. States are motivated primarily by their national interest.
3. Power relations are a fundamental feature of international affairs (Gilpin 1996: 7–8).

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1. The state-centric assumption: states are the most important actors in world politics.
 2. The rationality assumption: world politics can be analyzed as if states were unitary rational actors seeking to maximize their expected utility.
 3. The power assumption: states seek power and they calculate their interests in terms of power (Keohane 1986: 164–165).
1. Groupism. Politics takes place within and between groups.
 2. Egoism. When individuals and groups act politically, they are driven principally by narrow self-interest.
 3. Anarchy. The absence of government dramatically shapes the nature of international politics.
 4. Power politics. The intersection of groupism and egoism in an environment of anarchy makes international relations, regrettably, largely a politics of power and security (Wohlforth 2008: 133; Donnelly 2008: 150).
1. Humans face one another primarily as members of groups.
 2. International affairs takes place in a state of anarchy.
 3. Power is the fundamental feature of international politics.
 4. The nature of international interactions is essentially conflictual.
 5. Humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason.
 6. Politics is not a function of ethics.
 7. Necessity and reason of state trump morality and ethics (Schweller 1997: 927).
1. The international system is anarchic.
 2. States inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other.
 3. No state can ever be certain another state will not use its offensive military capability.
 4. The most basic motive driving states is survival.
 5. States are instrumentally rational (Mearsheimer 1994/1995: 9–10).

These are all “good definitions” that “point in the same direction.” They range, though, from very broad (e.g., Gilpin and Keohane) to rather narrow (Schweller). And they only partially overlap.

Even more importantly, the widely shared elements, such as anarchy, power, selfishness, and rationality, are also central to many (most?) other leading perspectives. (Most strikingly, most IR scholars would readily agree with Gilpin's "defining" claims that social and political life is organized in groups that regularly engage in conflict, that states are motivated principally by their national interests, and that power is fundamental to international relations.)¹ In fact, although these definitions identify many *characteristically* "realist" features, few, even in combination, are *distinctively* "realist," in the sense that they demarcate "realist" from "non-realist."

Furthermore, the use of terms like "primarily," "fundamental," "most basic," and "essentially" make it unclear just what is being claimed. And how one gets from these "realist premises" to "realist conclusions" is, at best, obscure.

This variety and imprecision, I will argue, is inescapable. (If it is a "problem," it is irresolvable.) Realism has no defining core; no set of criteria by which we can sort arguments, explanations, actions, or outcomes as realist or non-realist. That does not, however, make "realism" an empty or confused term. Rather, I will argue, realism is a complex and diverse family of "things" that recurrently appear in our analytical practice in varied but patterned ways.

REALISM AS "THEORY"

What kind of a "thing" is realism? One obvious answer is "a theory," in the broad sense of abstracted generalizations that purport to be of analytical or explanatory value. Here I identify five types of "realist theory," which I call theories, traditions, models, schools, and approaches.

Kenneth Waltz (1990b, 1991) drew a useful distinction between (realist) thought and (neorealist) theory. "Theory," Waltz argues (1979: 8–10, 12, 69), explains law-like regularities by showing them to be effects of underlying relations of cause or interdependency. I will adopt this fairly standard sense. *Theories* provide particular substantive explanations of patterned events. Waltz presents structural realism as a theory in this sense.

¹Most would also agree with Mearsheimer's claims, at least if we interpret his claim that survival is the most basic motive driving states to mean that states, if forced to choose, usually would rank survival above all other objectives.

“Thought” is a less clear category. I will use it here to refer to *traditions* of analysis, understood as persistent discursive communities and their associated bodies of work. Traditions of thought have no defining criteria. They do, however, have characteristic analytical perspectives and practices that typically are expressed in more or less widely shared parameters of conversation, common themes, characteristic elements and arguments, and exemplary authors and texts. The realist tradition is generally recognized as central to IR (although it long predates academic IR).

Models, as I will use the term, are combinations of interconnected analytical elements that say something significant about cause, process, mechanism, or outcome. Models, although more like theories than traditions, are too incomplete or underspecified to explain without (more or less substantial) supplementation.² Structural realism, I will argue below, is always used as a model.

“Schools” and “approaches”, like traditions, are communities of practice that encompass multiple theories or models. They are, however, narrower and more coherent than traditions (of which they typically are parts). *Schools*, as I use the term, are fundamentally substantive. Their identity is tied to canonical texts or authorities or characteristic arguments or insights. Marxism is a school of social theory. Structural realism can also be read as a school. *Approaches* are much more centrally “methodological”, defined more by shared analytical orientations and practices than by shared substance. Neo-classical realism, I will argue below, is an approach.

Finally, I suggest that it is useful to think of traditions, schools, and approaches as “perspectives”, which inspire and guide, rather than provide, explanations. Theories and models, in this typology, explain (as do ad hoc and eclectic arguments).

These categories should not be taken too seriously. The dividing lines are not clear. Other fruitful categorizations are possible. (For example, I have not included research programs.) Nonetheless, this typology seems to me both insightful and useful for clarifying the diversity of “things” that fall within the realm of realist “theory” in IR.

²This distinction between theory and model is common in natural science disciplines that have been intensively formalized through mathematics. It also seems to me broadly consistent with standard usage in self-consciously social-scientific IR. See, for example, King et al. (1994: 49–53, 106–107).

WHAT IS A REALIST EXPLANATION?

The rest of this chapter focuses on how and what “realism” explains. (For maximum clarity, I repeat that my focus is on realist *explanations*. The policies, actions, and outcomes that are being explained—which are the central concern of most of the other chapters in this volume—appear here only incidentally.) This section examines the character of realist (in any of the above senses) explanations. What makes an explanation “realist”?

Realist Explanations Versus Explanations that Employ Realist Elements

An explanation that employs “characteristically realist” premises in ways guided by and reflective of a realist tradition is, I will argue, “realist” in a strong and unambiguous sense. It is not enough that it gives a central place to one or more “characteristically realist” factors or forces—especially when those factors or forces are not *distinctively* realist.

For example, both neoliberal institutionalism³ and structural realism⁴ begin with anarchy and the problems for cooperation that it poses. Structural realism, however, focuses on self-help responses that pose power against power. Neoliberal institutionalism, by contrast, focuses on responses that develop and deploy international institutions. Structural realist theories and models (and the school or approach of structural realism) and neoliberal institutionalist theories and models (and the school or approach of neoliberal institutionalism) explore different kinds of responses to different things, producing divergent explanations.

Or consider neoclassical realism,⁵ which, like neoliberal institutionalism, focuses on situations where structural explanations fall short or fail. Most of the work in neoclassical realist explanations is done by factors such as domestic political structure, perceptions, intentions, and processes of strategic interaction that not only have no special connection

³Keohane and Martin (2003), Stein (2008), and Keohane (2012) provide good brief overviews. I treat neoliberal institutionalism both as a school that is part of a broad tradition of liberal international thought and a part of a broad institutionalist approach that has generated a variety of theories and models.

⁴See section below on structural realism.

⁵See section below on neoclassical realism.

to realism but are widely employed by a great variety of other theories (broadly understood)—including neoliberal institutionalism. Nonetheless, we regularly (and I think rightly) describe neoclassical realism as a school or approach within realism and neoliberal institutionalism as a school or approach outside of (or even opposed to) realism.

If we look simply at the elements employed in the analysis and see neoliberal institutionalism as not realist, then we would seem to be compelled to say that neoclassical realism is not actually a form of realism. Conversely, though, looking only at the elements employed and seeing neoclassical realism as realist, we would seem compelled to say that neoliberal institutionalism is a form of realism. And there is no neutral position to adjudicate between these readings.

I have not mentioned “realist conclusions” because I am arguing that there are no such things *separate from the (realist) path(s) that produce them*. A realist conclusion is a conclusion reached by a realist path, guided by a realist perspective, largely irrespective of its content.

Because realism is not one thing with a precise and highly elaborated form, no particular conclusions follow necessarily from “realism.” Therefore, there are no essential or defining realist conclusions. Conversely, any particular policy, action, outcome, or explanation usually can be reached by a variety of paths. Therefore, how one gets there (or explains getting there) is essential to whether it “is realist” (or not). In particular, simply reaching a characteristically realist conclusion (or behaving in a characteristically realist fashion) does not make an explanation (or action) realist.⁶

An explanation’s perspective—features such as heuristics, emphases, discursive settings, analytic dispositions, and characteristic frames, elements, and arguments—is fundamental (and, I am suggesting, usually decisive) in determining its character. It matters, centrally, that neoclassical realists operate (and see themselves as operating) within the realist tradition, from which they draw their analytical frames, positive and negative heuristics, “unthinking” analytical and substantive predisposition, etc. And it matters, centrally, that others whose work might seem “very similar” employ different frames, for different purposes, to reach

⁶To argue otherwise is likely to lead us dangerously close to confusing “realist explanations” with “explanations often (or even typically) offered by realists.” Were this error not so obvious, once noted, it might merit further discussion.

different conclusions (or the same conclusion by a different route)—and that they have different understandings of the meaning and significance of their accounts.

*Realist Explanations Versus Explanations
(Not In)Compatible with Realism*

The central presence of “characteristically realist” actions, outcomes, variables, or conclusions probably does make an explanation (not in)*compatible* with realism. Although perhaps of interest for the “dueling theories” contests that are still popular in some parts of the discipline, this tells us little if anything about the character of an explanation—which is my concern here.

Few if any important features of international relations can be completely encompassed by realist (or any other type of) explanations. Therefore, few if any parts of international relations are the unquestionable provenance of realist explanations. Nonetheless, realism, as indicated by its persistent prevalence, has something to say about much of international relations.

This helps to explain why starting points, elements, and conclusions are not decisive—and why perspective is almost always both central and essential. How one weaves together the various threads of an argument or explanation is crucial to its character.

The point is especially clear if we turn, briefly, from explanation to action. *How* a state responds to external power in anarchy⁷ is at least as important as *that* it does. One reasonable, and quite common, response is to seek to create rules or institutions that make such power less threatening. These, however, are institutionalist, not realist, responses.

Most if not all international actors take into account material capabilities and their distribution. (It would be a strange theory, model, or approach that suggested they did not.) “Realist” actors and actors employing other perspectives often will approach and respond to external power rather differently.

Explanations, it needs to be emphasized, do not sort neatly into realist and not realist. Realists have a “story”—or, rather, a genre of

⁷It may bear repeating that external power in anarchy is a universal feature of international systems and that has no special connection to realism (even if realism does have a special attachment to some of the problems it poses).

stories—about international relations. These stories tend to draw on a stock of situations, characters, themes, tropes, plot devices, and characteristic endings. If stories in other genres have certain similarities, though, that does not make them “realist.” (That a pear is like an apple does not make it an apple.) Even self-conscious borrowing from the realist repertoire does not make a story realist (unless those borrowings, because of their quantity or overall impact, create a hybrid or genre-bending story).

There is a continuum of relations between explanations and realism. At one end, explanations converge with, have certain similarities to, and are congruent or compatible with realist explanations. At the other end, explanations are not incongruent with, not incompatible with, and, finally, (merely) not *entirely* incompatible with realist explanations.

Towards the tail end of this list, arguments are likely to be fundamentally non-realist or even anti-realist. But even at the head of the list, a central and substantial realist contribution does not make an explanation “realist” *in the sense that it is also not “not-realist.”*

Therefore, to *say* that an explanation that merely borrows from or has important similarities to an unquestionably realist explanation “is realist” *without also saying that it is not realist* is likely to be misleading. And unless there is some clear and particular reason to focus on just one side of the story, it is suspiciously partisan. It shifts attention to the uninteresting (because utterly uncontroversial) question of *whether* realism makes an analytical contribution to IR—every serious scholar agrees that it does—and away from the crucial question of *what* realism contributes, both absolutely and relatively; of how and how much of what realism explains.

To understand the contributions that realism has made and might make—and what it hasn’t contributed and can’t contribute—requires clarity, and a certain degree of precision, about the variety of “realist” explanations. In particular, I have argued, we need to distinguish clearly the sorts of strongly realist explanations that I have identified here from explanations that merely employ characteristically realist elements or are (not in)compatible with realism. And even with explanations that are firmly rooted in a realist perspective and that centrally employ characteristically realist elements, it is important not to ignore the presence and contribution of non-realist elements.

STRUCTURAL REALISM: INDETERMINATE PREDICTIONS AND PERMISSIVE CAUSES

In academic IR today, self-consciously realist arguments usually are more or less “structural” or more or less “neoclassical.” This and the following sections look in a bit more detail at the character of structural and neo-classical realist explanations.

Structural realism can be most precisely (and most determinately) identified as the “theory” developed by Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*. As every graduate student in IR knows, Waltz argued that international political structures are sparsely but exhaustively defined by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities. (Waltz 1979: 93–97. Cf. 82, 100–101). In practice, Waltz went even further, effectively reducing international structure to its ordering principle, anarchy.⁸

Waltz’s account of anarchy/structure has been subjected to devastating criticism since at least the early 1990s.⁹ We have long known that purportedly structural arguments almost always rely heavily and illicitly on additional non-structural assumptions about the actors or the environment in which they interact. We will return to this point in the next section. Here I set aside the substance of structural realist arguments and focus instead on Waltz’s account of the character of structural realist “explanations”—which, on examination, turn out not to explain anything at all.

Waltz (1979: 124, 134. Cf. 54, 68–69) emphasizes that structural predictions are “indeterminate.” An “indeterminate prediction,” as Waltz presents it, claims that in some significant but unknown (and probably unknowable) number of instances the “predicted” outcome can be expected to occur, at some unspecified (and probably unspecifiable)

⁸“The essential structural quality of the system is anarchy” (Waltz 1988: 618). “The logic of anarchy does not vary with its content” (Waltz 1990b: 37). “The basic structure of international politics continues to be anarchic” (Waltz 1993: 59. Cf. Waltz 2000: 5, 10, 40). As the Index of *Theory of International Politics* put it “Structure, anarchy and hierarchy as the only two types of.”

⁹In particular, the so-called effects of anarchy are not effects of *anarchy*. See, for example, Wendt (1992), Snidal (1991a, b), Milner (1991), and Powell (1994: esp. 314). Wagner (2007: 16–18, 21–29) offers a particularly spirited rationalist refrain. Donnelly (2015) comprehensively critiques IR’s fundamentally Waltzian construction of anarchy.

times in some unspecified (and probably unspecifiable) places. Some times, some where, some things turn out “as predicted.”

Sometimes, though, for unexplained (and, from within the theory, inexplicable) reasons, things turn out otherwise. Such non-occurrences, however, even if they should prove to be the norm, are held not to count against the theory, its explanatory power, or even its predictive power—which remains “indeterminate.” Heads I win. Tails we flip again—until I win (and the explanatory power of structural realism is confirmed).

Furthermore, such “indeterminate predictions” provide no *explanation* at all. As Waltz puts it (1979: 69), to explain is “to say why the range of expected outcomes falls within certain limits; to say why patterns of behavior recur; to say why events repeat themselves.” Structure (anarchy and the distribution of capabilities), however, provides not even the outlines of an account of *why* (or even how¹⁰) “predicted” outcomes occur.

“Indeterminate predictions” are mere correlations. No effort is made to determine the expected correlation coefficient. And the correlation with anarchy is “spurious.”

Anarchy is a feature of all international systems. Therefore, it is correlated with *any* (all) patterned behavior or outcome—and thus explains none. Anarchy tells us nothing about why this happened *instead of that*—which is also (indeterminately) correlated with anarchy.

Consider the central substantive conclusion of structural realism, namely, balancing. Waltz does not argue that units, states, or even great powers *do* balance (rather than bandwagon). Quite the contrary, he claims (only) that balances tend to form. “According to the theory, balances of power recurrently form” (Waltz 1979: 124). “Only a loosely defined and inconstant condition of balance is predicted” (Waltz 1979: 124. Cf. 118, 119, 126). In fact, Waltz (1996) argues that structural theory *cannot* predict or explain the behavior of states. It only identifies a constraining context within which states act.

This, though, is little more than a roundabout way of saying that a states system is a states system, in which, by definition, there is some

¹⁰Waltz (1979: 74–77) does reference selection and socialization. Both, however, are, in Waltz’s terms, matters of interaction, not structure. (Socialization is especially distant from structure.) And he offers not even a hint of an account of when we should expect these mechanisms to work (or not work).

sort of loosely defined and inconstant condition of balance. As long as a “world hegemony,” (Waltz 1979: 124) global empire, or world state does not arise—that is, as long as international relations remains international relations—anything that happens is (not in)consistent with the balancing prediction. (One does not need to be a fan of Popper or Lakatos to find such an “explanation” at best empty.)

Structural “explanations” cannot be rescued by arguing that anarchy is a “permissive cause”, a feature of the world without which something could not occur; a necessary condition of that thing’s possibility. Waltz’s (1959: 232–234) classic argument that anarchy is a permissive cause of war, like his argument about balancing, has no explanatory content.

Even if it is true that war would not occur in the absence of anarchy, it is at least equally true that war would not occur in the absence of human life. And because anarchy is characteristic of all international systems at all times, calling anarchy a permissive cause (of anything) is not much more informative than calling human life a permissive cause.

Even more troubling, peace is far more frequent than war *in anarchic systems*. But anarchy *cannot* account for how, when, or why *either* war or peace is likely to occur. (A constant (anarchy) cannot explain variable outcomes (war and peace).) And as long as some wars occur at some times, almost any outcome is (not in)consistent with this “permissive cause.”

Furthermore, if by “war” we mean organized collective violence, and if wars occur regularly in hierarchical systems (as they do if war is thus defined), then *anarchy is not a permissive cause of war*. If by “war,” though, we mean violent inter-state conflict, then *the “permissive cause” of war is not anarchy* (absence of an international government) but rather the presence of a states system—which brings us back to the empty claim that if this were not a states system states would not war with one another.

Anarchy is not a cause. (It is more like a background condition.) And structural realism, understood as a theory that explains outcomes by reference to structure (anarchy and distribution of capabilities), explains nothing.

AUGMENTED STRUCTURAL REALISM

This conclusion—that structure (anarchy and distribution of capabilities) explains nothing—is confirmed by the fact self-identified structural realists in practice rarely if ever even try to explain anything by structure alone.

Consider John Mearsheimer, arguably the leading realist of the generation following Waltz. Despite the fact that structure concerns only the *distribution* of capabilities (not the substance of power), he devotes a crucial chapter in his major book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, to “the primacy of land power” and emphasizes “the stopping power of water.” Nonetheless, Mearsheimer insists (2001: 21) that “[his] theory of offensive realism is also [like Waltzian defensive realism] a structural theory of international politics.”

Even Waltz regularly left structural accounts behind—out of a (sensible) desire to say something more than that balances tend to form. For example, in developing his theory he makes central use of the (nonstructural) proposition that “the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system” (Waltz 1979: 126). And his explanation of the Cold War peace relies centrally, even primarily, on nuclear weapons (Waltz 1990a).

Or consider Stephen Walt, one of the first and most successful of Waltz’s students following the publication of *Theory of International Politics*. Unwilling to settle for the claim that balances will form, Walt derived the determinate structural prediction that states in anarchy balance against external power. Even a superficial examination of the evidence, however, shows clearly that states balance against *threat*—leading Walt (1987, 1988) to advance a balance of threat theory. Threat, however, is a perceptual, “unit-level” variable, making the theory—as Walt pointed out (1996: 916)—not a structural theory.

Although Walt insists that his theory is a “*refinement*” (1988: 281 [emphasis in original]) of structural balance of power theory, he does not say whether he considers balance of threat theory to be structural. This is in many ways an admirable orientation. If a structural theory can’t explain what we want or need to explain, then so much the worse for structural theory. Aesthetics ought to give way to explanation. Purity does not justify willful analytical self-mutilation.

Problems, though, arise when (structural?) realists fail to confront the implications of combining structural and non-structural elements in a model, theory, or explanation. And such problems become especially severe when realists who make central reference to structure do not even acknowledge the non-structural nature of their explanations. The result is a tendency to wildly overstate the explanatory contribution of structure.

For example, Mearsheimer (2001: 10) argues that “structural factors such as anarchy and the distribution of power ... matter most for explaining international politics.” But he identifies only anarchy and the distribution of capabilities as structural. And in his account of the need to acquire power, which he sees as the central dynamic of international relations, structure does little of the explanatory work.

The structure of the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other. Three features of the international system combine to cause states to fear one another: 1) the absence of a central authority that sits above states and can protect them from each other, 2) the fact that states always have some offensive military capability, and 3) the fact that states can never be certain about other states’ intentions. Given this fear—which can never be wholly eliminated—states recognize that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the better their chances of survival. (Mearsheimer 2001: 2)

Note the shift from “the structure of the international system” to “features of the international system.” Even more importantly, two of those three features are *not* structural; from uncertainty Mearsheimer jumps to fear—and what proves to be an almost overwhelming fear. And in the end fear does most of the analytical work. Structure (anarchy and the distribution of capabilities) may be part of, or even necessary, to the explanation. But it explains very little.

Or consider survival, which plays a central role in many ostensibly structural explanations. For example, Waltz (1979: 121) claims that “Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive.” This might seem to be a very modest and uncontroversial non-structural addition. But a mere desire to survive explains nothing, not only because it is (close to) universal (and thus correlated with pretty much any form of behavior) but because the crucial question is the relative weights of survival and other interests—which vary dramatically both “in the world” and in different models and theories. Only when the desire to survive is close to paramount and pre-emptive is anything like a determinate prediction likely to be possible. And when it is not—which certainly is the situation in most of contemporary international relations—a desire to survive

explains almost nothing (and probably can be left out of nearly all explanations).¹¹

To repeat, not only is there nothing wrong with supplementing structural explanations, supplementation is necessary if we are to be able to offer real explanations of international events (rather than obscure gestures in the direction of anarchy and external material power). The only caveat—which I am afraid that most structural realists regularly ignore—is that these supplements be clearly acknowledged (and, at a minimum, not misrepresented).

If we acknowledge these supplementations, though, the typology that I have elaborated can give us a pretty good handle on the character of such “structural realist” explanations. In practice, they employ a very minimal structural model that is more or less extensively supplemented by non-structural elements. And these nonstructural elements are added in a way that may be guided by a realist perspective but it is not governed by the model.

The resulting “theories,” it seems to me, are best described as *augmented structural realism*. Patrick James (1993) has described this kind of research strategy as “elaborated structural realism.” But it involves not the further elaboration of the elements or character of structure but non-structural additions—and additions that are not governed by the logic of the structural starting point. Augmented thus seems to me a better description.

To be sure, structural realists *might* go about extending (elaborating) their conception of structure by developing an expanded account of the features that characteristically arrange (structure) the parts of international systems. I know of no realist, though, who has done that. The closest thing that I am aware of is Glenn Snyder’s work on what he called “structural modifiers,” such as technology and institutions, which he defines as “system-wide influences that are structural in their inherent nature but not potent enough internationally to warrant that description” (Snyder 1996: 169). And—quite unfortunately in my view—even this modest elaboration has not caught on.

¹¹In Donnelly (2012: 610–616), I look at simple hunter-gatherer societies, which are anarchic and composed of people that wish to survive (who are also equal and equally armed) but who pursue security not through self-help balancing but by what I call binding through sharing. Waltz’s only-two-requirements claim is simply empirically false. Where we see balancing, other factors are present and essential to the explanation.

“Structural realism” today thus is largely a set of variously augmented “structural realist” models and theories. Those models and theories, and the explanations derived from or associated with them, can fruitfully be seen as encompassed within a “school” that is insightfully described as both structural and realist. The realist tradition helps to guide the choice of additional elements and the ways in which they are deployed. And the focus of the school is on broad “structural” (in the ordinary-language sense of the term) constraints and opportunities.

But—and for my purposes here, these are the essential points—structure plays only a small part in most such explanations (because anarchy, which is indeed a generic feature of international relations, has no determinate effects and because very few international events can be explained primarily, let alone only, by the distribution of capabilities). Structural realism, thus understood, *cannot* be a general theory of international relations—because the additional factors required to produce explanations are specific to particular situations or types of international systems. And the realist contribution, as I emphasized above, lies not in the elements employed (either individually or in combination) but in shaping and applying a theory, model, or explanation.

NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

The other principal strand of contemporary realism is usually labelled neo-classical.¹² Structure is moved to the background and attention is focused instead on, in Waltzian terms, “the unit level.”

Waltz understands structure—fruitfully, I would argue—as the arrangement of the parts of a system; the *relations* between them. This makes not only what occurs within states (and what states do) but also how they inter-act “not structural.” As Waltz puts it (1979: 80. Cf. 62, 69, 71, 110, 118), “structure is sharply distinguished from actions and interactions.” There are thus two broad types of neo-classical realism, focusing on, respectively, the interactions of states and decision-making processes within states (and their results).

¹²The term was coined by Gideon Rose (1998). Schweller (2003) and Rathbun (2008) are lively expositions and defenses.

In both types, neoclassical realism is differentiated by *where* it looks for explanations; that is, the level of analysis on which it operates.¹³ It is a (methodological) approach, not a (substantive) school.

A classic (and early) interactional example is Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder's "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks" (1990), which uses models of strategic interaction to explain certain alliance patterns (and their contribution to the outbreak of war). But even here, factors internal to states play a central role. And most neoclassical realist work focuses on foreign policy decision making.

We can usefully distinguish narrow and broad forms of such inward-looking neoclassical work.

In the narrow (or thin) form, illustrated by the literature on "under-balancing" (e.g., Schweller 2004, 2006), modestly augmented structural realism is treated as a rationalist model that sets a baseline of expectations. The focus then becomes explaining deviations from these expectations. Structural realism becomes a heuristic device, throwing up "puzzles" or "anomalies" to be explored non-structurally (although still from a realist perspective and with a realist style or sensibility).

The broad (or deep) form of neoclassical realism in effect treats anarchy and external material power as parameters within which decision-makers operate. The immediate sources of explanation are non-structural, lying in the full range of variables that foreign policy analysis regularly employs. A good recent example is Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Stephen Lobell's *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (2016), which develops a fairly complex theory (I would say model) that focuses on how structural stimuli are processed through perception, decision making, and policy implementation (which in turn are influenced by leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions).

What makes neoclassical realist explanations *realist* is the special emphasis placed on external material power in anarchy. Even if decision-makers are in fact responding immediately to other factors and forces, those (ultimately preemptive) constraints are treated as nonetheless central to the explanation (for example, as internalized dispositions, unacknowledged assumptions about the context of action, or external forces that then act on the decisions that have been explained neoclassically).

¹³It is important that we not confuse levels of analysis in general, understood as the location of causal forces, with Waltz's particular three level (individual, state, system) model. For example, Waltz himself (1979: 62, 68, 99) speaks of "the level of (the) interacting units."

The principal explanatory variables employed by neoclassical realism, however, have no substantive focus or coherence. (Neoclassical realism is an approach.) We know very little about an explanation, and nothing about its substance, simply knowing that it is neoclassical realist. The wide range of nonstructural additions, many of which have no special connection to realism, bear most of the explanatory burden. The resulting explanations usually can best be described as eclectic or multi-perspectival.

That a model or explanation is appropriately described as neoclassical realist does *not* mean that “realism” does most, or even much, of the explaining. Realism helps to shape neoclassical realist explanations. Usually, though, “realism” does little of the explaining.

FEAR, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE RETURN TO (AND OF) REALISM

So far I have stressed the variety of realist “theories”—and thus the variety of ways and things that “realism” “explains.” I have also stressed the role of realist perspectives in inspiring and guiding analysis (and thus defining a “theory” or explanation). I have had little to say, though, about the substance of realist perspectives.

Is there something like a core to those perspectives that we can use to help to identify (although not define) “realism”? I suggest that there is.

A realist sense or sensibility seems to me to lurk behind the definitions with which we began. And I think that I can see running through both structural realism and neoclassical realism, and “classical” realism as well, a fairly clear vision of the *nature* of international relations—and where that character comes from. My account, though, is very different from the accounts of most contemporary realists.

“Realism,” as I see it, begins with self-interested states operating in a states system (i.e., an international system structured around states, which are its predominant actors). This states system has a narrow, thin, and weak normative-institutional structure that does not go much beyond what Hedley Bull (1977, ch. 1) calls rules of coexistence (in this case, establishing sovereign statehood and a system of contractual international law) and relies almost exclusively on self-help to enforce rules.

It is this normative-institutional structure—not the absence of an international government (anarchy)—that impels states to focus on the

distribution of material capabilities. A thin and weak system of rules and a weak system of international governance pressures states towards self-help power politics by inducing fear and uncertainty (which are distinct problems that become especially acute when they interact and reinforce one another). What is frightening is not an “anarchic” world without an international government but a world with only minimal international rule and very few international rules.¹⁴

Neoliberal institutionalists, by contrast, see the international system as composed of a complex combination of states and (both public and private) nonstate actors, whose capabilities and authorities differ from issue area to issue area. *Their* international system has a fairly robust normative-institutional structure that provides not only an extensive system of rules but considerable international rule (both bilaterally and through international organizations and regimes). Fear and uncertainty—and the resulting pressures towards self-help balancing and power politics—thus often are mitigated, sometimes overcome, and occasionally even effectively eliminated.

International systems, I am suggesting, diverge most fundamentally in their *normative-institutional* structures. (This should not be surprising. International systems are *social* systems. And social systems are differentiated primarily by their norms and institutions.)

“Effects of anarchy” such as self-help balancing and the pursuit of relative gains actually arise from a particular institutional-normative structure (that is facilitated or enabled, but not caused, by the absence of an international government). And those effects work through fear and uncertainty, the nature and intensity of which varies considerably with time, place, and case. Whether realism has anything interesting or important to say about any particular international system, action, or outcome becomes, appropriately, an empirical question.

Now, finally, I come to the core questions of this volume. If, as I have suggested, a “realist world” is a states system with an anemic normative-institutional structure populated principally by states gripped by fear and uncertainty, then to the extent that such a world is actually realized “in the world,” characteristically realist actions are likely to increase in number and salience and realist explanations are likely to gain weight. This, it seems to me, explains the “return” to (and of) realism in Europe—and, in reverse, its earlier “retreat.”

¹⁴In Donnelly (2015: 210–211), I stress the importance of not jumping from absence of a “ruler” (government) to absence of “rule” or absence of “rules.”

Anarchy, as I noted above, is a constant and thus cannot explain any sort of change. There has been no significant change in the distribution of material capabilities either. What *has* changed, as the title of this volume suggests, is fear and uncertainty—which are at the heart of the realist perspective; realism’s comparative advantage, as it were. Thus realism’s current return—and its earlier retreat as fear and uncertainty subsided in the immediate post-Cold War period.

My account also points, much more vaguely, towards where to look for explanations of this return. Structural realism offers only a perspective from which to develop a challenge to the retreat and return story. Neoclassical realism, I suspect, will have a variety of explanatory contributions. But what those contributions might be is radically unclear (because neoclassical realism is a methodological approach not a substantive school). If I am correct about the centrality of norms and institutions, though, we should expect to find—and, as a non-specialist at least, I think we can see—an erosion of peace-preserving norms (perhaps most strikingly in the Soviet annexation of Crimea and continuing intervention in Ukraine) and growing uncertainty about the continued conflict-ameliorating effects of regional institutions (perhaps most notably the EU—even before Brexit).

Realism is a set of theories, models, schools, and approaches that are “tuned” to operate in—and provide particular perspectives on—a dangerous international world. Realism is returning today in Europe, I would suggest, because many Europeans increasingly see similarities between the kinds of dangerous worlds that realists model and the world that they seem to be coming to live in. Some of the details of that world, and of what realism can (and cannot) tell us about it, are the subjects of the following chapters.

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