International political theory

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For more information, see: www.londoninternational.ac.uk
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

International political theory is about different ways in which the nature of international politics can be explained, understood and judged. In other words, we will be exploring different frameworks for thinking about why and how international politics works in the way that it does, but also for thinking about how international politics ought to be. As a topic it is focused on theoretical texts and concepts (rather than empirical, historical material). However, you will be expected to relate the ideas discussed in this subject to the empirical material about international relations which you studied in 11 Introduction to international relations, a prerequisite for this course. This subject develops, extends and deepens theoretical topics covered in 11 Introduction to international relations, Chapter 1, as well as introducing you to a range of new texts, theories and concepts. It will give you a broad knowledge of the tools used in studying international relations and of the debates between different theoretical perspectives. It will also improve your skills of academic reading, conceptual analysis and argument.

Aims

The aims and objectives of the course are to:

• give an account of different frameworks of thinking about international politics
• acquaint you with ideas, concepts and texts in international political theory, both classical and modern, in their historical context
• introduce you to issues of methodology in the study of international politics
• enable you to think critically about alternative ways of explaining, understanding and judging international politics in the early twenty-first century.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• demonstrate knowledge of different frameworks for thinking about international politics
• demonstrate knowledge of a range of ideas, concepts and texts in international political theory and the historical contexts in which they arose
• distinguish and evaluate different methodological approaches within the study of international politics
• evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of alternative ways of explaining, understanding and judging contemporary international politics.

Essential reading


Brown, Chris Understanding International Relations. (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001) second edition [ISBN 9780333948507 (hbk)/9780333948491 (pbk)].

Burchill, S., Andrew Linklater et al. Theories of International Relations. (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001) second edition [ISBN 9780333914182 (pbk)/9780333914175 (hbk)].


As a minimum you should buy copies of the books by Baylis and Smith and by Brown, Nardin and Rengger. You should consider also buying the other books on the 'Essential reading' list.

Detailed reading references in this subject guide refer to the editions of the set textbooks listed above. New editions of one or more of these textbooks may have been published by the time you study this course. You can use a more recent edition of any of the books; use the detailed chapter and section headings and the index to identify relevant readings. Also check the virtual learning environment (VLE) regularly for updated guidance on readings.

Further reading

Please note that as long as you read the Essential reading you are then free to read around the subject area in any text, paper or online resource. You will need to support your learning by reading as widely as possible and by thinking about how these principles apply in the real world. To help you read extensively, you have free access to the (VLE) and University of London Online Library (see below).

Other useful texts for this course include:

Books


Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce Predicting Politics. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002) [ISBN 0814208983].


George, J. *Discourses of Global Politics: a critical (re)introduction to international relations.* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994) [ISBN 1555874460].


Journals


Online study resources

In addition to the subject guide and the Essential reading, it is crucial that you take advantage of the study resources that are available online for this course, including the VLE and the Online Library.

You can access the VLE, the Online Library and your University of London email account via the Student Portal at:

http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk

You should have received your login details for the Student Portal with your official offer, which was emailed to the address that you gave on your application form. You have probably already logged in to the Student Portal in order to register! As soon as you registered, you will automatically have been granted access to the VLE, Online Library and your fully functional University of London email account.

If you forget your login details at any point, please email uolia.support@london.ac.uk quoting your student number.

The VLE

The VLE, which complements this subject guide, has been designed to enhance your learning experience, providing additional support and a sense of community. It forms an important part of your study experience with the University of London and you should access it regularly.
The VLE provides a range of resources for EMFSS courses:

- **Self-testing activities:** Doing these allows you to test your own understanding of subject material.
- **Electronic study materials:** The printed materials that you receive from the University of London are available to download, including updated reading lists and references.
- **Past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries:** These provide advice on how each examination question might best be answered.
- **A student discussion forum:** This is an open space for you to discuss interests and experiences, seek support from your peers, work collaboratively to solve problems and discuss subject material.
- **Videos:** There are recorded academic introductions to the subject, interviews and debates and, for some courses, audio-visual tutorials and conclusions.
- **Recorded lectures:** For some courses, where appropriate, the sessions from previous years' Study Weekends have been recorded and made available.
- **Study skills:** Expert advice on preparing for examinations and developing your digital literacy skills.
- **Feedback forms.**

Some of these resources are available for certain courses only, but we are expanding our provision all the time and you should check the VLE regularly for updates.

### Making use of the Online Library

The Online Library contains a huge array of journal articles and other resources to help you read widely and extensively.

To access the majority of resources via the Online Library you will either need to use your University of London Student Portal login details, or you will be required to register and use an Athens login:

http://tinyurl.com/ollathens

The easiest way to locate relevant content and journal articles in the Online Library is to use the **Summon** search engine.

If you are having trouble finding an article listed in a reading list, try removing any punctuation from the title, such as single quotation marks, question marks and colons.

For further advice, please see the online help pages:

www.external.shl.lon.ac.uk/summon/about.php

### The structure of the guide

**Chapter 2: The history of international thought**

This chapter will put the idea of a ‘canon’ of international political theory into context. It will explain that the canon is the construction of twentieth-century thinkers, who look back for support for their ideas about international politics to famous philosophers of the Western tradition. The international political theory canon is therefore influenced by the preoccupations of twentieth-century thinkers about war and peace, sovereignty, international system or society, the nature of international law and rights and so on. The chapter highlights a selected number of thinkers who are often cited as offering insights into international politics that are
valid across historical time. The chapter will offer an introduction to the key ideas and concepts of these selected thinkers and ask you to respond critically to their ideas.

Chapter 3: Major schools of international relations theory 1919–1989

This chapter will deepen and extend your knowledge of mainstream twentieth-century international relations theory, to which you have already been introduced in 11 Introduction to international relations (via the realism, rationalism, revolutionism Wight categorisation). In addition, the chapter will demonstrate how the different twentieth-century schools of thought build on or adapt ideas from the canonic thinkers discussed in Chapter 2 above. The major schools are identified as:

• liberalism
• realism
• international society
• Marxism/structuralism.

The discussion of each school will be structured according to its account of the following:

a. sources of explanation in international politics
b. possibility of change in international politics.

In each case the historical and intellectual context will be emphasised, and the aim will be to enable you not only to understand the main elements of the different theoretical frameworks but also to begin to think about them comparatively and critically. The chapter will end with a brief account of the so-called ‘neo-neo consensus’ (between neo-realism and neo-liberalism), which arguably continues to dominate research in international relations into the twenty-first century.

Chapter 4: The critique of mainstream international relations

This chapter will introduce you to critical responses to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 3. The discussion of critical theory, poststructuralism and feminist theory will be contextualised intellectually (using Kant and Marx as reference points) and historically (end of Cold War, limitations, in particular, of the structural realist framework for dealing with a non-bipolar world). The account of each critical perspective will be structured using the same subheadings introduced in Chapter 3 (sources of explanation and the possibility of change). The chapter will also include a summary of the similarities and differences between the critical perspectives. The aim of the chapter will be to give you an idea of what is at stake in critical responses to mainstream theories of IR and encourage you to assess the strength of the various critiques.

Chapter 5: Methodology

A large part of the critique of mainstream theory discussed in Chapter 4 revolves around methodological, ontological and epistemological issues in social science. This chapter will focus on some of the key debates about methodology that have characterised twentieth-century international relations theory. Two questions will be highlighted: the question of how ‘scientific’ the study of international politics can be; and the question of structural versus agent-centred explanations of events in international politics. This will be followed by an introduction to contemporary discussions within IR of ‘constructivism’ as the way to resolve these issues. The aim of this chapter is to enable you to make the connection between
different theoretical frameworks and different assumptions about the kind of knowledge about international politics that is possible and how it may be acquired. You will then return to the mainstream schools and the critical responses discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 and assess the plausibility of their claims to explanation/understanding of the nature of international politics.

Chapter 6: Theorising International politics in the twenty-first century

This chapter discusses three ways in which dominant modes of thinking about international politics have been challenged in the wake of the Cold War. It takes the issues of human rights, American ‘empire’ and Western cultural bias in IR theory as ones that disturb the vision of international politics encapsulated in the neo-realism/neo-liberalism consensus. The aim of the chapter is to encourage you to think critically about the different theoretical frameworks you have encountered and to make the link between IR theory and the contemporary context of world politics.

How to use this subject guide

Using the guide

This subject guide is designed to be read in conjunction with the essential readings indicated in each chapter and, if possible, at least some of the specific further readings which are also listed in each chapter. Do not be put off by the long list of reading given above, you are not expected to read everything on this list! Instead you should take the essential readings as your starting point, and then read further selectively, depending on the topics you are interested in and wish to revise for your examination (see discussion of assessment below). If you are particularly interested in a specific topic or thinker, then there are further references for you to pursue in the ‘References cited’ list at the end of the guide.

The best way to approach each chapter of the guide is to start by reading at least one of the essential readings suggested at the beginning. You will then have some ideas about the material which the guide will take you through. You should then work through the chapter sub-section by sub-section, doing the reading as indicated and giving yourself time to work through the self-assessment exercises.

The learning process

The purpose of the exercises is to push you to think about the material you have learned and begin to form your opinions about it. Remember that there are several stages involved in your learning, and it will take time and repeated reading and thinking in order to complete them. The stages are:

- learning the material – in the case of a theory subject, this means learning about theoretical ideas both in the work of specific thinkers (e.g. Thucydides, Hobbes, Waltz) and as distinct analytical frameworks for understanding (liberalism, realism, Marxism)
- analysing the material – understanding the underlying assumptions involved in the theories and how the different aspects of the theories link together (e.g. the connection between liberalism’s focus on cooperation in world politics and its progressive theory of history)
- identifying lines of criticism of the theories – each of the theories has particular strengths and weaknesses which are often noted
in the literature and you need to find out what these are (for instance, neo-realism is criticised for not being able to account for change in international politics; critical theory is criticised for being both overly Western and overly Utopian)

- **developing your own lines of criticism** – once you have learned about the theories and their strengths and weaknesses, you are in a position to begin to form your own view on which theories you think are the most plausible and useful to explain and understand international politics. This is the most difficult part of the learning process, because it involves you thinking independently about the material you have learned and asking yourself the questions: how coherent (clear and internally consistent) are the theories? How well can they explain recent events in international politics?

**Time needed for study**

The material covered in this guide is roughly the equivalent of what students being taught face-to-face would cover over a 20-week period, working for 8–9 hours per week. You should expect it to take you a similar amount of time to work through the material in the guide and do the reading and thinking which is required. If it is at all possible, it is very helpful to discuss the topics and debates raised in the guide with other people. This can help to clarify your own ideas.

**Help with terminology**

Because this is a guide about theory, its subject matter is highly abstract and is likely to include unfamiliar vocabulary. You will find that the essential reading, Baylis and Smith (2001) is very helpful in offering definitions of theoretical terms (use the index to check them out) and there is also a glossary at the back of the guide to assist you in clarifying meanings. You should also look back at your work for **11 Introduction to international relations** which has already introduced you to quite a lot of the terminology used here.

**Help with empirical examples and illustrations**

This guide is focused on helping you to understand theoretical traditions and debates in international relations. However, in some of the exercises below you will find that you are being asked to test your understanding of theory by applying ideas to actual historical events. These are all events which you will have come across in **11 Introduction to international relations**, so you should have a basic familiarity with them. If you have forgotten the details or need more information, refer back to your notes from the **11 Introduction to international relations** guide. You may also find it useful to refresh your memory by reading the chapters in Part One of Baylis and Smith (2001): ‘The Historical Context’.

**Assessment**

**Criteria**

This subject is assessed by an unseen three-hour examination, in which you are expected to answer four questions out of 12 (see the Sample examination paper and guidance on answering examination questions at the end of the guide). Your examination questions will be assessed according to the following criteria:
Relevance: The extent to which the essay addresses the question set.

Material: The substance of the essay: the selection and use of relevant material gained from a variety of sources. Evidence of reading.

Argument: The extent to which the essay sets out a clearly-structured discussion and analysis of the issues raised. Evidence of clear and independent thinking (i.e., signs that you can weigh up evidence and think through and assess arguments for yourself).

Scholarship: Basic literacy, fluency and quality of presentation.

Of all of the above criteria, relevance to the question and quality of argument weigh the most heavily. It is not enough simply to be able to learn by heart what, for example, Hobbes has to say; you also have to be able to reflect on and assess Hobbes’ argument.

**Examination advice**

**Important:** The information and advice given here are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this, we strongly advise you to always check both the current **Regulations** for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

Revision involves looking back over what you have learned and trying to consolidate that learning in the light of the kind of questions you will be asked in the examination. Don’t try to revise everything. You will need to have a grounding in enough topics to enable you to answer four out of 12 questions. To be on the safe side, you should aim to revise around two-thirds of the material and to know at least half of it well.

You are advised to look at the Sample examination questions, the Sample examination paper and the advice on answering examination questions in this guide, to give you an idea about what to expect. It is a very good idea to practise writing examination essays to a 45-minute time limit.

You should also look at past examination papers and the Examiners’ commentaries that you receive, and the advice in your Academic Handbook on examinations. When you are preparing for your exam, don’t just learn lots of material, but take time to clarify your position on the various theories and debates you are revising. Always prepare your arguments in relation to the questions that are likely to be asked in the examination. So, don’t just know about realism or international society, also know what you think about those theoretical perspectives and their strengths and weaknesses.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered.
Notes
Chapter 2: The history of international thought

Introduction

This chapter introduces you to the key ideas relevant to theorising international politics of Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Grotius, Rousseau, Kant and Marx. These thinkers are generally agreed to be members of the ‘canon’ of international political theory. This ‘canon’ comprises the work of thinkers from the past that is judged to be most authoritative and influential on the ways in which we theorise about international politics today. It is important to remember that canonic thinkers are only identified as ‘canonic’, by contemporary scholars, in retrospect. The idea of a canon of international political theory only emerged as the study of international politics was institutionalised in the Western social scientific academy in the twentieth century. The canon therefore reflects the political concerns and cultural biases of primarily Western scholars in particular places at particular times (see Brown et al., 2002, pp.2–6).

Aims and objectives

The aims of the chapter are to:

- enable you to learn about the main ideas and concepts of the canonic thinkers and the historical context in which they were formulated
- enable you to compare and assess these ideas.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- outline the main ideas relevant to international politics of: Thucydides; Augustine; Machiavelli; Grotius; Hobbes; Rousseau; Kant; and Marx
- explain the ideas of the above thinkers in historical context
- discuss similarities and differences between the ideas of the above thinkers
- discuss strengths and weaknesses in the ideas of the above thinkers; outline reasons why you agree or disagree with the ideas of the above thinkers
- identify the key questions or issues each perspective highlights.

Essential reading

The Essential reading for this chapter can all be found in


As its title states, this book covers the history of international political thought up to the First World War. It provides overviews of the different stages in this history and extracts from all of the canonic texts, including
the work of the thinkers discussed below. The following passages are required reading: Chapter 2, pp.17–60; Chapter 3, pp.95–110, 119–35; Chapter 5, pp.243–69; Chapter 6, pp.311–40; Chapter 7, pp.379–98 and 416–56; Chapter 9, pp.519–32 and 572–74. You are recommended to read all of the editors Introductions, both to the volume as a whole and to the specific chapters.

If you are unable to get hold of Brown et al., you will find extracts from the thinkers discussed below in the following collections:


In the discussions below reference will be made to the original works of thinkers from which the extracts in Brown et al. are taken (listed in References cited at the end of the guide). Although you are not required to read beyond the extracts, you are encouraged to do so for those thinkers in whose work you are particularly interested.

**Further reading**


All the above texts cover a variety of thinkers and provide a good introductory starting point. In addition to the above, you should use the suggestions for further reading in Brown et al. to extend your knowledge of particular thinkers.

**Thucydides (approx 450s–400 BCE)**

Thucydides was a native of Athens. We do not know his exact dates of birth and death and we know of him largely through his work chronicling the ongoing wars between the Athenian empire and other Greek states in the fifth century BCE *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Brown et al., 2002 pp.34–60; Thucydides, 1972; see also Boucher, 1998: Chapter 4). In this work Thucydides sought to present an objective account of the Peloponnesian War both on the basis of his own direct knowledge of the
conflict (he participated as a General on the Athenian side in the war) and that of other eye witnesses. His account of the war has mainly been interpreted as an early formulation of a realist doctrine of international politics (see Chapter 3). The key tenets of this realism are claimed to be:

- a cynical view of human nature and of human ability to control events
- the identification of ‘interests’ rather than ‘justice’ as being at the heart of political decisions in foreign policy (and perhaps in politics as such)
- a recognition of the constraints imposed on the behaviour of political units (in this instance Greek city states) by the structure of relations between those units where there is no overarching authority.

Let us go on to look at each of these tenets in a little more detail.

**Human nature: freedom and necessity**

Ancient Greek political thought is acknowledged as the starting point of many of the themes of Western political thought in general. Philosophers such as Plato (427–347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) formulated theories about the link between the nature of human beings and the nature of the ‘polis’ (the Greek city state) and offered arguments about the nature of both the good man (and this does mean ‘man’, see Pericles speech as recounted by Thucydides, excerpt in Brown et al. p.42) and of the good political order (see Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1992: Chapters 1 and 2). Whereas Plato and Aristotle both thought that rationality was the highest virtue and that politics could be governed by reason, Thucydides offers us an account of human beings which is much more mixed. His politicians and soldiers are sometimes heroic, but they also make mistakes through their own pride, greed and emotional attachments or because of their inability to predict the actions of others (for instance the Melians in the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides excerpt in Brown et al. pp.53–60).

In general, the capacity of political agents to predict and control their environment is always limited by fate and chance (see the role of the plague in Athens’ downfall, Thucydides excerpt in Brown et al., pp.42–44).

**Interests v justice**

Much of Thucydides’s chronicle recounts speeches and debates between different political actors within and between the various states involved in the war. A recurrent dramatic theme of these debates is a tension between doing what is in the interests (i.e. will work to the advantage) of a particular polis and doing what is just in terms of the standards inherent within the polis. In the *Mytilenian Debate* (Brown et al. pp.44–53), Cleon and Diodotus debate whether or not Athens should punish the city of Mytilene (which had fought against Athens) by putting all men to death and enslaving all women and children in the city. The debate is not straightforwardly between Cleon (who supports this punishment) arguing on grounds of interest and Diodotus (who opposes it) arguing on grounds of justice. Rather, both men use the ideas of justice and interest to make their cases. Cleon makes claims both that Mytilenes deserve the punishment because of the injustice of their behaviour (an argument from justice) and that the devastation of Myteline is crucial to Athens interest because it would demolish opposition and deter other powers from doing what Myteline did. Diodotus claims that not only would the devastation of Myteline be unjust and against the great traditions of Athens, but it would also be against Athens’s interests, because it would entrench opposing powers in their opposition, discouraging them from surrendering and giving them reasons to further fear and fight against Athenian power. In this debate Thucydides dramatises recurring and crucial themes in Western
political thought about how states can manage the potentially conflicting claims of self-interest on the one hand and justice on the other. The message of Thucydides seems to be that when these values do conflict in politics, then self-interest tends to be the most powerful argument.

The structural constraints of an international system

For many modern scholars, Thucydides’s world of warring Greek city-states is like a miniature version of the contemporary structure of world politics, in which the whole world is made up of sovereign states, which relate to one another without any ruling body to enforce order between them (the idea of the anarchy of the international system, see Chapter 3). One of the most famous comments in Thucydides is his remark that the Peloponnesian war was caused by Sparta’s fear of Athenian power (Thucydides excerpt in Brown et al., p.36). This combination of both fear and power can be argued to be the consequence of any anarchic or ‘self-help’ situation. In a ‘self-help’ situation there is no source of security other than your own ability to protect yourself. This makes it imperative that you increase your own power and weaken that of others as much as you can. The metaphor often used for this is the idea of a ‘balance’, in which, as it were, ‘lighter’ powers band together to equal or outweigh the power of ‘heavier’ ones, and heavier powers try to prevent them. The trouble is that this creates high probability of war between polities that are all concerned to maximise their own position and undermine that of others. Two thousand years after Thucydides wrote, Hobbes (see p19) dramatised this situation in his notion of the ‘state of nature’ (he also translated Thucydides and was a great admirer of his work). The key point that both Hobbes and Thucydides make is that it is not necessarily because states are made up of immoral or cruel leaders that they do immoral or cruel things, it may simply be because the context of insecurity makes this the only possibility compatible with survival, it is a question of structure rather than agency.

Activity

These questions and all the other exercises in this guide are designed to encourage you to think about the issues raised in the particular thinker’s work – if possible, you should discuss the questions with someone else as well as thinking about them on your own.

1. Read the extracts from the ‘Mytelenian Debate’ in Brown et al. (pp.44–53).
   - Make a list of the key arguments used by Cleon and Diodotus.
   - Decide which argument you find more persuasive.
   - Give the reasons why you find that argument persuasive.

2. ‘What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear that this caused in Sparta’. (Brown et al., p.36)
   - Having read the extracts from the dialogue – do you think Thucydides is right in this claim?
   - If Thucydides is right, what does this suggest about what needs to be done to prevent war between states?

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE)

Augustine was a native of North Africa and lived at a time in which the Roman Empire was beginning to disintegrate, and Christianity had become the dominant religion within the Empire (see Brown et al., p.119). Augustine is best known as one of the most influential of the early ‘Church Fathers’ (see Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1992: Ch. 3; Williams,
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1992: Ch. 3; Thompson, 1994: Ch. 5). He wrote very widely on theology and philosophy, and his ideas became part of the orthodoxy of European Christianity and therefore of Western social and political thought throughout the medieval period and beyond. His main work relevant to politics is his book *The City of God* (Augustine, 1998) in which he puts forward certain ideas about:

- war and peace
- the nature of political authority and politics in general.

### War and peace

In complete contrast to Thucydides and the Ancient Greeks more generally, Augustine saw war as an evil (Augustine excerpt in Brown et al., pp.122–24). Many early Christians were complete pacifists, and although Augustine didn’t go that far, he was clearly opposed to the kind of aggressive wars of conquest that Thucydides saw as perfectly appropriate within the Peloponnesian context. For Augustine, the proper goal of politics was to ensure peace in the material world with a view to enabling individuals to live good lives and by the grace of God be able to enjoy eternal peace after their deaths. Augustine, therefore, saw war as something that could only be carried out by a legitimate authority (the acknowledged ruler of a state) and was only permissible for reasons of self-defence, to right a particular wrong or to punish a wrongdoer. This is the beginning of what has come to be called the ‘just war theory’ in Western thought, which remains influential to this day in the criteria for war enshrined in international law. Again, in contrast to Thucydides, it is based on the idea that political conduct needs to be governed by moral (in Augustine’s view, divinely inspired) principles. The relations between justice and interests in Augustine’s worldview is one in which justice has priority, but this is partly because everyone’s ultimate interest is bound up with their fate not in this world (the city of men) but in the next (the city of God). The soldiers in Thucydides’s history sought glory in this world, for Augustine the really important thing is salvation in the next.

### The nature of political authority and politics

It might seem from the above account that Augustine has a highly idealised view of politics; however, this is somewhat misleading. Although Augustine was clear that political authority ought to be governed by moral precepts (see Augustine excerpt in Brown et al., p.123), he saw the human condition, according to Christian ideas, as fundamentally flawed. In other words, he thought of all human beings as marked by original sin from birth and only able to transcend their sinfulness and selfishness through the grace of God. For this reason, he regarded the ‘city of men’, the mortal human world, as inevitably failing to live up to moral standards and in need of strong political order to constrain the effects of individual self-interest. In this sense it can be argued that Augustine shares Thucydides’s realism about politics. He thought that men were always likely to follow their selfish passions and needed to be kept in order by the threat of punishment, that is to say through manipulation of their fears and desires rather than through their ability to straightforwardly do the right thing.

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**Activity**

‘Is it wise or prudent to wish to glory in the breadth and magnitude of an empire when you cannot show that the men whose empire it is are happy? For the Romans always lived in dark fear and cruel lust, surrounded by the disasters of war and the shedding of blood which, whether that of fellow citizens or enemies, was human nonetheless. The
joy of such men may be compared to the fragile splendour of glass: they are horribly afraid lest it be suddenly shattered.’ (Augustine excerpt in Brown et al., p.122, see also pp.125–29)

Compare the above quotation from Augustine with Thucydides’s account of Pericles’s ‘funeral oration’ (Thucydides excerpt in Brown et al., pp.37–42). What does this tell you about the difference in values between Ancient Greek pagan feelings about death, war and conquest and early Christian views?

Machiavelli (1469–1527 ce)

Machiavelli lived in Italy at a time which is often referred to as the European Renaissance (meaning literally ‘rebirth’), because it included a great revival of interest in non-Christian, Ancient Greek and Roman texts and ideas. At this time also many of the practices of diplomacy and foreign policy that later became part of the European state system were being initiated. Although his world remains remote from ours, it is in many ways more familiar, in terms of both its ideas and institutions, than the worlds of Thucydides and Augustine (see Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1992: Ch. 4; Williams, 1992: Ch. 4; Boucher, 1998: Ch.5). Machiavelli is most famous for his short book The Prince (see Machiavelli excerpts in Brown et al., pp.257–61; Machiavelli, 1988), in which he offers advice to rulers about how to gain and maintain power in the context of the Italian city-states of the fifteenth century. Other works in which he discusses politics in general and international politics in particular are The Art of War (Machiavelli, 2003) and Discourses on the first Ten Books of Livy (Machiavelli excerpts in Brown et al., pp.262–69, Machiavelli, 1997).

As with Thucydides, Machiavelli’s primary concerns are with analysing the practice of politics, and these concerns reflect his own experience as a diplomat and as someone who suffered for his political loyalties (see Brown et al., p.257). The Prince is famous because instead of following the traditional Christian view that princes should follow the precepts of Christian morality in order to be good rulers (see Augustine excerpt in Brown et al., p.123), Machiavelli argues that in order for princes to be successful at gaining and maintaining power, they need to be prepared to act against morality, and rely on force and cunning. The lessons of Machiavelli’s work for international politics are in many ways reminiscent of Thucydides’s. Machiavelli teaches us that if polities are to be stable and rich then leaders have to enforce strong order within the city and inspire fear in its neighbours. However, it is misleading to see Machiavelli as simply endorsing the right of the stronger; in his major work on politics, The Discourses, he is interested in political power as something that promotes the good of the best kind of political order, the republic. To be a citizen of a republic, a participant in ruling one’s own community, is for Machiavelli the highest purpose of politics. Three aspects of Machiavelli’s arguments can be highlighted as having particular relevance for theorising international politics:

• the logic of means and ends in politics in general
• the idea that state interest (what later becomes known under the phrase, raison d’état, or ‘reasons of state’) is the key determinant of foreign policy
• the idea of a cyclical pattern in political affairs in which rulers and their kingdoms gain and lose power through combinations of human ability (what Machiavelli refers to as virtie), human weakness and the activities of ‘fortune’.
Means and ends

Machiavelli was condemned by many of his earlier readers as wholly amoral because of the way that he suggests that in politics, the ‘ends’ (meaning the goals of political activity, such as consolidating your power or defending your city) justify the ‘means’ (meaning the ways in which you set about consolidating your power and defending your city). Machiavelli’s conception of politics, in particular in *The Prince*, is highly instrumental. As long as it works, he doesn’t seem to think it matters that you have consolidated your power by murdering your opponent, or defended your city by tricking your attackers (see Machiavelli excerpt in Brown et al., p.261). This is manifested in his attitude to war, where, in contrast to Augustine, Machiavelli simply accepts that war is one of the instruments of politics and that its value is to be weighed only according to how likely it is to be successful as a means toward a particular end.

State interest and foreign policy

Machiavelli makes it clear that the relations of states with one another should be determined by their interests (recall the Mytelenian debate about justice and interests in Thucydides’s work). This meant that good rulers would not be swayed by personal motives (desire for glory or plunder) nor by desire for their own salvation (justice) but would act in the best interests of the state as a whole. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli speaks admiringly of Lucius Lentulus’s advice to the Roman army, which had been defeated and offered humiliating terms for surrender. Lentulus advised that what mattered was the survival of Rome, and that it was better for the army to agree to terms and survive to fight another day than to fight to the death and lose everything except glory (Brown et al., p.268). Contemporary thinkers see in Machiavelli’s insistence on the importance of state interest an early version of the idea of ‘national interest’ as the crucial determinant of foreign policy between sovereign states today. It is also sometimes argued that, as with the city states of Ancient Greece in Thucydides’s time, the Italian city states of the fifteenth century were like a miniature version of the contemporary state system, so that in giving priority to state interest, Machiavelli was recognising, like Thucydides, the structural constraints imposed by an international system in which the only source of security was self-help. The metaphor of ‘balancing’ as the effect of a self-help system is argued to be reflected in Machiavelli’s stories of different city-states constantly trying to protect themselves against powerful neighbours through both alliance and conquest.

The rise and fall of powers

Machiavelli was interested in questions about why rulers and their polities (whether empires, kingdoms or republics) lost power as well as gained it. In essence his explanation for both success and failure is the same, a mixture of human agency and fortune or fate. Success is likely to come to the man of *virtue*, by which Machiavelli does not mean ‘virtue’ in the traditional sense but the capacity to take the initiative and use strength or cunning to succeed in your aim. However, even such a man is subject to the vagaries of fortune (getting ill for instance), so that even the most capable leader is unlikely to be successful all the time. Moreover, it is a matter of fortune whether, when a successful leader dies, his successors will share his talents. In the overall scheme of things, combinations of human weakness, the competitiveness of others and sheer bad luck work against any political power remaining predominant forever. Instead, in Machiavelli’s view, history is made up of repeated cycles in which power
is gained, consolidated and strengthened but then is overcome and moves elsewhere. He is fascinated by the way in which examples of this pattern in the past, for instance in Ancient Greece and Rome, provide lessons for the rulers of his day. In common with both Thucydides and Augustine, therefore, he sees politics as a realm of repetition rather than progress.

Activity

‘For when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that alternative should be whole-heartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country.’ (Machiavelli excerpt in Brown et al., pp.268–9)

Some commentators say Machiavelli is an immoral thinker only interested in power, others see him as not straightforwardly immoral but as identifying a distinct kind of morality suitable for the political sphere. On the basis of the above quotation, what do you think?

Hugo Grotius (1583–1645 CE)

Grotius’s work provides a sharp contrast to the work of Machiavelli discussed in the previous section and the work of Hobbes to which we turn in the next section (see Boucher, 1998: Chapter 9; Thompson, 1994: Chapter 8). Like all of the thinkers to be discussed, he was very much a man of his time and place (see Brown et al., p.325). Whereas Machiavelli’s time and place was dominated by the warring city-states of Italy (and their powerful neighbours in Spain and France), Grotius’s time was dominated by the effects of the religious reformation in Europe and the subsequent wars of religion. He himself was a lawyer, and at one point acted as advocate for the Dutch East India Company. In his later life he was preoccupied by efforts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant Christianity in Europe. He died shortly before the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which is generally seen as founding the modern state system (see 11 Introduction to international relations, p.18). Grotius wrote widely on law, theology, philosophy and literature, but the most important aspects of his work from the point of view of international politics are:

- the idea of universal natural law
- the idea that relations between states could be law governed, even when states were at war with one another (Grotius, 1925).

Natural law

The idea of natural law has its origins in Judeo-Christian thought. The argument is that there is a universal law, which applies to human beings and relationships whether or not the law is actually written down in a statute book (Grotius excerpt in Brown et al., pp.326–28). Thus, according to natural law thinking, the idea of the preservation of life is a crucial value and therefore murder is wrong, whether there is a law in your country that forbids murder or not. The reason why we can be sure that this is so is that our own reason tells us that murder is contrary to natural law. For Grotius, the natural law is not a mystery, it is a set of rationally accessible moral rules by which all human beings are capable of abiding. States are necessary because, as sinful human beings (see Augustine above), we do not always obey the natural law and it has to be enforced by systems of crime and punishment. However, state law gains its fundamental legitimacy from natural law in the first place. This theory of natural law as the basis for written (so called ‘positive’ law)
has tremendous implications for Western political theory (for instance providing criteria by which positive laws may be judged to be unjust and illegitimate). In particular, it provides the foundation for the notion of universal entitlements or rights as belonging to all human beings (the origins of today's 'human rights'). The importance of natural law for international political theory lies in its (natural law's) universality. Natural law provides not only the basis of laws within states but also a basis for law governed relations between states, what we would now call 'international law'.

**International law and war**

In the work of Thucydides and Machiavelli, relations between different polities is at best an uneasy truce and at worst a chaotic free-for-all in which states grab what power they can in a never-ending search for security. In contrast to this picture, Grotius argues that relations between states can and should be those of a 'society' (a collective body in which certain rules and values are institutionalised) rather than a 'system' (an anarchic collection of separate states, which have to coexist but which are unable to trust one another). Natural law provides the basis for this society of states, indicating certain minimum standards of behaviour between states and underpinning social practices and institutions, such as those of diplomacy, through which foreign relations can be carried out in an ordered manner. This doesn't mean that states exist as one big happy family. Grotius still thinks that the interests of states will clash and that there will be war between states. Nevertheless, even where there is war we can distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate wars (Grotius excerpt in Brown et al., p.334).

**Activity**

Read the extracts in Brown et al., pp.325–34.

- What are the main principles of natural law?
- Under what circumstances does war become a legitimate activity according to Grotius?
- How similar is Grotius's argument about legitimate and illegitimate war to Augustine's just war theory?

**Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679 ce)**

Hobbes was a contemporary of Grotius and, like Grotius, in his work on politics he responded to the concerns of his time and place. In his case, however, his time and place was dominated by the experience of the English Civil War in the 1640s and 50s (Hobbes, 1996; see also Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1992: Chapter 5; Williams, 1992: Chapter 6; Hampsher Monk, 1992: Chapter 1; Boucher, 1998: Chapter 7). Unlike Grotius, Hobbes did not write a great deal explicitly about international politics. His importance for international political theory comes from his theory of political obligation within the state, and its implications for understandings of state sovereignty and the relation between political authority at the internal *domestic* level (the link between ruler and ruled) and at the external international level (the link between separate ruling powers). The key to Hobbes's account of both internal and external political relations is his powerful dramatisation of a world without political authority (perhaps modelled on the anarchic condition of a country in civil war), the so-called 'state of nature'. It is worth noting that Hobbes translated Thucydides work and was an admirer of his account of politics.
Nevertheless, Hobbes's account of a 'state of nature' is considerably bleaker even than Thucydides's most pessimistic analysis of inter-state violence. We will look first at the state of nature and then at its implications for political authority within the state and between states.

**State of nature**

For thinkers such as Grotius, a state in which there was no political authority, would still be governed by natural law. In stark contrast, for Hobbes, there is no natural law in which moral values or principles, or basic human commonality, are inscribed. Instead there are only 'laws of nature' that essentially give priority to self-preservation without any limits imposed, such as having to respect the rights of others (this is something people have to be forced by political authority to do). Although Hobbes's individuals, like Grotius's, want to live in peace, unlike Grotius's they have no basis upon which to trust one another. Moreover, according to Hobbes, because individuals are roughly equal in strength and intelligence overall, there is no likelihood of one person emerging as the stronger and able to enforce order over others, at least not in the long term. The picture of a state of nature that emerges is famously miserable. Every individual aims to maximise his or her own security, and the only way to do this is to acquire as much power as possible. The result is not only living in mutual fear, but the impossibility of any human civilisation: ‘In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.’ (Hobbes excerpt in Brown et al., p.337). Hobbes calls his state of nature a state of war, because even when fighting is not actually going on, violence is an ever present possibility.

**Domestic political authority**

Hobbes's answer to how one can escape the state of nature and enter into social existence is through a ‘contract’ between the individuals within that state. This contract transfers the natural rights (which in Hobbes means the natural power) of all the individuals to a ruler (sovereign) who is endowed with absolute authority and given the means of its enforcement (the sword). The important thing to note is that for Hobbes it is positive law that makes social existence and norms of justice possible, rather than natural law. Moreover, the authority of the sovereign power is envisaged in absolute terms, exemplified by the picture on the cover of Hobbes's most famous book *Leviathan*, in which the figure of a massive King is seen, on closer inspection, to be made up of lots of little individuals. Here we have the idea of the sovereign state as a single agency, which emerged in the seventeenth century in Europe and remains central to the understanding of state sovereignty today.

**International political relations**

Although Hobbes doesn't say a great deal explicitly about international politics, there are clear implications for the international in his account of internal sovereign power. Most obviously, his theory suggests that where there is no positive law, then there can be no norms of justice. In contrast to Grotius, this suggests that inter-state relations cannot be social (since there is no overarching sovereign authority that can legitimate or enforce international law), but will be far more likely to resemble the state of
nature. Because of this, some contemporary theorists see Hobbes as the archetypal representative of the realist tradition in international relations theory (see Chapter 3), which also includes Thucydides and Machiavelli. It is worth noting, however, that Hobbes actually thought wars between states were less likely to follow from anarchic inter-state relations than from the (imaginary) state of nature between individuals. Unlike in the state of nature, states are not roughly equal in strength and cunning and they have to rely on individuals who, being primarily interested in self-preservation, cannot always be relied upon to fight for their country.

Activity

‘To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place.’ (Hobbes excerpt in Brown et al., p.338)

Grotius thinks that natural law provides minimal standards of justice and injustice even in a state of nature. Hobbes disagrees. What do you think and why?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78 CE)

Rousseau lived at the time often referred to as the European Enlightenment (roughly speaking this period spans the eighteenth century). Most philosophers and scientists during this time believed that human reason provided a key to both scientific and socio-political progress for humanity. Rousseau is a typical Enlightenment thinker in some respects and atypical in others. He is typical in that he was concerned to diagnose and try to address the problems of his age. He was atypical, in that he did not share Enlightenment optimism about reason as a key to historical progress (Rousseau, 1991; see also Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1992: Chapter 7; Williams, 1992: Chapter 7; Hampsher Monk, 1992: Chapter IV; Clark and Neumann, 1996: Chapter 6; Boucher, 1998: Chapter 12).

Rousseau saw contemporary society and politics both within and between states as fundamentally corrupt and full of conflict. However, he saw this corruption and conflict as socially produced rather than naturally necessary. He therefore took issue with Hobbes’s view that in a state of nature people are selfish and violent and argued in contrast that people are naturally peaceful and inclined to be solitary. They have a survival instinct but they also have the capacity to sympathise with the pain of others. Only as civilisation develops, according to Rousseau, do we find in humans the desire for power and the conflict of interests that Hobbes identifies as natural or pre-social (Rousseau excerpts in Brown et al., pp.416–25). In particular, Rousseau identifies the development of the institution of private property as a corrupting force, which encourages greed, envy and violence. For Rousseau, war is the product of a social order in which princes regard their territories as private property and seek both to protect and extend their holdings.

Most of Rousseau’s writings on politics focus on political authority within the state. The argument for which he is most famous is that one can preserve individual freedom within a state only if one becomes part of a people that is self-legislating. Rousseau’s ideal state is a republic in which all citizens participate in legislating for the whole community and in which property is distributed equally. However, Rousseau was also concerned with inter-state relations, and makes a contribution to international political theory in the following ways:

• through his identification of state and nation
• through his idea for a confederation of European states.
State and nation

Rousseau was part of an eighteenth-century revival of a tradition in international political thought, which goes back to the ancient Greeks and is evident in the work of Thucydides and Machiavelli. This republican tradition emphasises the importance of patriotism and the strong link between individual and collective identity. For Rousseau, the legitimacy and viability of a state were tied up with whether it reflected the will of its people, and the 'people' were defined not just as a collection of individuals but as people who shared a common national identity. Rousseau asserted an important connection between the idea of nationality and the way in which international politics should be organised, that is to say, separation into independent, ideally republican, nation-states. He was thus one of the first to articulate the principle that became defined in modern international norms as the principle of national self-determination.

Confederation

As stated above, Rousseau was not particularly optimistic that the world would recover from the corruption and conflict that he saw as endemic in his time. One example of this was his critical response to an essay by the Abbé de St Pierre, 'Project for Settling an Everlasting Peace in Europe' (see excerpts from St Pierre and Rousseau in Brown et al., pp.394–98; pp.425–27). This was a typical Enlightenment essay, trying to show how peace and harmony were desirable and achievable for states on the grounds of both justice and interest. Some thinkers have argued that Rousseau's scepticism about the Abbé's proposals indicate that he was cynical about international politics in the manner of Thucydides or Machiavelli. It is certainly the case that he saw altering the state of international politics as a very difficult task. As well as seeing princes as inherently acquisitive and aggressive, Rousseau also saw international trade as being based on greed. He therefore thought that both the predominant mode of rule within states and the increasing commercial connections between states in his time encouraged war between peoples. However, for him, this state of affairs was not something naturally given, but had been socially constructed over time and therefore could, in principle, be changed. His main recipes for change apply at the level of both state and inter-state relations. He argued that all states should become republics, which meant that they should be ruled by the people as a whole and that there should be material equality between citizens. Because they are structured according to principles of freedom and equality, republican states will not be so prone to aggressive foreign policies as are states ruled by princes, nor will they be ruled by commercial greed. He also argues for the possibility of a confederation of European states in which the nation states of Europe, building on their common cultural heritage, form a larger political union in which war between members is renounced.

Activity

'I have already stated, and I cannot repeat it too often, that the error of Hobbes and the philosophers is to confuse natural man with the man before their eyes, and to transpose into one system a being who can only exist in another.' (Rousseau excerpt in Brown et al., p.424)

- Make a list of reasons to agree with Rousseau and reasons to disagree with him.
- If you had to choose between Hobbes's account of human nature and Rousseau's, which account would you choose?
Immanuel Kant (1724–1804 CE)

Kant is the most important philosopher of the European Enlightenment. He was very conscious that the time in which he wrote was one in which new ideas were having revolutionary implications in the sciences, the arts and in politics (the American and French Revolutions). He wrote his most famous works in the last three decades of his life, across all areas of philosophy, including epistemology, moral and political philosophy (Kant, 1991; see also Williams, 1992: Chapter 8; Boucher, 1998: Chapter 11; Gallie, 1978: Chapter 2). One of the philosophers who influenced him most powerfully was Rousseau. As with Rousseau, Kant sees domestic (internal) and inter-state politics as interconnected. But he is more optimistic than Rousseau about how republicanism at the level of the state can reinforce inter-state peace and vice-versa. Whereas Rousseau reads human history in terms of moral decline, in which people become more corrupt as society becomes more wealthy and sophisticated, Kant reads history in terms of progress. For the study of international relations, the following aspects of Kant’s arguments have been seen to be most significant:

- his theory of perpetual peace
- his philosophy of history.

The theory of perpetual peace

Kant’s essay ‘Perpetual Peace: a philosophical sketch’ (Kant excerpt in Brown et al., pp.432–55) draws on his theory of political obligation and his moral philosophy to arrive at three prescriptions for a peaceful world. These prescriptions are labelled the three definitive articles of perpetual peace (Kant excerpt in Brown et al., pp.436–43). The first article requires that all states become republics. Although Kant’s view of what this means is less radically democratic than Rousseau’s, like Rousseau he argues that a state will be more likely to behave responsibly and prudently if it has to be accountable to its people than if it is ruled by unaccountable princes. The second article requires that republican states enter into a pacific union with one another, in which they regulate their interactions and renounce war as a means of foreign policy in relation to each other. Kant argues strongly against the idea of a world state, because he thinks this would be likely to become tyrannical; instead he suggests something very like the arrangements that emerged, at least in theory, in the League of Nations (post First World War) and in the United Nations (post Second World War). The third article requires that there should be a guarantee of cosmopolitan right, by which Kant means rights of all individuals whether they are citizens of a particular state or not. For Kant this is the minimal requirement of a universal right of hospitality, but the idea of a cosmopolitan level of right draws on the Christian natural law tradition, including ideas in Augustine and Grotius, and anticipates the contemporary notion of universal human rights.

Philosophy of history

Kant’s political theory, including his international political theory, is not just an abstract normative scheme but is embedded in his philosophy of history. For Kant, perpetual peace is not an impossible dream, because he identifies natural forces that, he argues, will bring it about (Kant excerpt in Brown et al., p.430 and pp.443–45). In his moral philosophy, very much in line with the Christian tradition, Kant believes that humans are capable of acting morally (like Grotius he thinks the moral law is accessible to human reason), but that they are also flawed creatures who are just as likely to
be swayed by their passions and desires. However, according to Kant, in the realm of social life, even if people are simply driven by passions and desires (a nation of devils, Kant excerpt in Brown et al., p.444), they will still be impelled to form communities and eventually to live in peace with other communities because of their own fear and greed. Fear is what leads people to contract with each other to form states, so that they are no longer in a Hobbesian state of nature. Over time, fear of the increasingly dreadful weapons invented in warfare will deter states from attacking one another. Greed on the other hand, will push people into more and more production and trade and international trade will discourage war between states (note, this is opposite to Rousseau’s view). In the end, Kant argues, reason and passion point in the same direction. Any rational, moral person will see the requirements of perpetual peace as the right thing, and any prudent self-interested person will eventually also come to see them as the right thing. It can be said therefore that in Kant’s argument we have a reconciliation of the tension between ‘justice’ and ‘interest’ that Thucydides’s Greeks were so concerned about (see above).

Activity

1. Compare and contrast Rousseau’s view of the role of war in human history with that of Kant – which seems to you the most persuasive?

2. Kant’s three definitive articles have been influential on contemporary accounts of how to achieve a peaceful world – do you think they are still relevant today?

**Karl Marx (1818–1883 CE)**

Although many of the thinkers discussed above were politically involved in one way or another (Thucydides was a general, Machiavelli was tortured when the Florentine republican regime fell from power, Grotius was a political exile for many years etc.), Marx stands out as someone whose whole life’s work was dedicated to the cause of social and political revolution, both in his theoretical work and his practice. In partnership with his colleague and supporter, Friedrich Engels (1820–95 CE), with whom he co-wrote several works including ‘The Communist Manifesto’ (Marx and Engels excerpt in Brown et al., pp.572–74), Marx sought to explain and predict the shape of the contemporary world, which, in the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe, had been fundamentally transformed by political and industrial revolution (Marx, 1996; see also Forsyth and Keens-Soper, 1993: Chapter 6; Williams, 1992: Chapter 11; Gallie, 1978: Chapter 4; Boucher, 1998: Chapter 15; Hampsher Monk, 1992: Chapter X). He was profoundly interested in international affairs; however, it is not his comments on foreign policy or imperialism that have been influential on international political theory. Instead it is his theories of history and of capitalism. Particularly significant within these theories are:

- his account of history as the history of class struggle
- his account of capitalism and opposition to it as inherently international.

**All history is the history of class struggle**

Of the previously discussed thinkers, only Rousseau shared Marx’s view of the importance of economic inequality as a driving force in history. Thinkers such as Kant and many other eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century liberal thinkers saw economic growth, and especially expansion of trade, as an essentially benign process which would, in the end, work out in everyone's interest (see Brown et al., pp.521–24). Economic inequality
as such was not something that was seen to have profound political significance. However, for Marx it is crucial to different forms of social and political life and the reasons why certain forms (such as systems based on slavery or feudalism) eventually break down. Marx formulates a theory that it is the technological/material conditions of a given era that dictate the form the economic structure of society takes. And that structure in turn determines the division of people into classes. Class is defined by the relationship of given individuals to the ‘means of production’ (that is to say the sources of wealth – land, tools, factories etc.). The key class difference in any society at any time is that between those who own or control the means of production and those who don’t and must therefore work for the owners in order to survive. In agrarian, pre-industrial societies, the material conditions make systems such as slavery or serfdom appropriate, in which a landed aristocratic class dominates most of the rest of the population through direct ownership and control of labourers themselves. However, in industrialised market societies the new economic system of capitalism emerges which depends on a new class structure, premised on the division between bourgeoisie (owners) and proletariat (wage labourers). Marx argued that there is a close connection between the key political struggles of any society and the class position of people within that society. He saw the transformation of feudalism into capitalism as being due to the rising bourgeoisie’s need to throw off the shackles of feudal restrictions. He regarded the proletariat as the source of revolutionary challenge to the bourgeoisie, and as the force that would eventually overthrow capitalism and all its inequalities and usher in an age of peace and equality (i.e. socialism).

Capitalism and internationalism and revolution

Marx sees both capitalism and the bourgeoisie as inherently internationalist. He argues that capitalism’s only purpose is the maximisation of profit and that this necessarily cuts across other sorts of identities and loyalties, such as to nation or state. The maximisation of profit entails the constant expansion of markets and revolutionisation of technology. For Marx, British support for freed trade, imperialism and colonialism as well as Britain’s leading role in technological development in the nineteenth century follow logically from its role as the major capitalist power at this time. For Marx, the state reflects the interest of the ruling class of the day: ideologies such as nationalism are simply reflections of deeper economic class interests. But if the bourgeoisie is internationalist; then so too is the proletarian class. According to Marx, wage labourers all share a class interest with each other, which cuts across differences of nationality, religion or political affiliation. The interest that all proletarians share is the interest in overthrowing the capitalist system which rests on the exploitation of their labour and setting up a new kind of world in which economic inequality, and also state boundaries, are a thing of the past.

Activity

1. Summarise the key points of Kant’s theory of history and Marx’s – what are the similarities and differences between them?

2. ‘National divisions and conflicts between peoples increasingly disappear with the development of the bourgeoisie, with free trade and the world market, with the uniform character of industrial production and the corresponding circumstances of modern life.’ (Marx and Engels excerpt in Brown et al., p.573)

Does the experience of international politics in the twentieth century definitively disprove the above claim?
Conclusion

The thinkers discussed above wrote at very different times and in very different historical contexts. They are not all focused on the same questions or concerned with the same moral and political issues. Nevertheless, between them they chart the territory of international theory and, as we shall see in the next chapter, they influence and inspire later thinkers trying to meet the challenge of explaining, understanding and judging international politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A reminder of your learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- outline the main ideas relevant to international politics of: Thucydides; Augustine; Machiavelli; Grotius; Hobbes; Rousseau; Kant; and Marx
- explain the ideas of the above thinkers in historical context
- discuss similarities and differences between the ideas of the above thinkers
- discuss strengths and weaknesses in the ideas of the above thinkers; outline reasons why you agree or disagree with the ideas of the above thinkers
- identify the key questions or issues each perspective highlights.

Sample examination questions

1. Discuss the relation between domestic and international politics in the thought of one of the following: Thucydides; Hobbes; Rousseau; Kant.
2. Assess Grotius’s contribution to international political theory.
3. Compare and contrast Kant and Rousseau on the idea of progress in history.
4. Is progress in international politics possible? Discuss with reference to the arguments of Machiavelli and Kant.
5. Critically examine the relevance of any one of the following for thinking about international politics today: Thucydides; Hobbes; Marx.
Chapter 3: Major schools of international theory 1919–89

Introduction

In this chapter we will be examining the theoretical perspectives that have been most influential in the study of international relations during the twentieth century, in particular since 1945. You were introduced to these perspectives in Chapter 1 of 11 Introduction to international relations under Martin Wight's broad headings of ‘realism’, ‘rationalism’ and ‘revolutionism’. In this chapter the theoretical perspectives are classified under four headings: liberalism; realism; international society; and Marxism/structuralism. As we will see, these different perspectives all claim to be descendents of the theories of different canonic thinkers discussed in the previous chapter.

Aims and objectives

The aims of the chapter are to:

• enable you to learn the main ideas and concepts in the major schools of international relations theory
• enable you to compare and assess these theoretical perspectives.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• outline the main features of liberal, realist, international society and Marxist theories of international politics
• explain the contribution of particular theorists to developments within the theories
• discuss these theories in their twentieth century historical context
• explain key differences between the theories, and identify the key questions highlighted by some theories and omitted by others
• explain strengths and weaknesses in the theories
• explain reasons why you agree or disagree with the theories.

Essential reading

Further reading


Liberalism

Liberalism has a long history as a political ideology. It is associated with a belief in the rights of individuals to life, liberty and property, and of peoples to national self-determination and democratic government (see discussion of Woodrow Wilson, Chapter 1 of 11 *Introduction to international relations*). Liberals generally have an optimistic, progressive view of history, in which it is assumed that politics can be compatible with the achievement of moral ends such as justice and human rights. Liberal views of world politics gained prominence after WW1 as a reaction against the damage perceived to have been wrought by a culture of great power competition and secret diplomacy. Liberal approaches to the study of international politics follow the lead of thinkers such as Kant (discussed in the previous chapter). They identify forms of inter-state cooperation in international law and international institutions (such as the League of Nations or the UN) as representing the development of the international system from an anarchic situation of warring states in its Westphalian origins, to a cooperative, orderly and potentially harmonious sphere.

Liberal accounts of contemporary international politics take states and the state system as key to understanding international politics, and seek to identify the sources for state cooperation and how international law and institutions help to consolidate such cooperation. Unlike realists (see below), liberals see the characteristics of states themselves as important for their behaviour in the international realm. They also see economic relations (economic interdependence) between states as playing a
significant role in the increase of institutionalised cooperation between states and the growth of normative consensus in the international sphere over issues such as human rights. The broad school of liberalism includes IR scholarship under the following labels: liberal internationalists; liberal institutionalists; pluralists; interdependence and regime theorists (Burchill et al., 2001: Chapter 2; Baylis and Smith, 2001: Chapter 8).

**Key sources of explanation (those actors or features of international politics which best explain what happens in the international realm)**

a. States and the state system: liberals see states as the most significant international actor in current world politics and the key source of explanation of developments in international politics; they also accept that the anarchic nature of the international system is an important factor in shaping state behaviour. However, liberals argue that the type of political order within a state influences how the state behaves in the international realm and may eventually work to change the international system. In particular, liberals argue that democratic states are likely to be pacifistic in relation to one another, whereas they are more likely to be belligerent in relation to authoritarian states. This is known as the 'liberal democratic peace' theory. This theory holds out the prospect that the democratisation of states is the way forward to an international system in which anarchy becomes order and war gives way to peace (see Doyle, Chapter 4 in Kegley, 1995; Russett, 1993).

b. In addition to the causal influences of states and the state system, liberals also argue that economic interdependence and more generally processes of globalisation (in which there is increasing economic, social, political and cultural interconnection and commonality across different states) have effects on international politics. These kinds of processes push forward the creation of international institutions, organisations and 'regimes' that in turn may exert their own specific influence (Keohane and Nye, Chapter 19 in Williams et al., 1993; Keohane and Nye, 2001; Hobson, 2000: Chapter 3; Neumann and Waever, 1997: Chapter 4).

c. Liberals argue that international institutions and organisations, such as the EU, World Bank, World Trade Organisation or United Nations, may exert an independent influence on international relations, over and above the sum of the influences of the various states that participate in them. This independent influence is partly because such entities develop a distinctive identity. This means that their members start to identify with the institution or organisation rather than with their own states. It is partly because such institutions and organisations embed norms and rules within the international system that end up shaping or influencing the behaviour of states (see discussion of international society perspective below) (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). Related to this is the liberal argument that international 'regimes', which are essentially sets of rules and norms which govern the interrelation of states in relation to specific policy areas (such as global telecommunications; proliferation of nuclear weapons etc.), can acquire an independent capacity to shape and constrain the behaviour of states (Baylis and Smith, 2001: Chapter 12; Keohane, Chapter 1.8 in Little and Smith, 1991; Krasner, 1983).
d. Interest: liberals take the pursuit of self-interest as key to the behaviour of individuals and collectives, including different kinds of international actors. However, they argue that there can be a harmony of interests between different actors and that therefore this means that conflict is not inevitable within the international realm. In the most important version of liberalism within current international theory, neo-liberalism (see discussion below), liberals view cooperation as a rational, self-interested response to the various kinds of dilemmas involved in managing a complex world in which interdependence exists side by side with an anarchic international system. Cooperation can be a ‘win-win’ answer to how to overcome problems posed by the anarchy of the international system.

Overall, liberal explanations of events in international politics highlight the significance of the nature of specific states and the importance of economic, institutional and cultural factors. For liberals, there are a plurality of actors in the international realm, and therefore a plurality of possibilities for explaining specific international developments.

**Possibilities for change**

As already mentioned, liberals take an optimistic approach to international politics, though some are more optimistic than others. For instance, democratic peace theorists such as Russett (Russett, 1993) follow Kant in seeing a positive direction to historical development in which the combined forces of democratisation of states and economic interdependence promise to lead to the extension of the current ‘liberal zone of peace’ between democratic states to the world order as a whole. Liberal institutionalists, pluralists, regime theorists and neo-liberals see a variety of forces operating in international politics, some of which are progressive and some of which aren’t and they tend to give a less optimistic reading of history (Keohane and Nye, 2001). However, common to all liberals is the assumption that it is possible for international politics to change and that the sources of change may be internal to states, or may emanate from the requirement that states cooperate with others in order to serve their own interests, or may even be to do with the independent influence of international institutions and regimes on their members.

**Activity**

Kant is usually cited as the inspiration for liberal theories of IR. Make a list of the ideas of liberal democratic peace theory and liberal institutionalism. To what extent are these ideas present in Kant’s theory of perpetual peace?

**Realism**

Realism became identified as a distinctive way of looking at international politics after the Second World War, partly in reaction to what were seen as the mistakes of liberalism in its analysis of international politics in the 1920s and 1930s (see Chapter 1 of 11 Introduction to international relations). However, many contemporary realists claim that their ideas originate much earlier, with thinkers such as Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli and Hobbes, discussed in the previous chapter. There are two main phases of realism in the study of IR since 1945, ‘classical realism’ (Carr, 1995; Morgenthau, 1993; see extracts, Chapters 14 and 15 in Williams et al., 1993), which dominated thinking in the 1950s to the early 1970s and ‘neo-realism’ (Waltz, 2001; 1979; Waltz. Chapters 3–4 in Keohane, 1986; see extracts from Waltz in Williams et al., 1993, Chapter 17), which has dominated thinking from the late 1970s onwards. Classical
realism sees international politics as states’ pursuit of self-interest in terms of power in an anarchic context. In contrast to liberal perspectives, it is pessimistic about international progress. Moreover, classical realism sees liberal assumptions as inherently dangerous because they are (according to classical realists) so misleading about the nature of international relations. For classical realists it was liberalism that led statesmen to make the serious mistakes in the 1920s and 1930s of permitting Germany and Japan to re-arm, which paved the way for their later aggression. Classical realists argue for a non-moralistic approach to both judgment and action in international politics. They were particularly concerned with how to equip statesmen and foreign policy makers with the correct assumptions about how international politics operates and to stress its detachment from the kinds of moral ideals that might have significance in domestic politics (such as justice).

Neo-realists, who have come to represent the realist position in contemporary IR, are less concerned than classical realists with how foreign policy should be conducted and more concerned with trying to offer a coherent framework of explanation for the dynamics of international politics in general. Kenneth Waltz, the leading neo-realist scholar, argues that this framework essentially derives from the characteristics of the international system (see discussion of sources of explanation in realism below). Classical realism and neo-realism share ground in their emphasis on the distinctiveness of international politics (as opposed to domestic), their lack of faith in international progress and their focus on the importance of such ideas as ‘balance of power’. Because neo-realism is the most influential form of contemporary realism, the focus is on neo-realism below. (Burchill et al., 2001: Chapter 3; Baylis and Smith, 2001: Chapter 7; Brown, 2001: Chapter 4–6; Buzan, Chapter 2 in Booth and Zalewski, 1995).

Key sources of explanation

International system: for neo-realists the main way in which one can explain the behaviour of different actors in the international context is by reference to the state system. This system comprises three elements: the ordering principle, which is anarchy; the units in the system, which are sovereign states; and the distribution of capabilities between the units, which means the relative power of states in relation to each other.

Anarchy: the fact that there is no hierarchical order in the international system means that all members of the system have to operate according to a principle of self-help – very like that which Hobbes argues is at work in his ‘state of nature’. This means that states will always be obliged to maximise their power in relation to each other. This leads to a ‘balancing’ tendency in the international system as a whole, in which less powerful units will seek ways of challenging the power of more powerful actors. This can manifest itself in ‘bipolar’ (e.g. Cold War, between US and Soviet Union) and ‘multipolar’ (e.g. great powers in Europe in the eighteenth century) distributions of power (see discussion of Thucydides and Hobbes in previous chapter).

States: unlike liberals, neo-realists see the character of particular states as irrelevant to their behaviour as international actors. This is because whether a state is a democracy or a tyranny, the constraints of anarchy puts all states in a perpetual ‘security dilemma’ which forces them to act in a self-interested way abroad, even if they have a cooperative, democratic mode of government at home. This means that war is an ever-present possibility within the international system, even for democratic states (Hobson, 2000: Chapter 2).
Relative power of states: neo-realism sees the relation of states with each other as a ‘zero sum’ matter. That is to say, states need to have the advantage relative to other states. It doesn’t matter how powerful a state is, it is always in its interest to increase the power gap between itself and its competitors. In contrast to liberalism, there are no win–win situations (Grieco, Chapter 6 in Kegley, 1995).

In general, it is the focus on ‘system level’, as opposed to state or sub-state level factors in generating explanations for international politics that differentiates neo-realism from the liberal tradition, except for neo-liberalism (see final section of this Chapter and Chapter 5 discussion of ‘levels of analysis’ below). It is also the case that neo-realism sees non-state actors and economic interdependence as relatively unimportant for explanation in international politics. Neo-realism is much more holist in its approach than liberalism. Whereas liberals argue that there are a plurality of factors which need to be taken into account in understanding international politics, neo-realists always come back to the pre-eminent importance of the international system as a whole.

Possibilities for change

The realist view (both classical and neo-realist) is that the mechanisms governing international politics are antithetical to fundamental change, and certainly antithetical to progress. This does not mean that international politics is static, but the changes can only be from one distribution of power to another, for instance from multipolar to bipolar distributions rather than from a more to a less anarchic system. Whereas liberals see the development of international order as embedded in the self-interest of states as well as in forces that are not reducible to either the state or the state system, the realist emphasis is on the systemic factors which push states to behave competitively, and only to cooperate as a strategic tactic rather than because of an ultimate harmony of interests.

Activity

Go back and re-read the sections on Thucydides and Hobbes in Chapter 2: how much does neo-realism rely on ideas present in these two thinkers?

Comparative exercise

Example: Consider a major development in international politics in the twentieth century, the outbreak of the First World War, how do you think this development would be explained by liberalism as opposed to realism?

In order to answer the above question you need to think about the different sources of explanation offered by the two schools of thought. For instance, liberal theories see the type of political order within states as influencing their behaviour in international politics. The major protagonists in the First World War were imperial and either authoritarian or minimally democratic states. Liberals would expect war to be more likely either between authoritarian states or between democratic and authoritarian states. So, one likely liberal explanation for the outbreak of the First World War would be the absence of democracy within states at the time (indeed this was precisely the explanation favoured by statesmen such as Woodrow Wilson). In contrast, realist explanations emphasise the importance of the ongoing ‘security dilemma’ within the international system, in which states are obliged to pursue their self-interest by maximising their power at the expense of that of other powers through balance of power politics. So, one likely realist explanation of the First World War is that it was a simply an extension of balance of power politics in a situation in which states perceived their interests to be best served by resort to war.

Now you try: take another major development in twentieth-century international politics, the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. How do you think this development
would be explained by liberalism as opposed to realism? Do you think one of the two schools provides more convincing explanations than the other?

### International society

The international society approach to understanding international relations is also known by the labels of ‘rationalism’ (see Chapter 1 of *Introduction to international relations*) and the ‘English School’ (see Burchill et al., 2001: Ch. 4; Forum, 2001). In many ways it sees itself as the middle way between the extremes of realism and liberalism (Brown, 1995). Initially formulated in the 1950s and 60s in Britain, its most important founding text is Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* (1995, see extract, Chapter 20 in Williams et al., 1993). Proponents of this perspective see their ideas as originating with thinkers such as Grotius, for whom there were principles embedded in the international order in spite of its anarchic nature (see discussion in previous chapter). Whereas realists see inter-state relations in systemic, mechanical terms, in which the competitive dynamics of interaction are simply inscribed within the anarchic international system, international society theorists see inter-state relations as ‘social’ rather than mechanical. This means that inter-state relations are governed by norms and rules that have been explicitly or implicitly agreed upon by the members of international society. International society is still anarchical, in the sense that it has no overarching authority, but it is also ordered. In contrast to liberals, however, international society theorists have traditionally been wary of strong claims for the possibility of progress in international politics, and have emphasised state actors and the realm of ‘high politics’ as opposed to, for instance, economic interdependence.

Other international society thinkers in addition to Bull include Nardin (1983) Jackson (2000) and Wheeler (2000). In recent years there has been an effort to revise international society theory on a more rigorously social scientific basis (see Buzan, 2004). There are differences between international society thinkers in how ‘social’ they see international society as being. Whereas some thinkers (Nardin, Jackson) argue that international society is relatively thin, allowing states to operate with very different cultures and norms yet still participate; others, such as Wheeler, argue for the development of an increasingly ‘solidarist’ international society in which states share more and more cultural and normative ground, for instance over human rights or humanitarian intervention (see discussion in Chapter 6 below).

### Key explanatory variables

International society theorists, like realists, see the anarchic nature of international relations and the way in which that constrains the behaviour of states as vital for understanding international politics. From an international society perspective, however, this anarchy is not simply a ‘state of nature’ in a Hobbesian sense, but a social condition in which certain norms/institutions shape the nature of international politics. Bull identifies the following as key norms/institutions of international society: sovereignty; diplomacy; international law; balance of power; war; role of great powers.

Institutions: in the international society perspective, the term ‘institutions’ does not refer to specific international organisations but to more general systems of rules and norms that are accepted as legitimate means of inter-state relations. So for instance, the institution of sovereignty in this context
refers to the mutual acceptance of rights to sovereign self-determination and non-intervention in the affairs of other states, by which all states have explicitly or implicitly agreed to abide.

International society theorists focus on the importance of internalised norms (that is, norms which have been consented to by states and their representatives as guiding their conduct in the international realm) in the conduct of international politics. For some international society theorists, called pluralists, these international norms are largely about permitting sovereign states to determine their own affairs (the predominant norm being a norm of non-intervention). In pluralist work, there is an emphasis on the difficulties of developing a strong set of shared values at the international level, because of the cultural differences between different states (Brown, 1995). However, for other international society theorists, called solidarists, the norms of international society are becoming stronger and putting more constraints on the sovereign rights of states. For instance, solidarists have argued that we can see the influence of universal shared norms of justice in post-Cold War international society in the willingness of states to intervene in other states' affairs on humanitarian grounds. Solidarists see the idea of universal human rights as a norm which has been accepted in international society and which may, in certain circumstances, override the norm of non-intervention.

Overall, international society theorists occupy a middle position between realists and liberals in terms of how they understand and explain international politics. Their main distinctive contribution to the study of international relations is in the attention they pay to the role of rules and norms in shaping the behaviour of states. In addition, however, they also pay much more attention than either realists or liberals to the history of the international system and the importance of looking back in order to understand how international society evolved and may change (Bull and Watson, 1985; Watson, 1992).

Possibilities for change

Different international society scholars take different positions on the question of change and progress within the international system. Thinkers of a more pluralist persuasion point to the difficulty of bringing about major change in inter-state relations and the possible dangers of trying to force change by challenging existing norms, such as the norm of non-intervention in the affairs of other states. Solidarist thinkers, however, find more potential for progress, through the evolution of norms in international society, and argue that developments such as the human rights regime or humanitarian intervention signal genuine moral progress in international politics. In this sense, pluralists are closer to realists and solidarists to liberals.

Activity

Go back and read the section on Grotius in Chapter 2, identify the similarities and differences in the account of international society between Grotius and Bull.

Comparative exercise

Look back at the liberal and realist explanations for the end of the Cold War you identified at the end of the previous section. In what ways do you think international society theorists would agree or disagree with liberal and realist accounts?
Marxism/Structuralism

Approaches to the study of international politics that derive from Marx's work (see previous chapter) have developed in parallel with the liberal, realist and international society perspectives in the twentieth century. As with the other perspectives (liberals in relation to Kant, realists in relation Hobbes, or international society scholars in relation to Grotius), contemporary Marxist theories build on but do not simply reproduce the ideas of the thinker that inspired them. Marxist theories of IR also draw on a range of Marxist thinkers other than Marx, in particular Lenin and his theory of imperialism (Burchill et al., 2001: Chapter 5; Baylis and Smith, 2001: Chapter 10). For these reasons they are often labelled 'structuralist' rather than 'Marxist' in international relations texts. In its modern (post 1945) form the Marxist approach to international relations was essentially a response to the liberal narratives that dominated accounts of the relation between rich and poor countries in the international system in the 1950s and 1960s (Brown, 2001: Chapter 10). At this time, liberal theories argued that global economic inequalities would be overcome by a common process of economic modernisation, in which poorer countries would follow the same pattern of economic development as the advanced capitalist states had done. Marxists argued that the evidence instead suggested that poorer countries were becoming poorer (see essays by Galtung and Wallerstein, Chapters 3.2 and 3.3 in Little and Smith, 1991). In addition, liberal, realist and international society theories of international politics all stressed the importance of states and the international system and society rather than the economic system as the key determinant of international politics. Following Marx, structuralist theorists argued that most theories of international politics missed the key factor that shaped the interactions between states, the capitalist system. There are several significant contributors to the Marxist theory of IR, including Frank (1971); Galtung (1971) and most importantly, Immanuel Wallerstein and his 'world-systems theory' (Wallerstein, 1983; see extracts in Chapter 18, Williams et al., 1993).

Key sources of explanation

a. Capitalist mode of production: the main point Marxist theorists make is that capitalism is a global economic system, which is the key shaping force of both international and domestic politics. The apparent equality of the sovereign state system effectively masks a world in which core (rich, advanced industrial) states systematically extract resources from periphery (poor, backward agrarian) states in an exploitative relationship. Wallerstein identifies three economic zones in the world system: core, periphery and semi-periphery.

b. States: for Wallerstein, core states have the role of managing and policing the world system, if necessary through the role of military force, but more often through setting up the rules which govern the world economy through such organisations as the WTO. In addition, core states are technologically and industrially advanced, creaming off the benefits of the broader system through their exploitation of the raw materials and cheap labour of the peripheral states. Semi-periphery states share some characteristics with core and some with periphery states. They may be dominated by core interests but have success in controlling niche aspects of production, for instance in electronics in the Asian Tiger economies in the 1980s. The semi-periphery states act to help stabilise and legitimate the world system in a variety of
ways, including through their example of economic progress within it. Periphery states have a weak indigenous industrial base and are a source of raw materials and unskilled labour for the world economy as such. Their resources are essential to the productivity of core states, but they do not get the benefit of the value that they produce.

c. Class: unlike any of the other IR theories, Marxist theories take the concept of class seriously in explaining world politics. According to theories such as those of Frank and the world systems theory of Wallerstein, class relations have been effectively globalised with the spread of capitalism so that the vast majority of the population of dependent or peripheral states are like a global proletariat, whereas the populations of the core states are like the global bourgeoisie. For Marxist theorists state interests are equivalent to class interest in the context of global capitalism, and this means that the behaviour of both ‘bourgeois’ states and ‘proletarian’ states will be primarily dictated by class position. However, the possibilities of revolution from the proletarian states is mitigated by the cooption of their elites by the core. Leaders and elite groups in poor countries, it is argued, identify with the interests of the global bourgeoisie rather than with the interests of their exploited peoples and this keeps the people of the periphery in their subordinated position.

d. Contradiction: as in Marx’s theory, contemporary Marxist accounts of IR see the capitalist system as prone to crisis and conflict because the interests of the bourgeoisie and proletariat are fundamentally at odds. For instance, it is in the interest of employers to keep down the wages of workers and in the interests of workers to maximise wages. According to Marxists, the response of capitalist states in the late nineteenth century to this conflict was to fund ‘buying off’ workers at home, by exploiting foreign workers and resources through colonialism and imperialism. Another conflict, however, is that although employers need to keep wages down, they also need consumers to buy their products, so there is an ongoing tension between the drive to impoverish workers on the one hand, and enable consumption on the other. This kind of tension, according to Wallerstein, can lead to crisis and even ultimately to the breakdown of the system. Overall, Marxist theories are quite distinct from the other theories we have examined. They place much less emphasis than realists and international society theorists on the level of inter-state relations (whether anarchic or social) as the fundamental source of explanation of developments in international politics, including war. And they place much less emphasis than liberals on the internal political order of states as a primary determinant of developments in international politics, including war. Instead they put emphasis on the primacy of the economic over the political; on classes as political actors and on class conflict and the tensions inherent in capitalism as key motors for international change and as causes of war.

Possibilities for change

When Marx was writing in the mid to late nineteenth century, he thought that the revolution which would transform capitalism into socialism was, if not imminent, at least foreseeable within the next three or four generations. 150 years later, Marxist analysis in IR, though it continues to find useful categories for explanation in Marx’s work, tends to be much less optimistic (Halliday, 1994: Chapter 4). For instance in Wallerstein’s case, the ‘world system’ is viewed as something that can operate with relative stability for centuries. There is certainly the potential for change,
but there is no certainty that there will be a global revolution in the near future – especially as the core states have proved very efficient in managing the tensions of the global economy.

Activity

Read the extract from Wallerstein in Williams et al., 1993. What similarities and differences can you identify with Marx’s theory, discussed in Chapter 2?

Comparative exercise

Marxist explanations of the First World War emphasised how its origins were tied up with the imperialist capitalist Great Powers’ struggle with each other for raw materials and markets. Is it possible to explain the end of the Cold War using Marxist sources of explanation such as capitalism or class? Compare possible Marxist explanations with those of liberalism, realism and international society theories.

Problems with the theories

It will be evident from the discussion above and from your reading that the theoretical frameworks above disagree on important issues when it comes to the explanation of international politics. Each of the theoretical perspectives can be criticised in a variety of ways and you can use ideas from one theory to criticise ideas in another. It is important to recognise that differences between the theories reflect differences in their basic assumptions, and you need to decide which basic assumptions you find most convincing. The list below sums up issues that you will need to think about in order to come to your own assessment of the theories. Please look at the list, think about the questions and try to identify the fundamental points on which the theories differ, then look at the suggested answers below.

Issues/questions

1. Is there such a thing as a ‘harmony’ of interests between states, or are international politics necessarily ‘zero sum’ in character? (liberalism v realism)
2. Can democratic peace be explained other than by the factor of democracy? (liberalism v realism)
3. Can one explain international politics simply by reference to the international system? (realism v liberalism, international society and Marxism)
4. How can realists account for change in the international system? (realism v liberalism, international society and Marxism)
5. How important are internalised rules and norms in explaining the behaviour of states? Can there be such a thing as an anarchical society? (international society v realism and Marxism)
6. Is the mode of production more important for explaining international politics than the relative power of states? (Marxism v realism)

Possible responses

1. Both realists and Marxists would argue that liberals are wrong to claim that there can be a harmony of interests in the international sphere. For realists, this is because states are committed to self-help within a context of anarchy and must therefore always seek relative advantage. For Marxists this is because there is a deep incompatibility between the interests of the exploiters and the exploited within the global political
economy. For liberals there is at least the possibility that recognition of common interests will push the development of the international system in a more harmonious direction, whereas for realists, although states may sometimes share interests, this is a temporary coincidence which cannot be relied upon to continue.

2. Realists would claim that you can explain the absence of war between democratic states in realist terms as being because there has been no major clash of interests between democratic states in the twentieth century, or that there have been different ways of dealing with those conflicts, for instance through economic competition. In particular they would argue that the bipolar structure of the Cold War froze any nascent conflict between capitalist great powers in the larger struggle between East and West. In the post Cold War situation, realists would claim that it might well be that over time conflicts between e.g. the remaining superpower (USA) and nascent powers such as the EU could emerge and even escalate into war. However, this is extremely unlikely, not because the states are democratic but because the relative advantage of the US in the current international system is so great that it would make no sense for states to go to war against it.

3. Liberals, international society theorists and Marxists would argue that realism is mistaken in thinking that the international system is the key determinant of international politics. For liberals a plurality of factors, including the nature of states is important. For international society theorists, it is not so much the focus on the international system but the way in which realists understand that system that is mistaken – realists see it in mechanical terms, whereas international society theorists argue this is a social, rule governed system. For Marxists, the key level of explanation of international politics is also systemic, but it is the economic system that they see as crucial – for Marxists the international state system is essentially in place because it is highly compatible with the globalisation of capitalism.

4. Because it emphasises the level of system, realism has tremendous difficulty explaining how the international system might change. Liberalism, international society and Marxist theorists are all much more historical in their approach to explaining international politics and see a focus on the dynamics of change as an essential part of their theorising. It is worth noting that even when it comes to changes within the system, realism does not have a good record of prediction – but then none of the theories have been strong at anticipating change (e.g. the end of the Cold War).

5. For realists and Marxists, the role of norms is always subordinated to material interests. In other words, states or other international actors may represent their motivations in terms of norms and values, but essentially these are a mask for interests. For realists a state which uses moral arguments to justify war is using those arguments for strategic purposes to help sell its policies to its own population or gain support from the international community; ultimately states will be acting according to self-interest. For Marxists, the norms of the international community such as those of sovereignty or human rights are essentially ‘ideological’, that is, they disguise and legitimate the actualities of the pursuit of class interest on the part of the core states in the world system. The international society focus on norms and rules is therefore seen as fundamentally wrong in realist and Marxist terms.

6. Realists would argue the opposite to Marxists, that is, that the relative power of states is the key determination not only of developments in
international politics such as war or alliances, but also of international economic developments.

The neo-realist/neoliberal consensus

In general within the academic study of international relations since 1945, the predominant modes of theorising international politics have been the liberal and realist modes, with realist modes being particularly significant (since the late 1970s, neo-realist modes). The influence of international society and Marxist approaches has been much less important. By the late 1980s, a new version of liberalism, called neo-liberalism, developed. Neo-liberalism shares much more ground with neo-realism than with other liberal theories. We have already discussed neo-realism (see above). Neo-liberalism follows liberalism in focusing on dynamics of cooperation between states and the study of international institutions and regimes. As with liberalism in general, it operates on the premise that ‘absolute gains’ (that is to say outcomes in which everyone benefits) are possible within the international system. However neo-liberalism also accepts many of neo-realism’s assumptions about the importance of the constraining power of the international system, the definition of international actors as rationally self-interested and the state as by far the most important international actor. Neo-liberalism tends to be much more limited in its optimism about the possibilities for radical change within the international system than the liberal tradition more broadly (Baylis and Smith, Chapter 9; Nye, 1992; Grieco, Chapter 6 in Kegley, 1995). Critics have argued that there is increasingly little to choose between realist and liberal accounts of the international realm over the past two decades and this is partly why a series of critical responses to dominant modes of theorising international relations have emerged, which we will go on to examine in the next chapter.

A reminder of your learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and having completed the Essential reading and activities you should be able to:

• outline the main features of liberal, realist, international society and Marxist theories of international politics
• explain the contribution of particular theorists to developments within the theories
• discuss these theories in their twentieth century historical context
• explain key differences between the theories, and identify the key questions highlighted by some theories and omitted by others
• explain strengths and weaknesses in the theories
• explain reasons why you agree or disagree with the theories.

Sample examination questions

1. Critically assess liberal theories of the democratic peace.
2. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of neo-realism as a theory of international politics.
3. Is international society evolving in a more ‘solidarist’ direction?
4. If Marxist theories of international politics are right, why hasn't there been an international revolution?