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IR Working Group 3 December 1999

Summary of "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" by Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik
International Security, vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5-55.

Realists tend to pride themselves upon the parsimony of their theories, but in "Is Anybody Still a Realist," Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik argue that realists have abandoned the elegance of explanations based on the distribution of material resources. Instead, many realists have attempted to subsume their critics by looking to changes in state preferences, beliefs and international institutions as explanations for state behavior, and even privileging these explanations over material power. Legro and Moravcsik describe the rise of a "minimal" realism, based on assumptions of anarchy and rationality, and reliant upon explanations outside of realism. They assert that realism, properly constructed, ought to stack up distinctively against three alternative paradigms in particular: the institutionalist, liberal and epistemic paradigms.

In turn, they discuss the three core assumptions that unify realist thinkers. The first assumption is about the rational and unitary nature of political actors (for our purposes, states), who pursue goals in anarchy. Rationality in their characterization implies the choice of the most efficient means to designated ends, in the face of uncertainty and incomplete information. The second assumption is that states have fixed and uniformly conflicting goals. This is your standard picture of black balls competing in a zero-sum environment over scarce goods. According to Legro and Moravcsik, this does not exclude bargaining and positive-sum interactions, although realism may only be relevant to the distributive aspects of such situations. Legro and Moravcsik also emphasize that conflicting preferences do not necessarily imply conflicting state policies or strategies, and that the realists see "the fundamental problem of statecraft" as "manag[ing] conflict in a world where state interests are fundamentally opposed," (16). The third core assumption of realism, which truly marks off realism from other paradigms, is that outcomes in international relations are a function of "the relative cost of threats and inducements, which is directly proportional to the distribution of material resources," (17).

Having discussed what they believe realism should be about, Legro and Moravcsik cast aspersions on recent work that calls itself realist, especially targeting "defensive" and "neoclassical" realists. They begin by discussing minimal realists, including Joseph Grieco, who claim that assumptions of rationality and anarchy are enough to derive state interests in maximizing relative gains in the realms of security and autonomy and the ability of the state to do so via material power. Legro and Moravcsik claim that rationality and anarchy do not distinguish realism from other paradigms, and that relative-gains-seeking behavior in a competition for goods on the basis of material power do not necessarily follow from the two assumptions. Therefore, other realists have added to minimalist assumptions. Most commonly, states fall into a range of fixed preferences that range from defense of territorial integrity and political independence to the expansion of political influence over the international environment (shorthand for the former end is "security," while shorthand for the latter end is "power"). Additionally, the threat and use of force are two primary strategies. But even these extensions do not tell us anything about how international conflicts are resolved, and why they arise in the first place. Legro and Moravcsik tell us that the recent realist work attempting to answer these questions has increasingly resorted to explanations based in liberal, epistemic and institutionalist theories.

For instance, realists have made much of the varying preferences among states for hostile (revisionist) and status quo behavior. According to Legro and Moravcsik, identifying variation in these preferences forces scholars to treat preferences as a dependent variable—this is already a departure from the realist assumption of fixed preferences. Moreover, explanations for this variation draw upon state-society relations, culture, and various other non-realist traditions of thought. To make their case, Legro and Moravcsik sample recent realist work. They begin with Jack Snyder, whose explanation for overexpansionist behavior is, in their view, rooted in domestic politics. Next, they turn to Joseph Grieco, who treats concerns for relative gains as variable on the basis of history, the other state's reputation for exploitation, the relationship with the other state, and other factors. Like defensive realists who treat preferences as variable, neo-classical realists (NCRs) are also interested in the variation between states in their tendency towards status quo and revisionist behavior. Legro and Moravcsik argue that this consigns NCRs to liberal discussions of domestic politics, ideas, and interests. Moravcsik turns to his friend Fareed Zakaria, who explains varying degrees of expansionist behavior in part on the state's ability to extract resources from society. Next, Legro and Moravcsik consider Randall Schweller's explanation of changing state behavior on the changes in state preferences, to which a state adjusts its power. Finally, they critique Stephen Van Evera's story of varying preferences because it is rooted in the actions of elites, bureaucracies, militarism and nationalism. In other words, while realists are supposed to (according to Legro and Moravcsik) hold state preferences to be fixed and exogenous,

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NCRs and defensive realists vary state preferences on axes of domestic politics, structures and actors. They thereby deprive realism of the parsimonious elegance that also distinguishes it from other paradigms of international relations.

Also depriving realism of its parsimonious elegance are the middle range realists who underscore the importance of beliefs and perceptions of power (in the tradition of the epistemic paradigm), rather than objective power. Once objective power as an explanation for state behavior becomes captive to perceptions, scholars turn increasingly to epistemic, institutional, and liberal paradigms. For example, Stephen Walt's well-known "balance-of-threat" theory relied on state perceptions of others' intentions, a move which, according to Legro and Moravcsik, excludes very little as an explanation for rational balancing. Additionally, Walt's examination of the causes of variation in perception reflected preferences or strategic beliefs and perceptions, both of which are not a part of the realist paradigm. William H. Wohlforth argues in a similar vein that perceptions of power shape state behavior. Legro and Moravcsik critique the four factors that Wohlforth identifies as causes for the "timing of the sudden Soviet perception of decline in the late 1980s that, in his view, brought the Cold War to an end," (39). Legro and Moravcsik cast the four factors, that is, the scientific-technical revolution, a shift in perceptions and ideas of the Soviets and Americans, and the symbolic impact of the revolutions in Eastern Europe, as various forms of non-realist approaches.

Some recent realist work has apparently also gone institutionalist on us. Joseph Grieco, for example, characterizes the European Monetary Union (EMU) as an instrumental use of an institution by a coalition of weak states to transfer power. In other words, states apparently disadvantaged in the distribution of power were able to use an institution to transform the distribution of power. The distribution of power becomes, in Grieco's story, variable in a way that Legro and Moravcsik's realism would not admit. Charles Glaser goes even further in describing institutions as a means of alleviating misperceptions about the preferences of other states—he draws on functional theories of international institutions, and casts them as consistent with realism, because he does not violate the assumptions of egoism and anarchy. Legro and Moravcsik believe that Glaser has simply remade Keohane's functional argument and called it realist, and question what has been gained by such an endeavor.

Having made their case that realism has degenerated, Legro and Moravcsik defend their position that distinguishable paradigms are meaningful. Essentially, they argue for a more conscientious organization of IR debates along the assumptions made and hypotheses generated, in an effort to avoid confusion due to mislabelling. Legro and Moravcsik contend that the empirical research can be fruitfully aimed at distinguishing between the causal importance of "the distribution of material resources, the distribution of preferences, the distribution of beliefs, and the distribution of information," which line up more or less with the realist, liberal, epistemic and institutional paradigms, respectively. This would help clarify explanations of imperialism, alliances, cooperation, war and peace, and hegemony. Legro and Moravcsik also urge the delimitation of realism to "circumstances in which states are motivated by strong and symmetrical underlying conflicts in preferences—overlapping territorial, economic, or ideological claims—or situations where the cost of coercion is so low (at least to one party) that its cost-effective use is feasible," (49).

Of course, Legro and Moravcsik are at pains to assure everyone that they think realism is important to the study of international relations, and thereby present their characterization of the complementarities among paradigms. Specifically, preference and belief formation is more the locus of epistemic and liberal explanations, whereas the logic of strategic interaction among states is more the realm of realist and institutional explanations. Research done in this vein will naturally require greater knowledge of the specifics of a particular situation. It is in the empirical testing that realism has often come up short, but Legro and Moravcsik argue that this is no justification to re-cast international relations as a debate between realists and idealists. Naturally, Legro and Moravcsik prefer the rise of healthy debates among various rational theoretical strands—liberal, epistemic, institutionalist, and, of course, realist paradigms.