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Realisms

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1. Intro

Realism is one of the longest-established approaches to the study of security, and a cornerstone in the construction of international relations as a distinct discipline in the 20th century. But the longevity of the label over decades – and its ubiquity in disciplinary surveys – perhaps gives a misleading impression as to the constancy and uniformity of the intellectual framework to which it refers. This will be old news to veterans of realism's internal debates, which have been recurrent and extensive. Those uninitiated in realism's rolling conversation within and about itself, however, might be surprised by the range of divergence between alternative versions established in the literature.

Among other things, alternative conceptions of realism have diverged on: whether rigorous theory can work at all below the system level; the extent to which prediction of state behaviour is possible; the meaning and applicability of 'rationality' to states' actions; whether realism's function is merely explanatory or also prescriptive or normative; and the relevance of ideas to national behaviour. This chapter will not resolve what qualifies as the 'realest' realism. That would be hard to do other than by fiat given the length of time over which different strands have made accepted use of the label. It will, however, elucidate in more detail some of these important points of divergence, drawing out the implications for realism's efforts to look to the future in the practice and study of international security.

2. Mapping the schools of realism

Most accounts of realism make central – rightly – the distinction between two variants that emerged sequentially during the 20th Century: classical and structural. The first, original, realism manifested in the scholarship of Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr, published in the aftermath of the outbreak of the Second World War. Its *raison d'être* was to serve as critique and counterpoint to liberal ideas of the period, which realists thought overestimated the viability of suppressing international aggression and war through law, institutions and appeals to the common interest in peace. Liberal 'idealists', this realism contended, failed to appreciate the primacy of power and the irreconcilability of states' interest in accumulating it for their rival purposes.

The second realism arrived with Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Waltz explicitly criticised, disavowed and disengaged from significant parts of previously-existing realism. His starting proposition was that Morgenthau and those who followed him were fundamentally misguided in seeking to identifying universal behavioural laws applying to states or individuals building bottom-up from the cataloguing of recorded events. The goal, he proposed, should not be to identify through observation what attributes of states and statesmen generate the outcomes of war and peace, but rather to explain the consistency with which the same outcome – conflict – manifests in international life despite the striking diversity of individuals' and states' qualities. To account for this, he proposed, only a theory of *system* would do. In pursuit of such a theory, he found his organising principle in anarchy, i.e. the absence of any sovereign authority above states analogous to that existing in domestic politics. Operating in such an environment, he argued, states wanting to preserve their continued autonomous existence had an incentive to balancing against concentrations of power that might otherwise ultimately dominate them. States that failed to heed this incentive entirely would be selected out of the system, losing their sovereignty. Those who made sub-optimal but less catastrophic choices would, in general, be socialised over time into more appropriate behaviour.

With the advent of this distinction came the new terminological regime: previously existing realism baptized retrospectively as 'classical', while Waltz's theory and subsequent work rooted in the furrow he ploughed becoming 'neo-' or 'structural' realism. Realist scholarship in the years since this demarcation can be classified in three major categories, to which this chapter will refer as we proceed:

- *Structural Realism (SR)* accepts Waltz's premises regarding the purpose and parameters of theorising international politics, and seeks to develop and refine an account of international politics on that basis.

- *Neoclassical Realism (NCR)* accepts the fundamentals of a Waltzian structural model, or refined variant thereof. But it proposes that it is (a) desirable to provide a supplementary account of how, when and why some state behaviour diverges from optimal responses to systemic incentives, and (b) possible to ascertain stable, consistent rules governing such divergence.

- *Classical Realism (CR) Redux* is, like neoclassical realism, interested in the role of factors below the international-systemic level. But rather than grafting 'unit-level' attributes onto a structural model as 'intervening variables' as NCR does, CR advocates reprising the original methodological and normative facets of classical realism. This contrasts with the positivistic scientific aspirations of both SR and NCR.

Inevitably, presentation of the taxonomy in this stark form makes the frontiers between categories seem more rigid and impermeably than tends to be the case in the work of actually existing scholars. Nevertheless, these categories do provide a useful framework for exploring the key points of principled intellectual divergence within contemporary realism. Let us now examine how this plays out in regard to some particular issues.

3. Is realism a predictive theory?

A key point of divergence between realists is whether the approach can generate robust predictions – and to what degree success in that regard determines worth. None of the three strands claims to be capable of generating comprehensively accurate predictions down to the level of every state's behaviour in every case. But each questions the plausibility of attaining such total predictive power for different reasons, and the differences are instructive.

3.1. Structural Realism and prediction

In Waltz's SR theory, the possibility of knowing what every state will do on any given occasion is ruled out from first principles as unrealisable. What it offers instead is an account of how systemic incentives generate a pattern of behaviour towards which states – on aggregate, not individually – will gravitate consistently over the long term. In combining incentives, selection and socialisation in a system-level account, SR borrows substantially and explicitly from the basic outline of the economic theory of the market. States may vary in their internal structures, values, desires and types of leader. But for each, continued survival as an autonomous entity is always a precondition for achieving other goals. From this Waltz deduces there will be a tendency for states to balance against rival concentrations of power, since this is necessary to secure that foundational interest.

Crucially, this does not require the claim that all states respond optimally to systemic incentives. It does not even require the claim that as a matter of descriptive empirical fact – as distinct from operationally useful theoretical assumption – every state is primarily motivated by survival. States that persistently show reckless disregard for their own survival will be destroyed, i.e. selected out. States that do seek survival but make poor choices in pursuit of it will, presuming they avoid the relatively rare fate that is total destruction, be subject to painful costs. Over time this will lead them either to course-correct, or else they will be overtaken in power by states whose behaviour better matches the reward-structure of the system.

SR in Waltz's formulation therefore *is* predictive. But – importantly – not at the level of the individual state. It posits two things. First, a predictable pattern of balancing behaviour on the part of states on aggregate over the long term. Second, that states will, in general, experience punishment and reward in proportion to how appropriately they respond to the system's incentives.

In the years since, many have followed in Waltz's footsteps. This has meant a sizeable tranche of literature (for an excellent survey, the steps of which we need not retread here, see Taliaferro 2000/01) in which contributors generally (a) accept the centrality of the SR framework, while (b) proposing some refinement of their own regarding the specifics of how incentives and capabilities interact to produce a certain pattern of behaviour. The content of each offshoot on the family tree of SR varies, but all generate hypotheses that are – in principle at least – amenable to testing against historical cases or future events. At the least, empirical case evidence is relevant to confirming – or disproving – the existence of whatever pattern of behaviour they expect. In addition, to the extent it is claimed states self-consciously adapt to systemic incentives – i.e. are socialized – empirical evidence might also be used in tracing the process by which this occurs.

While pursuing this agenda, some structural realists (Mearsheimer 2001, 2014) have concluded that the pattern of international behaviour tends towards expansionist pursuit of ever-greater power. Others have more stayed closer to Waltz in discerning a more defensively oriented pattern (Walt 1987). 'Balancing behaviour' is the aspect of SR that has received most attention in recent decades. This is both because it is the clearest empirically testable prediction derivable from the theory, and also one that appears to have direct relevance to the order arising after the end of the Cold War. Faced with the puzzle of the United States maintaining since 1991 a sizeable relative power advantage over all others major powers, some, such as Layne (2012), Mearsheimer (2014), and Waltz himself (2000), have predicted the emergence of balancing against the United States – albeit while acknowledging the likelihood of a time lag while systemic incentive translates into actual behaviour. Others have argued, contrarily, that a unipolar distribution so heavily stacked in favour of one power deters others from challenging the status quo, either alone or through alliances. (Brooks and Wohlforth).

This latter, balancing-sceptical realism can interweave comfortably with the account previously provided by Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin 1981). Both agree that hegemonic power, once established, is unlikely to be challenged by coordinated resistance. If and when it is destabilized, it is more likely to be because of an increase in the capabilities of lesser powers brought about by differential rates of economic growth and technological capacity. Such focus on states' internal development of capabilities has been amplified in the most recent SR scholarship: Rosato and Parent (2016) argue that although the evidence for *external* balancing may be rickety, SR's predictive power is vindicated if we focus on the

regularity with which *internal* balancing has occurred. That is to say: great powers are – justifiably – wary of the utility of alliances when contending with a stronger power, but have much more consistently tended to arm themselves against and to emulate the organisational and doctrinal innovations of rivals.

3.2 Neoclassical Realism and prediction

NCR (Rose 1998) simultaneously softens yet expands realism's claim to predictive power. It softens it by acknowledging that the patterns of systemically-incentivised behaviour it imports from SR are in practice routinely disrupted by other variables. It expands it by suggesting we can derive, from case research, law-like rules about which variables have what consequences, allowing us to anticipate deviation from structurally-driven patterns with some precision (Lobell et al, 2009). As this author (Quinn, 2013) has noted previously, particular NCR scholars have varied widely in the variable they propose 'intervenes' between systemic incentive and state action:

> According to assorted neoclassical realists, these mediating variables include, *inter alia*: divisions between and within elites in the foreign policy executive (Lobell 2003, 2009); entrenched strategies formed at the national level during previous historical periods (Brawley 2009); the need or desire of parts of the governing class to appeal to nationalist sentiment, even in contexts of economic interdependence (Sterling-Folker 2009); embedded ideological constructions in the domestic political culture within which national foreign policy must be justified (Dueck, 2004, 2006, 2009); the ability of powerful domestic forces to shape the pursuit of the national interest by threatening the security in office of the government (Ripsman 2009); the capacity of some states relative to others to 'extract' resources for the purposes of foreign policy (Taliaferro 2009); and the role of a strong, coherent state, with a complementary ideology, to make expansionary policy on the part of a state possible (Schweller 2009, 2009)

Each of these accounts certainly does propose something predictable about the world that should be amenable to testing against events, e.g. Schweller's would lead us to expect certain types of state response to external threat based on the structure of domestic institutions. Each is based on qualitative analysis of case-study evidence. However, it should be noted that if we credit them all with being accurate, it becomes most challenging to preserve the ultimate compatibility with Waltz's account of structure that NCR claims. This is for two reasons. First, because theoretically it opens the door to an uncontrollable proliferation of variables of precisely the kind Waltz condemned in principle as a dysfunctional feature of IR scholarship prior to imposing the brutalist parsimony of his *Theory*. A structural purist would therefore complain that NCR presents the illusion of

greater predictive and descriptive accuracy by reaching down to the level of state behaviour, but at the price of giving over realism's research agenda to the endless accumulation of new *ad hoc* variables that supposedly account for every variation in case outcome. Second, because the scope and duration of the divergences from structural imperative posited by NCR is unclear. Does NCR want to claim only that these intervening variables produce anomalies that – while interesting – are insufficiently frequent or lasting to ultimately disrupt the predictions of long-term aggregate state behaviour on which SR rests? (Rathbun 2008). Or is its goal "bolder: to build a causal model … whereby state-level attributes drive states to act contrary to supposed systemic imperatives in ways that are not merely anomalous, but are predictable, recurrent and lasting." (Quinn, 2013)

3.3 Classical Realism Redux and prediction

Scholars who advocate for the rediscovery of the neglected virtues of classical realism, and their reapplication in the contemporary practice of IR scholarship, have made the predictive pretensions of SR and NCR a point of departure. Barkin (2009) emphasises in his interrogation of prediction's place in classical realism that it is at heart "a theory of foreign policy, not a theory of system constraints", underlining the distinction with a structural approach. Unlike NCR, however, CR does not understand 'theory of foreign policy' to mean a deterministic account of the rules governing state action. Rather, it seeks to focus of the situation facing national decision-makers that emphasises their agency and the undetermined nature of their choices. In doing so it also brings to bear its own advocacy to the effect that they should embrace prudence and circumspection, in light of the inescapable uncertainty of the future, and of outcomes from their actions.

Kirshner (2015, 2), who has called for a "renaissance" of CR, criticises "purportedly scientific and, in particular, economistic approaches to IR theory", which in his view have displaced "an older, classical realist tradition with its emphasis on choice, contingency, history, ideology, uncertainty, and unpredictability". He portrays CR as committed to a kind of objectivity, but at the same time sceptical about IR's ability to successfully imitate the natural sciences in making prediction central to its utility. One can "describe, explain, understand and anticipate", he proposes, but not predict with the same kind of credibility. When it comes to international politics there are simply too many explanatory variables, and too many behavioural relationships in play, for circumstances to ever precisely replicate in the way required to allow construction of a rigorous predictive theory. In addition, he emphasises – as does Barkin – the disruptive effect of the reflexivity of actors on models that try to extrapolate from the historical record into the future, neglecting the feedback effect of learning to which IR scholarship itself contributes: "Structural realists model their states as amnesiacs innocent of historical legacies, and their statesmen as caretakers arranging the deckchairs on ships guided by inexorable currents beyond their control." (14).

4. Is realism a theory of rational action?

Advocates for reprising the classical realist approach often foreground its reservations about attributing too much rationality to states or leaders. Kirshner sets up CR as a counterpoint not just to structuralism but also to what he calls "hyperrationalism", an approach he characterises as involving "misapplication of economic theories and analogies to the study of IR". (2) He criticises the 'rational expectations' model of state behaviour for its reliance on positing an implausibly high level of information and capacity for calculation on the part of actors:

> This scepticism…is not a rejection of the scientific study of politics but a conservative regard for what social science can hope to achieve. Classical realists model their actors as rational, but not hyperrational, essentially as Keynes described them: doing the best they can to advance their interests in an uncertain world (24)

> …In the context of uncertainty, classical realists tend to model states in the abstract as rational muddlers – essentially rational, purposeful and motivated – but not as hyperrationalist automatons, Presented with a range of plausible policy options in an uncertain, contingent world, the choices states make will reflect the distinct historical experience, ideological context, and political contestations of the moment. (25)

Barkin (2003) similarly argues that although classical realism wants the *study* of politics to have a rational cast, this should not be conflated with supposing political actors *themselves* are strictly rational. He also notes, citing Guzzini, that as a matter of disciplinary history, "the argument that human nature is power-seeking [was] replaced by the assumption that the state is rational" during the shift towards a more aspirationally 'scientific' study of international relations. (236). By implication, the assumption of rationality was not a mainstay of prior classical models. Rathbun (2016), in his version of revived classical realism, suggests setting aside entirely the question of whether actions can be judged rational by reference to their aims, or the efficacy of their end-means calculation. He defines rationality instead as a thought process certain individual decision-makers may or may not be inclined to follow, rendering realist rationality as something closer to a temperamental disposition than an objective behaviour pattern.

It is also a premise of neoclassical realism's project that rational action is not to be expected uniformly across states. NCR provides an account of variation from optimal behaviour by

states, with the explanatory weight falling on intervening variables of myriad kinds – cultural, organisational, institutional or political. We might note however that logically such a theory only functions if it can posit a stable account of what optimal behaviour would look like, against which actual behaviour may then be evaluated. Simply put, one can only have a theory of divergence if there is something to diverge from. NCR finds this in its acceptance of structural realism (Rathbun 2008). But as noted earlier, there is some unresolved tension within the approach as to whether it merely seeks to account for anomalies, or, more boldly, to propose wider new behavioural rules of greater implication. Does the force of structure always win out in the end or can divergent behaviour be sustained indefinitely? (Quinn 2013) If the former, simply importing a structural realist model does resolve the 'divergence from what' question. If the latter, things get trickier, since – as we are about to note later in this section – in structural realism it is by observing socialisation and selection in action that we actually define what optimality and rationality are. Without socialisation and selection, the 'suboptimal' and 'irrational' becomes simply the different.

Since other strands of realism rely on some standard outside actually-existing state behaviour against which any particular action might be evaluated, the following question therefore acquires no small importance: does structural realism's account of the system and its incentives entail a theory of rationality? Certainly some who have built on Walz's foundation have explicitly framed their account as one involving rationality. Most prominently, Glaser (2003, 2010) provides an account of when conflict or cooperation occur based on the interaction of state capabilities, information and motive (whether a state is satisfied with basic security or 'greedy'). Still, Glaser is clear that his theory is more focused on providing an account of *what rational states would do* than on making the empirical claim that states do behave rationally. And since his theory takes differences in state motive as given at its starting line, it allows for different actions to be considered equally rational.

For a more parsimonious structural realism such as Waltz's – which ascribes to all states a single fundamental motive – the question is more stark: does obeying the imperatives of the system equate to rationality? Or to put a sharper point on it: does divergence constitute *irrational* behaviour? As it happens, Waltz himself speaks to this point, making it apparent in the process that he sets a rather low bar for what it means for rationality to pertain. In *Theory* he explains this by reference to his favoured analogy of the market:

> Firms are assumed to be maximizing units. In practice, some of them may not even be trying to maximize anything. Others may be trying, but their ineptitude may make this hard to discern. Competitive systems are regulated, so to speak, by the 'rationality' of the more successful competitors. What does rationality mean? It means only that some do better than others, whether through intelligence, skill, hard work, or dumb luck. They succeed in providing a wanted good or service more

attractively or cheaply than others do. Either their competitors emulate them or they fall by the wayside. (77)

Rationality for Waltz, therefore, reduces to something very basic indeed; perhaps to no more than that the systemic outcome simply 'is what it is'. Referring to the imputed centrality of rationality to his theory in later years, he was more blunt:

> I do not even know what 'rational actor' means empirically... Some [people] are going to do better than others; some are going to be a lot smarter; some are going to be a little bit luckier than others; some are going to be better at cheating than others. All those things affect outcomes, but rationality—in its empirical form—has really little to do with it. The notion of rationality is a big help in constructing a theory... But in the real world, does anybody think 'I'm rational, or you're rational'? Let alone, that states could be rational? It has no empirical meaning." (interview, cited in Bessner and Guillhot 2015, p.111)

Taking all this into account, it might seem odd, therefore, that some prominent sceptics of realism, when seeking to boil it down to its irreducible core alone, should have alighted on a "commitment to the assumption of rational state behaviour" (Legro and Moravcsik, 54). As respondents to Legro and Moravcsik noted at the time, an emphasis on 'rationalism' seems to contradict Waltz's own extremely limited claims for the power and relevance of rationality (Feaver et al 2000). Feaver puts his finger on the essential point: realism is entirely comfortable with the occurrence in practice of a great deal of state behaviour running counter to realist ideas about what systemic pressures incentivise. Structural realism's expectation, however, is that such behaviour will be "punished" by the system and thus state behaviour on the whole "constrained". This, in fact, is the true core of structural realism. Feaver noted in 2000 that the question of whether and how such punishment actually unfolds in practice had been "undertheorized": "how systematic are system constraints, really?" (167).

5. Is realism prescriptive/normative?

On first look, structural realism might seem to facilitate disengaging from prescription when it comes to the actions of states or their leaders. In practice, however, even realists with an emphasis on structure have not tended to steer clear: Mearsheimer (2014), Walt (2016) and others engage frequently in evaluating the wisdom of national policies and dispensing judgement and advice. We might deal with this fact simply by compartmentalizing: declare that the theoretical work of such scholars stands separate from their policy analysis and there is no particular need for reconciliation. But for those whose theory leans into a kind of

soft determinism, there is at least a *prima facie* tension. To take Mearsheimer as an example, his theory suggests states are driven to pursue power-maximising strategies unless and until checked by outside power. Yet in his contemporary policy analysis he appears to criticise US leaders for behaving in line with what his framework tells us to expect. This points to a non-trivial question hanging over any instance of a structuralist dispensing advice: why advise and criticise decisions if both behaviour and outcome are determined by forces at the system level?

This is a little unfair in the presentation, however. As established above, even the most emphatically structural realist allows that there is scope for variation between states in their choices, albeit within constraints imposed by the system. To the extent that we allow for some agency in selecting the substance of that variation, this opens up the space for prescription to be meaningful. It is within the capacity of individual states to decide to at least try and buck the system. At the same time, Waltz's model in which the accumulated outcomes of selection and socialization generate a distinction between what is rational and what is not seems to provide a strong normative standard against which to measure state policy – unless we are to take it the theory implies no directive in favour of policies it characterises as optimal and rational, which seems implausible. In fact, Mearsheimer (2009) has himself argued that Waltz's theory may work better as a normative one than as an empirically accurate account of state behaviour patterns.

Mearsheimer himself is in a somewhat tighter bind: his theory's central proposition is that states are power-maximisers, but at the same time he talks of "reckless" states and his policy recommendations tend towards commending the wisdom of restraint. Whereas the defensive realist sets up a norm of rational self-interested action while suggesting real-world state action does in fact generally abide by it, the offensive realist seems at once to identify a prevailing pattern of behaviour *and* the undesirability of that behaviour from the perspective of states' interests. One might say that continuing to dispense policy advice when one conceives of systemic theory in this tragic light – as an account of predestined self-harming behaviour – implies the greatest commitment of all to the inherent worthiness of normative prescription. After all, it implies a willingness to persevere in the face of certainty that more often than not good advice will not be heeded, and entails advocating not for adherence to the prevailing behavioural norm, but for efforts at resistance to it in spite of its powerful pull.

Neoclassical realism walks a similar line between the behaviour it expects and that it recommends. In adopting a structural realism as a foundation NCR imposes a framework of expectation – whether tacitly or explicitly – regarding what rational self-interest demands of states. Since its *raison d'etre* is to then provide accounts of divergence from this standard, one might reasonably conclude that at least some measure of criticism, aimed at the level the decision-making unit, is implied. Schweller (2008), for example, is not merely observing

the correlation between the arrangement of domestic politics and institutions and a certain pattern of state behaviour, but also linking this to a judgement as to whether and when states act to adequately address external threats. For another example, authors who focus on the role of ideology and culture in constraining choice (Dueck 2006, 2009; Quinn 2010) pair that with concern that this may close off strategically sensible options from consideration.

Classical realism is the most overtly normative of the realist approaches. Its lesser attachment to prediction and its emphasis on contingency and agency foreground the fact that prescription is purposeful. As Barkin (2009) puts it:

> …[T]he need for prescription underlines the possibility that prediction might fail. This is the case inasmuch as it involves having to tell decision makers to do what they have been predicted to do, or having to warn them not to do what it has been predicted they will not do anyway. To the extent therefore that we expect that prescription might work, we must accept that prediction might fail. (245)

For him, classical realism is at heart a "theory of foreign policy, not a theory of system constraints". (241) By this he means not – as a structural or neoclassical realist would – an explanatory account of how foreign policy *will* unfold, but rather an injunction as to the disposition leaders should adopt when making decisions. Similarly, Williams (2004) in advocating renewed attention to Morgenthau's CR, emphasises the demand it places on leaders to make "critical normative and political judgements" (635). For Morgenthau, he says, approvingly:

> While it was essential to recognise objectively the dynamics and power relations involved in collective identity formation, and the intrinsic relationship between politics and power, it was equally essential to develop an ethical and evaluative stance towards these dynamics. If realism was not to descend into a crude realpolitik, and if a recognition of the centrality of power in politics was not to result in the reduction of politics to nothing more than power and violence, critical judgement was essential. (657)

That classical realism would seek to open up the space first for agency and then for critical thinking by actors should not surprise us when we recall that its foundational puzzle was that states frequently do 'the wrong thing', and that it is therefore worthwhile to advise them otherwise (Quinn 2010, p.13; 2014).

6. Do 'ideas matter' in realism?

Ideas do not play the primary role in structural and neoclassical realist accounts. But they certainly do feature within the world of those frameworks. This is true in three regards. First, because state leaders – and national cultures for that matter – have ideas about the ideal world they wish to see realised. Survival as an autonomous entity is the fundamental drive of states according to realism, but this is because it is the *sine qua non* of their pursuit of myriad other things. Most such 'next-step' goals relate to ideal states of political or economic order towards which they wish to see progress. We should not confuse realism's claim that states will, anomalies excepted, prioritise survival over abstract ideological purism with a denial that states invest sizable importance in ideas of the good whenever they have a baseline platform of security from which to do so.

Second, because structural realism is in large part an account of how the pressures of anarchy *moderate and modify* other impulses. As a matter of intellectual history, no small part of the reason structural realism came into being was to make the case that liberal domestic institutions and norms can be trusted to competently coexist with competent provision for national security, because of the socialisation effect of the international system (Bessner and Guilhot, 2015). This is one example of the contention that structure is a mechanism that brings states which differ widely in their features, into a pattern of similarity in behaviour. We can find other examples of the same logic in arguments by realists that in the final analysis we should expect no less rational pursuit of self-preservation from ostentatiously ideological non-democracies, e.g. the Soviet Union or Iran, than from the US.

Third, because for NCR in some cases ideas account for sub-optimal behaviour, whether directly in the form of ideology and culture (Dueck 2006, 2009) or indirectly in the form of institutional structure (Schweller 2008) or domestic political coalitions (Lobell 2002).

When we consider classical realism, ideas are not merely present but absolutely central. We have noted above – and therefore need not labour here – Williams' point that Morgenthau's realism demanded that actors reflect critically on their own political and ethical position. In reprising prominently this dimension of classical realism, the movement for CR Redux means not merely to remind realists that, however tacitly, they inevitably assume a normative position, but also of the vital imperative to keep their own values in perspective. It is here Barkin finds the space and the grounds for his contention that there is underappreciated overlap between realism's fundamentally relativistic take on political values and critical-constructivist frameworks of analysis.

People, especially groups and nations, are prone to identifying their own ideological convictions with universal values, and to rationalising the pursuit of their own interests as somehow demanded by the universal good. Pointing this out and criticising this human tendency was central to the ouevre not just of Morgenthau but also Carr (1995) and Niebuhr (2005, 2008). Barkin highlights the value of this strand of "moral scepticism" which represents "a key difference between idealism and realism":

> Idealism recognises a single ideal, a universal political morality towards which we should strive. Realism argues that no universal political morality exists… [W]hen we justify a use of power to ourselves as being for moral purposes, we may simply be fooling ourselves and rationalizing an action as moral that we want to take for other reasons. As such, even though power is hollow without political morality, the classical realist argument is that we must, nonetheless, apply to that morality, ours as well as others, a certain scepticism when it is used to justify power. (337-38).

CR thus not only opens up the space for agency and prescription – it also makes the meta-ethical move of insisting that at the most fundamental level the values and preferences guiding our own actions be placed in an equivalence relationship with those of others. And it argues it is important for actors to remain conscious of this relativity. In this regard, CR might be argued to be a more dispassionately relativistic theory than many 'critical' approaches.

7. Is a realism in which 'ideas matter' still distinctive?

If it is willing to embrace a strong ideational dimension – in addition to the acknowledgement that behaviour often varies from supposed structural incentives – then the question arises of whether realism remains distinct from other approaches. This is one major thrust of the famous assault by Legro and Moravcsik (1999). Further, since one of the few things Legro and Moravcsik think a core realism *can* be reduced to is a belief in rational action, but that is a problematic claim for the reasons set out above, what if anything *can* provide an irreducible foundation uniting all realism worthy of the name?

Wohlforth (Feaver *et al*, 2000) has justly accused Legro and Moravcsik of a unilateral land-grab of theoretical turf by branding as "the epistemic paradigm" all theories that allow for the relevance of "collective beliefs and ideas", and proposing to deny anything that strays into this territory the right to call itself realist. Still, the underlying substantive question is

legitimate. If culture, ideas and perceptions are all live factors in today's structural and neoclassical realist accounts, and if, as Barkin persuasively claims, constructivism can be complementary to classical realism rather than antagonistic, is there anything at bottom that no realist approach can give up?

A plausible possibility lies in the idea that realism imposes limits on the possible, believes that humanity is constrained in the extent of change that is realisable. Realisms certainly have a place for change – indeed they are to a non-trivial extent given over to explaining the process by which it unfolds. Gilpin's account of hegemony (1981) sets out the role of internal economic shifts in destabilising power balances, prompting major shifts in the global distribution of power. And almost all the realist accounts referred to previously concern themselves with states' responses to power distributions that are dynamic, not static. It is fair to note, however, that these are accounts of limited change *within* a system centred on states with an indissoluble core of antagonism between their interests. They take the continuation in perpetuity of this foundation as a given.

Phrasing it this way risks making the assumption of limits on change seem like a mere failure of imagination on the part of realists. But it would be fairer to say that realism, even when prompted to reflects on the possibilities, is actively sceptical regarding certain kinds of radical change. Specifically, realism believes it is a core truth about humans that they group. States are one, heavily institutionalised version of this phenomenon, and states have been extremely prominent and consequential during a certain period of history that includes the present. But the universal grouping tendency itself pre-dates the establishment of the state, and by implication realists are confident it would outlive any change in the standard type of political unit.

This observation has been a mainstay of classical realists through the years, brought especially into focus by Niebuhr (2005, 2008), who emphasised not just the grouping tendency but also the intrinsic (or so it appears) flaw of human groups that they lack insight into their own lack of specialness, and are rarely if ever capable of conceiving of their own interests in a relation of equivalence with those of others – even though this is the true state of affairs. More recently, Sterling-Folker (2002, 2005) has suggested realism's belief in this tendency may be so comprehensive and strong that it implies a biological root. Whether or not we go that far, it is certainly true as she argues, that dialogue between realism and liberal constructivism should focus on the proposition that "there may be limitations on how human beings construct their social realities" (76). When Sterling-Folker engages in print with a more 'critical' scholar (Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2005), it fast emerges as their point of divergence that realists do not believe humans are either so desirous or so capable of detaching themselves from all in-group out-group identity formation as radicals wish:

The problem… from a realist perspective is that individuals do not want freedom from settled identity; and in any case it is the nation, not the state, that is the chief oppressor in this regard. Human beings are social creatures, whose humanity is only realisable within the context of a group, and, as a result, human beings do not embrace identity ambiguity. They will form groups even when there is no rational reason to do so, and group formation means the demarcation of identity difference from other human beings. What binds a collective of individuals is always the opposition to something normatively different, external, and less desirable, because without this juxtaposition the members of a collective cannot know who they are and cannot function as a collective. The need for order and stability is not a function of the state, then, it is a function of human sociability that derives, in turn, from the anarchic conditions of species evolution. (653)

This presents an excellent candidate for the irreducible core of realism today. Ideas, institutions, ideologies, cultures, identities, norms, interests: all these things may indeed be constructed. But realists believe that where there are humans, there will always be groups. While the precise content of their imagined basis for division may vary, people will always find ways to distinguish themselves across some mixture of the aforementioned categories. Combined with the inevitability that power and resources will be unevenly distributed, this baseline reality provides us with the inescapable stuff of politics, in a realist analysis.

Conclusion

There is little risk that realism's centrality to International Security scholarship will go unrecognised in any survey. The risk is greater that its diversity may go underappreciated. Some realisms attribute significant weight to their ability to make predictions at the system level. Others claim to be able to divine law-like relationships between attributes at the state level and future behaviour. Yet others actively emphasise the importance of contingency and agency, advocating that both scholars and political actors should remain acutely conscious thereof.

Some realists have a robust conception of rational action – or at least proceed as though they do – against which state actions can be judged anomalous, even deviant. Others appear sceptical of 'rationality', doubting not just whether states or people behave rationally, but also whether it is possible to give that concept itself thick and stable meaning. Some realisms are normative only tacitly: they have a standard for optimal system-incentivised behaviour against which to judge the actual, and we might reasonably draw from this an inference of approval. Others, in particular classical realism as revived in a 21st century incarnation, are invested in restoring ethical and meta-ethical considerations to the foreground. For some realism, ideas matter in the sense that states and leaders have them

and their efforts to pursue them will be moderated by the pressures of the international system. Others see realism itself as an intellectual project that challenges political actors to put their own ideas in perspective, avoiding the lure of chauvinism and universalism.

One thing that binds realists together is scepticism towards claims by radicals that some new order may be realised, through 'resistance', which overcomes altogether the human tendency towards grouping and the exercise of power within structures that follow from it. As Sterling-Folker and Shinko (2005, 642) put it, realism is "skeptical of the ability to displace existing structures, and it assumes that structural reconstitution in one form or another is a fact of human existence. What happens after power of resistance has been unleashed and existing structures are displaced is a particular worry of realists, since the opposite of structure is anarchy and newly constituted structures may be relatively worse than what was displaced." Realism allows for change: material, ideational and institutional. But perhaps more than anything, realism believes in limits.

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