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The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations

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The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations

Realism is commonly portrayed as theory that reduces International Relations to pure power politics. Michael Williams provides an important re-examination of the Realist tradition and its relevance for contemporary International Relations. Examining three thinkers commonly invoked as Realism's foremost proponents – Hobbes, Rousseau, and Morgenthau – the book shows that, far from advocating a crude *realpolitik*, Realism's most famous classical proponents actually stressed the need for a restrained exercise of power and a politics with ethics at its core. These ideas are more relevant than ever at a time when the nature of responsible responses to international problems is at the centre of contemporary political debate. This original interpretation of major thinkers will interest scholars of International Relations and the history of ideas.

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Introduction

Few claims are as enduring, powerful, and controversial in the study of world politics as that of being a Realist. To some, being a Realist represents the height of wisdom: the mark of a clear-sighted ability to understand the world the way it is, a willingness to confront the dynamics of power and interest that are held to govern world politics. To others, Realism is a mark of failure: morally obtuse and historically anachronistic, it represents a lack of political understanding and imagination that is misleading at best, pernicious and destructive at worst. Yet whatever stance one takes, there is little doubt that despite continual declarations of its irrelevance or imminent demise, Realism remains at the heart of theoretical and political dispute in world politics, constituting a continuing reference point against which competing positions consistently define themselves and a conceptual and rhetorical fulcrum around which both analytic and political debates revolve.

Throughout the 1990s, Realism seemed on the defensive. The end of the Cold War, it was widely argued, demonstrated its limitations all too clearly, while emerging dynamics – from state fragmentation, to globalisation, to environmental degradation – presented challenges that Realism was ill equipped to analyse, and even less well suited to address. Even amongst its supporters, the question ‘Is Realism Finished?’¹ seemed to emerge with new urgency; and although they almost invariably answered their rhetorical question with a rather predictable ‘no’, the frequency with which it was asked illustrated the pervasiveness of the challenge and the breadth and sophistication of Realism’s critics.

¹ Fareed Zakaria, ‘Is Realism Finished?’ *The National Interest* (Winter 1992–3).

These debates have by no means disappeared,² but it is difficult to avoid a sense that in the twenty-first century Realism is resurgent. Given increased impetus by the events of September 11, 2001, but driven more generally by a concern with American power and foreign policy in an era of seemingly unprecedented primacy, a series of influential writers have sought to reassert Realist truths supposedly obscured by the 'liberal' euphoria that dominated the previous decade. The hard realities of power politics, of the tradition of *realpolitik*, are once again being touted as lessons that must (yet again) be learnt and imperatives that must be followed. It is not difficult to discern a degree of mythologisation in these calls for a return to Realism. Casting the 1990s as a period of naïve liberalism bears suspicious signs of an attempt to reinvoke the 'twenty years' crisis' of the interwar period, and to draw on the still powerful symbolic legacy bequeathed by previous Realist assaults on well-meaning but profoundly misguided visions of world politics.³ Be this as it may, there is no doubting Realism's resurgence. Books such as Robert Kaplan's *Warrior Politics* and Robert Kagan's *Of Paradise and Power* have made considerable impacts on the broad intellectual setting within which policy is debated, each arguing forcefully for a return to Realist principles even as they challenge previous understandings of what Realism is and how it should be applied.⁴

One of the most notable dimensions of Realism is its appeal to history, and particularly to a legacy of Realist thinking stretching back centuries, if not millennia. It is thus not surprising to find familiar references to a 'Hobbesian' international system in Kagan's account of the imperatives of power, and Kaplan's mining of the history of political thought for inspiration (while certainly refreshing in a popular book on world politics) is by no means out of the ordinary. On the contrary, the claim that there exists an identifiable 'Realist tradition' stretching across the ages and illustrating the 'timeless wisdom'⁵ of a vision of world politics centred upon the principles of power politics and the dictates of

² See, for example, Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' *International Security* 24:2 (1999), and the responses in Peter D. Feaver, et al., 'Correspondence: Brother Can You Spare a Paradigm (Or, Was Anybody Ever A Realist?)', *International Security*, 25:1 (2000).

³ For a broad survey, see David Long and Peter Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Interwar Idealism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁴ Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002); Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

⁵ Barry Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, ed. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

international anarchy is one of the central aspects of International Relations theory. Renditions of this tale pervade the study of International Relations, informing everything from standard introductions to Realism for new students of the subject, to sophisticated scholarly and popular discussions of theoretical alternatives currently on offer. The protagonists in these stories are familiar: Thucydides and his account of the rivalry between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War; Machiavelli, with his advice to the Prince in the Italian city-states of the Renaissance; Thomas Hobbes' stark portrayal of the state of nature as a 'war of each against all'; Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his telling analogy of the stag-hunt illustrating the logic of international distrust and competition; Hans Morgenthau, with his assault upon the naïvetés of interwar 'liberalism' and his powerful restoration and reaffirmation of the principles of power politics as the basis for a revived study of International Relations in the wake of the Second World War, all play prominent roles in evocations and invocations of the Realist tradition as a bedrock for understanding world politics.⁶

The idea of a Realist tradition has a powerful impact on the study of international politics, as these figures and the tradition which they are held to comprise have become central elements in the narrative which the discipline of International Relations tells about itself, its history, and its conceptual foundations. Equally importantly, claims about the Realist tradition function as forms of legitimation, confirming the continuing validity of 'Realist' principles throughout history, and appropriating the authority of classical figures in political theory in their support. Indeed the claim that there is a Realist tradition is a key component of claims about the continuing salience and wisdom of Realism itself. The appeal of the idea of such a tradition is, therefore, hardly mysterious.

⁶ For a powerful recent restatement of this position, see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 17–27, 365–6. For diverse appraisals of Realism see, Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: Norton, 1997); Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (London: Routledge, 1998); David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Jack Donnelly, *Realism in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Johnathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Ashley Tellis, 'Reconstructing Political Realism: The Long March to Scientific Theory', in *Roots of Realism*, ed. Benjamin Frankel (London: Frank Coss, 1996). A major study that unfortunately arrived too recently to allow me to do it full justice is Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Joseph M. Grieco, 'Realist International Theory and the Study of World Politics', in *New Thinking in International Relations*, ed. Michael Doyle and John Ikenberry (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997).

This book arose from a deep dissatisfaction with the ways in which key figures in the history of political thought have been appropriated in much of International Relations, and the visions of Realism that have been associated with them. The more I looked at these thinkers, the more convinced I became that Realism had generally done little justice to those figures it claimed as its own. In fact, the more I looked, the more I came to suspect that the positions of key thinkers in the Realist canon not only bore remarkably little resemblance to their roles within standard renditions of the Realist tradition in International Relations, but that they often stood in direct opposition to the claims attributed to them. Far from supporting contemporary Realism, it seemed to me, a fuller engagement with the legacy it claimed actually undermined its authority.

The first two chapters in this study – on Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – were the initial results of these suspicions. In each, I argue that far from supporting claims about International Relations as an inevitable ‘state of nature’, or a realm of *realpolitik*, these thinkers actually develop understandings of International Relations that profoundly challenge many of the dominant claims which they are today used to support.⁷ But I also gradually became convinced that revisiting claims about a Realist tradition could go beyond just challenging conventional appropriations and misappropriations of these thinkers. In particular, it seemed that by taking the thought of these canonical figures more seriously, and reopening the questions with which they struggled, it might be possible to contribute to a reconstruction of a Realist tradition in ways that both brought out their historical concerns and altered their contemporary significance. In short, was there not another Realism – within the existing ‘tradition’ – that could be brought into view by challenging contemporary claims about both the nature of Realism and the positions of classical thinkers within its tradition?

⁷ In this regard, these analyses support other critiques of the interpretation and appropriation of classical political thinkers within International Relations in general, and within Realism in particular. In addition to those cited above see, for example, the treatments of Thucydides by Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Thucydides the Constructivist’, *American Political Science Review*, 95:3 (2001), Daniel Garst, ‘Thucydides and Neo-Realism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:2 (1989), and Stephen Forde, ‘International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 39:2 (1995); of Machiavelli by R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); of Carr in Michael Cox (ed.), *E. H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal* (London: Palgrave, 2000), and Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

This agenda was further stimulated by an engagement with another canonical figure in the Realist tradition: Hans Morgenthau. Morgenthau, I had long assumed (largely on the basis of my own very limited reading and the assurances of numerous cursory, secondary accounts), was a remarkably crude, if surprisingly influential figure, whose theory of power politics based in a universal *animus dominandi* represented everything that a sophisticated theory of International Relations – whatever its stripe – should leave behind as rapidly as possible. As in the cases of Hobbes and Rousseau, it did not take long to discover that this view bore little resemblance to reality. Indeed, it soon became apparent that Morgenthau’s thinking reflected a deep engagement with – and a clear and sophisticated understanding of – many of the issues at work in the understandings of international politics that could be found in Hobbes and Rousseau. At this point, I decided to move away from the narrower (albeit safer) theme of simply engaging with individual thinkers and providing critiques of their interpretation within the discipline of International Relations, toward the broader goal of reconstructing an understanding of Realism that would bring out (and bring together) the concerns of these thinkers and illustrate what I increasingly came to believe was their profound challenge to contemporary understandings of the Realist tradition and its place in International Relations theory today.

This book seeks to outline this understanding of the Realist tradition, a tradition that I call ‘wilful Realism’. The vision of wilful Realism as I try to present it here has three defining features. The first lies in its relationship to *scepticism*. Wilful Realism is characterised by a rational questioning of the limits of reason. It is not a denial of knowledge, or of rationality, and it insists upon the importance of empirical and historical knowledge. It is, however, deeply sceptical – and often harshly critical – of modern empiricism and rationalism as adequate bases for political knowledge, and of the broader tendency to model knowledge after the lead of Enlightenment science. These concerns are not abstract: they are driven by the conviction that questions of knowledge and belief are crucial elements in the construction and evaluation of action and order. The sense of limits arising from this scepticism does not yield resignation or nihilism; on the contrary, it is taken as a challenge requiring the active construction of political and social order, leading wilful Realism to a continual concern with the relationship between knowledge and politics, the politics of knowledge, and a strong advocacy of the need for a

politics both informed and suitably chastened by an understanding of the limits of knowledge.⁸

A second key component is *relationality*. Wilful Realism does not assume that the nature of either the self or political order is fixed or given. It focuses instead on the construction of subjectivity and political order through relational processes of self and other, at the level of both individuals and communities. This concern with relationality is historical and sociological, examining processes of constitution, maintenance, and transformation within and between political orders. It is also conceptual and philosophical. By focusing on the importance of knowledge in the construction of action wilful Realism seeks to ensure that the inescapability of relationality – of, for example, the self gaining identity in relation to others, or of concepts gaining meaning in relation to their antitheses – does not devolve into dualism: into understandings of identity or knowledge as defined wholly by opposition. This makes the concern with relationality more than just analytic: it is also part of a political and ethical sensibility in which the relationship between self and other has significance as a political principle, and constitutes one of the most important differences between wilful Realism and forms of rigidly oppositional power politics.

The third dimension can, more familiarly, be termed *power politics*. Power is central to any understanding of Realism, and wilful Realism is no exception. At the centre of wilful Realist analysis is an engagement with the multiple forms of power at work in politics, including those involved in knowledge claims, forms of subjectivity, and structures of authority and action (including those that allow the effective mobilisation and exercise of material power). Beyond these analytic issues, however, there again lies a broader set of political and ethical imperatives. Politics is in this vision identified by its specific duality: an indeterminacy that makes it at one and the same time a realm of power and inevitable struggle, *and* a realm of openness and self-determination. As a sphere of contest over the determination of values and wills, politics is an undetermined realm in which the struggle for power and domination is potentially limitless. Yet politics is also the sphere of activity uniquely concerned with the consideration, generation, and

⁸ For broader overviews of scepticism, see R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); M. Burnyeat, *The Sceptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and his 'The Sceptic in His Place and Time', in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

transformation of common interests and understandings: the sphere where the fundamental meanings and values of social life are contested and determined. The lack of fixed understandings of the good and the true is the condition of modern politics, and the basis of its distinctiveness as a realm of freedom, creativity, and change. Wilful Realism is deeply concerned that a recognition of the centrality of power in politics does not result in the reduction of politics to pure power, and particularly to the capacity to wield violence. It seeks, on the contrary, a politics of limits that recognises the destructive and productive dimensions of politics, and that maximises its positive possibilities while minimising its destructive potential.

This understanding of the Realist tradition clearly stands at some distance from many – indeed most – understandings of Realism today. The first three chapters seek to establish my claims by exploring the significance of each of these dimensions in the thinking of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Morgenthau. I argue, for example, that the concept of ‘Hobbesian anarchy’ is both more complex and more challenging as a foundation for thinking about International Relations than has usually been recognised. The significance for International Relations of what Stephen Holmes has called the ‘Hobbesian moment’ in political thought lies less in Hobbes’ stress on human mendacity, or a presentation of the objective ‘logic of anarchy’, than in his use of the state of nature as a powerful metaphor underlining the role of knowledge and belief in political action, and the centrality of the politics of knowledge in political order. One of Hobbes’ most interesting, and perhaps important, contributions to thinking about international politics thus lies in his engagement with scepticism and the limits of political order, and his attempt to provide a renewed understanding (and cultural practice) of subjectivity and sovereignty that would allow a maximum degree of autonomy – while providing stability, peace, and order – both within and between states.

Like Hobbes, Rousseau has achieved a canonical status in International Relations. His parable of the stag-hunt, so influentially drawn upon by Kenneth Waltz,⁹ has become a staple model and powerful metaphor conveying the structural ‘logic of anarchy’ in the international system. Yet Rousseau’s thinking also emerges from sources considerably different from those which have been invoked in his name

⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 167–71.

within International Relations. Beginning with the relationship between knowledge and politics, Rousseau develops an account of the historical development of subjectivity, grounded in the relationship between self and other, that provides him with both an explanation of the emergence of realpolitik, and a vision for moving beyond it. Far from being a quintessential theorist of the logic of anarchy, one of Rousseau's primary goals is to demonstrate how such a view systematically misunderstands politics; and far from revelling in a discovery of the deterministic laws of international anarchy, he provides a penetrating critique of the logic of realpolitik and seeks to overcome its dilemmas through an understanding of sovereignty as a politics of right formed within states, but extending beyond them.

Finally, one of the most fundamental and yet misunderstood elements of Morgenthau's Realism lies in his struggle with the nature of 'politics' itself. Morgenthau is often accused of initiating a Realist tradition that marginalised, or even excluded, the role of ideas in international politics, and of having an almost incomprehensibly narrow and simplistic concept of politics itself. I argue that a deeper enquiry into Morgenthau's understanding of politics reveals in his Realism a sophisticated interrogation of the relationship between knowledge claims, political order, social mobilisation, and political power. Far from reducing politics to power, Morgenthau's Realism recognises both the destructive and productive potential of politics, and attempts to construct an understanding of domestic politics and foreign policy that restrains modernity's worst potentials while retaining its principled and productive possibilities.

Each of these thinkers is fully aware of the destructive possibilities of modern politics, and their ideas reflect a direct concern with the politics of power, violence, and conflict. The relationship between knowledge and politics that is at the centre of Hobbes' engagement with scepticism, for example, is for him no abstract question: he sees it at the heart of the bloody conflict of the English Civil War. For Rousseau, the brutal degradation he sees in civil society, and the violent state of war he observes between sovereigns, is a direct consequence of the distorted forms that the process of relationality and the evolution of reason have undergone. Morgenthau's apparently abstruse interest in the concept of 'politics', similarly, is not an esoteric philosophical excursion: it arises directly from his attempt to oppose the violently oppositional vision of the 'concept of the political' developed by the 'crown jurist of the Nazi party', Carl Schmitt, and from his attempt to construct a viable liberal