



Cooperation, anarchy and interdependence

The realist model

William Brown

Jef, can you outline for us what the key building blocks, what the core steps are in the realist argument about international order.

Jef Huysmans

There are three central building blocks to the realist understanding of international order and international politics. It starts from the idea that, unlike states where you have a sovereign and a rule of law which can be imposed by police, the government, the military, or whomever so there's a strong hierarchy, in the international system there is no world government, there is no-one basically who can impose globally and legitimately a rule of law or make sure that when states don't operate according to the rules that have been agreed, for example, in the WTO, that they will be sanctioned and therefore have to obey the rules. The idea behind this is that the international system is anarchical, it's an anarchy, it's a horizontal system that has no hierarchy, at least not a top power. Now one of the consequences is if you don't have anyone, any state or any big organisation that will look after the interests of all the people and of all the states involved, that you have to look after yourself, therefore, in direct implication which is still part of the first building block, a direct implication of anarchy is that self-preservation is the over-riding goal. So states can do all kinds of things but ultimately they will calculate always whether they can survive in the world as it exists. So that's the first building block which arises from anarchy. Now this first building block has another implication which leads me to the second building block, which is what can a state do in a world of anarchy when there's no-one who can actually impose a rule of law or co-operation for that matter. They can't really specialise, like domestically you could have firms specialising in doing economic benefits and playing the market game, artists doing art, priests doing religion. You can't do that as a state because you become dependent. If you would specialise in economics you would become dependent for your military protection on another state. What if this state suddenly decides to turn against you? There's no fall back option but yourself. Therefore the second building block implies that you can't specialise which one calls that states in more technical terms are functionally not differentiated from one another. They are basically the same units. They do the same kinds of things which ultimately means they do all kinds of things including economics, kinds of art, moral discourses, protecting values etc, but they have to do all of this so they can't differentiate, so that's the second building block. Now out of these two, what that means is that what centrally differentiates states is their power, that's why it's so important in the sceptical view to see that you've got weak states and strong states and the strong will have a capacity to control the weak to some extent. What you then get is that international politics differs or is often identified according to the number of great powers you have in it, for example, multi-polar system which has at least five or more great powers in it. A bi-polar system with two or a uni-polar system so that's the third building block; it's power as capacity that differentiates states.

William Brown

Just to recap: that for realists the system as a whole is anarchic because there is no world government, there are multiple sovereigns. In Chapter 5 the analogy is made with Hobbes's idea of a state of nature, internationally we'll have an international state of nature with competing sovereigns. Secondly because of that, states have to rely on their own resources to secure their own survival and so they all do similar things. They all seek to defend themselves and their own futures. Thirdly, therefore, what differentiates states is their power in relation to each other. What are the consequences then for understanding, particularly the potential for cooperation internationally? What follows on from these building blocks?

Jef Huysmans

It has very important consequences, for example, it means that cooperation always has to be limited even in a big strong organisation with a long history like the WTO because you can't create what's called dependencies. You can't, even if you see there's benefits coming out of participating in the WTO, you can't become dependent upon other countries. For example, if you were to open your borders for agricultural import and export there are some countries who actually are not competitive at all in the global market. Now that would be very good to some extent if they could get cheaper food, that could be good for consumers and in a certain way you could say, therefore, that nationally there is more money in the system to do other kinds of things, for example, to spend on defence. But what happens if you end up in a war? You rely on food supplies coming from far away possibly so you easily end up with very vulnerable food supplies and therefore a high risk of famine which then demoralises your population, therefore you've got all kinds of spin-offs in terms of weakness. So you can't afford to create dependencies. That limits considerably the scope of cooperation. The other element that limits it is that states, or regional blocks in this case, sometimes like the European Union, they are not calculating primarily their benefits from cooperation in terms of what they would gain, but how much they would gain in comparison to their major competitors, because what matters is not how much richer I become as a state, what matters is how much richer I become as a state compared to you, because then I'm more powerful, can translate to military power, economic power and so on.

William Brown

So from these limited building blocks the three points you outlined before, there are actually far-reaching claims made about the expectations of what will happen in the international system and, in particular, that cooperation internationally between states will be limited; firstly by their fear of dependence on others, of becoming vulnerable to others, particularly in matters that may affect their future survival and, secondly that cooperation would be limited because they are worried primarily about relative gains, about how they fare in comparison to their main rivals and that they won't engage in cooperation that weakens significantly their relative position compared to other powers. So, taken as a whole, what we have presented in the realist model is a very neat and quite constrained view of the international order that, although it starts from limited beginnings, makes quite far-reaching claims about what we can expect internationally.