Review – The Tragic Mind

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/06/20/review-the-tragic-mind/

GEORGE MOODY, JUN 20 2023

The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power
By Robert D. Kaplan
Yale University Press, 2023

In *The Tragic Mind* Robert D. Kaplan has focused decades of foreign policy thinking and experience through the lens of tragedy to produce an insightful reflection on the qualities needed for good (US) foreign policy making. Published in February this year, Kaplan considers the lessons for foreign policy making to be drawn from tragedies, principally classical Ancient Greek and Shakespearean, to offer a view imbued with a tragic realism that advocates that US policymakers must 'think tragically to avoid tragedy'.

The classical Greek inheritance is one of the central pillars of Western political theory, and this influence is notably strong in the relationship between tragedy and realist thought in International Relations. The nature and character of tragedy however differs between classical realism and its later putative systemisation in neorealism (and indeed earlier structural variants: Arnold Wolfers drew the same distinction between Morgenthau's 'evil' classical realism and the tragic irony of the structural imperatives of Herz's security dilemma (Wolfers 1962, 83–84)).

For classical realists tragedy is inherent to the human condition: humanity is unavoidably imperfect, and as a consequence 'forever condemned to experience the contrast between the longings of his mind, and his actual condition as his personal, eminently human tragedy' (Morgenthau 1974, 221). It is this tragic 'foundation stone' to classical realism, here exemplified by Hans Morgenthau, that means 'any hope of a rational, incremental, constructive, progressive approach to politics […] is doomed to futility' (Rengger 2007, 123, 125), which means in turn that in the fractured international sphere, once combined with humanity's inherent *animus dominandi*, the result can only be a tragedy of all-round struggle for survival.

For neorealism however, there need be no inherent flaw in our natures and the tragedy is a structural effect: anarchy forces states to seek security through increased power, which creates a 'vicious circle' in which 'success leads to failure' as their growth in power in turn forces reciprocal action and opposition from other states. (Herz 1951, 157; Waltz 1979). This situation, that 'no one consciously designed or intended, is genuinely tragic' (Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Kaplan himself has been influenced by both of these forms of realism, drawing on both Morgenthau and Mearsheimer in previous work (e.g. Kaplan 2012), but writes here in a classical realist vein, seeing the human condition as inescapably and inherently tragic, and citing Morgenthau to note that to improve the world one must work with an imperfect, often base, human nature (Kaplan 2023, 9). It is then appropriate to consider Kaplan's volume in the light of Richard Ned Lebow's 2003 *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, in which Lebow, a former student and later colleague of Morgenthau, situates Morgenthau's work in a tradition of a tragic understanding of politics, within which he also includes Thucydides and Clausewitz.

The two works are of a different character. Lebow's is a focused and thoroughgoing treatment, carefully building through extended consideration of context and, for the classical Greek sources, nuances of language and translation to make his case: impressive in its 'sheer depth and scholarly achievement' (Jütersonke 2005, 234).

By contrast Kaplan offers us a more succinct – this is a 115 page essay – yet broader and somewhat eclectic tracing of the tragic sensibility, through classical Greek tragedians and Shakespeare, to Camus and Conrad and beyond: while I confess I find it hard not to warm to any work that brings Lampedusa's *The Leopard* into the frame, its inclusion here gives an indication of the heterogenous scope. Kaplan's work is also very personal, and, along with a lightness of touch and an agility of mind, there is a consistent integration of the more abstract elements with his long experience in the field, whether that be having his passport confiscated by Saddam's security forces, or unnerving encounters with machine gun toting teenagers at African roadblocks.

Of real interest though is the difference in aims and target audience. Both agree that a tragic view must accept there being irresolvable dilemmas and irremediable conflicts in the world, and that humility and an understanding of the limits to reason are therefore called for. Both also see a tragic understanding of just such a conflict between order and security on one hand and justice on the other as of a central importance to international relations. Yet, despite this common framing, neither Kaplan nor Lebow can ultimately accept this as a true dilemma: both seek to escape this tragic truth that we are sometimes faced with 'a choice between two radically incompatible but equally undesirable outcomes: that whatever we do in a given situation we will be, from one perspective, acting wrongly' (Brown 2007, 5).

Lebow seeks to subordinate order and security to justice, arguing that 'justice and security, and interest and ethics, can be reconciled at a more fundamental level', as ethics are not merely instrumentally important, but constitutive of national interests and security as it is 'impossible to formulate interests intelligently outside of some language of justice' (Lebow 2003, 16). In so doing he further seeks to dismiss the legitimacy of the internal-external distinction, stripping away any justification for 'unethical' behaviour on grounds of national interest or security.

Kaplan tilts the other way privileging order over justice: order is the 'ultimate necessity' 'and must be obeyed even when unjust' (Kaplan 2023, 29, 41)**.** Kaplan was pushed to write this book by the 'clinical depression I suffered for years afterward because of my mistake about the Iraq War'; the mistake being that 'removing Saddam Hussein was a good thing, but it supplanted a greater good: the semblance of order' (*ibid* xiv). So, while Kaplan notes that tragedy is 'not the triumph of evil over good but the triumph of one good over another good that causes suffering' (*ibid*), he has shorn the choice of goods of incommensurability, creating options able to be ranked, and thus Iraq becomes a mistake, not a tragic choice.

As Peter Euben notes, underlying this kind of discomfort with tragedy is often '[t]he assumption that ambiguity and unresolved dilemmas (let us call them riddles) are somehow pathological' (Euben 2007, 19). Despite their attempts not to – both are critical of the over-rationality of contemporary social sciences, with Kaplan noting that 'to be unrelentingly rational is to be unrealistic' (*ibid* 25) – in their different ways both Kaplan and Lebow are overcome by the need to find a correct answer, to 'reintegrate tragedy into analysis and faith into progress'. (*ibid.* 15*,* commenting on Lebow).

This slippage though does not really detract from Kaplan's primary aim of moving the mindset of US foreign policy makers towards a tragic sensibility. One of the most intriguing themes throughout the book is his loose sociology of the US policy elite. He is broadly dismissive of 'intellectuals and journalists' who, being free of bureaucratic responsibilities, can be 'always on the side of the right while requiring no difficult choices, so that you may treat morality as an inflexible absolute' (*ibid*. 37). One fears he would include Lebow in this group, whose stated aim is not to guide action but to 'stimulate reflection, initially by scholars' (Lebow 2003: xi-xii). Indeed, the difference in intent and attitude is tellingly exemplified in their contrasting attitudes towards Nixon: Lebow, who states that heads of government 'routinely finesse moral dilemmas' (*ibid.* xii) opens his book with a short, wish-fulfilment story entitled 'Nixon in Hell', whereas Kaplan 'would have liked to have known the post-Watergate Nixon, with his keen foreign policy instincts built on fear and thinking five steps ahead; but now armed with shame about his mistakes' (Kaplan 2023, 101).

While thus empathetic to those with policy making responsibility, Kaplan is not uncritical and sees US policy makers' habitus and milieu as a root cause of failing. As part of 'the most physically and financially secure generation in American history' they are too callow, and then too comfortable, solipsistically sealed in the 'luxurious urban cocoons'

of the elite policy world for their entire careers (*ibid.* 8, 26). It is this that means they take order and security completely for granted, left unable to understand the world as '[t]heir lack of experience makes them blind to what existence without such security truly feels like' (*ibid.* 20, 32).

Kaplan's reflections in *The Tragic Mind* are stimulating and useful, even as they demonstrate the difficulty for the modern Western mind to truly think tragically. Taking on board his call to think tragically would temper the hubristic arrogance and congenital optimism – both, Kaplan suggests, forms of idiocy – he sees as prevalent amongst Western foreign policy makers.

References

Brown, Chris. 2007. 'Tragedy, "Tragic Choices" and Contemporary International Political Theory'. *International Relations* 21 (1): 5–13.

Euben, J. Peter. 2007. 'The Tragedy of Tragedy'. *International Relations* 21 (1): 15–22.

Herz, John H. 1951. *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* . University of Chicago Press.

Jütersonke, Oliver. 2005. 'Tragedy and the Realist Pigeonhole in International Relations'. *Cooperation and Conflict* 40 (2): 233–41.

Kaplan, Robert D. 2012. *The Revenge of Geography*. Random House Publishing Group.

———. 2023. *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lebow, Richard Ned. 2003. *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*. Cambridge University Press.

Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Morgenthau. 1974. *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rengger, Nicholas. 2007. 'Realism, Tragedy and the Anti-Pelagian Imagination in International Political Thought'. In *Realism Reconsidered*, edited by Michael C. Williams. OUP.

Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Long Grove, Ill: Waveland.

Wolfers, Arnold. 1962. *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

About the author:

Dr. George Moody is a policy professional, currently focused on UK net zero policy. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Sussex, and has taught both there and at the University of Brighton.