**HUMAN NATURE and IR THEORIES**

**Realism**

The human nature claim at the center of classical realism is that “People are generally viewed as nasty selfish creatures, and political power merely corrupts them further.”

This leads, in Sens and Stoett’s introductory text, to the conclusion that Political relations are fundamentally about conflict, as unitary rational actors seek their own self interest. In the case of global politics, the relevant actors are states, which seek their national interest at all times. Military power is the most important expression and guarantor of survival, and the most important issue in the field is the threat or actual use of force.

Their summation is an excellent example of how a human nature claim can have immediate international ramifications and about how a core assumption then leads to and makes sense of the layers and policies of a theoretical tradition. Cynthia Weber states that the classic realist assumptions are that ”man is flawed and therefore prone to conflict” and that “this explains why cooperation is never guaranteed and world government is unachievable.”

Because of this focus on the flawed, selfish, aggressive, and status seeking nature prevalent in humanity, realist prescriptions for the pursuit of military strength for self protection, balancing through alliances, and a focus on the balance of power as a least imperfect response to the problem of world order, begin to make sense. Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism, on the other hand, rejects human nature, or the”first image” level of analysis of human behaviour, psychology, or motivation,as a useful explanatory frame for Ir.

**Waltz** states that “if human nature is the cause of war and if, as in the systems of the first image pessimists, human nature is fixed, then we can never hope for peace,” and if human nature is a fixed variable, then it is not part of useful political analysis.

Waltz’s structural realism has, at its core, the idea that the environment or the structure of the World is distribution of power determines the action of the actors in the system. The anarchic distribution of power forces states, regardless of their nature, to pursue self help behaviour so as to be secure. Structural realism, however, can never make the characteristics of the first image of human nature, behaviour, psychology, or motivation entirely irrelevant. The actors in the international system are ultimately humanbeings, governing and forming states and armed forces, with characteristics that determine and influence how they react to the structure of power distribution.

Annette Freyberg-Inan’s study on motivational assumptions in realist theories concludes, as assumptions about the motives of political actors, which represent beliefs about individual psychology, form the ontological foundation of all realist theories, even those which, like the structural systemic realism of Waltz, attempt to avoidall concern with how individual actors come to make their policy choices. The fact that realists have traditionally been primarily concerned with the behaviour of nation-states rather than individual policy makers has served to obscure the role these beliefs play in supporting realist arguments.

The structural distribution of power and other environmental characteristics are still necessary in explaining the causes of particular wars or treaties of how actors with certain stable characteristics reacted to a certain environment.

**Idealism and Liberalism**

Moving on to the next major paradigm, Sens and Stoett characterize an”idealist perspective” as assuming “the best of human nature,” where “we are essentially cooperative political animals who are occasionally led astray by evil influences into war and conflict, and we have a natural affinity toward the communal, as opposed to the individual, good.”

The ramification of this idea is that “when people behave violently, it is because of the institutional or structural setting in which they live.”

Weber states that “idealists believe that there is a basic goodness to people that can be corrupted by bad forms of organization” and that “these bad types of organizations are found at the level of the state and society.”

As well, she shows that idealists believe “good organizations can lead to good changes in people, all of whom are basically good to have a good moral core even if they occasionally behave badly.”

It is from these core assumptions that, historically, the idealist shapers of the Leagueof Nations and United Nations thought that **cooperative structures** could lessen violence and instability.

That human nature is reasonable and has a cooperative and altruistic core is a necessary assumption for this final claim to make sense. Sens and Stoett, after summarizing this Idealist antecedent, move to liberalism.

Idealism is most prominent modern variant of which also makes assumptions about human nature “A liberal perspective suggests people can rationally cooperate in the name of self interest,” since “what is good for one may be goodfor another as well, contrary to a zero-sum world perspective in which a gain for one is a loss for another.”

This thesis will show that an assumption about non-zero-sum rational cooperation is also an assumption about human neurology, and brings in to question the possible evolutionary adaptation of the human brain, as well as policies such as commercial exchange, republican democracy, and the rule of law. For example, the **Kantian** idea of the democratic peace is intricately tied in with human nature assumptions. Dawson points this out, as Kant’s “scheme for perpetual peace was based on the belief that citizens of a democratic or republican State characteristically gives much greater reluctance to engage in violent conflict, primarily because they are reluctant to risk their own lives.”

A human nature that is able to recognize rational interest and is ultimately motivated by selfI preservation through cooperation is an assumption necessary for the democratic peace. The liberal or idealist paradigm of IR ultimately relies on the “more optimistic view of the possibilities for peaceful relations among humans,” as “for some liberals this derives from a more positive assessment of human nature, at least to the extent that they can learn from their mistakes, but also confidence in the capacity of individual humans to choose rational courses of action in politics, as in other fields such as economics.”

**Marxism and Constructivism**

The final major theoretical tradition in IR is Marxism or Constructivism, which have their theoretical differences but are both linked by a conception that human nature is a malleable blank slate. Human nature in Marxism is tied in with the concept of a “species being,” based on the core “materialist worldIview” that The world is constructed in our minds by the economic structure of society and that the means of production technology, invention, natural resources, property systems determine our religious, philosophical, government, legal, and moral values and institutions.

Marx’s concept of a “species being” is complex, but comes down to the idea that it is “only by means of the historical process that man became a human being,” where “at the outset he was merely a generic being who belongs to a tribe or herd.”

In **Marxist theory**,”the way in which production is organized is of crucial importance because it expresses the life ofhuman beings.”

This is because “the mode of life, as Marx calls it, is what people are... people are what they do in the ways in which they express themselves, they are themselves.”

In other words, human nature in Marxism is not a fixed entity but is malleable and contingent on the historic forces of production that shape what we perceive to be a human nature. Pennock has a slightly different characterization, claiming that Marx believed that man is true nature, once it is free from all the encumbrances and distorting, even destructive influences of bourgeois society, reveals itself as devoid of the evils of competitiveness and self-partiality, fully capable of participatingin a cooperative commonwealth, in which each would give according to his means and receive according to his needs.

A claim to such a “true nature” is a claim to an essential core that exists regardless of the historic means of production, though a large malleability is said to exist around this core. Either way, Marxism has an assumption about the nature of humanity that is at the root of the further influence of Marx in the dominant modes of production of globalization and imperialism can alter the nature of those dispossessed and marginalized in the global South to form greedy or possessive subjects who act against their true interests, while an emancipation from these exploitative means of production would bring out the best of this “true nature.” Marxist analysis of world events rest on the assumption of a mostly malleable human nature. **Constructivists** share this basic conception of a flexible human nature, as they dismiss ”the notion of an external reality which is accessible to the human mind,” and ”embrace the idea that human agents construct the social world which they inhibit.”

A malleable social world means that both “subject (human agent)” and “object (society, social institutions or structures)” are “constituted by the other through recurrent practices.”

This formative aspect of social reality construction means that “through deeds alone, acts performed and words spoken, people construct the society around them,” and “are, in turn, constituted by it.”

Knutsen boils this down to the idea that “underneath this lies a basic assumption about human nature that humans are active, social, creative beings.” Like Marxism, this assumption implies a larger range for variance in howthose “active, social, creative beings” construct and form their identities

The overall image of human nature in Constructivism, that human nature is pliable and flexible, feeds into an example of how the question ofhuman nature is problematically seen in IR.

Stephanie Lawson’s International Relations states that ”there is no single concept of human nature,” and some theories “reject the notion that there is any such thing as a universal or essential human natureat all, arguing that all human behaviour is shaped by local factors to do with culture and circumstances and will therefore differ according to time and place.”