

Transcript: Theories of International Relations – Realism

Firstly, there is the theory of realism. Realism argues that as a consequence of the absence of a world government, states are condemned to live in a type of international anarchy that compels states to practice self-help. A self-help system is one in which there are no 999 emergency services that governments can call upon if another state were to break an agreement or in the extreme case: invade. Ultimately, when the chips are down, states must guarantee their own security. Consequently, realists argue that the use or the threat of force is the only way a state can protect itself. In this tragic vision, the international realm is understood as a nightmarish 'state of nature': a world in which fear stalks the landscape, there is no room for trust, and cooperation, if it happens at all, is fleeting, self-interested, and always temporary.

The elusiveness and limits of cooperation in this theoretical paradigm is perfectly captured by the parable of the stag-hunt which International Relations theorists have wrestled with for decades: imagine five hunters cooperating to catch a deer when all are hungry; each is aware that success in the hunt is dependent upon the others staying at their post. If anyone were to break position, the deer might evade capture through the gap in their lines.

Having taken their positions, one of the hunters spies a rabbit. Not enough to feed the collective, but enough to satisfy their individual hunger; they are confronted by a dilemma: do they stay at their post, running the risk that others might see the rabbit and break ranks, with the result that they go hungry. Or, do they assume that others will act on their narrow self-interest and need for survival? And thinking this, do they feel compelled by the situation they find themselves in to defect from the cooperative undertaking?

This simple story is profound in its implications. At the heart of the stag-hunt is the assumption that there is no overarching authority to police and enforce rules of cooperation, and as a result, with no safety net and survival at stake, players have no choice but to assume the worst about the behaviour of others.

Paradoxically, the fear that the other hunters cannot be trusted leads you to break your trust with your fellows. This concern that cooperation is not possible given the uncertainty you have about the motives and intentions of others becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as you break the cooperative agreement in order to avoid the worst outcome that others defect whilst you cooperate. This is the tragedy of realism – and this is why realists argue that the possibilities for cooperation in the contemporary world are both limited and fleeting.