Realisms

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Abstract and Keywords

Realism is one of the best-known and longest-established approaches to International Security, but the level of diversity that exists within the label often goes underappreciated. This chapter first enumerates and explains the primary divergent strands co-existing within realism: structural, neoclassical, and revived classical realism. It then outlines the ways different types of realist vary in their answers to key social-scientific questions: Should theory be predictive, and if so what kinds of predictions can realism hope to make? Is realism a theory of rational action? Is it purely descriptive and explanatory, or also normative/prescriptive? Do “ideas” matter in a realist framework, and if so in what way? Finally, taking all the preceding into account, can realism still claim to be a distinctive approach, united by some common principle or principles?

Keywords: theory, realism, structural, neoclassical, classical, prediction, rationality, ideas

6.1 Introduction

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 twentieth century. But the longevity of the label—and its ubiquity in disciplinary surveys over decades—gives a misleading impression of 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 extensive. Those uninitiated in realism’s rolling conversation within and about itself, however, might be surprised by the range of difference encompassed by the alternative versions of realism established in the literature.

Rival conceptions of realism have diverged on fundamental issues: whether rigorous theory can work at all below the system level; the extent to which prediction of state behaviour is possible; the meaning of “rationality” and its applicability to states’ actions; whether realism’s function is merely explanatory or also prescriptive/normative; and the role if any of ideas in driving behavior. 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, and draw out the implications for realism's efforts to look to the future in the study and practice of international security.

6.2 Mapping the Schools of Realism

Most accounts of realism make central—rightly—the distinction between two variants that emerged sequentially during the twentieth century: classical and structural. The first, original, realism manifested in the scholarship of Hans J. Morgenthau and E. H. (p. 72) 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 a common interest in peace. Liberal "idealists," this realism contended, failed to appreciate the primacy of power and the irreconcilability of states' interests in accumulating it for their rival purposes.

The second realism arrived with Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (2010/1979). Waltz explicitly criticized, disavowed, and disengaged from significant parts of previously existing realism. His starting proposition was that Morgenthau (1966) and those who followed him were fundamentally misguided in seeking to identify universal behavioral laws applicable to states or individuals by building bottom-up from the cataloguing of recorded events. The goal, he proposed, should not be to try and discern through aggregated observations which attributes of states and statesmen generate the outcomes of war and peace. Rather it should be to explain the consistency with which the *same* outcome—conflict—manifests in international life despite the striking diversity of individuals' and states' characteristics. To account for this, he proposed, only a theory of *system* would do. In pursuit of such a theory, he found his organizing principle in anarchy; that is, in 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 achieve a balance 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 which made sub-optimal but less catastrophic choices would, in general, be socialized over time into more appropriate behavior.

With the advent of this distinction came the new terminological regime: a previously existing realism baptized retrospectively as “classical,” while Waltz’s theory and subsequent work in the furrow he ploughed becoming “neo-“ or “structural” realism. Realist scholarship in the years since can be classified into 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 theorizing 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 behavior diverges from optimal responses to systemic incentives, and (b) possible to identify 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 (p. 73) 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 impermeable 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.

6.3 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 behavior in every case. But each questions the plausibility of attaining such total predictive power for different reasons, and those differences are instructive.

6.3.1 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 unrealizable. What it offers instead is an account of how systemic incentives generate a pattern of behavior toward which states—on aggregate, not individually—will gravitate consistently over the long term. In combining incentives, selection, and socialization in a system-level account, SR borrows substantially and explicitly from a simple outline of the economic theory of the market (Waltz 2008). 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 fundamental 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, that is, 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 correct their course, or else be overtaken in power by states whose behavior better matches the reward structure of the system.

(p. 74) 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 behavior 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 sizable 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 behavior. 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 behavior they expect. In addition, to the extent it is claimed states self-consciously adapt to systemic incentives—that is, are socialized—empirical evidence might also be used in tracing the process by which this occurs.

While pursuing this agenda, some structural realists (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001a, 2001b) have concluded that the pattern of international behavior tends toward expansionist pursuit of ever-greater power. Others have stayed closer to Waltz in discerning a more defensively oriented pattern (e.g. Walt 1987, 1995). "Balancing behavior" is the aspect of SR that has received most attention. 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 sizable relative power advantage over all other major powers, some, such as Layne (2012), Mearsheimer (2001a, 2001b), 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 behavior. Others have argued, contrarily, that a unipolar distribution so heavily

stacked in favor of one power deters others from challenging the status quo, whether alone or through alliances (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008).

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 (2015) 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 reliability of alliances when contending with a stronger power, but have with much more consistency tended to arm themselves against rivals, and emulate their organizational and doctrinal innovations.

(p. 75) 6.3.2 Neoclassical Realism and Prediction

NCR (Rose 1998) softens yet simultaneously expands realism's claim to predictive power. It softens it by acknowledging that the patterns of system-incentivized behavior 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 structure-driven patterns with some precision (Lobell et al. 2009; Ripsman et al. 2016). As this author (Quinn 2013) has noted previously, particular NCR scholars have varied widely in the variable that 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; Lobell et al. 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, in making expansionary policy on the part of a state possible (Schweller 2008, 2009)

Each of these accounts certainly does propose something predictable about the world that should be amenable to testing against events, for example Schweller's would lead us to expect certain types of state response to an external threat based on the structure of domestic institutions. Each is based on a qualitative analysis of case study evidence. How-

ever, it should be noted that if we were to 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 behavior, but at the price of giving over realism's research agenda to the endless accumulation of ad hoc variables that supposedly account for every difference in case outcome. The second reason is 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 occasional anomalies that—while interesting—are insufficiently frequent or lasting to ultimately disrupt the predictions of long-term aggregate state behavior on which SR rests (Rathbun 2008)? Or is its (p. 76) 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).

6.3.3 Classical Realism Redux and Prediction

Scholars who advocate rediscovering 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 major point of departure. Barkin (2009) emphasizes 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," thus underlining its distinction from a structural approach. Unlike NCR, however, CR does not understand "theory of foreign policy" to mean a deterministic account of rules governing state action. Rather, in focusing on the situation facing national decision-makers, it seeks to emphasize their agency and the non-determined nature of their choices. In doing so it also engages in a kind of exhortation, to the effect that political actors should embrace prudence and circumspection given the inescapable uncertainty of the future and of the outcomes of their actions.

Kirshner (2015: 156), who has called for a "renaissance" of CR, criticizes "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 skeptical 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 behavioral relationships in play, for circumstances to ever precisely replicate in the way required to allow construction of a rigorous predictive theory. In addition, Kirshner emphasizes—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." (2015: 168).

6.4 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 (p. 77) counterpoint not just to structuralism but also to what he calls "hyperrationalism," an approach he characterizes as involving "misapplication of economic theories and analogies to the study of IR" (Kirshner 2015: 156). He criticizes the "rational expectations" model of state behavior 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. (Kirshner 2015: 178)

> … 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. (Kirshner 2015: 179)

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 toward a more aspirationally "scientific" study of International Relations. (Barkin 2003: 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, have the temperamental disposition to follow.

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 behavior by states, with the explanatory weight falling on intervening variables of myriad kinds —cultural, organizational, institutional, or political. We might note, however, that logically such a theory only functions if it can posit a stable account of what optimal behavior would look like, against which actual behavior 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 in Section 6.3.2, 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 behavioral rules of greater lasting consequence. Does the force of structure always win out in the end or can divergent behavior 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 socialization and selection in action that we actually (p. 78) define what optimality and rationality *are*. Without socialization and selection, the "sub-optimal" and "irrational" becomes simply the different.

Since other strands of realism rely on some standard outside actually-existing state behavior against which any particular action might be evaluated, the following question therefore takes on 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 (the latter meaning whether a state is satisfied with basic security or is "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 in fact behave rationally. And since his theory takes differences in state motive as given at its starting line, it allows for different courses of action in otherwise identical circumstances 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* behavior? As it happens, Waltz (2010/1979) 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 the *Theory of International Politics* he explains this by reference to his favored 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. (Waltz 2010/1979: 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 even 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 Guilhot 2015: 111)

(p. 79) Taking all this into account, it might seem odd, therefore, that some prominent skeptics 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 1999: 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 behavior running counter to what realists think systemic pressures incentivize. Structural realism’s expectation, however, is that such behavior will be “punished” by the system and thus state behavior 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?” (Feaver et al. 2000: 167).

6.5 Is Realism Prescriptive/Normative?

At first glance, 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 who emphasize structure have not tended to steer clear: Mearsheimer (2014), Walt (2016) and others frequently offer evaluations of the wisdom of national policies and dispense judgment and advice. Does this make sense?

As established in Section 6.3.1, 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, that is, we are to regard the theory as implying no favor for the policies it characterizes as optimal and rational, which seems implausible.

Mearsheimer places himself in a somewhat tighter bind than Waltz. His theory’s central proposition (2001b) is that states are power-maximizers, but at the same time he talks of “reckless” states (2009) and his policy recommendations tend toward commending the

wisdom of restraint (2014). Does this not amount to criticizing states for doing no more than acting in line with what his own framework tells us is to be expected? 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 behavior *and* the undesirability of that behavior with regard to states' true interests. One might conclude that continuing to dispense policy advice when one conceives of the international system in such tragic (p. 80) terms—as an account of predestined self-harm—implies the greatest commitment of all to the inherent worthiness of normative prescription. After all, it suggests a willingness to persevere despite being convinced that more often than not good advice will fail to be heeded, and entails advocating not for adherence to a prevailing behavioral norm, but for valiant efforts at resistance in spite of the powerful pull of self-destructiveness.

Neoclassical realism walks a similar line in expecting one kind of behavior and recommending another. 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'être* is to then provide accounts of divergence from this standard, we might therefore reasonably conclude that some measure of criticism, aimed at the level of the decision-making unit, is implied. Schweller (2008), for one example, is not merely observing a correlation between the arrangement of domestic politics and institutions and a certain pattern of state behavior, but also linking this to a judgment as to whether and when states act *adequately* to address external threats. For another example, authors who focus on the role of ideology and culture in limiting policy choice (Dueck 2006, 2009; Quinn 2010) often pair that with concern that this serves to close off some strategically sensible options from consideration.

Classical realism meanwhile is the most overtly normative of the realist approaches. Its lesser attachment to prediction and its emphasis on contingency and agency foreground the idea 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. (Barkin 2009: 245)

For Barkin, classical realism is at heart a "theory of foreign policy, not a theory of system constraints" (Barkin 2009: 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 bring to the task of making decisions. Similarly, Williams (2004) in advocating renewed attention to Morgenthau's CR, emphasizes the demand it places on leaders to make "critical normative and political judgements" (2004: 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. (Williams 2004: 657)

(p. 81) 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 exhort them to do otherwise (Quinn 2010, 2014).

6.6 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 universe posited by 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 realized. Survival as an autonomous entity is the fundamental drive of states according to realism, but that is because it is the *sine qua non* of their pursuit of myriad other things they value. Most such "next-step" goals involve ideals of political or economic order toward which actors wish to see progress. We should not confuse realism's claim that states will, anomalies excepted, prioritize survival over abstract ideological purism with a denial that states invest importance in their "idea of the good" once they have a baseline of security from which to proceed.

Second, structural realism is in large part an account of how the pressures of anarchy *moderate and modify* other drivers, some of which are ideational. As a matter of intellectual history, Waltz's structural realist theory came into being in order to make the case that democratic domestic politics could, despite its vicissitudes, be reconciled with the need to provide competently for national security, because of the socializing effect of the international system (Bessner and Guilhot 2015). Similar arguments are made today by realists regarding highly ideological states such as Iran and North Korea.

Third, for some variants of NCR, 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 in Section 6.5—and therefore need not labor here—Williams' point that Morgenthau's realism demanded actors reflect critically on their own political and ethical position. In reprising prominently this dimension of classical realism, the movement for CR Redux seeks not only to remind realists that, however tacitly, they inevitably assume a normative position, but also that it is a vital imperative to keep one's own values in perspective. It is here that Barkin finds the space and grounds for his thesis that there is an

underappreciated overlap between realism's fundamentally relativistic take on political values, and critical-constructivist frameworks of analysis.

(p. 82) People, especially groups and nations, are prone to identifying their own ideological convictions with universal values, and to rationalizing the pursuit of their own interests as somehow demanded by the universal good. Pointing this out and criticizing this human tendency was central to the *oeuvre* not just of Morgenthau but also Carr (1995) and Niebuhr (2005, 2008). Barkin emphasizes 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. (Barkin 2003: 337–8).

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 exist in a relationship of equivalence with those of others. And it wishes actors to become and remain conscious of this equivalence. In this regard, CR, it might be argued, is a more dispassionately relativistic theory than many "critical" approaches.

If realism can be skeptical about rationality and encompass a major role for ideas, the question may then arise: Is it any longer a distinct theoretical paradigm? This has certainly been a matter of animated debate (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Feaver et al. 2000). One plausible possibility lies its conviction about the limits constraining change. Realism *does* have a place for change. Even Gilpin's (1981) account of hegemonic stability, for example, is concerned with how it ultimately is destabilized. And almost every realist account treats the distribution of power as something dynamic not static. Nevertheless, realism offers accounts of only limited change *within* a system centered on an indissoluble core of antagonism between interests.

This is not simply a failure of imagination. Realists, even when prompted to reflect on the possibilities, are actively skeptical of the viability of certain kinds of radical transformation in human political relations. Specifically, realism believes it is a core truth about humans that they form groups. States happen to be the dominant organizational form this has taken in the modern era, but the universal tendency pre-dates the state, and by implication realists are confident it would outlive it. This observation has been a mainstay of classical realists through the years, brought into focus especially by Niebuhr (2005, 2008), alongside his emphasis on human collectives' consistent failure to recognize the moral equivalence of their own interests relative to those of others. More recently, Sterling-Folker (2002) has even speculated on a biological root to the grouping impulse.

Whether or not we go that far, it is quite right, as she argues, that future dialogue between realism and liberal constructivism should most usefully focus on the proposition that “there may be limitations on how human beings construct their social realities” (Sterling-Folker 2002: 76).

(p. 83) 6.7 Conclusion

There is little risk that realism’s centrality to international security scholarship will go unrecognized in any survey. The risk is greater that its diversity might 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 state attributes and future behavior. And yet others still actively emphasize the importance of contingency and agency. Some realists have a strong conception of rational action—or at least proceed as though they do—against which state actions can be judged anomalous, even deviant. Others are skeptical of “rationality,” doubting not just whether states or people behave rationally, but also whether it is possible to give the very concept itself thick and stable meaning.

Some realisms are normative only tacitly: they have a standard for optimal system-incentivized behavior against which to judge the actual, and we might reasonably infer that they approve of what is optimal. Others, in particular classical realism as revived in a twenty-first-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 in pursuit 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 beliefs and values in perspective alongside those of others, avoiding the lure of chauvinism and universalism. One thing that binds realists together is skepticism toward claims by radicals that some new order may be realized, through “resistance,” which overcomes altogether the human tendency toward grouping and the exercise of power within structures that follow from it. Realism allows for change: material, ideational, and institutional. But perhaps more than anything, realism believes in limits.

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