IDEALISM

Idealism allegedly dominated the study of international relations from the end of the First World War until the late 1930s. Sometimes referred to as *utopianism*, idealism is in fact a variant of **liberal internationalism**.

Notable liberal idealists are Immanuel Kant, Richard Cobden, John Hobson, Norman Angell, Alfred Zimmern, and Woodrow Wilson.

The term is not a flattering one. Idealists are out of touch with current thinking, they put moral principles before practical or prudential considerations, and are naïve about the world around them. They are futurists who seek a perfect world. It is not surprising, then, that it was the self-proclaimed **realists** who coined the term to describe the liberal internationalism of the interwar years. Whether it deserves such a label is debatable. Recent research indicates that the idealist thinkers of the period were not as ‘other-worldly’ as many realists suggested.

Yet, the label has stuck and continues to be used both by realists in their ongoing debate with liberals, and by theorists writing on the interwar years.

Idealism came to prominence in reaction to the carnage of the First World War. Most intellectuals and policymakers of the day pointed the finger at the *Realpolitik* of the European **great powers** and set themselves the task of abolishing war as an instrument of statecraft.

Philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie donated money to study the problem, peace groups formed, universities began to teach international relations, and many intellectuals began to try to educate people about the benefits of developing an internationalist orientation.

Indeed, the birth of international relations as a separate discipline coincided with these developments. However, the best summary of the thinking of the period is to be found in Woodrow Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’, a set of principles that he took with him to the Versailles Peace Conference in December 1918. This document not only provided an outline for the settlement of the First World War, it was also the basis for the establishment of the **League of Nations**.

Generally speaking, the idealists shared a belief in progress and were of the view that the procedures of parliamentary democracy and deliberation under the rule of law could be firmly established in international diplomacy. This is why they placed

so much importance on the League of Nations and on strengthening **international law**.

A central characteristic of idealism is the belief that what unites human beings is more important than what divides them. The idealists rejected **communitarian** and realist arguments that the state is itself a source of moral value for human beings. Instead, they defended a **cosmopolitan** ethics and sought to educate individuals about the need to reform the international system. Interwar idealism was as much a political movement as an intellectual one. Alfred Zimmern, for example, regarded his professorial chair at Oxford University as a platform 'for the preaching of international relations'.

Idealism fell into disrepute with the collapse of the League of Nations and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Although the idealists had sought to use the League system to replace European *Realpolitik*, in fact it simply became a forum that reflected the competing **national interests** of the great powers of the day. From an intellectual perspective, however, it was the critique of E. H. Carr, a British Marxist that completely undermined its credibility. In his famous text entitled *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1946), Carr argued that the aspirations of the idealists (whom he disparaged as utopians) were only to be expected in a new field of study where the desire for change and the dictates of the moment overshadowed all else. Only with disillusionment and failure do scholars become more circumspect and clear-headed about the nature and purpose of their subject matter.

Carr refers to this attitude as realist because such a view does not shy away from a hard, ruthless analysis of reality. Furthermore, he suggested that idealism was an expression of the political philosophy of the satisfied great powers. It was simply the product of a particular set of social, political, and historical circumstances rather than a timeless moral code devoted to universal ends. When it came to a concrete political problem, it could not find an absolute and disinterested standard for the conduct of international politics. The idealists were also naïve about the role of **power** in international relations. Not all states had, according to Carr, an interest in peace. Those who dominated the international system were more likely to pursue peace because it was in their interests to maintain the international status quo. Contrary to the belief of the idealists, then, there was no natural harmony of interests among states.

Since the outbreak of war in 1939, idealism has been regarded as an example of both policy failure and theoretical naïveté in international relations. However, the

tide seems to be turning. There is now much more acceptance of liberal thinking in international relations than there was during the **cold war**, and a number of scholars are also revising some of the conventional wisdom about 'idealist' thinking in the 1920s and 1930s.

See also: **communitarianism; cosmopolitanism; disarmament; international law; League of Nations; liberal internationalism; perpetual peace; realism**

Further reading: Carr, 1946; Crawford, 2000; Kober, 1990; Long and Wilson, 1995; Schmidt, 1998

PRISONERS' DILEMMA

A particular example within game **theory**, which demonstrates how and why a rational selection of strategies may be less profitable than a non-rational selection in certain situations. Before describing this game and its application to international relations, it is important to have a basic understanding of game theory in general. Game theory is a formal mathematical method used to study decision-making in situations of conflict or bargaining, in which it is assumed that each player will seek his or her maximum advantage under conditions of rationality.

Players may be individuals, or groups such as states. The framework of game theory consists of the players, a statement of their values in quantified form, the rules and the pay-offs for each combination of moves. The result of any game may be *determinate* (i.e. one solution is logical as an outcome, given conditions of complete rationality) or *indeterminate* (i.e. no single logical outcome is obvious). Game theory usually concentrates on two-player games, as calculations and statements of strategies rapidly increase in complexity with games of more than two players.

The values that players attach to possible outcomes of the game must be quantified, in order to allow the calculation of optimal strategies and the pay-offs of the various outcomes. A strategy is a set of contingency instructions concerning moves in the game, designed to cope with all possible moves, or combinations of moves, of the opponent.

The rules of the game state all the relevant conditions under which the game is played, such as which player moves first or whether moves are simultaneous; how moves are communicated; what information is available to each player concerning the opponent's values and strategies; whether threats can be made binding, and

whether and to what extent side-payments are permitted (these are payments made by one player to the other outside the formal structure of rewards and penalties of the game itself, such as a bribe). Games may be *zero-sum* (where the pay-offs to the players add to zero: what one loses, the other wins), or *non-zero-sum* (where certain outcomes are possible which give both, players advantages or disadvantages, compared to other outcomes).

The type of game known as Prisoners' Dilemma is a non-zero-sum game. The scenario involves two prisoners who are suspected of jointly committing a crime, but neither has yet confessed. They are held in separate cells, unable to communicate with each other. Each prisoner is told that: (1) if neither confesses both will go free; (2) if both confess they will both be imprisoned; and (3) if only one confesses, turning state's evidence against the other, that one will be positively rewarded while the other will serve a longer prison term.

Since each prisoner is better off confessing, given the action of the other (the reward is better than just going free, and the short prison term is better than the long one), the normal outcome in the absence of cooperation between the prisoners is for both to confess. Both could be better off than that equilibrium however, if they could somehow agree to cooperate and neither confess. Unfortunately for them, such cooperation is bound to be difficult since both have an incentive to break any agreement by confessing.

The lesson of this game for students of international relations is that cooperation among states will be difficult to achieve in the absence of communication and of ways to enforce agreements. Three possible strategies to overcome such difficulties are widely discussed in the literature.

First, the expectation that players will fail to cooperate assumes that the game is played only once. However, if the game is repeated with the same players, and assuming that they value future absolute gains from cooperation, it is possible that they will learn to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome by employing a 'tit-for-tat' strategy. This prescribes that a state initially cooperates and thereafter mimics another state's moves – cooperating or defecting. Over time, the other state may become convinced that the first state will cooperate if it does.

Second, some scholars argue that the creation of powerful international institutions or **regimes** helps states to cooperate, even though they co-exist in an international political system characterised by structural **anarchy**.

Third, it may be argued that the degree to which the system confronts states with dilemmas modelled in the above scenario is often exaggerated. There are some major problems in reducing real-life situations to the form of a game, including the quantification of preferences (i.e. the degree to which states are motivated by the pursuit of **relative** or **absolute gains** through cooperation), the complications introduced by third parties or coalitions, and the general distinction between the complications of actual situations and the formal rigour of game theory.

See also: **anarchy; arms control; arms race; beggar-thy-neighbour policies; regime; relative gains/absolute gains**

Further reading: Axelrod, 1984; Axelrod and Keohane, 1985; Conybeare, 1984; Jervis, 1988; Schelling, 1984; Snidal, 1985