Realist Challenges

Duncan Bell

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Abstract and Keywords

Realism casts a long shadow over International Political Theory. For many scholars, especially those working on global justice, it is a pernicious foe that needs vanquishing to secure political and theoretical progress. For its advocates, especially in International Relations, it serves as a blunt reminder of the limits of morality in international affairs. However, realism is a shape-shifting body of thought compatible with assorted ethical and political orientations. This chapter discusses some challenges that realism poses, but also challenges that realism itself faces. It opens with a discussion of how realists can contribute to debates over feasibility constraints, before challenging three common myths about realism—that it is amoral, state-centric, and conservative—and concludes with a discussion of liberal realism, understood as an international variant of the liberalism of fear.

Keywords: realism, liberalism, power, feasibility, state, morality

REALISM casts a long shadow over international political theory. For many scholars, especially those working on global justice, it is a pernicious foe that needs vanquishing to secure political and theoretical progress. For its advocates, especially in International Relations (IR), it serves as a blunt reminder of the limits of morality in international affairs. However, realism is a shape-shifting body of thought compatible with assorted ethical and political orientations. Today it is produced in two disciplines, and there is often little engagement between them. IR has long been its home. Whereas the “classical” realism of Morgenthau, Herz, and Carr was explicit about its ethical commitments, the bulk of recent IR scholarship has claimed the mantle of social scientific knowledge. Intellectual historians have partially undercut this positivist self-image, recovering the complexity of classical realism, but this has not (yet) been matched by the development of new realist ethico-political theories.[1] Contemporary realists, for example, have had little to say about questions of international socioeconomic inequality and (re)distribution. The state of the art in political theory is rather different. While realism was long dismissed as a crude form of *realpolitik*—if acknowledged at all—recent years have witnessed a surge of inter-

est in developing realist theories (Rossi and Sleat 2014). This literature too has striking gaps. Above all, it fails to say much about international politics. A central task for realists in the coming years will be to initiate constructive dialogues across these disciplinary boundaries, and to produce a new body of realist international political theorizing. This chapter discusses some challenges that realism poses, but also challenges that realism itself faces.

The Feasibility Challenge

Despite their manifold differences, realists tend to converge on some core claims about international politics.

(p. 642)

a. Politics is a domain of human activity structured by power and coercion. The ever-present potential of conflict, including but not limited to lethal violence, accounts for much of the intensity of political life.
b. Within political communities, power and the possibility of conflict can usually be constrained or channelled by institutions, although they can never be eliminated. In contrast, relations between political communities unfold largely in a context of "anarchy." The interstate system is shaped and reproduced by the asymmetric distribution of power, where power is defined in multidimensional terms (but especially military and economic capacity).
c. Governments adopt a hierarchy of priorities, invariably placing the "national interest" above other considerations. At the core of the "national interest" lies "national security." Although ideas about the content of the national interest vary, this ranking is found in all types of regime.
d. The most powerful states set the terms of global interaction and dominate international institutions. Relations between "great powers" are frequently marked by fierce competition. Although such states voluntarily enter arrangements that constrain their behaviour, they will not adopt policies that fail to conform with their interpretation of the national interest. Binding agreements and institutions—indeed, the very possibility of international cooperation—are thus limited in their scope and effects, at least where they are seen to challenge the interests of the powerful.

Let us call this "analytical realism." Adopting this account has significant implications for achieving international reform.

Feasibility concerns enter the construction of a normative political theory at three points: first, in elaborating and justifying action-guiding principles; second, in designing institutional schemes to implement those principles; and third, in identifying efficacious strategies to help realize the principles and create the institutions (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012). Analytical realism is relevant chiefly at the second and third stages. It identifies significant constraints on the ability to create a just global order.

The normative literature on global poverty presents a good test case. Much of this work, especially in an egalitarian cosmopolitan vein (see Chapter 9), argues that wealthy states have extensive duties to redistribute wealth to poorer ones, and that the basic norms and institutions of the system need fundamental reform. Political theorists have displayed great ingenuity in devising policy proposals to ameliorate crippling poverty—Thomas Pogge's (2002) "Global Resources Dividend" (GRD) is but one of the best-known examples. Yet state behaviour has changed little. The same might be said of progress in democratizing international institutions (or replacing them with more legitimate ones) (see Chapters 29 and 34). Configured in a deeply hierarchical manner, the world remains scarred by poverty and violence. Analytical realists have little difficulty in identifying the political dynamics that account for this situation, and the factors blocking significant reform. Indeed, realists view many normative theories as impractical expressions of wishful thinking. This is most evident in (p. 643) plans that demand that the most powerful states cede key aspects of their sovereignty, or that sovereignty itself be dissolved or replaced by new cosmopolitan structures. While sovereignty is far from monolithic, and while major states do sometimes pool control over elements of domestic and foreign policy decision-making—notably in the European Union—this is almost always where it is seen to be in the national interest. States typically rank issues such as global poverty or inequality low on their list of priorities.

We can distinguish between "hard" and "soft" constraints on political action. The former include facts about what is "logically, conceptually, metaphysically, and nomologically impossible," and they set absolute limits on realizability. The latter are chiefly economic, institutional, and cultural, and they are in principle changeable (Lawford-Smith 2013: 252, 255). Some soft constraints, though, are much "harder" than others, insofar as they are deeply entrenched and sustained by power elites. The constraints identified by analytical realism are typically at the harder end of the "soft" spectrum. They are theoretically changeable, but (the realist insists) the probability of change occurring in the foreseeable future is very low. We can distinguish two types of soft constraint in relation to global distributive justice: economic and political. Because citizens and government officials usually reject expensive policies that fail to appeal to self-interest, a distributive policy proposal is *economically* feasible in relation to financial burdens it would impose on the governments and/or citizens of wealthy states. This understanding of feasibility combines two distinct claims. The first refers to individual motivation, identifying an unwillingness to bear high economic costs on behalf of alien others. The second relates to the electoral dynamics of democratic societies: officials intent on remaining in power will not countenance expensive policy proposals unless they can effectively link them to the perceived self-interest of a wide constituency. Many cosmopolitan theorists are sensitive to both of these dimensions. Pogge (2002: 1, 205), for example, argues that "modesty is important if the proposed institutional alternative is to gain the support necessary to implement it and is to be able to sustain itself in the world as we know it." Economic conditionality, sometimes combined with accounts of the motivational plausibility of liberal principles, often seems to exhaust feasibility questions for normative theorists.

Yet economic feasibility does not address key aspects of state motivation and compliance. This is the domain of *political* feasibility. Realists argue that the norms and institutions shaping international politics place significant constraints on the range of realizable policy options. While an obvious point, it is nonetheless one that receives little sustained attention in the global justice debates (see Chapter 8). Such constraints would include the centrality of the national interest in the calculations of state leaders, the overriding importance accorded to sovereignty, the daunting collective action problems generated by great power competition, the routine prioritization of security over distribution, and the subservience of international institutions to dominant states. The major geopolitical context for the foreseeable future is the brute fact of American predominance and challenges to it from Russia and China. Any attempt to enact global reform will have to deal with the fierce rivalry between them.

(p. 644) Both economic and political feasibility conditions need to be met if a proposal is to have any chance of adoption. As such, Pogge's GRD runs into trouble. The reason for this lies not in the economic costs it would impose, but rather in the demand that states cede a significant element of sovereign control over the financial proceeds resulting from the extraction and sale of natural resources within their jurisdiction. For realists, this has no hope of gaining support from the relevant agents in the key states. For moral arguments to shift government policy, one of two conditions usually have to hold: (1) the policy domain is exogenous to perceived core national interests; (2) the moral convictions and public pressure actually *conform* to, or are aligned with, dominant perceptions of the national interest. If this is right, it raises thorny ethical questions about the extent to which reform proposals should be adjusted to the perceived national interests of the most powerful states (Bell 2018).

As this brief sketch highlights, analytical realism presents a major challenge to the feasibility of many ambitious proposals for global reform. It suggests, minimally, that far more attention be paid to "non-ideal" theorizing, and especially to identifying strategies for reform in a world of great power competition. Yet it is important to recognize the limited scope of this challenge. It only applies to the second and third stages of theory construction. As such, it leaves untouched the project of "ideal theorizing" (see Chapter 50), which chiefly falls into the first stage. Analytical realism is thus normatively indeterminate. One could, in principle, accept its tenets and hold cosmopolitan egalitarian moral views. Likewise one could utilize analytical realist reasoning to underwrite a conservative defence of the status quo. Relevant for addressing feasibility, analytical realism does not represent a distinctive normative contribution to international political theory.

Three Myths

A number of myths have inhibited dialogue between political theory and IR. Perhaps the most pervasive is that realists deny space for moral reflection in international politics. According to Charles Beitz, realists contend that "moral judgments have no place in discussions of international affairs or foreign policy" (1999: 15). Even some self-proclaimed re-

alists accept this dispiriting picture. Thus Raymond Geuss charges Morgenthau and his fellow travellers with denying that "moral considerations play a very considerable role" in politics (2001: 55). Call this the myth of amorality. Yet realist theorizing encompasses a rich array of ethical arguments. Rather than characterizing it as a distinctive normative theory, it is best understood negatively, as a family of positions that challenge *moralism*, not *morality*.

Moralism, for Geuss, is a "kind of moralised preaching and an associated assumption about the causal efficacy and cognitive significance of making moral judgements." In causal terms, the moralist places great weight on the ability of moral argumentation to shape the world. In cognitive terms, the moralist believes that moral judgements should (p. 645) have a privileged status. Combined with these claims is the belief that "it is possible to attain a kind of absoluteness, apodicticity and definite determinateness of judgement." Rejecting these assumptions, the realist is committed to "a certain kind of open-endedness, indeterminacy and context-dependence or at any rate to agnosticism about absolute and categorical judgement" (Geuss 2015: 4–5). For Geuss, moralism is an ideal type, but it is closely approximated in the philosophy of Plato and Kant, and it dominates contemporary political philosophy, especially that indebted to Rawls. From this perspective, contemporary debates over global justice are hamstrung by their moralism.[2]

Realists stress contingency, context, fallibility, conflict, power, and the significant limits (not irrelevance) of human reason and moral argumentation. Usually sceptical about the value of "ideal" theorizing, political theory realists are largely united by the methodological injunction that theorizing "should begin (in a justificatory rather than a temporal sense) not with the explication of moral ideals (of justice, freedom, rights, etc.), which are taken to settle the questions of value and principle in the political realm but in an (typically interpretive) understanding of the practice of politics itself" (Rossi and Sleat 2014: 690). On this account, the defining feature of realism is "the attempt to give autonomy to political normativity" (p. 690). This moves well beyond the empirical claims of analytical realism (though it may align with them), and establishes a particular way of understanding the role of political theorizing. Beyond that point of convergence, realists differ in numerous ways.

For David Runciman, the dangers of moralism come in two basic forms. The first is that it is well intentioned but politically inefficacious, because it distracts attention away from the workings of power. It serves as a smokescreen. A stronger argument is that moralism is deliberately cultivated by elites to give an idealistic gloss to their self-interested actions, thus becoming "a weapon in the hands of the privileged" (2016: 4). Moralism of this kind is not confined to academic philosophical debate; it is a feature of general political discourse. Thus Runciman (2006) argues that in pushing for war against Iraq, Tony Blair was so convinced of his own moral probity that he was prepared to overlook countervailing evidence and charge on, with predictably disastrous consequences. The conviction politician thinks it is possible to transcend politics. "That belief is dangerous because their response when they encounter the messy reality is to deny it, or to ignore it, or to insist they can mould it to their higher purposes, which only makes the mess

worse" (Runciman 2016: 5). Yet Max Weber teaches a lesson that realists are prone to forget, namely that the realist critique of moralism can lead them to fall prey to self-deception: "an insistence on the hold of power can morph into an inflexible realpolitik; an emphasis on the unavoidability of contingency can become a form of fatalism; a focus on legitimacy can become a celebration of order at all costs" (Runciman 2016: 8). Realists, then, can succumb to the cognitive and ethical vices they warn against.

The other two myths can be dispatched more straightforwardly. The myth of state-centrism suggests that realism is necessarily committed to the normative priority of the state, thus underwriting the "Westphalian" system. However, realist attitudes towards the state are more complicated. Most realists have been state-centric in the analytical sense: they regard states (or at least the most powerful of them) as the key actors (p. 646) in world politics. This is an empirical claim. Many realists are also normatively state-centric, assigning the state a privileged ethical status in international affairs. But these two positions are not necessarily connected. One can be committed to analytical realism while rejecting the normative priority of the state. Even classical realists were open to replacing the state with new institutional forms. Morgenthau once wrote: "Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the political world into nation states will be replaced by units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the moral requirements of the contemporary world" (1985: 10). During the 1950s he and Herz argued that the Promethean nuclear power available to humanity rendered the main rationale for the state—its ability to protect its citizens—obsolete. This led both thinkers, albeit rather hesitantly, to argue that the nation-state model was outdated, and to suggest the necessity of a global state. Realism, then, can challenge existing political forms in the name of human flourishing. William Scheuerman (2011) has developed this point, identifying a strand of "progressive realism" (including Carr, Morgenthau, and Herz) that offers conceptual and normative resources for imagining cosmopolitan political forms. In particular, he argues that realists insightfully stressed that cosmopolitan institutions require extensive social foundations to function.

Despite the fact that realists are not necessarily committed to normative statism, most political theory realists today say little about politics beyond the state (Bell 2017). But a political theory that cannot address international relations is radically incomplete, and fails to achieve the task of theorizing in a realist mode. Moreover, Runciman is right to caution that realists must acknowledge forms of power—especially those of capital and technology—that escape the rigid juridical framework of the state system. "Conceptions of power and legitimacy in early twenty-first century [. . .] realism," he writes, "continue to have a distinctively twentieth-century feel to them, in that they identify power and legitimacy with the state and with the communicative and coercive instruments available to the state" (Runciman 2016: 2) To illuminate the real may require breaking away from traditional forms of realist analysis. This is a major challenge for realist theorizing, not least because many realists remain wedded to a view that the basic character of international politics is unchanging.

A third myth is that realism is inherently conservative. IR is plagued by many misleading typologies. One of the most pernicious is the purported contrast between realism and liberalism, which shapes pedagogy and writing alike.[3] There is some truth to this charge, insofar as many realists have been conservative and much post-Waltzian realist IR constitutes "a stodgy and rather self-satisfied defence of the international status quo" (Scheuerman 2011: vii). But this does not exhaust realist politics. While it is arguable that all conservatives should be realists, realism is not necessarily conservative. Most classical realists defended liberal political visions. As Herz once wrote, "there is no essential opposition of realism and idealism" (1981: 202). The same is true of the recent burst of realist writing in political theory: with only a handful of exceptions (e.g. Geuss 2008) they deploy realist insights to bolster liberalism. And realism, as we shall see, is also compatible with more radical forms of politics. It is thus a mistake to view realism (p. 647) as a distinct substantive position in (international) political theory—it does not present a coherent, consistent worldview. Rather, realist commitments are compatible with various ethico-political stances.

These myths are not straightforwardly false. Some realists have evacuated morality from international affairs; many are state-centric; and realism dovetails neatly with conservatism. Instead, they present a monochrome image that bears little relation to the more sophisticated expressions of realism found in political theory and IR.

The Liberal Realism of Fear

Navigating between conservative realism and ambitious visions of transformation, liberal realists seek to create the conditions necessary for liberal values to flourish in a brutally competitive world. They reject the former as too fatalistic, too wedded to the logic of power and conflict; they reject the latter because such visions are insufficiently attentive to the limits of moral argumentation, and because of the dangers of moralism.

Liberal realism takes different forms. Among the "classical" realists, Herz offered the most explicit account of what he termed "realist liberalism." A German émigré whose thought was haunted by the terrors of mid-twentieth-century Europe, he was clear about what was at stake. "The human cause will be lost if the liberal ideal is forgotten, even as surely as it is lost if left to the utopian Political Idealist" (1951: v). He divided political thinking into ideal types: political realism and political idealism. Realism acknowledged "the implications for political life of those security and power factors which [. . .] are inherent in human society," while idealism fatally downplayed such factors. The most important was the "security dilemma." Since "politically active groups and individuals are concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals," they seek to avoid this fate and consequently "can never feel entirely secure in a world of competing units." As such, they are compelled to acquire "more and more power for themselves" (Herz 1951: 14). Exemplified in the abject failure of the League of Nations, idealism was blind to such power dynamics. But idealism was not identical to liberalism, and he argued that a "basically liberal philosophy may be

founded on the insights supplied by Realism, at the same time that it is guided ethically by the standards of Idealism, namely concern for the individual and the free development of human personality, and insistence on the universality of these standards" (p. 227). Realism was about means, not ends. In international affairs this entailed an emphasis on prudence, restraint, coexistence, humility, and incremental reform, as well as a fierce rejection of attempts to dominate the international system. Like most realists, Herz's political thought focused chiefly on questions of political violence and international organization, saying little about economic (re)distribution.

Liberal realism can be read as an instance of the "liberalism of fear." The liberalism of fear focuses on avoiding cruelty, not on specifying ideal conditions for human flourishing. It does not "offer a *summum bonum* toward which all political agents should strive, (p. 648) but it certainly does begin with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself" (Shklar 1989: 29). Shaped by a historically informed scepticism about the capacity of humans to (peacefully) transcend their circumstances, it aims instead to ameliorate human suffering. Eschewing the "intense moralism" of much contemporary philosophy, such liberals insist that political theorists attend first to the "only certainly universal material of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty" (B. Williams 2005: 22, 59).

Neither Judit Shklar nor Bernard Williams wrote much about international politics. Instead, Stanley Hoffmann presented the most extensive articulation of the realist "liberalism of fear" (1981; 1998). Conservative realists, he argued, conjure a world that is descriptively inaccurate and normatively undesirable. They fail, that is, to recognize that moral norms can motivate human action and help to sustain political order, while defending a perverted form of politics by insisting on the absolute priority of the "national interest." Yet he also cautioned that many liberal visions were implausible, even dangerously optimistic. While it remained the "only comprehensive and hopeful vision of world affairs," liberalism nevertheless "needs to be thoroughly reconstructed—and that task has not proceeded very far, either in its domestic or international dimensions" (Hoffmann 1995: 177). Liberal internationalism needed reconstruction because it was premised on a series of false beliefs about the possibility of international reform. It was unrealistic in its understanding of international competition and conflict—"the plight of the liberal vision results from the fallacy of believing that all good things can come together" (p. 167)—and because it failed to offer a plausible account of transition, expressing "a vision of harmony that remained rather vague about how to reach nirvana" (p. 164).

Methodologically, Hoffmann's critique focused on questions of feasibility. Dismissive of "ideal" theorizing—it had "little relevance to reality" (1981: 2)—he argued that liberals needed to work within the existing constellation of arguments deployed by political elites.

> Willing the good after we have defined our idea of the good is simply not enough; if we think that the game needs to be improved or needs to be transformed, we can do this only by working through the actors themselves; exhortations are not

> sufficient. We have a duty to show how the idea is compatible with or can be made compatible with the actors' self-interest.
>
> (Hoffmann 1998: 63)

It was essential, he argued, to locate ethical concerns in context. "All ethical judgements in politics," he warned, "are historical judgements. They are [. . .] contextual or situational: they are not separable from the concrete circumstances, from the actual cases" (1981: 27). Patient diplomacy, piecemeal reform, institutional cooperation, the pressure of public opinion: all could help to improve the international system.

Hoffmann's liberal realism was predicated on a distinction between domestic and international politics. Presided over by a central government, domestic politics is more amenable to realizing ethical principles. Indeed, he argued that the state was the most appropriate site for fostering liberal values. Liberal cosmopolitans "step outside of the (p. 649) limits of traditional liberalism (which saw universal values of its creed realized in and through a world of states, not a world state)" (1995: 170). International politics is an anarchical order populated by societies expressing very different, and often antagonistic, value systems. The liberalism of fear was a response to this structural constraint. It "modestly aims at damage control—but today that in itself is a revolutionary aspiration" (Hoffmann 1998: 51–3; Shklar 1989: 23). Like that of Herz, Hoffmann's political thought remains more suggestive than systematic. Rather than construct an overarching normative theory, he sketches various reformist proposals for how states (and other organizations) should act to limit interstate violence, uphold human rights, protect vulnerable peoples, and address economic inequalities.

A more radical strand of realism rejects this moderate reformist account. Geuss is the leading figure in contemporary radical realism, although other thinkers can also be seen as arguing in the same vein, including Chantal Mouffe (2005: 90–118). Radical realists are not committed to defending existing institutions and ordering principles—indeed, they offer excoriating attacks on them. They challenge both the status quo and the ameliorative reformism of liberal politics. Carr is the most famous IR radical realist. Developing a heterodox Marxist perspective, he indicted the hypocrisy of the liberal world order bequeathed by the British empire. Unlike Carr, contemporary radical realists (like the liberals) have so far done little to flesh out an empirically rich picture of international politics and its pathologies (Scheuerman 2013). Yet they offer a promising way of thinking about the power asymmetries and gross injustices of the international order.

One key difference between liberal and radical realisms concerns their attitude towards utopia. While the liberalism of fear is "entirely nonutopian" (Shklar 1989: 26), radical realists often embrace utopian thinking. Carr insisted that "[u]topia and reality are [. . .] the two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found where both have their place" (1956: 10). Geuss likewise advocates the utopian possibilities of realism. He contrasts "being realistic" with being "a realist." The latter rejects moralism, the former is not a theoretical stance but rather a "policy, attitude or disposition to behave in a certain way," which typically involves accepting the prevailing or-

der. The person who is "realistic," that is, "tries to cut his desires to fit the cloth which his particular society has made available" (2015: 15). Commitment to the former does not entail commitment to the latter. The realist need not be realistic. Geuss distinguishes between two senses of utopianism:

> The content-based usage refers to the fact that the utopian project is outside the bounds of what are conventionally thought to be politically or morally possible, or that it focuses on human needs and desires that cannot be satisfied in the basic structure of society as it now exists. The more form-based use describes utopian thinking as presenting the advantages of a final state to be attained without giving an account of how we are to get there. (2015: 18)

The latter sense is close to moralism, and it was this kind of utopianism that Marx (in his critique of "utopian socialism") and Carr (in his critique of liberal "idealism") rightly lambasted. Content-based utopianism, however, is compatible with realism as a form of (p. 650) radical critique. Realism of this kind need not be constrained by the feasibility worries discussed earlier. Geussian utopianism is less concerned with fixed blueprints and ideal societies than with developing "a more historically informed analysis of existing, but changing, dissatisfactions and needs, and possible (contextually and historically specific) ways of satisfying them" (Geuss 2015: 18). Yet as with the liberalism of fear, this position has yet to be developed systematically. This is the challenge facing both liberal and radical realists in the coming years.

Conclusion

Realism, then, is an amorphous category employed in different ways across political theory and IR. It lacks a determinate set of political commitments. While realists of all stripes emphasize the centrality of power and conflict in politics, they specify the meaning and interrelation of the concepts in contrasting ways, and draw radically different political implications from them.

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Notes:

(1.) For bibliographical discussion, see Bell (2008; 2018). Partial exceptions include M. Williams (2005), Lebow (2003), and Scheuerman (2011).

(2.) Less sceptical of Rawlsianism, Coady (2008) offers the most developed critique of moralism (see also Bell 2010).

(3.) This opposition is less common in political theory than in IR: see Bell (2008) and Rossi and Sleat (2014).

Duncan Bell

Duncan Bell is a Reader in Political Thought and International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge.