

Notes on Jeffery Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?”

Realism is in trouble, and the enemy is within. In attempts to address anomalies, its proponents have in fact made it theoretically less determinate, less coherent, and less distinct. They advance the very causal claims that realism traditionally rejects. These secondary factors (state preferences, beliefs, and international institutions) are often treated as more important even than power.

This “minimal realism” is left with only two core assumptions – anarchy and rationality. Thus any rational influence on state behavior is now acceptable. The fact that minimal realists, using these, subsume the explanations of other paradigms is hidden by the fact that they test their new midrange theories are generally tested only against other forms of realism.

Well-developed paradigms are important for “developing coherent explanations, structuring social scientific debates, considering a full range of explanatory options, defining the scope of particular claims understanding how different theories and hypotheses relate to one another, and clarifying the implications of specific findings.” (8).

A paradigm must be coherent and distinctive in order to be conceptually productive.

Coherence means that a paradigm does not include internal logical contradictions that allow for the derivation of contradictory conclusions. Theories may use auxiliary assumptions but, they should not rely heavily on unconnected assumptions, let alone contradictory assumptions.

Distinctiveness means that a paradigm must be clearly differentiated from its alternatives.

Legro and Moravcsik identify three paradigms competing with realism:

Institutionalism, which stresses the role of international institutions, norms, and information.

Liberalism, which stresses the role of exogenous variation in state preferences.

The epistemic paradigm, which stresses the role of collective beliefs and ideas which states use to calculate how to achieve their underlying goals.

In order to give realism the coherence and distinctiveness that has been lacking, Legro and Moravcsik are kind enough to put forward three core assumptions for a reformulated realism.

1. Actors are rational, unitary political units in anarchy.
2. State preferences are made up of fixed and uniformly conflictual goals. This turns interstate politics into a continual bargaining game over the distribution of scarce resources. This, they note, does allow for a wide variation in theories and outcomes, and does allow for defensive realism.
3. This bargaining is primarily determined by the distribution of material capabilities.

At its worst (e.g. Joseph Grieco) minimal realism holds that its distinctiveness lies solely in the assumption of rational actors in an anarchic setting. Unfortunately, most paradigms share these assumptions. Also, because they are constant, these factors do little to explain variation in states behavior.

Some other minimal realists add the assumptions that states seek to realize fixed preferences

ranging from maintaining independence and territorial integrity to expanding into the international environment. Still, however, virtually everyone agrees with these, not only realists.

Basing their realism on such trivial assumptions, supposed realists degenerate into each of the three other paradigms

Liberalism: Many “realists” reject the notion that preferences are fixed, and bring in exogenous variation in domestic factor causing preference formation. Thus they enter the liberals territory. This sin has been committed by Jack Snyder, Grieco, Fareed Zakaria, Randall Schweller and Stephen Van Evera.

Epistemic theory: Some realists have shifted from focusing on variation in objective power to variation in beliefs and perceptions of power. If these regularly differ considerably from actual power, then power is at best one of multiple factors in the equation. The “blowback” of the myths in Snyder and Van Evera also drift toward epistemic theory. The highlighted criminals of this section, however, are Stephen Walt (who lets perception reign in his balance-of-threat) and William Wohlforth (who sees changing perceptions of power as key to the end of the Cold War).

Institutionalism: Some realists have even embraced the “legalism” that has so long drawn realist scorn. In so doing, they sometimes actually make institutions out to be stronger than institutionalists would usually claim, without putting forward a clear model of how institutions work. This is the sin of Grieco (working on the EMU) and Charles Glaser (working on signaling and arms control).

Why Reformulate realism?

The above-trashed works do “make innovative and valuable contributions to the scholarly understanding of world politics, particularly at the level of midrange propositions” (45) (thanks for stopping by, sorry you didn’t win, but here is your cheese-of-the-month club door prize). Because of sloppy and incomplete theories, however, they cannot tell us much broadly about the effect of different factors in world politics.

By sticking to the reformulated realism would “facilitate more decisive tests among existing theories, define more sharply the empirical domain of realist theory, and provide a superior foundation for multicausal synthesis between realism and other theories.

Refocusing tests would allow for better assessments of which individual factor have what effect in given areas. The sloppier above theories could not always distinguish effects of material factors from those of the other factors they assessed.

Specifying the proper domain of realism will enable us to know when it is appropriate to apply it and when it is not. It should not be uniformly applied as the analytically prior theory, as many realists (and some non-realists) claim. Realist claims only should be used when states are motivated by strong underlying conflicts in preferences, or when the cost of coercion is low enough to be cost-effective.

The authors also believe that multicausal syntheses must be created, but first clear first-order theories must be created so that they can be synthesized. Otherwise one just encourages ad hoc argumentation and obscures the meaning of empirical tests.

Responses to Legro and Moravcsik:

Peter Feaver

Basically, Feaver says that Legro and Moravcsik got realism wrong by focusing on the determinants of behavior and not the consequences. Realists, says Feaver, believe that states will act based on a wide range of non-realist motivations, like ideology and domestic preferences. What realism says is that states that do conform to realist prescriptions will be better off than those that do not. The real problem with realist theory is not that it allows for other causes of state behavior, but that it has not yet adequately explained the causal mechanism of “system constraints” or “system punishment.” They also must address why democracies have seemed to do better than other states in international affairs, (if this is in fact the case) and if democracies are able to flout the rules and are doing so, under what circumstances realist assumptions hold.

Gunther Hellmann

The above article can be seen in criticized ways

1. As a rhetorical attempt by a liberal and an epistemicist to delineate the proper bounds of realism, and thus claim more theoretical ground for themselves. There are, in fact, no agreed upon paradigms. Realism, like liberalism, simply has different narratives or traditions.
2. The positions regarding the philosophy of science taken by Legro and Moravcsik are not universally agreed upon. The distinction between first and second order theories may be unclear and useless. Nor is the clear delineation of paradigms necessary for synthesis. In fact this is not how people think or speak. Any separation of the discipline into distinct camps will be largely subjective and arbitrary, and will not be useful.

Randall Schweller

The most basic realist proposition is that states need to recognize and respond to shifts in relative power, and that things tend to go wrong when they ignore power realities. Recent realist work is faithful to this proposition, in part because it does not advance uncausal explanations of complex phenomena.

L&M want to stack the game against realism. They take a small subset of realism (basically their reading of Waltz) as determinate of the paradigm, and want to enforce this strictly. They then call for the testing of these theories. This is basically equivalent to cutting off a competitor's legs, the calling for a race.

Interestingly, they also have largely recast liberalism from its traditional position (as idealism) and in fact appropriated some traditionally realist ground. In the end, however, this debate is about semantics and is not important. If realists are really non-realists in disguise, they are still producing valuable work, and work which those who claim these titles seem not to be producing.

Jeffrey Taliaferro

There are four main problems with L&M's typology:

1. Their charges against contemporary realism contradict their own criteria for conceptually productive paradigms. While they charge contemporary realists with appealing to the intellectual history of realism, while they themselves do so in attacking contemporary realism for deviating from the canon of Carr, Morgenthau, and Waltz.
2. They claim greater coherence for their paradigms than they have. None meet meet Lakatos's criteria for coherent and distinct research programs.
3. The four part division of international relations theory ignores the often ambiguous divisions between the different research traditions (e.g. between "liberalism" and "neoliberal institutionalism").
4. The "epistemic paradigm" is not a coherent research program in any way, shape, or form. It is used as a catch-all for everything that does not fit into the other three categories.

Contemporary realism does set a baseline of expected outcomes – they will agree with relative distribution of material resources. The use of beliefs is not heretical. In fact, a mechanism by which explanatory variables are translated into policy is necessary, and does not make the theories non-realist.

The evaluation by L&M does nothing to stimulate productive dialogue, their reformulation does not generate testable hypotheses, and their critique is unlikely to stimulate productive research.

William C. Wohlforth

L&M face a contradiction between their purposes of setting forth their vision for the field of international relations, and assessing a large body of scholarship. This makes it hard to tell "where the advocacy ends and the detached appraisal begins" (183). They create a novel division of the field into four paradigms, and act as though this were established. In fact, they "recast the entire field of international relations, invented two paradigms [epistemic and liberal], completely reformulated two others, either expelled Waltz's theory from the realist corpus or else rewritten it, and rendered a stern judgement of 'degeneration' on a large body of scholarship" (183).

Wohlforth also says that they were wrong about his work. He did not emphasize perceptions of power over actual power. Rather he showed that perceptions of power are usually quite accurate – more so, often, than the measure used by political scientists. While L&M were correct in noting that power is hard to measure, and that this is a problem of many realist theories, they did not note that preferences and beliefs are equally hard to measure. Further, while they act as though some epistemic theory exists that could have explained this situation better than Wohlforth's no such theory exists.

Response by Legro and Moravcsik

One might have expected at least two responses that were not heard (either here or elsewhere) to

this article:

1. “a demonstration that recent midrange empirical propositions advanced by self-styled realists do differ systematically from midrange causal claims based on other paradigms.”
2. “a proposal of alternative core realist assumptions that do unambiguously distinguish realist empirical arguments from the liberal, institutionalist, and epistemic alternatives” (185).

Instead, the primary critique comes based on intellectual history and the philosophy of science. They assert that it does not matter if the paradigm is indistinct or incoherent, and thus propose two basic challenges:

1. L&M’s paradigmatic reformulation is too narrow and thus excludes most theorists, including noted realists.
2. Paradigms are just arbitrary labels without coherent foundations, and therefore are exempt from conceptual criticism.

If these are true, say the detractors, wouldn’t be better just to use established, if incoherent, labels rather than instituting hard core assumptions?

L&M defend their critiques of Schweller and Wohlforth. To Feaver they respond that consequentialist realism may be grand, but it is not what the theorists criticized are doing. They are clearly trying to explain state behavior. Feaver’s idea might thus be used in a multicausal synthesis, in which non-realist theories were used to explain variations from expected behavior and results.

Returning to the two big above critiques:

1. The claim that L&M’s reformulation will exclude most theorists misses the point. They do not object to people using different theories, but only to them calling the combination of all theories used an extension of realism. Instead, they should clearly state which parts of these theories are realist, and which are not (as Carr, Aron, Morgenthau, Waltz, Jervis, Gilpin, and Keohane all do).
2. L&M disagree with the attack on paradigms in general, and the desire to use accepted but indistinct names for them when they are used, for three reasons:
 - a. Intellectual history is a poor standard against which to judge paradigmatic consistency.
 - b. reliance on the authority of intellectual history creates contradictions. Either realists must resolve their contradictions in favor of coherence, or otherwise justify their use of social scientific concepts like paradigm, theory, testing, etc.
 - c. reliance on intellectual history leaves the critics without the means of structuring an academic debate. Schweller and Taliaferro simply subsume anything with a realist portion into realism, while Hellmann hints at going fully relativist, then comes back to say that scholars could agree to classify theories into intersubjectively distinguishable groups, which look much like paradigms.

What is needed, but not carried out is a discussion of what realism is and what it is not.