

The notion that there is a monolithic theory of realism is increasingly rejected both by those who are sympathetic to, and those who are critical of, the realist tradition. The belief that there is not one realism, but many, leads logically to a delineation of different types of realism. The most simple distinction is a form of periodization that differentiates realism into three historical periods: classical realism (up to the twentieth century), which is frequently depicted as beginning with Thucydides' history of Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and incorporates the ideas of many of those included in the classic canon of Western political thought; modern realism (1939–79), which typically takes as its point of departure the First Great Debate between the scholars of the inter-war period and a new group of scholars who began to enter the field immediately before and after the Second World War; and structural or neo-realism (1979 onwards), which officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979).

While these different periods suggest a neat historical sequence, they are problematic in so far as they close down the important question about divergence within each historical phase. Rather than opt for the neat but intellectually unsatisfactory system of historical periodization, we outline below our own representation of realisms that makes important connections with existing categories deployed by other thinkers in the field. A summary of the varieties of realism outlined below is contained in Table 6.1.

## Classical realism

The classical realist lineage begins with Thucydides' representation of power politics as a law of human behaviour. The drive for power and the will to dominate are held to be fundamental aspects of human nature. The behaviour of the state as a self-seeking egoist is understood to be a reflection of the characteristics of human beings. It is human nature that explains why

Table 6.1 Taxonomy of realisms

Type of realism	Key thinkers	Key texts	'Big idea'
<b>Classical realism</b> (Human nature)	Thucydides (c. 430–406 BC)	<i>The Peloponnesian War</i>	International politics is driven by an endless struggle for power, which has its roots in human nature. Justice, law, and society have either no place or are circumscribed.
	Machiavelli (1532)	<i>The Prince</i>	Political realism recognizes that principles are subordinated to policies; the ultimate skill of the state leader is to accept, and adapt to, the changing power political configurations in world politics.
	Morgenthau (1948)	<i>Politics among Nations</i>	Politics is governed by laws that are created by human nature. The mechanism we use to understand international politics is the concept of interests, defined in terms of power.
<b>Structural realism</b> (international system)	Rousseau (c. 1750)	<i>The State of War</i>	It is not human nature but the anarchical system that fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity.
	Waltz (1979)	<i>Theory of International Politics</i>	Anarchy leads to a logic of self-help in which states seek to maximize their security. The most stable distribution of power in the system is bipolarity.
	Mearsheimer (2001)	<i>Tragedy of Great Power Politics</i>	The anarchical, self-help system compels states to maximize their relative power positions.
<b>Neoclassical realism</b>	Zakaria (1998)	<i>From Wealth to Power</i>	The systemic account of world politics provided by structural realism is incomplete. It needs to be supplemented with better accounts of unit-level variables such as how power is perceived, and how leadership is exercised.



international politics is necessarily power politics. This reduction of realism to a condition of human nature is one that frequently reappears in the leading works of the realist canon, particularly in the work of Hans J. Morgenthau. Classical realists argue that it is from the nature of man that the essential features of international politics, such as competition, fear, and war, can be explained. For both Thucydides and Morgenthau, the essential continuity of the power-seeking behaviour of states is rooted in the biological drives of human beings.

Another distinguishing characteristic of classical realism is its adherents' belief in the primordial character of power and ethics. Classical realism is fundamentally about the struggle for belonging, a struggle that is often violent. Patriotic virtue is required in order for communities to survive in this historic battle between good and evil. Two classical realists who wrestled with the degree to which state leaders could be guided by ethical considerations were Thucydides and Machiavelli.

Thucydides was the historian of the Peloponnesian War, a conflict between two great powers in the ancient Greek world, Athens and Sparta. Thucydides' work has been admired by subsequent generations of realists for the insights he raised about many of the perennial issues of international politics. Thucydides' explanation of the underlying cause of the war was 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta' (1.23). This is considered to be a classic example of the impact that the distribution of power has on the behaviour of state actors. On this reading, Thucydides makes it clear that Sparta's **national interest**, like that of all states, was survival, and the changing distribution of power represented a direct threat to its existence. Sparta was, therefore, compelled by necessity to go to war in order to forestall being vanquished by Athens. Thucydides also makes it clear that Athens felt equally compelled to pursue power in order to preserve the **empire** it had acquired. The famous Athenian leader, Pericles, claimed to be acting on the basis of the most fundamental of human motivations: ambition, fear, and self-interest (see Case Study 1).

Classical realists concur with Thucydides' view that the logic of power politics has universal applicability. Instead of Athens and Melos, we could just as easily substitute the vulnerability of Machiavelli's beloved Florence to the expansionist policies of external great powers. In Morgenthau's era, there were many examples where the innate drive for more power and **territory** seemed to confirm the realist iron law. The seemingly endless cycle of war and conflict confirmed

in the minds of twentieth-century classical realists the essentially aggressive impulses in human nature. How is a leader supposed to act in a world animated by such dark forces? The answer given by Machiavelli is that all obligations and treaties with other states must be disregarded if the security of the community is under threat. Moreover, imperial expansion is legitimate as it is a means of gaining greater security. Other classical realists, however, advocate a more temperate understanding of moral conduct. Taking their lead from Thucydides, they recognize that acting purely on the basis of power and self-interest without any consideration of moral and ethical principles frequently results in self-defeating policies. After all, as Thucydides showed, Athens suffered an epic defeat while following its self-interest (see Case Study 1).

## Structural realism

Structural realists concur that international politics is essentially a struggle for power, but they do not attribute this to human nature. Instead, structural realists ascribe security competition and inter-state conflict to the lack of an overarching authority above states. Waltz defined the structure of the international system in terms of three elements—organizing principle, differentiation of units, and distribution of capabilities. Waltz identifies two different organizing principles: **anarchy**, which corresponds to the decentralized realm of international politics; and **hierarchy**, which is the basis of domestic order. He argues that the units of the international system are functionally similar sovereign states; hence unit-level variation is inconsequential. It is the third element, the distribution of capabilities across units, that is, according to Waltz, of fundamental importance to understanding crucial international outcomes. According to structural realists, the relative distribution of power in the international system is the key independent variable in understanding important international outcomes such as war and peace, alliance politics, and the balance of power. Structural realists are interested in providing a rank-ordering of states so that they can discern the number of great powers that exist at any particular point in time. The number of great powers in turn, determines the overall structure of the international system. For example, during the cold war from 1945 to 1989 there were two great powers—the USA and the Soviet Union—that constituted the bipolar international system, and since the end of the cold war the