Week II: Realism

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Thucydides, *The Melian Dialogue*

Depending on whom you ask, Thucydides is either the first or second historian in Western Civilisation. His landmark work is his History of the Peloponnesian War, which was an existential military conflict between Athens and Sparta in the Hellenic peninsula. A key passage is the so-called "Melian Dialogue," an imagined debate between the leaders of the island city-state of Melos and of Athens on the eve of battle. Thucydides uses this as a chance to illustrate the mentality of the Athenians in their pursuit of power. This makes it one of the earliest attestations to political realism in Western IR theory.

Thucydides wrote that states go to war for three reasons: pride, fear, and self-interest. Pride, believing that their reputation is at stake, compels states to conquer others; fear, as pre-emptive defence; and self-interest, taking what can be taken from others who are powerless to stop them. If any of these three motivations grow too great in a state, they are likely to go to war. In the Peloponnesian War, all three motivated Athens and Sparta to take up arms against one another.

The circumstances of the war made Melian neutrality intolerable for Athens. The Melians and Spartans shared a common heritage, and Athens worried about Melian silver being used to fund the Spartan war effort. Furthermore, Athens needed to make an example out of a state which refused to capitulate, so as to discourage any other uppity vassals from getting any ideas about "rebellion." Athens had the best navy in the Aegean sea, and they used it to counter Sparta's advantage on land – which meant conquering islands.

The Athenians encouraged the hopelessly outmatched Melians to surrender quickly, and they assured that Melos would be spared from destruction and benefit from being an Athenian subject. The Athenians saw this as a simple cost-benefit analysis: certain destruction versus survival. Right and wrong did not enter into consideration, and the Athenians claimed that the Melians would do the same if Melos were invading Attica.

The Melians, naturally, saw things entirely differently. They responded that even if their odds at defeating Athens were a million-to-one, they would sooner take that chance rather than surrender and lose their sovereignty forever. The Athenians countered that there is no shame in surrendering in the face of certain defeat, since this is politics and not the Olympics.

To the Athenians, the right to use power to dominate other states was as natural as gravity. Customs and laws can only exist within a state, but between states there exists nothing but coercion and reciprocal coercion. They characterise the Melians as foolish and irrational, unable to recognise where their best interests truly lie.

Following the negotiations, Melos rejected terms of surrender; Athens crushed them, executed their men, and enslaved their women and children. Rather than discourage uprisings against Athens, their tribute states began to defect en masse, outraged that the defenceless Melians was treated so cruelly. Sparta would later liberate Melos and install a military governor of its own. Athens, who so casually remarked to the Melians that they did not fear the loss of their empire, won the battle of Melos, but it would go on to lose the war to Sparta. Perhaps the true lesson of the Peloponnesian war is that realist practitioners are not necessarily as realistic as they claim. Short-sightedness has always been the Achilles Heel of this school of thought.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Thomas Hobbes lived through the English Civil War (1642-51), a conflict fought between Monarchists (Cavaliers) who supported the divine right of Kings and Parliamentarians (Roundheads) who fought for the rule of law, binding even to Kings. The destruction and lawlessness of the war disturbed him deeply and informed his unique perspective on the proper behaviour of sovereigns towards their subjects and vice versa.

Hobbes is best known for his description of the human condition as a "nasty, cruel, brutish, and short." Adding to the inherent dangers of the natural world, humans are in conflict with one another, making matters even worse. Pessimistic as it is, Hobbes argued that the role of the state is to ameliorate the misery of life as much as possible, and that subjects

of a sovereign state have every duty to submit to it entirely for it to accomplish this task. It may come as no surprise that Hobbes was a royalist, and blamed the Roundheads for starting the Civil War.

The relevance of *Leviathan* to modern realism is that it describes the ideal state as a unitary actor. The Hobbesian ideal is that the government of a territory have complete or near-complete control over its resources, citizens, &c. When the need arises to fend off an aggressive neighbour, the state can rapidly marshal forces to counter a threat and preserve its society's well-being. Like the Athenians, Hobbes appeals to nature for justification, not the Divine Right of Kings (even if it just so happened to coincide with his political beliefs vis-à-vis the war). Likewise with Athens' short-sighted foreign policy, it is prudent to consider whether such a unitary control of society and territory is possible let alone desirable if you aren't an early-modern Monarchist. Hobbes' own argument could be used to justify the Cromwell Dictatorship during the interregnum, since it doesn't particularly matter *which* sovereign you obey, so long as it is the sovereign who commands legitimacy for most of society. And when a state pursues legitimacy, wouldn't that necessarily entail conceding a bit of control to major stakeholders of society, thereby undermining unitary control?

Morgenthau

Hans Morgenthau was a German-Jewish political theorist who fled Nazi Germany and resettled in the US. In the immediate aftermath of two world wars, it seemed apparent to many that political realism had led the world to the most destructive international conflicts in human history; this was the decade in which the UN was founded and Wilsonian Idealism was finally attempted in practice. In this environment, Morgenthau emerged as a pre-eminent advocate for a resuscitated form of realism in international relations.

Morgenthau carries on the proud tradition of appealing to nature to justify realist theory. Writing after the scientific revolution, he states that his theory is derived from describing, explaining, and predicting the behaviour of states. From these observations, he codifies the underlying assumptions of political realism: first, that states are the only political actors worth consideration on the international stage; second, that states seek power because they

have an obligation to keep their citizens safe from harm; and third, that states should exert as much control over their societies and territory as reasonable in the pursuit of that end.

Morgenthau differs from his historical predecessors in not championing the raison d'état above all moral concerns. Instead, he argues that a better, more moral world can only be realised by working with nature, not it. Any ethical principles in politics "must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and space."[1] For a state to put principles before its sovereignty is an abdication of its duty to ensure general welfare for its citizens; one might spot this as a reworking of Hobbes's Leviathan, that the *state* has duties to its citizens, not citizens to their sovereign.

In *The Balance of Power*, Morgenthau elaborates on the ultimate telos of realist international relations theory. If the three fundamental assumptions of his theory are followed to their logical conclusion, the most secure world is one in which the ambitions of powerful rivals are in equilibrium. This equilibrium is accomplished through military deterrence, selective accommodation, and strategic alliances. When unforeseeable events radically alter the distribution of power in a political ecosystem, the prudent and 'realistic' action would be to adjust the balance of power to prevent its collapse.

As an example of realist theory, consider how Morgenthau would explain the origins of the two World Wars. The unification of the German Empire destabilised the Concert of Europe's balance of power; like Napoleonic France, its sudden military ascendancy was unanticipated. To avoid destructive war, the Great Powers of Europe ought to have reconfigured their alliances and interests to accommodate for a new power in the centre of the continent; instead, they neglected France and Austria as a potential check on Germany until the British had already begun a naval arms race against the Second Reich. After Bismarck was no longer the "balancer" of Europe, that duty lay at the feet of the British, who faced a choice as soon as the Schlieffen invasion of Belgium began in 1914: would they honour their international commitments, and intervene to save France? Or would they not intervene, thereby forcing the continental powers to finally readjust to an ascendant Germany? The British chose to intervene, and they saved Paris. And the war claimed 40 million lives, set the stage for Nazi

1 Morgenthau, "A Realist Theory of International Politics." In *Essential Readings in World Politics*, edited by Karen A. Mingst, Jack L. Snyder, & Heather Elko McKibben, 87. New York: Norton, 2019.

revisionism, and sowed the seeds of violent conflict for a century to come. A realist would argue that irrational preoccupation with honour and reputation were what ended the Pax Britannica: not a failure of realist theory, but of states misinterpreting realist theory. It must be remarked, however, that there exist several other compelling explanations for the onset of the First World War.

Mearsheimer, *Anarchy and the Struggle for Power*

John Mearsheimer wrote *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* in 2001; the best attestations of the exact date indicate that it was published before September. At any rate, the following passage was undoubtedly thought up and drafted before the September 11 attacks of that year. In this excerpt, Mearsheimer argues against Morgenthau's variant of realism, and advances a theory of "offensive realism" to explain state behaviour within the structures of the international system.

Responding to the common refrain that realists are "unrealistic," Mearsheimer argues that explanatory power must be tempered with sound postulates to be useful. He elaborates on the realist concept of Hobbesian anarchy: the international order is not a war of all against all, but a community of states often with incompatible interests, but fully aware that reciprocal violence is always on the table if anyone pushes the envelope too far. This is anarchy in the oldest sense of the word: not chaos, but a world *without rulers.* Therefore, states are sovereign only because there is no higher ordering power above them.

In this fundamentally anarchic world, states are in a so-called "security dilemma." Because rival powers always have to operate from imperfect information of their adversary's capabilities, they hedge their bets and reflexively prepare for war. Even if there were 99% confidence that your enemy has no dangerous ambitions, pure dumb luck might suddenly change that (consider how US foreign policy changed overnight after the September 11 2001 attacks). Imperfect information also applies to one's own capabilities, which once again makes maximising power a rational preference.

The other important innovation which Mearsheimer brings to the table is that power is not in itself the end which states seek – but without hard power, a state is unable to accomplish its goals, whatever they may be. Power is political currency, redeemable for

political objectives like security and survival; the less dependent a state is on others, the more latitude it has to pursue its ends free from foreign intervention.

Mearsheimer lists three patterns of behaviour which arise: fear, self-help, and power-maximisation. Fear arises out of mutual suspicion and the live-or-die stakes of the game; states then prefer to maximise their ability to help themselves because they can trust themselves best; lastly, they form alliances when they have exhausted their abilities to increase their security without help from other states. States seek hegemony within the international system because it guarantees survival; weaker states do not pick fights with stronger ones. (On this note, I find Mearsheimer to be quite naïve. The head which wears the crown hangs heavy, and hegemonic powers will buckle under the weight of internal contradiction and external actions inevitably; secondly, hegemony is not the final stable state of international relations: it will *never* stop requiring maintenance, and such efforts always suffer from diminishing returns. Furthermore, weaker states don't have to maximise their offensive capability to still retain enough defensive potential to make even the mightiest nation get bogged down in a quagmire.)

Since all states instinctively pursue power, they all fall into the so-called "security dilemma," where all productive capacities are directed towards building hard military and economic power. It's a tragedy of the commons scenario: the relative gains of arms spending quickly evaporate as your paranoid neighbour does the same. Perhaps neither state has intention to invade, but the possibility never vanishes. Thus a 1% chance of war quickly escalates to a 99% chance, if only because both states are making more bullets than they know what to do with. Rival states also play mind games to alter the perceived threat they pose to one another: either minimising their threat to deceive their enemies, or exaggerating their military prowess to dissuade them from action.

Mearsheimer describes *defensive realists* as those who prescribe maintaining the balance of power rather than changing it. Any one state trying to elevate its status at the cost of the rest faces an enormous opportunity cost with diminishing returns for its efforts, since the rest will ally against it (such as the Coalitions against Napoleonic France). Mearsheimer is not so sure. States operating within their sphere of influence over minor states can certainly do whatever they want, but the only stable equilibrium is found at the borders of those spheres: where

regional hegemons check one another. Power projection becomes the principal strategy in this arena, and states aware of this fact will selectively build up power-projection-capability (aircraft carriers, submarines, ICBMs, foreign military bases) – and to be sure, this is *offensive realism*. A regional hegemon is secure within its own sphere, but it can also contest control of another sphere if it is politically desirable to do so (consider the US in the Persian Gulf and Western Europe). So while there may never be a "world police," there will certainly be the possibility of a pre-eminent regional power without a peer-competitor anywhere else. When there is a peer competitor, Mearsheimer predicts an arms race and security competition.

There are different configurations of power distribution which correspond to the perceived threat of a hegemon or revisionist power to the rest of the world. Mutually assured destruction and geographic separation by bodies of water between regional hegemons reduces the instability of an equilibrium; sharp asymmetries in power balances increase instability. The most important relationship is that between the eminent hegemon and the second-most powerful hegemon: are they satisfied with the arrangement, or is one suspicious of the other? Is the second state trying to attain peer-status? Lastly, perfectly balanced multipolarity is the most stable, rare, and fragile equilibrium.

Offensive realism does not preclude political goals outside of survival, but it stipulates that these goals can't be realised without paying due diligence to political reality (which of course, is what realists will always say is their speciality: defining *reality* on their own terms). Mearsheimer is sceptical of any claims that world peace is possible, since the only entities able to realise such a project are states – which are naturally predisposed to act as if peace is never an option. However, he does not preclude cooperation between states as a force for peace on earth, but the collaborator's preference for absolute gains versus relative gains would determine any joint peace-keeping mission's success. And once again, imperfect information always leaves the possibility of free-riders and cheating open, which undermines faith in international cooperation.