

Liberalism and Realism in International Politics

Research Essay

Political Science 330

Tasha White

April 01, 2021

This essay seeks to compare and contrast two political ideologies: Idealism and realism. It will consider similarities and differences among them, referencing their introduction to society within the political world to create a simple timeline of their stage of influence. It will dissect their relation to international politics and, in doing this, will elaborate on strengths and weaknesses of both variants of political thought regarding the international world. Lastly, it will give my opinion of which ideology holds most value to international politics. Through this essay I intend to persuade the reader to reach the same conclusion that I have come to; Idealism holds more value to international politics than realism does. This is not to say realism is irrelevant, however, it is an opinion piece given to promote the idealist train of thought among like-minded scholars and emphasize its continued relevance.

Idealism can be a complicated ideology. It can be described as the practice of pursuing, or believing in the possibility of, ideals (Knight & Keating, 2010). It is the ideology of the optimist, believing in the good of human nature and, therefore, the potential for a united, peaceful globality. In order to achieve what we currently deem impossible is to reach for it in the first place (Knight & Keating, 2010). Idealists crave a fair law system to govern society as well as the assurance of just war principles. They believe in the malleability nature of humanity as well as the rationality of it. Idealists believe that we construct the social world we live in as we live in it (Armstrong, 2006). We are in control of our world and create perceptions that further emphasize what we believe. In that regard, seeking to achieve a peaceful global future based on cooperation is attainable. To follow an idealist path would be to pursue the idea of something greater with the assumption that it will, or at the very least could, result in the positive manner that we anticipate

(Knight & Keating, 2010). All of existence is perceived so the idea is that if we shift our perceptions on anything, in this case politics and the international world, our reality will reflect this ideal. This ideology gained popularity in between the first and second world war. Following the first, it became a joyous school of thought that accounted for the transcending of the previous war state of mind. Enlightened people wanted to spread idealist thought and share their wealth of knowledge. It was the onset of the second world war that shut down idealists and emphasized realist thought. Idealism lost its relevance when people realized war was still occurring within this optimistic mindset. Realism became the pessimistic war time reality. Realists believe in subjectivity and reason (Morgenthau, 2006). If idealists were correct in their description of human nature then the second world war could not have possibly occurred, especially to the inhumane degree that it did. Realists believe that human nature is doomed to be evil. They illuminate the dominant consistency of opposing interests, competition, conflict, and war throughout history. Realists believe that the central law ruling society is chaos. Humans are ultimately seeking power and will do whatever they can to achieve it. Realists believe that three principles guide humanity: statism, survival, and self help (Knight & Keating, 2010). Humanity is self-interested and this only gets stronger within communities. The priority is always to help survival and advancement of one's state at any cost. By writing about how the social world was ultimately pessimistic, people could better understand and deal with their reality of living in a constant state of war. The only solution of war for a realist is to achieve balance of power. This has been done but ultimately power is a fluid concept and a consistent balance is unattainable and unrealistic. Therefore, we must move to other solutions.

Given realists narrative, idealism could not possibly be an accurate ideology as is evident with the onset of a second hot world war, and the following forty-five years of cold war. Though, if we were to consider the presence of war as a mistake in a longer lasting peaceful society then it would make sense in reference to a phrase we all know well: “practice makes perfect.” In our first years of practicing idealism, it only makes sense that there will be mishaps along the way. We are talking about a global school of thought which is huge, allowing for its impending mistakes to, as well, be massive in scale. Likewise, there is no current global governance so it only makes sense that things may get out of hand, especially with the presence of a nuclear scale arms race. Idealism thrives with a just legal system in place and in order to effectively judge the ideology, all characteristics must be present (Knight & Keating, 2010). Similarly, idealists believe that war is due to societies clashing and only escalates due to arms races, ignorance, pride, or selfishness. Global governance has the ability to constrain these emotions and provide deterrence from states acting on them. The idea that idealism is unrealizable is based on the fact that in the first attempt, it was not successful. That and the truth realists claim which names humans as strictly self-interested and chaotic. Tensions were still high at the end of the first world war, deeming the second one inevitable. If humans were innately anarchic as realists suggest then history would unlikely hold the capacity for a moment of peace. That is not the case. In reality, peace and cooperation are often present to some degree in international politics. States don’t desire war for the same reasons now as they did in history. As much as realism may help us come to terms with and understand why certain things happened the way they did, idealism is the ideology that will enable us to construct a better future. Recognizing the ability to change and determining the means to achieve such change is vital before we end up in another

world war from lack of addressing global issues as a united nation. The reconstruction of our social world is ultimately what will allow the world to reach globality in a relatively peaceful manner.

International politics is ultimately about perspective (Crawford, 2005). It is sustained by multiple intellectual contributions and globally shared education. Every nation will have different needs and limits. Globalization thrives on cooperation just as a global nation does. It is well known that a global institution is needed to deal with all things international due to the current trend of globalization. This institution will be what overlooks sovereign states in order to maintain a peaceful globality. It should not be used as a means of restricting sovereign states but instead enable them to thrive on their own while presenting a rational limit on their actions and guaranteed international justice and protection. Such as we, individuals, conscript ourselves into society and unofficially agree to follow the just principles that being here entail, the international world must allow for certain principles to be instilled among every nation for the betterment of society as a whole. The nuclear arms race of the past has deemed any future war potentially life ending for all of us. Realism will only recognize the nuclear apocalypse and shame humanity for putting the world in this situation while idealism will construct our current social world, doing whatever is necessary to achieve a peaceful, global future (Armstrong, 2006). Idealism recognizes the cooperative potential of humanity and the global society as a whole. Realism just doesn't believe that that is possible and since nuclear weapons are relatively new, there is no historical way for them to reflect on and use for our current situation. Idealists believe heavily in the presence of a just law system to overlook the only warlike characteristic of humans: society.

Similarly, this ideology believes in the ability of media to manipulate public opinion and can use this to its optimistic advantage. Instead of convincing troops that intervention in Vietnam was necessary in 1975, media can relay education for maintaining a rational and moral political order under just principles. Raising standards for education will ultimately result in the upkeep of social institutions to maintain public services to ensure any depraved individuals or groups are addressed and removed as a threat using limited force. Idealism recognizes the bad but believes in the good, just as we all should do in order to achieve it.

Idealism and realism are both extremely beneficial ideologies for international politics. Together, they describe the evolution of thought and reasoning within our current world. They outline the perceptions of individuals, communities, and the global world as a whole. Idealism is an optimistic, forward-looking practice. Realism is easily quite the opposite, pessimistically judging our history and deeming our future constrained by it. While both have clear benefits to helping construct our social world and perceptions of it, only one stands to be prioritized as most valuable. Idealism holds the most value to international politics as we know it. Its influence will continue to justify this fact. It has lasted this long among international politics for reasons other than a good history lesson. Idealism is undoubtedly an effective ideology for shaping our globalized political future.

## References

Armstrong, Peter. "Ideology and the grammar of idealism: The Caterpillar controversy revisited." *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 17, no. 5 (2006): 529-548.

Bell, Duncan. "Political realism and international relations." *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 2 (2017): e12403.

Crawford, Robert MA. *Idealism and realism in international relations*. Routledge, 2005.

Guyer, Paul, and Rolf-Peter Horstmann. "Idealism." (2015).

Knight, A. W., & Keating, T. (2010). Chapter 1: Making Sense of Interesting and Global Politics: Contesting Concepts, Theories, Approaches. *Global Politics* (pp. 20-33). Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.  
(Armstrong, 2006).

Morgenthau, Hans J. "Six principles of political realism." *Classic Readings of International Relations* (2006): 34-38.