

RATIONALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: CONCEPTS, THEORETICAL LIMITS AND CRITICISM

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes the presence of the axiom of the rationality of the political actors in theories of International Relations and traces considerations about the concept of rationality as a whole, its theoretical limits and the main criticisms about it. Aiming to overcome the absence of an in-depth conceptualization for the idea of rationality, the paper base itself on the literature of rational choice theory of Political Science to define the concept in question. It questions the validity of considering the states as rational actors and the limits of explanation offered by the axiom of rationality, addressing the criticisms originated from the constructivist current of International Relations. It concludes that considering states as rational actors is a valid theoretical simplification in cases where subnational actors with decision-making power behave as a cohesive unit and argues that rationalist theories and approaches such as constructivism are potentially reconcilable, considering that they are two analytical lenses whose nature is more complementary than contradictory.

Keywords: Rationalism; Rational Choice; Models of Foreign Policy Analysis; Two-Level Games; Nested Games.

Resumo

O presente artigo analisa a presença do axioma da racionalidade dos atores políticos nas teorias das Relações Internacionais e traça considerações a respeito do conceito de racionalidade como um todo, seus limites teóricos e as principais críticas a seu respeito. Visando suprir a ausência de uma conceitualização aprofundada para a ideia de racionalidade, o artigo se ampara na literatura da teoria da escolha racional da Ciência Política para definir o conceito em questão. Questiona-se a validade de considerar os Estados como atores racionais e os limites de explanação oferecidos pelo axioma da racionalidade, abordando as críticas provenientes da corrente construtivista das Relações Internacionais. Conclui-se que considerar os Estados como atores racionais é uma simplificação teórica válida em casos nos quais os atores subnacionais com poder decisório se comportem como uma unidade coesa e argumenta-se que as teorias racionalistas e as abordagens como o construtivismo são potencialmente reconciliáveis,

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tendo em vista que se tratam de duas lentes analíticas cuja natureza é mais complementar do que contraditória.

Palavras-chave: Racionalismo; Escolha Racional; Modelos de Análise de Política Externa; Jogos de Dois Níveis; Jogos Ocultos.

1. INTRODUCTION

The belief in the rationality of actors that operate in the international system is a central axiom in several of the major theories of International Relations, which can be perceived from the very first debate of the discipline between the idealists and the classic realists. However, as point out by Duncan Snidal, “rational choice is a methodology [...] wide open in terms of specific substantive content” (2013, p. 86), and, in this sense, some basic theoretical aspects concerning the adoption of this axiom seem to have been curiously little explored by International Relations theorists: what is the definition used to determine the concept of rationality? What parameters must be met to consider a given actor as a rational agent? What are the limits imposed by the adoption of this axiom?

Aiming to contribute to the debate in question, the present paper will seek to make considerations about the application of the axiom of rationality in international relations and the theoretical implications of doing so. Thus, the first part of the paper will be devoted to a brief review of the application of the axiom of rationality in International Relations theories. In order to overcome the lack of an in-depth conceptualization of rationality, it will be adopted the concept as described by the rational choice theory of Political Science, emphasizing the works of George Tsebelis (1990) and Anthony Downs (1957).

In the second part, the paper will explore the conceptual validity of treating states as rational entities and how to explain apparently irrational behaviors adopted by them. In this section will be presented two models of analysis to understand the state action in these cases of apparent irrationality, based on the concepts of “two-level game” by Robert Putnam (1988) and “nested games” by George Tsebelis (1990). Finally, the third and last section will present considerations about the explanatory limits of the axiom of rationality when applied to International Relations and how it can relate to theories that are not based directly on it, such as the constructivism as expressed by Alexander Wendt (1992).

2. THE AXIOM OF RATIONALITY AND ITS RELATION TO THE MAIN THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The axiom of the rationality of political actors has been continuously present in the most diverse theories of International Relations since the emergence of it as Science, presenting itself with varying degrees of relevance from one theory to another. In the first pages of his classic work “Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace”, Hans Morgenthau already points to the existence of two great traditions of political thought. The first of these traditions, now understood in the field of International Relations as classical idealism, “believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now” (MORGENTHAU, 1997, p. 3), thus relying on the rationality of the actors to perceive and seek a global political order that would guarantee a supposed common good.

Morgenthau identifies himself with a second tradition, which, in the author's perspective, manifests a "theoretical concern with human nature as it actually is" (MORGENTHAU, 1997, p. 4), reason why it ended up being named realism. In direct confrontation with the main propositions of classical idealism, the author states:

This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but must at best be approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts (MORGENTHAU, 1997, p. 3).

Although it represents an absolute negation of the idealistic logic that the simple rationalization of political processes by the actors could lead to the establishment of an order that would guarantee the common good, it is important to note that Morgenthau does not establish a direct denial to the rationality of the actors, defending rather that they do not act in pursuit of common good, but always seeking their own interests. It is, therefore, a critique of the purpose of the rational process advocated by the classical idealist current, not of the process itself.

With the change of focus carried out by neorealism in relation to classical realism, leaving aside the importance given to human nature while assuming the anarchic nature of the international system as the main determinant of international politics, the axiom of the rationality of the actors assumes a new prominent role. While exposing the central premises on which neorealism is based¹, Mearsheimer argues that "states think strategically about how to survive in the international system. States are instrumentally rational" (MEARSHEIMER, 1994, p. 10). In summary, from the neorealist perspective, the nation-states - the

¹ The premises of neorealism exposed by Mearsheimer (1994, p. 10) are: (1) the international system is anarchic; (2) all states have some offensive military capability; (3) the states are never certain about the intentions of other states; (4) the basic objective of all states is their own survival; and (5) states act in a rational way.

only actors considered relevant in the international relations – act in a rational and self-centered way in an environment defined by systemic anarchy, with their basic objective being to ensure their own survival.

Drawing a parallel to contemporary debates in international security studies, Busan and Hansen argue that the validity (or invalidity) of the axiom of rationality applied to state actors results in major consequences for security theories, since

‘international security’ is at the most general level about the threats states (or other political entities) face and the responses they can and should adopt to defend themselves, it makes a huge difference what kind of actors those states are. If states are rational, it is possible to predict their behaviour – and thus define appropriate security policies – to a much greater extent than if they are not (BUZAN; HANSEN, 2009, p. 30).

However, the authors also emphasize the debate prompted by the very adoption of the concept of rationality and, above all, by the meaning of this concept: according to Buzan and Hansen, most of the criticisms about the axiom of state rationality in the field of international security studies float around the idea that “a rational state” is necessarily a state that is and acts according to realistic principles, which “are neither objective, nor analytically or politically neutral” (BUZAN; HANSEN, 2009, p. 31). That said, it must be considered that, although the axiom of the rationality of state actors is undeniably one of the basic assumptions associated with the neorealist theory, in the field of International Relations neorealism is far from being the only theoretical current that accepts this axiom as true.

For example, in regards to the liberal institutionalist theory, Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin – in a work that stands precisely as a direct response to Mearsheimer’s (1994) criticism of the institutionalist theory – categorically state that “liberal institutionalists treat states as rational egoists [...]. Like realism, institutionalist theory is utilitarian and rationalistic” (KEOHANE; MARTIN, 1995, p. 39), with the essential difference between the two theories residing “in contrasting understandings of why

institutions are created and how they exert their effects” (KEOHANE; MARTIN, 1995, p. 48). Thus, while authors associated with the neorealist theory argue that international institutions are relevant only as instruments of the major powers in the execution of its policies (MEARSHEIMER, 1995, p. 86), and that cooperation between states is inevitably constrained by the logic of relative gains (WALTZ, 1979, p. 105), institutionalist authors see institutions as responsible for promoting changes in the expectations of states in relation to each other’s actions, especially by providing information on the behavior of other state actors in the international system – which ultimately increases the capacity of them rationally make assertive choices. The central argument of liberal institutionalist theory, therefore, revolves around the idea that international institutions are created and maintained by rational states, which recognize its importance through a logical calculation.

Beyond the theoretical boundaries of the classical debate between neorealist and liberal institutionalists, it is also possible to identify the acceptance of the axiom of the rationality of the state actors as a basilar element in other schools of International Relations. Hedley Bull, for example, by combining the grotian rationalist tradition with the realistic idea of systemic anarchy, recognizes the possibility of creating an international order essentially derived

from fear of unrestricted violence, of the instability of agreements or of the insecurity of their independence or sovereignty. It may have its origins in rational calculation that the willingness of states to accept restrictions on their freedom of action is reciprocal. Or it may be based also on the treatment of these goals as valuable in themselves and not merely as a means to an end - it may express a sense of common values as well as of common interests (BULL, 2002, p. 64).

The “anarchical society” advocated by Bull is thus supported by two possible processes of rationalization (or a combination of them): one focused on the personal objectives of the actors, and the other on the recognition of common interests, supported by the rules and agreements in force.

However, although the axiom of the rationality of actors is widely accepted by the theoretical currents of International Relations, notably its concept is not adequately explained in most of the texts cited above. Of these, the best conceptualization presented appears to be that done by Hedley Bull, who defines an actor who behaves rationally as one “that is acting in a way that is internally consistent and consistent with given goals” (BULL, 2002, p. 101). In addition, Buzan and Hansen point out that structural theories, such as neorealism, adopt a systemic perspective of the axiom of rationality, meaning that states will not always behave in a necessarily rational way, “but that those who do not will be punished by the structure, and will eventually either fall by the wayside or learn how to behave” (BUZAN; HANSEN, 2009, p. 31). Although they already present some central points to be considered, namely the need for coherence between strategy and objective and the achievement of sub-optimal results in cases of deviant behavior, the concept of rationality still sounds superficial and incomplete. Thus, aiming at a more appropriate theoretical understanding of the concept that is central to this article, this paper will turn to the works of the rational choice theory of Political Science to extract a more precise concept, applicable to International Relations², for the idea of rationality.

The theory of rational choice of Political Science has its fundamental base in the axiom of human rationality, understood in a similar way to the conceptualization presented by Bull, as “nothing more than an optimal correspondence between ends and means” (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 18), that is, it argues that actors will always adopt a maximizing behavior in their social interactions. Its behavioral model is typically economic, understanding the purposes objectified through the concept of *utility* (DOWNS, 1957, p. 36). In this

² The use of these concepts in the study of international relations is not new. Robert Gilpin (1981, p. xii), for example, openly admits the use of this approach in the preface of his book “War and Change in World Politics”. This paper differs itself by specifically using these works to explore the theoretical implications of accepting the axiom of rationality of political actors in the International Relations field.

regard, its central axiom may be reduced to the idea that individuals adopt behaviors that maximize utility – which, in the field of International Relations, can be translated as national security, if the realistic perspective is adopted for example.

Therefore, it remains to know what the inherent characteristics of a rational behavior are. Tsebelis seems to be the author who presents the most advanced categorization, theorizing the existence of two sets of requirements to consider a given behavior as rational: the *weak requirements*, set that “assures the internal coherence of preferences and beliefs”; and the *strong requirements*, which “introduce requirements for external validity (the correspondence of beliefs with reality)” (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 24). Thus, the set of the weak requirements (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 24–27) of rationality is:

- (1) The impossibility of contradictory beliefs or preferences;
- (2) The impossibility of intransitive preferences, meaning that the preferences must present a logical hierarchy between them;
- (3) And conformity to the axioms of probability calculus, which means that an actor will be willing to take risks if he considers that the probability of winning multiplied by the prize is equal or outweighs the chances of losing multiplied by the fee.

On the other hand, the strong requirements (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 28–31) are:

- (1) Adoption of strategies that are mutually optimal in equilibrium, from which the actors have no incentive to deviate;
- (2) Probabilities that approximate objective frequencies;
- (3) Beliefs that approximate reality.

Therefore, an actor can objectively be considered rational if the strategies that he adopts are in accordance with the objectives he draws, being necessary that this rationality manifests itself in two dimensions: the first, of the weak

requirements, is associated with the relationship between the strategy and the objective and regards the internal cognitive aspects of the actor in question – that is, the simple ability to find answers to a problem –, while the second dimension, of the strong requirements, is linked to their concreteness in practical terms. Having defined the parameters in which rational action occurs, this paper now proceeds to what may be his most controversial issue: are states rational entities?

3. ARE THE STATES RATIONAL ACTORS?

Before addressing the central question of this paper, it is necessary to consider an even more basic issue: What are states? Considering the definition proposed by Weber, a state “is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” (WEBER, 1991, p. 78). Adopting a similar conception, Morgenthau argues that

The sovereignty of the nation [...] manifest itself in what is called the “impenetrability” of the nation. This is another way of saying that on a given territory only one nation can have sovereignty – supreme authority – and that no other state has the right to perform governmental acts on its territory without its consent (MORGENTHAU, 1997, p. 330).

He further states that “without the mutual respect for the territorial jurisdiction of the individual nation, [...] international law and a state system based on it could obviously not exist” (MORGENTHAU, 1997, p. 330). Thus, it will be adopted the perspective that, individually, the state is an organized human community that successfully claims the legitimate use of force within a given territory, while the community of states consists in the mutual recognition by these human communities of their sovereignties over their respective territories.

Being states nothing more than political organizations controlled by individuals, logically they cannot possess a rationality of their own, since they are incapable of executing cognitive processes by themselves. Any inferred rationality must, therefore, necessarily be derived from the individuals who control them and from the institutional pressures to which they are potentially subject. In fact, the theory of rational choice itself is emphatic in the logical refusal to methodological collectivism, arguing that social phenomena are only possible to be understood if they are liable to be reduced to individual behavior (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 20-21). Therefore, the concept of the rationality of states actors in the international relations has its theoretical origin derived from the presumption that these human communities behave at the international level in a consistent and unitary way or, as described by Allison (1969, p. 698), “centrally controlled, completely informed, and value maximizing”.

As demonstrated in the previous section, the presumption of a rationality behavior derived from national unity at the international level is present in the views expressed by various theoretical currents of International Relations. For example, the neorealism, as expressed by Mearsheimer (1994, p. 10), is based on some premises about the international system and the behavior of states, being among them the rational nature and the quest for survival as the basic objective of any state. Thus, neorealism considers that states – understood as organized political communities – behave at the international level in a consistent and unitary way (either because subnational actors are united around a supposed “national interest”; because only a limited group has access to the means of international action; or for any other reason that can be theorized), being the perpetuation of their state the ultimate goal of all actors.

In order to maintain the focus proposed by this paper on the question of state rationality, let us consider the second proposition to be true, despite the existing debate around it. Therefore, it will be adopted as truth the idea that the

basic objective of all states is undoubtedly their survival. So why do states sometimes behave in a seemingly irrational way? How to explain situations in which states willingly and constantly submit to situations that tend to reduce their security in the medium and long term (such as ceding control of resources of great importance to the war industry, such as oil and iron, to foreign companies)? In summary, assuming as true the realistic argument that the international system is managed by the logic of security, how to explain behaviors that diverge from the main objective of survival?

The answer to these questions lies in the very nature of states as organized political communities, which necessarily implies the recognition of the existence of political dynamics internal to these same communities. Robert Putnam outlines some valuable considerations in this regard, noting that “central decision-makers (“the state”) must be concerned simultaneously with domestic and international pressures” (PUTNAM, 1988, p. 431). Thus, the author argues that a nation's foreign policy can often be interpreted as a “two-level game”, according to which:

At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments. Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision-makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign (PUTNAM, 1988, p. 434).

In a similar way, George Tsebelis goes even further by arguing that the apparent irrationality behind certain actions of an actor considered to be rational may be the result from an inadequate frame of reference used by the analyst. In his words:

if, with adequate information, an actor's choices appear to be suboptimal, it is because the observer's perspective is incomplete. The observer focuses attention on only one game, but the actor is involved in a whole network of games – what I call *nested games* (TSEBELIS, 1990, p. 7).

In these terms, a seemingly irrational foreign policy can be interpreted as a result of subnational actors with decision-making power (the ones responsible for defining the actions of the state internationally) seeking to maximize their gains in other arenas or dynamics, whose data are not always available to the analyst – the so-called “nested games”.

4. THE THEORETICAL LIMITS OF THE AXIOM OF RATIONALITY

As demonstrated at the beginning of this paper, the axiom of rationality has been widely accepted by the main currents of International Relations since the emergence of it as science and, as Wendt (1992, p. 391) points out, historically “the debate between “neorealists” and “neoliberals” has been based on a shared commitment to “rationalism””. Nonetheless, the definition of the concept of rationality and the required characteristics of rational behavior are topics to which International Relations theorists seem to devote little attention. In this sense, the adoption of studies from rational choice theorists of Political Science contributes to delimiting precisely what is meant by “rational behavior”, providing greater precision to the resulting analyzes while adopting a more comprehensive behavioral model.

However, the in-depth adoption of rational choice theory also opens room for the criticisms to which the theory is subject. Green and Shapiro (1994), for example, point to a number of problematic issues in the rational choice approach, such as the abstraction of factors of influence on political behavior, the logical

inversion in the derivation of hypotheses and problems (with the problems being selected to prove the hypothesis) and the lack of capacity for empirical confirmation of the rationality of the actors. Even in the field of International Relations it is possible to find criticism of this approach, with Wendt correctly pointing out that the analysis based on the rational choice approach disregard questions of identity and interest on the part of the actors, which are fundamental to the understanding of their objectives (WENDT, 1992, p. 392). In this sense, authors like Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner (1998) and Price and Reus-Smit (1998) have suggested that the debate between rationalism versus constructivism may become one of the central topics in the field of International Relations.

That said, it is important to point out that the own authors associated with rational choice theory recognized that the specific utility that one given actor seeks to maximize (that is, the individual goals of that actor) are, indeed, treated as secondary by the theory. The theories that are focused specifically on the axiom of rationality are not concerned with the objectives aimed by the actors, considering the reason for their preferences as not relevant. Rational behavior refers to the means that are employed, that is, the behaviors that the actors adopt in order to achieve their ends (DOWNS, 1957, p. 5). In practical terms, the axiom of rationality has the theoretical potential to explain the means employed by actors to achieve their goals but is unable to elucidate the goals behind these acts. In the rationalist theories of the International Relations, this gap is often filled by the adoption of a second axiom, defending that the basic objective of any state is its survival in the international anarchic environment.

Ultimately, the logic of survival of the nation-state as its central and ultimate goal makes sense. Since the state apparatus is the source of power of the subnational actors acting through it, they are expected to wish to ensure its continuity. Therefore, assuming the states as rational entities is an acceptable theoretical simplification in certain areas, but it should be borne in mind that it is

just that: a simplification. Notwithstanding, in cases where simplification is not feasible given the apparent irrationality of states, the applicability of the rational axiom in International Relations gains a new strength if we consider domestic actors as holders of the *real rationality* – that is, a rationality of themselves, as opposed to the merely theoretical rationality of the nation-states, which in turn derives from these sub-national actors – and the multiplicity of arenas in which they are involved.

Although it directly criticize the rationalist approach, theories like constructivism as expressed by Wendt (1992), which proposes the creation of a specific theory about the formation of identities and interests, are still potentially reconcilable with the axiom of rationality. This is even recognized by the author himself, who argues that “there are also substantial areas of agreement [between constructivism and rationalism], and where genuine differences exist they are as often complementarities as contradictions” (FEARON; WENDT, 2002, p. 52). In this sense, Wendt and Fearon stress the role of ideas as central in the rational process, stating that

rationalist explanations are a species of intentional explanation, the basic structure of which is the formula, ‘Desire + Belief = Action’. This means that at their core – the level of individual choice – ideas are an essential, not just secondary, element of rationalist explanation (FEARON; WENDT, 2002, p. 59)

Thus, considering that the focus of theories like constructivism is on understanding the attribution of meanings responsible for shaping the actors’ perspectives, their final objectives and the institutional environment in which they operate – factors that are precisely the elements that base the actors rational thought – rationalism seems far from being really overcome in the field of International Relations.

5. CONCLUSION

As has been shown throughout the paper, the axiom of rationality of political actors is a theoretical basis shared by some of the major theories of International Relations. However, the shallow conceptualization of it tends to generate superficial and sometimes confusing theoretical considerations. Thus, the adoption of the concept of rationality as exposed by rational choice theorists of Political Science, of which this paper emphasized George Tsebelis and Anthony Downs, provides more refined conceptual tools for the researcher in the field of International Relations.

In addition, the adoption of the concept of states as organized political communities with the monopoly of the use of force in their territories guarantees in theoretical terms the possibility of the researcher to open the “black-box” to search for elements in domestic politics that help explain the international positioning of the state in question, without abandoning the axiom of rationality. In this sense, concepts such as Tsebelis’ “nested games” or Putnam’s “two-level games” offer functional models of analysis to be explored. However, this does not necessarily imply the inability to treat states as rational entities for analytical purposes. Such theoretical simplifications are valid in situations where subnational actors with decision-making capacity act in a consistent and reasonably unitary way at the international level. The research problem must always be responsible for determining the most appropriate method of analysis, never the other way around.

Nevertheless, the adoption of the studies of theorists associated with the rational choice approach also causes the criticisms they suffer to be taken into account. Of those, the most significant is undoubtedly the inability of the axiom of rationality, or of the models based on it, to explain the formation of the goals

that drive the actors' actions. However, recognizing this gap and understanding the explanatory limits of the axiom of rationality makes its application feasible along with theories that seek precisely to understand how the identities and goals that drive the actors are formed. This makes it possible to even imagine, within the limits of rationalism, a potential overcoming of power politics by changing the sets of meanings that the actors attribute to each other and to the other elements of the international system, as theorized by Wendt (1992), since it is from these sets of meanings that the actors rationalize the world. However, this is an unlikely prospect of being undertaken in the short and medium term, since the actors who are in privileged positions in the current model lack incentives to change their way of acting and thinking. Therefore, doing so would be irrational.

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