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A Neuro-Philosophy Of Global Order: The Case for Symbiotic Realism, Multi-Sum Security and Just Power

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International Relations (IR) developed as a distinct discipline after World War II but its theoretical and philosophical foundations predate the 20th century. During the Cold War, IR studied relations between states, competition, and power, and it remained closely attached (if not subservient) to the interests of the superpowers locked in a cold confrontation.

The dominant theory of IR in this long interval was Realism, although, conventionally, the story of the IR discipline opposes two main theoretical approaches, Realism and Idealism. Later on, the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of other approaches such as neo-realism, Liberalism, Cosmopolitanism, Constructivism and some Marxist interpretations of global politics.

To introduce a "neuro-philosophy of IR", I wish to briefly provide a background of the discipline prior to this. The IR debate was from its earliest days tightly weaved into philosophies of human nature.

Classical Realism, the most influential IR paradigm, is rooted in a tragic understanding of politics and human nature and is associated with the writings of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Hans J. Morgenthau. The view of human nature shared by Classical Realists is that humans are essentially selfish, competitive and easily turned against each other – and by analogy, states, which are a reflection of the character and behavior of men, are also competitive and power-driven. The *animus dominandi* that defined humans equally defined states. As Lebow puts it: for Classical Realists, "communal bonds are fragile and easily undermined by the unrestrained pursuit of unilateral advantage by individuals, factions and states", and therefore, like Greek tragedians, Realists tend to see history as cyclical: time and again, efforts to build peace and escape fear-driven, state-of-nature situations can be promising temporarily, but eventually will succumb to the pressures from destabilizing actors who seek power, and who do not wish to accept that their power be constrained by norms.

In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes elaborated on his theory of human nature, which was driven by instincts and passions, a pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. And yet, man was also aware of his own death and aware of his own precariousness in the state of nature, where everyone was profoundly selfish and self-motivated. For Classical Realists, these pessimistic features of human nature were mirrored in the character of states, which were also self-interested, seeking survival, resources and power. The main difference was that while man's destructive passions could be contained by the

creation of the state, which established order and thus an end to the nasty unpredictability of the state of nature, the global system lacked an overarching authority, a Leviathan of its own, and was condemned to anarchy.

The main contrasting theory to Realism, Idealism, harbored more optimistic views of human nature but Idealism remained a more marginal voice in IR, lacking an agreed ontology.

In fact, rather than a theory, idealism was first a foreign policy *approach*during the interwar years and had an early advocate in President Woodrow Wilson. With his Fourteen Points (1918), he hoped to advance world peace and believed that a country should pursue a foreign policy that reflects its philosophy of internal government. The intellectual origins of Idealism can be traced to Kantian moral philosophy and Kant's "kingdom of ends" where reason and the moral progress achieved by humanity would allow all to have their intrinsic worth recognized. Idealism championed the notion that human beings had the power to change any world political arrangements for the better – a belief that often easily disregarded the fragility of the international order.

In the second half of the Cold War, the IR debate became more animated by Marxist theories, such as the world-system theory or, less radical in substance, Moral Cosmopolitanism, which advocated for a more just and inclusive global system, focused on human dignity and global distributive justice.

The end of the Cold War made Classical Realism appear obsolete. Transnational and unconventional risks were brought to the forefront – in a move away from state-centrism. Simultaneously, following years of Cold War uncertainty, the new era was received with some optimism and hope for a more collaborative global community. The focus of Realism on states, wars, alliances and balance of power appeared out of touch with the realities of a global scene that was transforming. In *Politics as Usual*, German philosopher Thomas Pogge urged for greater focus on global justice as finally, "poverty has overtaken war as the greatest source of human misery".

However, dismissing great power politics and the role of the state is very dangerous. Certainly, Realism can be blamed for a reductionist view of human nature and international conflict, but reality is punctuated with examples that prove the salience of geopolitics even in the digital, hyper-connected age we live in. Yet, does this re-validate Classical Realism?

Back to human nature

To theorize on IR in our contemporary times, I propose to turn to human nature, as Classical Realists did, but to do so by harnessing evidence from neuroscience. Based on these neurophilosophical insights, I propose three paradigms to explain and guide the IR debate and global governance.

A few words on the neurophilosophy of IR. Neurophilosophy is an interdisciplinary field that connects findings from neuroscience and philosophy. The most fundamental gap in the Realist account of human nature rests with the unverified and speculative methods to theorize on human nature and, from there on, on states, war and peace. Over the past decades, neuroscience has provided insights into the human brain, and the intricate workings of neurochemistry and brain plasticity. As tools such as the fMRI technique emerged and perfected, our understanding of human nature reached new frontiers. In many instances, neuroscience-based findings simply overturned long-held beliefs about human nature. (In the second post of my series, I explained this in greater detail.)

For example, emotionality is a defining element in decision-making, and our amygdala (the most researched organ in emotional processing) is profoundly involved in learning, memory-formation and other cognitive processes. The human experiences is intimately linked to and mediated by emotionality and we are far more emotional than rational. As a result, our morality and our 'virtues' are also vulnerable to circumstances. Because our brains are neurochemically impacted by everything in our environment, our moral compass is fragile and it will shift according to conditions around us. A fear-laden, stressful environment will alter the brain and, consequently, will bear on our decision-taking abilities. Chronic stress has been shown to lead to neural atrophy in the medial prefrontal cortex and the dorsal striatum, which impacts how we set goals and leads to a preference for short-term, immediate needs, as opposed to thinking about long-term goals and gratification. Other studies also showed a clear correlation between levels of stress and egocentric moral decisions.

Based on findings from neuroscience, I previously proposed a theory of human nature as emotional, amoral and egoistic. Human nature is overwhelmingly driven by emotions – as briefly described above. We are also amoral, in the sense that we born neither immoral (as Realists would suggest), nor innately moral (as more optimistic Idealists believe), but rather as a *predisposed blank slate*. We are only predisposed in a minimalistic sense, which is in our drive for survival – a basic form of egoism.

This neurophilosophical account of human nature as emotional, amoral and egoistic provides a starting point for conceptualizing governance and international relations.

Symbiotic Realism

The Realists *are* right to describe conflict as a reflection of the competitive and dominating nature of man but the tenets of Realism must be fundamentally revisited in light of the more complex picture of human nature provided by neuroscience. Realists do not address the many instances when conflict is less 'rational', and they would have a hard time accepting the transformative power of global interdependencies on national security doctrines (see the case of the US-China symbiotic relation).

To make sense of these factors, I proposed a more comprehensive theory for understanding international relations in the 21st century, called Symbiotic Realism. This theory shares with Realism the view that human nature must be at the center of theorizing about the state and the global system, but it departs from Realism in its definition of human nature. Symbiotic Realism provides a framework to understanding the global system and is premised on four main elements: 1. a neurophilosophical approach to human nature, 2. global anarchy – a persistent reality of the international system, which in our century simultaneously co-exists with 3. unprecedented interdependence and 4. instant connectivity. Furthermore, Symbiotic Realism stresses the critical importance of absolute gains, where win-win situations are possible. This is in contrast to the notion of relative gains, which is related to zero-sum games, and it is premised on the notion of gains at the expensive of others.

Multi-Sum Security

Zero-sum games, the mainstay of politics according to Realists, are more difficult and counter-productive today simply because national (military) security is only one element of state security. Simply put, in a globalized world, states must think about preserving *global* security not only fulfilling their national security goals. The multi-sum security principle provides a more comprehensive definition of security:

"In a globalized world, security can no longer be thought of as a zero-sum game involving states alone. Global security, instead, has five dimensions that include human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural security, and therefore, global security and the security of any state or culture cannot be achieved without good governance at all levels that guarantees security through justice for all individuals, states and cultures."

This is not optimistic, but in fact the most pragmatic approach for long-term stability in the global system.

Just Power

This result has consequences for our understanding of power in international relations. According to the Realist dogma, power was a relation of subordination or hierarchical ordering. Robert Dahlsynthesized this back in 1957 when he wrote that power meant, in essence, that *A* could influence *B* to do something that *B* would otherwise not do. Realism was for a long time preoccupied with hard power, which measures power by material resources, but in the 1990s, a new concept emerged in US: soft power – not in opposition but complementary to hard power. Soft power was about less tangible factors, such as power of attractiveness, cultural influence, diplomacy and perceived legitimacy. Later, in a bipartisan report, the term "smart power" was suggested as an appropriate approach for American foreign policy, which would integrate both hard and soft elements. The problem is that these definitions of power do not sufficiently take into account the agency of others. It is not enough that power is exercised smartly if it is not committed to justice. *Just Power* integrates considerations of fairness and respect for international law, as well as respect for the dignity of others, both at the individual and collective levels.

There is an element of eternal truth in the Realist analogy of the man-state, insofar as institutions and states are human enterprises, but that analogy lends itself to greater complexity. Indeed, what was previously held to be a definitive account of human nature has been overturned by evidence from neuroscience. States, like humans, are conditioned and change due to evolving circumstances. And just like with humans, where emotionality is pervasive in decision-making, states too are emotional actors insofar as they are defined and guided by numerous emotional motivators. Indeed, the assumption of 'reason' and rationality of states, which was at the foundation of Realism – and other approaches to IR – overstated the rational character of states. In neuroscientific terms, emotionality and rationality are less disconnected as, in reality, emotional processing in the brain is intimately linked to decision-making. The emotionality of statespervades state behavior and strategic choices. It is evident through distinct strategic cultures, which are reflections of national identity, collective history and geopolitical experiences, as well as other behavioral patterns (including habits) and emotions-filled policies (nationalism is an ideology of emotions and symbols). Symbiotic Realism thus expands the perspective on the 'rational' character of man and, by analogy, of states.

Symbiotic Realism accounts for the transformative power of global interdependencies and interconnectivity, even as states continue to interact in a context of anarchy. The traits of global anarchy have evolved as well; despite the absence of a global overarching authority, international law and normative regimes impose extensive obligations on states. Moreover, because the threats to a country and its population today rarely only come from another hostile country, states are compelled to take into account actors and issues far beyond the purview of their national borders, or which can be fixed by military means alone. That is why, any reductionist idea of power or zero-sum games are

ultimately counter-productive and politically costly in the long-term. As I wrote elsewhere, global security today has at least five dimensions: national security, human security, environmental security, transnational security and transcultural security – to ensure global security, we must look within and across states.

Of course, the era of *Realpolitik* is not behind us but exigencies for legitimacy and compliance with international law are far greater today than at any point in history. This has a bearing on what kind of leadership and power is most effective and enforceable. While power exercised without any consideration for law and the dignity of others can secure a quick win in the short term, it is only *Just Power* that guarantees greater acceptability in the long term. To any cynical, a consideration for justice may seem as naive but adding *Just* to *Power* does not weaken its force, it only strengthens its endurance.

Global security today is much more than the collective national interests of states and much more than a constant balancing of military power. Moving the IR debate forward in this century, human dignity, both individual and collective, must be placed at the center of governance because dignity is paramount to politics.

To conclude:

- Global security is much more than the collective national interests of states and has five dimensions.
- Individual and collective dignity are paramount.
- States can be emotional as well as rational.
- Realism is still relevant but a Symbiotic form (which stresses absolute gains) is less conflictual and more likely to sustainably serve the national interest in a connected and interdependent world.
- Zero-Sum paradigms are counter-productive, and must be replaced by Multi-Sum approaches.
- The power exercised by states (in order to be sustainable) must be "Just" as well as "Smart".

The next post will address the issue of global cultural understanding from a neurophilosophical perspective.

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