Realism And Liberalism In International Relations Theory: A Comparative Analysis

Introduction

In understanding international relation and what happens around the world, it is important for us to look into the theories which seeks to explain this, which are; the theories of international relations. Studying the relations between nations involves the study of those theories which seeks to explain this relationship between nations (Stephen and Rose 2007). Thus, it is essential for scholars on international relations to have a wide knowledge of the theories of international relations. Thus, theories of international relations are ideas of different people on how they see things happening in the present and that of the future especially in the domain of politics. it is of great essence to commence the study of international relations with its theories because, they aid scholars to easily grasp the how the international system functions, operates and also the way states collaborate with each other. This theory is of great significance to international experts as well as nations because it helps states in deciding on which policy to follow, or decide on, and at the same time helps experts to understand the reason behind a state's decision on a particular policy.

As transformation /development erupt, so to do theories change and new ideas develop. New ideologies have been introduced in the field of politics to explain changes, old ones have been revised and some theories have been registered less importance. Any attempt at analyzing the theories of international relations must begin with the two traditional theories (ideologies) in politics, that is, Realism and Liberalism. Despite several renovations on this two theory's ideas, as well as, the introduction of the new theories into the field of international relations to buttress the ideas of these traditional ideologies, they still remain the main theories of this discipline and sometimes, the new theories draw inspiration from these traditional theories. It is for this above reason that, this paper will be focusing on these two traditional theories of international relations, highlighting their disparities as well as their point of convergence.

However, we should be mindful of the fact that so many alternative theories exist in the field of international relations such as, feminism, constructivism, green politics, Marxism, post-structuralism, English school, post–colonialism as well as institutionalism. However, we are going to be looking at realism and liberalism.

Realism

From the onset, realism was called an 'utopian' theory. It came to lamplight during the cold war period to explain why states acts the way they do. However, its ideas evolved during the cold war period which led to the birth of a new version of realism known as neo-realism. However, despite the fact that it was a new version of the old, they still held the point that states have that inbred likelihood to fight for their interest over those of other states and this is what drives them to fight against each other. Realism portrays international affairs as the tussle authority between nations in other to ensure their self-respect will be safe. To realist, they have come to a conclusion that, conflict between states at the international realm cannot be brought to an end,

reason being that, states have that in-born tendency to pursue their own interest at the expense of others. Such ideas of realism have been followed by writers such as Kenneth Waltz, Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau.

As time went on, the school of realist divided into 2 classes, this being the classical realist who still uphold the fact that states have an in-born tendency to dominate and this is why nations fight at the international scene (Jack 2000:9). Then we have the neorealist also known as revised version of realism, who held that, it is the presence of anarchy at the international realm, which causes states to go into war amongst themselves (Mearsheimer 2001:30). To neorealist, the problem is not the nature of states but rather the anarchical nature of the international system with no supreme power to exercise some degree of control over states. It is of this lack of a supreme authority that states are left alone to act in whatever way they can so as to survive (Martin:9). States act in whichever way they want to since there is no leader and at one point, their action either threatens or offends the other states thus leading to a fight. An example of a situation where states actions may threaten another in the increase of a state's security because, this does not only imply an imbalance in their powers but also a threat that states with much security may one day attach the vulnerable state. So to neorealist, if there existed a bi-polar authority to control the activities of states, there would have been a possibility of peace to reign.

From its above definition, we see a clear cut between classical and neorealist because for classical realist, peace can never be attained because states have that bad behavior in them to always seek for powers. But on the other hand, neorealist think peace can be attained if the international system seizes to be anarchic. One may say that, the neorealist view based on anarchy has fade away with time because, they exist organizations such as the United Nations, who controls states actions at the international scene. If I'm to take a stand on this point, would say this organization have not taken away the anarchic system which exist at the international scene. Reason being that, these organizations do not possess total sovereignty to control states actions and at some point have failed to control states actions or even punish them. States have refused to surrender their sovereignty to this organization leaving it with little or no power to control the international system, as such, anarchy is still the order of the day.

Another aspect of realism is the offensive–defensive realist theory. To the offensive realist, states fight against each other because of the vulnerability of other states and the easiness to defeat those states for the defensive realist on the other hand, states as a result to protect themselves fight each other.in all, by the end of cold war, realism took a slight shift from human nature to more optimistic tone of the possibility of peace. The key elements of realist are thus, Anarchy, statesmanship, constitutionalism, and conflict. (Stefano 2004: 536)

Liberalism

Liberalism was a political doctrine which emerged in the early 19th century. It has as main elements freedom, equality, consent, constitutionalism, and individualism. Liberal philosophers included people like John lock in his explanation and stands on social contracts to enhance peace amongst states, Adam smith and Immanuel Kant in his theory of perpetual. Looking at the term liberalism, one would automatically know that it talks of freedom. Liberals are against the realist believed that states are the main actors at the international scene. It stood for the freedom of individuals and also individuals as key actors at the international scene and not

states. They held that the individual is good from within and not as bad as realist paints it. So, if individuals are internally good, there is a possibility of peace to exist, especially is freedom of activity is ensured.

The above stand (individual freedom, laissez-fair state, political freedom, protection of human rights, equality before the law and democracy) is what characterizes the 19th century classical liberalism. However, (Scott 2005:55) registered dramatic shift in the late 19th century to Neo-Liberalism. Neo liberals where against the fact that a laissez-fair state is the best form of government. To them, institutions are of great importance. These institutions may be put in place to breakthrough and check (limit) the powers of the government (Kenneth 1998:3). To them, liberal democracy is the best form of government. They advice that, states should become liberal democracies because; democracies never fight with each other. This is what modern liberals have termed Democratic peace theory. This theory explains that, if all states are democracies ruled by the people, nations would ever go into war with each other. It was this idea that led to the creation of the League of Nations after the 1st World War, in other to ensure peace amongst nations at the international scene.

Overall, liberals champion the idea that, any government's goal should be geared towards ensuring that the rights of its citizens are protected. To them, a government made up of check points do not guarantee the freedom of citizens, as such, their advice is for institutions should be build up, which would have as function to guarantee individual freedom as well as, limit the powers of the government.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War and the collapse of the League of Nations, showed liberalist stands as a complete failure. Liberals failed in their stands and this led to the creation of other new theories to explain why the war came to pass. These new theories are not the basses of this paper and as such would not be discussed in this paper. Thus liberals stood for economic interdependence, democracy and international institutions.

Key Differences and Similarities

i. These 2 theories both agreed on the fact that states/nations do matter and have a say at the international scene, wither in ensuring peace or creating war.

ii. A difference between this 2 is the fact that, to realist, states have the final say at the international scene and are the main actors in international politics. But for liberalist, not just states but institutions, NGOs, MNCs, have a role to play in ensuring that peace is attained in international politics.

iii. Dissimilarity between the 2 is their belief on what states can do. Realist say states pursue their personal interest and do not care if their actions affect other states or not. Liberals on the other hand say there is a possibility of sates to cooperate with other states, through organizations which would help them agree together on a common action.

iv. Aside from a divergence, a similarity between them has to do with the fact that, their proponents agree on the fact that, there is a need for theories in other to understand how the international system functions, and what influences a state to carry out a particular action.

v. Also, another similarity is that both ideologies draw from the write-ups of writers way back. Their stands have been developed and mentioned way back, before these theories could ever crop up.

vi. Diving back to dissimilarities between the 2 ideologies, liberals are more optimistic and believe that, peace can gradually take the place of war at the international system. Thus to them, peace is possible. But to realist, peace is not an option because it cannot be obtained. To them, the anarchical nature of the international system, plus the inborn nature of man, cannot permit peace to reign at the international system.

vii. Also, these 2 theories disagree in the way they see the human being. To realist, man is selfish and egoistic and this is what makes it impossible for war to bring to bock because, they will always pursue their personal interests. To liberals, man is born good, and as such peace is possible if they cooperate.

viii. To realist, the state is the sole power to decide on which actions its country will carry out. It has sovereignty and its individuals are loyal to their state. To liberals, states do not control the individuals, for at one point, they may differ in opinions and interest, and as such they are free to carry out their interest without government control.

Conclusion

As time passes by and things changes at the international scene, so too do theories crop up to explain these change in actions and how it could be resolved. This has led to the emergence of several theories of international relations at the First World War, some of include Liberalism and Realism. Some of which erupted either to buttress the ideas of other theories or to provide a solution to the happenings of the world.

Taking into consideration liberalism and realism, liberals evolved to criticize realist ideas and to provide a solution to lasting peace. In my own opinion, I believe liberals better explain the world we leave in today. Man or states can never be solely independent because in one way or the other, they need the help of other nations. It is for this reason that, institutions such as the UN, ILO and so many others were created.