## Peter Wilson
## Idealism in international relations

## Book section

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**Idealism in International Relations**

(For K. Dowding (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Power*, Sage 2011)

In general parlance on international matters, idealism is a term applied to any idea, goal, or practice considered to be impractical. Thus eradicating nuclear weapons is considered idealistic, as is substituting open for secret diplomacy, entrusting international security to the UN, creating an African Union on the model of the EU, or the global eradication of poverty and injustice. The bases of such judgments are rarely made explicit, but they usually rest on a pessimistic reading of human nature along with an historical judgment on the difficulty of peaceably achieving radical change in world affairs.

In the professional study of international relations (IR), the term is generally employed in two ways: one broad, one narrow. The broad understanding sees idealism as a perennial doctrine or disposition towards world affairs which can be witnessed in all historical periods where independent political communities exist in a condition of anarchy i.e. in the absence of central government. Idealism is an optimistic doctrine which seeks to transcend the international anarchy, and create a more cosmopolitan and harmonious world order. The narrow understanding sees idealism as intimately tied to the inter-war period (1919-1939). It is a doctrine that dominated the first phase of IR theorising, emphasising the growing interdependence and unity of mankind, and bound-up with the experiment in internationalism that was the League of Nations. It received a visceral attack in E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939).

There is no agreed definition of idealism. Indeed the term is often employed in a rhetorical way, particularly by realist thinkers, in order to discredit radical or reformist ideas they dislike. As a consequence various approaches and bodies of thought—cosmopolitanism, internationalism, liberalism—have frequently been lumped together and labelled idealism, despite considerable differences between and diversity within them.

According to most accounts, idealists emphasise the power of reason to overcome prejudice and counteract the machinations of sinister forces. They believe that the spread of education and democracy—including increasing democratic control of foreign policy—will empower world public opinion, and make it a powerful force that no government can resist. They view war as a disease of the international body politic, contrary to the interests of all bar a few special interests and unrepresentative governments. Arms manufacturers and merchants have frequently been targets of their wrath. Left-internationalists have also attacked large business corporations for their aggressive pursuit of profit and disregard of general human welfare. Idealists emphasise the importance of universal bodies such as the League and the UN in galvanising and organising world public opinion. Through such means, they contend, it will be possible to eliminate crude power from international relations, substituting research, reason and discussion in place of national armies and navies. Importantly, idealists tend to stress the existence of a natural harmony of interests between all peoples underlying the superficially conflicting interests of their states and/or governments. While accepting that the different peoples exhibit different codes of behaviour, cultural norms, values, habits and tastes, they contend that human beings are fundamentally uniform. Regardless of ethnic, social, cultural and religious background, all human beings desire the same things in terms of security, welfare, recognition and respect. All are bound by a common morality with its bedrock in basic human rights and the Kantian principle that human beings should be respected as ends in themselves and never treated as mere means. Many idealists share the belief of Mazzini that there is no essential incompatibility between nationalism and internationalism. There is a natural division of labour between nations. Each nation has its special task to perform, its special contribution to make to the well-being of humanity. If all nations were to act in this spirit, international harmony would prevail. This doctrine provided the philosophical basis for President Woodrow Wilson's campaign to put national self-determination at the heart of the 1919 peace settlement.

In the inter-war period these beliefs gave rise to numerous policy prescriptions, nearly all of which sought to regulate the power of the independent nation state by investing increasing power and political authority in international organisations. The international anarchy of competing nation-states was seen as the underlying cause of the catastrophe of World War One, and thus the principle of sovereignty and the institution of the balance of power needed to be regulated and, in the view of some of the more radical idealists, abolished if the same was not to happen again. Collective security, compulsory adjudication of disputes, national disarmament, open diplomacy and international colonial accountability were the most cherished policy prescriptions of inter-war idealists. Some went further, calling for the creation of an international police force and complete international oversight of armaments production.

One of the main criticisms Carr levelled at the idealists (or 'utopians' as he preferred to call them) was that they underestimated the role of power in international politics and overestimated the role, actual and potential, of law, morality and public opinion. He was particularly scathing of the idea that reason and discussion could take the place of armies and navies. Change did not come about, he claimed, through reason—or at least not reason as conceived by the utopians. Power was a decisive factor in every political situation, and one could no more abolish power than abolish politics. Power, whether used, threatened, or held silently in reserve, was an essential factor in international change, and change would only be brought about by whom or in the interests of whom power could be wielded.

Realists today often criticise the intellectual descendents of inter-war idealists—those e.g. advocating global governance, cosmopolitan democracy, and much greater power for the UN—on much the same grounds. They ignore the power and self-interestedness of the independent nation state, the reign of instrumental (cf. 'abstract') reason in international politics, and the emotional appeal of national sovereignty.

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See also: Anarchy in International Relations; collective security; E. H. Carr; interdependence; League of Nations, Realism; United Nations.

**Further Reading**

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