

Symbiotic Realism and just power

By Nayef Al-Rodhan, 28 April 2015

Four interlocking elements shape the global system: the *neurobiological substrates of human nature* (providing a more complex account of human nature), the persistence of *global anarchy*, which today coexists with conditions of *instant connectivity* and *interdependence*.



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In an era of widespread decentralization, formation of regional blocs, and popular uprisings the role of states will continue to evolve dramatically. While they will without doubt remain pivotal, their nature and the ways in which they deploy power are in a profound transition.

In parallel to these developments, the discipline of International Relations can now benefit from a more complex understanding of human nature than what was previously held as perennially true. The role of rationality and egoism, long touted by the Realist school as critical to our understanding of human and state behaviour has become subject to significant criticism.

Neuroscience has contributed largely to providing a more nuanced view of humans and their neurochemistry. More circumspect accounts of human nature show that emotionality in fact plays a much more prominent role than previously believed, which overturns the conception of the foundations for interstate relations. A strong case can be made for the emotionality of states alongside a greater appreciation for the role of emotions in individual thought. These conceptions substantially undermine classical Realism in which the structure of IR itself was taken to be both zero-sum and analyzable in terms of pure rational self-interest.

Alternatively, the theory of Symbiotic Realism adheres to our best neurobiologically-informed understanding of human nature, and offers the potential for a more collaborative conception of International Relations through the use of just power.

One important tenet of Symbiotic Realism is the acknowledgment that emotional vulnerabilities are shared by all parties, and that these can be orchestrated for good or for ill. While the human nature of classical Realism was fundamentally that of a pure rational egoist, Symbiotic Realism acknowledges the importance of symbiotic relationships in which both parties benefit from their willingness to interact cooperatively and compete in a non-conflictual way.

As such, Symbiotic Realism recognizes four interlocking elements which shape the global system: the *neurobiological substrates of human nature* (which provides a more complex account of human nature), the continuing persistence of *global anarchy*, which today coexists with conditions of *instant connectivity* and *interdependence*.

Emotionality, individuals, and states

Neuroscience and advanced brain-scanning technology has helped to elaborate our understanding of human nature in at least two important ways. The first is to lessen the role of reason in human decision-making, in large part by demonstrating the immensely important role of emotions. The second is to name and characterize aspects of the ego that do not manifest straightforwardly in terms of self-interest or power-seeking. With regard to the first of these, there is growing consensus in both neurological and psychological research that human beings have long overestimated the role of reason in their thoughts. Reason has an important role, but comes into play more rarely than is usually understood, and typically only after emotions have had their say.

The circumstances necessary for reason can best be realized where just power is consistently employed. The term “just power” is defined here as the exercise of power that respects human dignity and international norms, is savvy with regard to current global conditions, and protects the national interest. In these conditions, emotions will inevitably be present and have causal efficacy, but their effects will be accommodated rather than downplayed or ignored. Just power generates stability as well as a wider recognition of the equal availability and legitimacy of this stability.

This consideration does not override the basic tenet of international politics that self-interest is the fundamental attribute of human nature nor the argument about emotionality. This self-interest evolved according to selection pressures in precisely the same ways as all other features of human beings, and these attributes are marked by a strong inclination towards self-preservation. The fundamental nature of these emotions also highlights the importance of group inclusion and a narrative of identity in fully developed human beings. Therefore, these attributes might broadly be construed as egoist in the sense that they are required for individual human flourishing, yet they simultaneously indicate an irreducible interdependence of people which undermines a simplistic conception of self-interested rational actors.

Although states differ in many ways from individuals, it is worth noting that the decisions that inform interstate relations are ultimately in the hands of individual human beings, even in cases of collaborative decision-making. Evidence for the emotionality of states is ubiquitous if we realize that genuine existential threats to states are far less common than challenges to a state's self-conception. In contemporary events, it is often issues with a state's self-conception that results in conflict.

For example the desire for vengeance across generations is very difficult to characterize in terms of (purely) rational actors, but is sufficiently emotionally compelling to motivate some of the world's longest-standing and most intractable conflicts.

Modern states, power, and sustainability

The game-theoretic interpretation of Classical Realism was characterized by a structural situation in which each actor was forced to act egoistically in order to avoid being taken advantage of or defeated by free-riders. Typically these actors were seen as rational and egoistical states and the zero-sum assumption that underpinned this idea meant that one party's gain implied another's loss.

Symbiotic Realism also recognizes the inherent propensity of actors to be egoistic yet in a more accommodative manner as implies a wider appreciation for cultural synergy and recognizes the possibility to move beyond a zero-sum scenario.

Globalization has greatly increased the interdependence between actors in areas such as environmental integrity, the stability of financial markets or the control of nuclear proliferation. This theory remains realist in the sense that it acknowledges an important role for rational self-interest, but Symbiotic Realism is better attuned to the realities of an interdependent world and emphasizes that mutual benefits should be possible in collaborative circumstances.

Cultural borrowing has been a source of great gain for centuries and now the opportunities for such shared benefits are more readily available than ever. Despite the significantly anarchic circumstances of contemporary interstate relations, connectivity and increasing interdependence now ensure that more intercultural exchanges are inevitable, and that problems of governance will arise (and are already arising) that cannot be resolved unilaterally. To put this in a simple scenario: suppose that "A" discovers a highly advanced and effective technology for mitigating carbon pollution, while actor "B" but not "A" has the resources and infrastructure to implement this technology successfully. In an arrangement in which both A and B will have absolute gain—that is, both will gain more than they lose if the technology is shared, Symbiotic Realism can overcome the zero-sum limitations of Realism. The pressing policy objective for the future will thus be to create the conditions in which such good faith arrangements are encouraged and implemented.

Just power includes conceptions of "hard," "soft," and "smart" power, with additional parameters of respect for human dignity, and a basic guarantee of justice and compliance with international law. These are the necessary conditions for this good faith to become the norm between states. Power conscientiously exercised in this way provides assurances to all the parties in the system and to would-be collaborators that their contributions will not be used unfairly. In order to be sustainable in our radically interdependent world, uses of power must be demonstrably just, as the misuse of power quickly destabilizes interstate relations.

The recent reporting of extensive torture in the name of security, and the violation of international norms should be examined in exactly this light. Such actions radically undermine the possibility of good faith agreements in the international theatre.

While Realism asserts an almost exclusive focus on the balance of power with an implicit assumption about the malign intentions of other powers, Symbiotic Realism is more nuanced in this view and alludes to the inescapable interdependence now predominant in the international system. The new climate of international relations imposes new mechanisms of deploying power. Manifestations of power that uphold robust regard for human

dignity and respect for international norms enable the *sine qua non* trust that is necessary for mutually beneficial decisions. When such just power is exercised and recognized to be operational, the conditions are created for collaboration and the possibility of absolute gain among actors.

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