

CHAPTER 6

Realism

Jason Charrette and Jennifer Sterling-Folker

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The literature on international organization (IO) and global governance gives the impression that realism contributes very little to the topic. Many

critics treat it as a nemesis to be defeated before analysis can proceed, rather than an approach with something important to say in its own right about these subjects. Yet realists have always contributed to discussions of IO and global governance.¹ How realism defines these terms may be part of the reason it is often given short shrift. From a realist perspective, the term “IO” is a reference to the Westphalian system comprised of sovereign states, which interact in predictable ways thereby generating patterns of order and disorder in world politics.

Central to these patterns is the relative power of states. This is because in an anarchic environment in which there is no world government to impose order and stability, states engage in self-help behavior to ensure their own survival. Anarchy heightens the stakes of state interaction so that competing interests have the potential to escalate into military conflict. States are concerned with relative power because power capabilities become the central means within anarchy of obtaining self-interests and defending against other states. In such an environment, relative power—or the distribution of capabilities—determines outcomes. Periods of relative peace or violence are traceable to the interactions of the relatively more powerful states in the

system. From a realist perspective, then, the term IO is a reference to the specific patterns of order that can arise from great power self-interests and interaction.

While never fully divorced from patterns of disorder, periods of relatively greater order, organization, and management have existed. Realism explains these periods by focusing on the interactions and efforts of relatively powerful states. Patterns of order do not displace the significance of relative power to global affairs or states as its constitutive unit. They are instead *contingent* on the interests of powerful states. Hence, if there are patterns of authority, control, and legitimacy in contemporary world politics—global governance in common parlance—it is because of the relative power, ongoing interactions, and preferences of powerful states.

Realist insistence that states and power remain fundamental to the subject of IO and global governance is an important contribution to our understanding of order, organization, and management in world affairs. Realist claims are also essential for understanding the arguments and concerns of many other approaches to IO and global governance, which often contrast themselves with realist explanations.

The next section of this chapter reviews the historical development of IO from a realist perspective, with a focus on the implications of polarity and hegemonic stability for the contemporary world order. We then discuss a number of current debates among realists involving the future of contemporary IO. Because these debates reflect realism's ongoing skepticism about some of the bolder claims in the IO and global governance literature about the future, we then consider how realism addresses key criticisms and emerging issues. In so doing, we argue that the ethical concerns evoked by realism's ongoing pessimism serve as an important check against an undue optimism that masks deep inequalities and exploitations. These can generate backlash both between and within states that have serious ramifications for the sustainability of the current world order. In this respect, realism provides not only a compelling explanation for IO and global governance, but also a basis from which to consider the normative biases of other perspectives.

IO from a realist perspective

Because states are suspicious of one another's intentions in an anarchic environment, relative harmony among powerful states has been historically rare. Cooperation does occur, but it has usually been when states have faced a common threat and pooled their relative power to defend against it. These dynamics account for the coalitions against Napoleon in the early nineteenth century, as well as opposing alliances during World Wars I and II. Such cooperation can be difficult to achieve and sustain, however, as states are just as suspicious of the intentions of potential alliance partners, and these suspicions reassert themselves after the common enemy has been vanquished.

The contemporary international system is remarkable for the extensiveness of cooperation, as well as for the relatively lengthy period of peace among the great powers. While interstate violence and warfare continue to be endemic to many parts of the globe, their centrality to great power politics declined in the latter half of the twentieth century. A variety of analytical perspectives have tried to explain why contemporary international relations (IR) appear to be qualitatively different from the past. Many highlight the role of democracy, economic interdependence, and international

organizations (whether intergovernmental, IGOs, or nongovernmental, NGOs) as the progenitors of international peace and cooperation. The term “global governance” is often preferred because global politics is seen as the sum of all global actors, their interests, and their practices, not just state interests, as the term IO implies. Thus, global governance is sometimes defined as the management of this decentralized web of interdependent transnational actors through public–private partnerships, network entanglements, and institutions that enable increasing cooperation despite the anarchic environment.² From a realist perspective, however, the term “global governance” misdirects attention from deeper structures of power that shape patterns of global management by implying that these activities occur independently of states.

In contrast, realism argues that global governance is a phenomenon contingent on power politics. To account for the extensiveness of cooperation today, realists argue that while an anarchic, self-help environment makes suspicion endemic and hence a severe inhibitor to cooperation, these dynamics may be overcome on an ongoing—albeit impermanent—basis if particular circumstances related to relative power occur. Beyond security

alliances, the presence of exceptionally powerful states, whose interactions shape global affairs in ways that conform to their own interests and values, can lead to circumstances in which more extensive forms of cooperation, organization, and order are achieved.

The concept of polarity, which is the relative distribution of capabilities in the international system during particular time periods, accounts for cooperative circumstances in anarchy. Realists argue that distributional changes not only affect system stability, by producing different patterns of behavior and hence the probability and scale of international violence, but also have consequences for international order and management.³ According to Randall Schweller and David Priess, management in a multipolar system, which consists of many great powers, can vary from shallow and spontaneous to more formal and permanent depending on whether there is a “revisionist” state dissatisfied with existing arrangements.⁴ Examples of management variation in multipolar systems include Europe during the Napoleonic era, interstate relations prior to World War I, and the Concert of Europe after Napoleon’s defeat in the early nineteenth century.

In a system with two great powers—referred to as “bipolarity”—organization will be a by-product of relations between the two superpowers. The example of this type of IO is the US and Soviet spheres of influence during the Cold War. According to Kenneth Waltz, the two states learned “to behave as sensible duopolists” by “moderating the intensity of their competition and cooperating at times to mutual advantage while continuing to eye each other warily.”⁵ Schweller and Priess argue that bipolar systemic management involves explicit and implicit arrangements designed to avoid unnecessary conflict while each superpower imposes or negotiates an order within its own sphere of influence.

In a unipolar system of one great power, the unipole attempts to establish rules that benefit itself, and its internal characteristics shape the organizational choices it pursues. Although domination alone can be used to establish and enforce the rules of the game in its favor, unipoles may instead rely on a combination of domination and negotiated consent to a rules-based system. Because such behavior also provides collective public goods that make the unipole’s rule attractive to weaker states, scholars refer to these negotiated forms of great-

power IO as periods of “hegemonic stability.” The unipolar state can act as a “hegemon” that uses its greater capabilities to shape international politics for the promotion of relatively more order, stability, and cooperative behavior within the system.

To be clear, as Elke Krahmann notes, “unipolarity does not necessarily entail hegemony; nor can hegemony only be found in unipolar structures.”⁶ Thus not all unipoles or great powers are hegemonies, and most scholars identify just three periods of hegemonic stability: the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century, and the United States after World War II. What has historically distinguished hegemony from unipolarity is the great power’s desire to promote international trade and investment with other states, which can only be done effectively by encouraging regularized, cooperative relationships.

This does not mean that coercion is absent from how these hegemonic “goods” are spread among participants, but it is the combination of a single state’s relatively greater capability *and* the existence of collective self-interests in economic exchange that differentiates hegemony from imperialism and unipolarity. In a period of hegemonic

stability, “the distribution of power among states is the primary determinant of the character of the international economic system” and it explains “patterns of economic relations among the advanced capitalist countries.”⁷ It also accounts for the relatively greater cooperation and order we have seen in contemporary world affairs.

Most of the IGOs that serve as the backbone for contemporary international cooperation can be traced to US hegemony in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The United States emerged from that conflict as the most powerful state in the international system, and its reliance on formal institutions and international law is a distinguishing feature of its hegemony. It promoted the creation of the UN as an umbrella organization for treaty-based cooperation in a variety of global concerns and issue areas. It also oversaw the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), with the express goal of encouraging cooperative economic exchange. In so doing, the United States rewarded cooperation, punished defectors, and served as a guarantor for the international economic system it shared with its allies. Its presence, combined with the common threat posed

by the Soviet Union, was also an inducement to avoid warfare among the states within its alliance system. The term *Pax Americana* is often used to indicate the post–World War II period of US hegemonic stability.

Despite analytical differences, both the hegemonic stability and polarity perspectives assume that patterns of world order can be traced to and remain contingent upon the distribution of capabilities. In the contemporary moment that has meant a realist fixation on the United States, as both a hegemon after World War II and a unipole after the end of the Cold War, and its willingness to support the extensively formal, legalized, and cooperative world order it promoted in order to obtain its own economic and military interests. If the US' relative power and its willingness to support cooperation changes, then so too would existing patterns of organization and management. In other words, if the contemporary world order, often referred to as the Liberal International Order (LIO), is sustained through a particular distribution of power, there are significant implications for IO when that distribution changes. Because realists are pessimistic that US primacy can be maintained in the face of rising powers, increased economic and military

competition, technological changes, and internal social pressures, they are also skeptical about the preservation of the LIO. This has led to debate among realists over whether the United States is in decline and what this means for the LIO and world affairs.

Current debates

There are a variety of reasons why powerful states cannot count on a lasting favorable distribution of capabilities. One reason is that anarchy induces a competitive drive among states to balance unchecked power as a potential threat to their survival.⁸ States try to increase their own military capability (internal balancing) or ally with other states to benefit from their pooled military capability (external balancing). Unipolarity is expected to be short-lived in such a context, since states face a security risk from the unipole's potential military aggression. Realists anticipate that a challenger or group of challengers will become dissatisfied with the international order preferred by a single great power and eventually will balance against it. Such moments of power transition are often fraught

with interstate violence and—at the very least—the system could revert to multipolarity, which is associated with higher levels of warfare among the great powers.

A second reason why particular distributions of capability do not last involves technological advances that may contribute to the rapid rise of potential challengers, particularly in strategic planning and warfare.⁹ Rapid shifts in technology can make weapons systems obsolete almost overnight and, in an environment where other states have an incentive to compete to acquire more power, the maintenance of relative power is precarious. Even in economic affairs, a hegemonic state cannot expect to dominate the global market indefinitely. The very states that benefit from its international order will also innovate and may eventually prove to be its greatest economic challengers.

A third reason why relative power does not last is that hegemony comes at a high price. To ward off potential challengers to its world order, the hegemon must constantly stay economically and militarily ahead. However, the maintenance of its order inflicts an inescapable and eventually fatal “economic drain” on the hegemon.¹⁰ Since its own economy is critical to the health of the global econ-

omy, the hegemon must remain open to commerce and trade—even if it hurts its own people. Thus, it risks domestic backlash against the very policies necessary to maintain its hegemony vis-à-vis other states. It must also commit itself to pay for the defense of far-flung allies that are a part of its system—even when its own country is not directly threatened. It might even need to share its military technology with other allies, allowing those states to erode its own military advantage. Put simply, the greater a state's reach and influence, the more territory and core interests it is forced to defend. Eventually, the hegemon will suffer “imperial overstretch,” exhaustion, domestic backlash, and relative decline, ending the world order that was dependent on it. Whatever order might replace it will be contingent on an entirely new distribution of capabilities, with no guarantee that a hegemon will emerge to encourage and support a system of economic exchange.

If we consider US preeminence and decline from either a unipolar or hegemonic perspective, pessimism about the preservation of contemporary world order is warranted. Since the end of the Cold War, realists have debated whether the United States must inevitably decline, or if it is categor-

ically different from previous hegemons.^{[11](#)} One dominant theme has been whether other states are even capable of balancing against US military and economic power because many realists argue its relative capabilities have been without peer. This makes the cost of both external and internal balancing enormous and therefore band-wagoning rather than balancing more likely.

Another much-debated theme is whether the hegemon's own behaviors might induce a balancing backlash if it behaves too aggressively in pursuing its interests. The US invasion of Iraq and its Global War on Terror (GWOT) have often been cited as confirmation of this potential danger, leading Waltz (among others) to argue that, "even if a dominant power behaves with moderation, restraint, and forbearance, weaker states will worry about its future behavior."^{[12](#)} G. John Ikenberry and Stephen Walt have argued that as long as it pursues liberal hegemonic rather than imperial policies to support the current international order, there should be no reason for other states to challenge that order.^{[13](#)} Realists have also debated why there is a declining commitment on the part of the hegemon to the LIO. The 2016 election of Donald Trump and his administration's repudiation of the LIO are widely cited as

evidence for this decline, although many scholars note it was a trend predating his administration. Yet, when the hegemon still wields enormous relative power and obtains many of its interests through the LIO, why has declining commitment occurred at all? Answers tend to split between whether, as Fareed Zakaria puts it, “the death of the US’s extraordinary status [is] a result of external cause, or did Washington accelerate its own demise through bad habits and bad behavior?”¹⁴

Scholars such as Randall Schweller, Alexander Cooley, and Daniel Nexon argue that external causes and structural shifts in US relative power made declining LIO support inevitable.¹⁵ The rise of and collaborations between China and Russia made the world more competitive, the ability of the United States to dominate core institutions and governing rules weakened overtime, and illiberal transnational forces increasingly challenged US liberal preferences. Such other scholars as John Mearsheimer, Carla Norloff, and Stephen Walt emphasize the choices that Washington’s foreign policymakers made and the internal pressures that they faced.¹⁶ Leaders pursued ambitious normative projects such as democracy promotion that resulted in policy over-reach, while disgruntled do-

mestic populations became increasingly unwilling to support the costs of the LIO. For these scholars, as Norloff puts it, “If Pax Americana were to come to a close over the course of the next decade, it would not be by necessity, but as a result of deliberate U.S. choices.”¹⁷

These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive; most scholars recognize that the hegemon’s declining commitment is due to a combination of structural and agentic factors. Yet, the different emphases lead to different expectations about the LIO’s future and what can be done about it. For scholars who see the declining commitment as primarily a structural outcome, the LIO’s future is relatively bleak. Cooley and Nexon argue that declining commitment is inevitable, and so “US policy makers must plan for the world after global hegemony” in which there will be multiple power centers.¹⁸ Other scholars share their pessimism, recommending that the United States abandon grand ambitions and embrace a more restrained, decentralized, and incremental foreign policy that relies on offshore balancing.¹⁹ Alternatively, an emphasis on leadership choice and domestic factors suggests that the LIO is damaged but salvageable. It could be extended, many scholars argue, if

the hegemon recommits and convinces its allies, competitors, and its own domestic public of the LIO's continued utility and desirability.^{[20](#)}

The declining hegemonic commitment to the LIO also makes it imperative to address China's relationship with the order. Realist scholars have long been interested in how China's rising power could make it a potential challenger to US dominance. What remains unclear is what sort of management would evolve in an international system dominated by China. As Joseph Nye writes, "one of the important questions today is whether other states, such as China, that benefit from this rules-based international order would preserve the institutional framework even if the place of the United States within it were to change."^{[21](#)} Realists are generally pessimistic that it can be preserved and argue, as Christopher Layne does, that under Chinese leadership "the international system is likely to become much less liberal politically."^{[22](#)} Not only is it unlikely that China would want to maintain a US-style LIO, but also realists would expect other states to eschew existing cooperative arrangements and pursue more unilateral behaviors. As all these debates indicate, from a realist perspective, the balance of power politics remains central to inter-

national order, even when it is dominated by liberal processes and preferences.

Key criticisms and emerging issues

Because realists assume that states are the central actors in world affairs, it is the distribution of capabilities among them that sets the stage for patterns of global authority, control, and legitimacy. States should not be analyzed as first among equals in relation to non-state actors (NSAs), such as IGOs, NGOs, transnational corporations, activists, or transnational civil society. No realist scholar would deny that these actors exist, are currently engaged in the governance of some sort, or can make a difference to the quality of some people's daily lives. However, this web of formal and informal actors, institutions, and arrangements is contingent on the authority and legitimacy of the state. Far from displacing the preeminence of states, there is considerable evidence that non-state actors' activities actually reinforce it.^{[23](#)}

NSAs are important not because they are independent of states but because they allow states to achieve more efficiently their state interests and

so are useful to powerful states. Institutions and NSAs “enable great powers to rule others and to manage regional and world affairs more effectively and efficiently than would be possible in their absence,” while international law “direct(s) great power behavior in accordance with the established rules of the game.”²⁴ States can, if they wish, halt increasing governance regardless of how binding or permanent it may seem since it is an inherently contingent condition. The COVID-19 pandemic provides ample evidence. When faced with a transnational problem that required collective solutions, states reverted to unilateral, insular policies involving tighter border controls and vaccine hoarding in order to protect their own citizens.²⁵ Similarly, climate change poses escalating dangers for the planet, and yet the hegemon and other states have been unwilling to engage in the necessary cooperative efforts to address it.²⁶ As these examples underscore, even the strongest institutions for governing a global space can be fractured when they do not serve a state’s immediate interests, and dense, entrenched networks of capital and trade can be insufficient for preventing management contraction and collapse.

Realism's critics often suggest that it fails to read contemporary international order correctly. They argue that by *a priori* privileging the state, it misses the importance of NSAs, and its fatalistic tendencies counsel conservative foreign policies that reinforce power politics. This implies that it is realism's hold on policymaker imaginations, not power politics itself, which stands in the way of achieving greater progress in world affairs. Certainly, its assumptions can lead realists to make bad predictions and its analyses can have significant blind spots about the daily activities of global management. Moreover, because realism suggests that activism separated from the distribution of capabilities will be ineffective, its underlying fatalism raises serious ethical questions about whether it is suggesting resignation to the oppression and exploitation associated with all power politics. In an LIO, realism appears to be out of step with the ideals and aspirations of the majority of its participants.

It is at this juncture, however, that realism makes an important contribution to the discussion of contemporary IO and global governance. Realism's pessimistic reading of world order is shaped by its understanding of human history, in which patterns of competition and violence have contin-

ually reflected the unfortunate truism that “might makes right.” Powerful entities throughout history have always determined what was politically, economically, socially, and ethically acceptable. In so doing, they shaped the boundaries of thought and behavior for the actors and individuals that existed under their exigencies. This is just as true for the contemporary world order, in which “right” is derived from the “might” of the powerful states in the system, among whom a set of Western ideals (involving the desirability of democracy, capitalism, and state sovereignty) shape what international order should look like. The have-nots understand that power determines outcomes in this system and that they are not necessarily beneficiaries of it. Yet much of the IO and global governance literature would have one believe that relative power is superfluous because there is an obvious “rightness” to the liberal world order that is globally recognized and shared.

Realism serves as an important corrective for this tendency to equate liberal ideals, global reach, and normative desirability without also acknowledging the relative power (both among and of states) that necessarily, coercively supports this equation. As Martin Griffiths has observed, “real-

ists in the US are at the forefront of contemporary debates about the future of US foreign policy,” because they recognize the “close nexus between political and economic stability at the global level” and “between power, authority and legitimacy.”²⁷ International organization is dependent upon and a reflection of the interests and preferences of the most powerful states in the system. We should not be surprised, then, to discover that the world order they have created supports their continued dominance over others. Hence, realism draws attention to the error of what Duncan Bell (drawing on the work of C. A. J. Coady) calls “the moralism of imposition,” in which we “seek to impose values (even if we think they are universally applicable in principle) on other people and communities” without also recognizing that doing so “almost always requires the use of coercion, disrespect or force.”²⁸

In addition, the most powerful states in the contemporary system have created a world order that generates significant global inequalities and externalities not only for weaker states but also for populations within their own borders. It has been subject to backlash from groups, such as Al-Qaeda, and led to the rise of far-right populist nationalism in the United States, the United Kingdom (with the

2016 Brexit vote), and numerous other countries.^{[29](#)} There are, as a result, serious questions about the long-term sustainability and normative desirability of the liberal consensus from which contemporary international cooperation and management derive.

Conclusion

Despite the contemporary rhetoric about global governance, we do not live in a brave new world in which old ways of thinking and behaving have become irrelevant. Our world continues to be dominated—for better or worse—by the preferences, values, and goals of relatively powerful states. Hence, the term “IO” is still a more appropriate signifier for the contemporary world order. While contemporary world order has been characterized by relatively extensive cooperation, management, and NSA involvement, using the term “global governance” to describe this order is problematic. The term suggests that management occurs independently of its deep structural foundations and is not a contingent pattern arising from great-power interactions. In divorcing systemic organization and governance from overt and implicit power

structures, the term disconnects the study of world order from the study of IR more broadly; it risks getting lost in the novelty of a particular international moment, having read its durability with undue sanguinity.

Unfortunately, this is hardly a new phenomenon. Remarking on the typical pre–World War I London inhabitant, who could engage in international commerce at home using cutting-edge communications technology, John Maynard Keynes noted that such an individual “regarded this state of affairs as normal, certain, and permanent, except in the direction of further improvement, and any deviation from it as aberrant, scandalous, and avoidable.”³⁰ With little modification, such a statement could describe many contemporary explanations for IO and global governance. Alternatively, the enduring contribution of the realist tradition is both to contextualize the current management of international relations within the larger sweep of history and to provide a check on the blind optimism that assumes the hegemony of liberal ideas and institutions is natural and inevitable. Realism provides a critical voice to the larger debate about IO and global governance by drawing attention to power politics—reminding the discipline that,

despite the fluidity of international politics, some things never change.

Additional reading

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