

Just War Theory versus Political Realism

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### Just War Theory versus Political Realism

The Just War Theory and political realism are some of the theories that explain issues of international relations. The Just War Theory states that, although attacking others is unjustifiable, one can or should do it to defend themselves. According to the theory, having a just cause is the most important reason for going to war ("Pacism, Just War, and Political Realism"). Other reasons include legitimate authority, a reasonable chance of success, proportionality, and the last resort. The Just War Theory draws its principles from three aspects of war. One is *jus ad bellum*, which means going into a war under humanitarian intervention, or defense (Moseley, 2011). The second one is *jus in bello*, which involves going to seek justice. It means that the soldiers prohibit the unjustified killing of the civilians. The third one is *jus post bellum*. This means being just even after the conclusion of the war and relates to the conduct of the occupational forces. On the other hand, political realism is a more skeptical approach to international relations. It upholds that states must act in their own interests. According to the theory, power should be the primary end of political action. The theory drafts its principles from the general view that global relations are characterized by chaos since there is no world government to enforce the code of rules. Thus, it becomes critical that states pursue self-interests to protect themselves. Whereas the theory advocates for self-defense like the Just War Theory, it considers the moral attributes of such action. Thus, the realists do not believe in the rules of war. From a moral and ethical point of view, one should consider political realism as a better model for shaping international relations as opposed to the Just War Theory.

One strength of the political realism compared to the Just War Theory is its advocacy for equality of nations. The realists view the world as a self-help system, where the weak countries can use all justifiable means to defend themselves. Otherwise, they risk the will of the might

being imposed on them (Korab-Karpowicz, 2010). This view by the realists implies that they do not advocate for domination. The idea that states must be self-seeking is based on the presupposition that world nations are natural aggressors and domination seekers, and the only way to establish equality is to allow countries to fight for themselves. This does not mean just waging war for the sake of it, but when it is the only and prudent thing to do in the face of adversities. This is a major strength of the realism theory, which is lacking in the Just War Theory. In view of the latter, it is right to go to war as long as the nations consider it justified to do so. This may lead the mighty nations taking advantage to assert their political ideology.

Besides, from a humanitarian point of view, the Just War Theory falls short of justifications. Whereas the theory supports the need to use just means during the war, it is evident that conflicts always cause death. Perhaps, the combatants may not attack the civilians, but the war itself is daunting and traumatizing to the fighters (Rocha, 2019). The combat experience and the traumatic exposures of the soldiers and their families support the view that war is unjustified by all means. Still, the combatants may attack the non-combatants as a way of instilling fear. In this regard, it is unrealistic to expect that the means used during the war will be restrained as it is the expectations of the Just War Theory. For instance, during the Second World War, the Japanese and its allies used brutal means to kill prisoners of war, medical personnel, and civilians (Rocha, 2019). The political realism theory postulates that peace is the supreme value. It advocates that nations should seek peace first and can only be justifiable for them to fight for it if it cannot be obtained otherwise. In this regard, political realism can be described as a more relaxed approach to international pursuit. Wars can be used through a gradual process if all other means of seeking peace are not possible. This is unlike the Just War Theory, which justifies war as a spontaneous reaction to events. As long as the rules of war have been met, then

nations are justified to go to the battlefield. This is an aggressive approach that could lead to more conflict as opposed to peace in the international arena.

Additionally, from the earlier experiences of humanity, Just War Theory has been associated with conflict and imposing a common ideology. For example, during the early Christian period, there was a common belief of a single denomination. In fact, the term “just war” was coined from a Christian point of view (Orend, 2006). It advocated for a war of holiness in which dissenting voices would be silenced. In particular, the early Roman church was taken as the only true religion, in which any other emerging form of belief was to be wiped out. A Roman Catholic leader would have a just reason to go to war. In such a case, the just cause would be the punishment of the enemy for their “evil” ways (Delahunty & Yoo, 2012). Apart from the experiences of the early church, the idea of “holy war,” which is still held by factions of the Islamic faith, emphasizes that the Just War Theory is unjustifiable. Ideally, by waging a religious war, the perpetrators believe they are justified to do so. This satisfies the first rule of war according to the Just War Theory. It suggests that as long as an individual, group, or state feels justified to start a war, it is right to do so. Religious faiths waged wars to defend their faith and impose a common belief. Unlike this approach of the Just War Theory, the political realism justifies war in the process of self-defense. One cannot fight to impose a will upon others since it is not prudent to do so. In this regard, the political idealism approach provides a better model for propagating international ideas in a manner that leads to less conflict. Since individuals and states hold different ideologies, it would be dangerous to adopt a Just War Theory since everyone will feel justified to fight for their cause, which could create anarchy.

Furthermore, the political realism theory makes more justifiable claims than the Just War Theory. In particular, the claim that the current international system is characterized by anarchy

is an acceptable description. Since ancient times, countries fought with each other; there were religious wars, conquests, world wars, and trade disputes. Given that there is no single world government, it makes sense to allow the state the authority to protect its own people from international anarchy. Delahunty and Yoo (2012) note that in such a case, the government does not need to resort to armed conflict to fuel its international agenda. Instead, the political realism theory gives non-combat approaches to ending the conflict. A state can only use war as a last resort. This means that countries can negotiate with others or enter into agreements to address the anarchy that occur between them. This mirrors the current state of international relations since countries are always in constant dialogue with each other to address issues of anarchy. However, the Just War Theory lacks objectivity in its claims. The idea that countries can attack each as long as they feel justified to do so is a recipe for international disaster as it was evident in the previous global conflicts. In this regard, following the political realism theory provides a better model of understanding international relations and intervening in ways that do not escalate the conflict.

Also, political realism draws its strengths from the idea of moralism. In what is referred to as political moralism, realism makes morals a priority over political pursuit (Bell, 2017). In this regard, moralism emphasizes the need for contingency, prudence, historical context, and moral argumentation for all political conduct. According to the realists, politics should be assessed on its terms. This means that any political conduct must be assessed while considering moral features and conditions. The aim is to ensure that political order does not sacrifice its predecessor's moral attributes. The idea of contingency and consideration of the historical context is a more proactive approach to address conflicts in international relations. This implies that the political realism theory does not operate in a vacuum. Instead, there is an appreciation of

historical issues of conflict and the current context in determining whether to defend oneself.

This leads to the avoidance of historical mistakes that were fueling the conflicts, which make the realism theory a better approach to amending historical errors that were associated with wars.

Other researchers have associated political realism with the ideals of justice. According to McKeogh (2016), claiming to be a realist is more than just stating one is in line with reality. In this case, reality entails an appreciation that the world is full of chaos and it would be sufficient for nations to be self-seeking to protect themselves. Instead, McKeogh argues that realists appreciate that there are multiple disagreeable aspects of human life. McKoeogh observes that the pessimistic view of appreciating the different disagreeable aspects is critical in political thought. To be just, a nation has to respect the autonomy of any other state against its overriding interests. On the other hand, Just War Theory has been criticized for being a major hindrance to the perpetuation of justice. While giving the example of the Persian Wars, Delahunty and Yoo (2012) narrate how the idea of just war hinders justice. As recounted by Thucydides in a Melian dialogue, Delahunty and Yoo (2012) observe that the Athenians offered the inhabitants of the Melos island a choice of either joining them, or get them destroyed. This is a major concern of the Just War Theory since it does not speak of rights but rather, interests. The political idealism theory overcomes such shortcomings not by ignoring issues of an international contest but advocating for a just cause for all war interventions. This makes the realism approach a superior model of intervening in global affairs.

Finally, the Just War Theory postulates that two wrongs can make a right, which is an unjustifiable way of looking at issues of international concern. According to Fotion (2013), Just War Theory holds on the doctrine of the moral equalization of war combatants. The proponents of the theory argue that the combatants of the aggressor state have similar moral rights as those

in the country that is defending itself. On the one hand, the combatants from the country that is defending themselves have moral rights to fight because they risk losing their autonomy to the aggressor nation. On the other hand, the aggressor nation has the justification for repelling any attempts to fight it since there is a just cause (attack) from another. In such an instance, it becomes important to rely on political realism theory. This is because the Just War Theory leads to acts of aggression on both sides, which escalate the conflict.

To conclude, the political realism theory is a better approach to addressing international relations. It advocates for a lesser combative way of handling conflict by giving a chance for other means of settling the conflict. Although it also advocates for wars, there is the presupposition that it can only occur if it is the most prudent thing to do. This is unlike the Just War Theory, which advocates for combat as long as particular rules are prevalent. If countries are to result in war, each time there is a just cause, and the proportionality of the means used are met, there is likely to be unending wars. Also, adhering to the realism approach allows nations to consider the context before they result in war. This is a more proactive approach for addressing issues that escalate into global wars. Consequently, political realism is less combative, realistic, and generates more justice for nations by limiting acts of aggression.

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