

Theories of International Relations: Idealism

Objectives

- I. Understanding the background
- II. Idealism (in IR): Introduction
- III. Main Idealist Thinkers
- IV. Main Assumptions of Idealist Approach
- V. Main Criticisms of Idealist Approach
- VI. Conclusion

I. Understanding the background

- ✓ An older tradition- 'idealist'- Plato, Kant's belief in the possibility of 'universal and perpetual peace'.
- ✓ In the post WWI, the first generation of liberal thinkers in IR were also known as the Idealists.
- ✓ These thinkers emphasized on the rule of law and collective security.
- ✓ Focus on establishing a world free of war and League of Nations as a platform for resolving conflicts.
- ✓ From Woodrow Wilson's idealism- rise of liberal school of thought in the post WWII.

II. Introduction

- ❖ Different theories/approaches to explain/view phenomenon of IR.
- ❖ Idealism and Realism- classical traditions of IR.

- ❖ The Realist sees IP as struggle for power among nations, self-help, safeguarding national interest etc.
- ❖ The Idealist sees it as dangerous and would lead to war, and more conflict and violence in world.
- ❖ The Idealist advocates for a peaceful/harmonious world order, free from power politics, violence and immorality.
- ❖ The Idealist emphasize on knowledge, reason, compassion, norms, values and self-restraint in IP –a normative dimension.
- ❖ Idealism - states are rational actors (peace, and not war).
- ❖ Idealism advocates for global governance- Int. Law, Int. Org- the UN, IMF, EU, GATT etc.
- ❖ One of the fundamental differences btw the realists and idealists - the problem of power.
- ❖ The term Idealism in IR, mainly seen in two ways-broad and narrow:
- ❖ In broad sense- seen traditionally/historically in international affairs
- ❖ In narrow sense- seen during the first phase of theory building of IR (phase between WWI&WWII)

III. Idealist Thinkers

- In both classical and contemporary theories-
- Classical Idealist thinkers - Plato, Kant, Hobson, Angell, Wilson, Russell etc.
- Other prominent idealist thinkers-St. Simon, Aldous Huxley, Mahatma Gandhi etc.

-- Main goals of these thinkers- International peace, morality and cooperation

IV. Main Assumptions

- ❑ Charles W. Kegley Jr and Wittkopf: -
- Human nature is in essence good.
- Human wellbeing and progress are the main objectives for all.
- It is the bad environment makes a human bad- Need to reform.
- International community should eliminate war, hunger, inequality, tyranny violence etc. by global efforts.
- Faith in international institutions-it can establish international peace, law and order and would solve the security threats emanating from anarchy prevailing in IP

V. Criticism

- ✓ Weak assumptions
- ✓ Full of ideals and norms- Utopian, can not be adapted for use
- ✓ Acc. to E.H. Carr- Idealist underestimated the role of power
- ✓ Acc. to Logical positivist- Idealism not compatible with the principle of verifiability

VI. Conclusion

- ❑ Idealist approach- emphasis on a natural harmony of interests, morality etc.
- ❑ Idealist thought in IR existed for a short period-failure of LN and WWII.
- ❑ Later, the progress of theory building in IR largely drew aspects from the idealism.
- ❑ Elements of Idealist school of thought can be found in the subsequent rise of Liberal thinkers in IR.
- ❑ Acc. to one of the prominent Idealist thinkers, Bertrand Russell- “A world full of human happiness is not beyond human power to achieve.”

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