This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

History of the Future: Classical Realism and Trump

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/11/26/history-of-the-future-classical-realism-and-trump/

HARO KARKOUR, NOV 26 2024

The re-election of Donald J. Trump is a testimony that history tells its jokes more than once and leaves to theoreticians the task of explaining them. Without history, theory finds refuge in the ideal; without theory, history is a series of unrelated events. A theoretician is one who extends the baton of history; stretches history, as it were, to periods that tell society a great deal about its times. For a theorist seeking to make sense of the crisis of liberal order, this period is the 1930s–40s and coincides with the publication of the classical realist texts. Can these texts make sense of our times? No doubt they intended to.

Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* ran five editions in his lifetime. In the fifth edition, in 1978, Morgenthau warned America of what history lay in store for those who forgot – or did not learn from – the Nazi experience. A society that is atomised, insecure about its future and powerless in the face of existential threats, Morgenthau wrote, 'the United States is likely to partake to a growing extent in those tendencies in modern culture which have found their most extreme manifestations in Soviet Russia and National Socialist Germany' (Morgenthau 1978, 121).

The 'tendencies in modern culture' that Morgenthau refered to represent the challenge posed by liberal modernity after the death of God. The spiritual void left by this experience intensified the individual's sense of insecurity and powerlessness in the face of a meaningless existence. Meaning had to be restored, and it was indeed restored, in the individual's loyalty to secular religions. God was killed but mortals needed their temples of worship. A temple built on a demolished church, the nation, in Reinhold Niebuhr's words, 'pretends to be God' (Niebuhr 1932, 225). Fallen from the heavens, the individual is seduced by modern nationalism. Modern nationalism offers a promise of infinitude in a reality of finitude. A sanctuary for a shaken self-esteem; a promise land for the restoration of pride in the solidarity of the group.

The experience of the 1930s–40s taught the classical realists an important lesson: that unless the individual's spiritual needs are met, extreme nationalism will keep knocking at the door, threatening the fragile internationalism of the liberal order. Even the most Marxist inspired of the classical realists, Edward Hallet Carr, who, naturally, emphasised the needs of employment, drew attention to this spiritual dimension in the reconstruction of the post-war order (Karkour 2023). 'The new faith' Carr wrote in *Conditions of Peace*, 'must solve the unemployment problem by providing a moral purpose as potent as was religion in the Middle Ages' (Carr 1943, 120). In short, the challenge for the architects of the post-war order was to address the psycho-social needs of the individual; to restore meaning and social solidarity in a world that was abandoned by God.

Did the post-war order address the challenge of liberal modernity? The classical realists did not think so. In the 1950s and 1960s, Morgenthau argued that America became a 'society of waste', driven by hedonistic pursuits and concerned solely with endless production and consumption. The political began and ended at the edge of private happiness. History does not speak optimistically about the future of such a society, Morgenthau concluded in*The Purpose of American Politics*; for the lack of engagement by the citizens to deliberate the nation's sense of meaning led to moral disintegration and, in due course, will lead to either fascism or civil war. A political leadership that fails to engage society in its sense of meaning leaves a vacuum that will be filled by 'someone else, more likely than not a demagogue or demagogic elite catering to popular emotions and prejudices who will create a public opinion in support of a certain policy more likely than not to be unsound and dangerous' (Morgenthau 1960, 264).

Did Morgenthau's prophesy materialise with the advent of Trump? It is possible to interpret Trump as a realist, as some realists do (e.g. Schweller 2018). I find this interpretation difficult to agree with, given that Trump's policies do not follow the dictates of the balance of power. The withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal is one such example where 'maximum pressure' was sought despite that Iran posed no threat to US global position (Karkour 2021). The policy also threw Iran to the arms of America's opponents – Russia and China. On strictly realist – balance of power – terms, the policy made little sense.

But how can Trumpism as a phenomenon be explained through the lens of classical realism? In my*International Affairs* article, I offered an answer. Trumpism, in my interpretation, 'fills a spiritual void left by liberal modernity, conferring a sense of warmth in a society that has been frozen by individualism and social atomism' (Karkour 2022, 581). Trump's plea to 'the forgotten men and women of our country' seeks to offer this sense of warmth (Trump 2017). In group solidarity, these 'forgotten men and women' are no more finite. They have been reunited with their God – the nation. Trumpism is their path to disalienation; a temple built on the ruins of their demolished church.

To deal with a phenomenon such as Trumpism, therefore, something more radical is required than simply 'reforming' the status quo or devising a clever strategy – such as 'offshore balancing' – that will retain America's hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. The former is advocated by liberals (e.g. Ikenberry 2020), the latter by neo-realists (e.g. Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). The defence of the liberal order, even a reformed order, paradoxically, deepens the crisis of liberalism. The further the liberal order pushes away from traditional mores, the deeper the individual's sense of existential anxiety and the crisis of liberalism.

Meanwhile the defence of neo-realist strategy lends itself, again paradoxically, to idealism. The further neo-realists push their strategy on US elites, the more they learn that those elites have little interest in listening to what neo-realists have to say. Since the collapse of the USSR neo-realism became a badge of protest. From Kosovo to Iraq, from Libya to Iran, neo-realists failed to change the course of policy towards what they deemed as rational. In a recalcitrant policy reality, neo-realists became idealists *par excellence*.

Ultimately, neither a piecemeal reform of the liberal order nor an elite level policy engagement will enable a country like the US to restore its sense of meaning and the health of its foreign policy. Like the national interest, and logically prior to it, a nation's sense of meaning needs to be negotiated in a process of democratic deliberations (Karkour and Roesch 2024). Only through engagement in these deliberations can the individual feel empowered as part of a group. In liberal modernity, this empowerment is a necessary bulwark against the usurpation of power by secular religions. The only substitute for God is the appearance before fellow citizens in the Polis. For the absence of avenues for political engagement leaves the individual alienated. Demagogues capitalise on this feeling by offering a false sense of community to advance their private interests and, more often than not, dangerous policies.

It is true that classical realist texts should ultimately be read in their times. But they did not only speak for their times. Carr was an historian; his most remembered book, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, was a work of theory. By theorising, the classical realists transcended their times. It is for this reason that we ought to read them today. If those who do not read history may repeat its errors, those who do not read theory may inadvertently reinvent it – often with omissions. Examples are replete where IR missed opportunities to learn from its own texts. It was to Morgenthau that Ty Solomon (2012) returned, to bring insights to the study of emotions in IR. Meanwhile Sean Molloy (2020) demonstrated the importance of the *émigré* to the contemporary understanding of reflexivity in IR.

There is a debate today on whether and how IR might be a discipline. If there is a point in being a discipline, as some argue (e.g. Corry 2022), there also ought to be a point in reading the texts that are part of our shared heritage as IR scholars. Particularly if those texts, as this article argued, can bring insights to help us understand our times. Or, as theoreticians, to take upon ourselves the task of explaining history's repeated jokes.

References

Carr, E. H. (1943) *Conditions of peace.* London: Macmillan.

Corry, O. (2022) 'What's the point of being a discipline? Four disciplinary strategies and the future of International Relations' *Cooperation and Conflict* 57:3, pp.290-310.

Ikenberry, J. (2020) *A world safe for democracy: liberal internationalism and the crises of global order.* London: Yale University Press.

Karkour, H. (2021) 'Illiberal and irrational? Trump and the challenge of liberal modernity in US foreign policy', *International Relations* 35:4, pp.533–50.

Karkour, H. (2022) 'Liberal Modernity and the Classical Realist Critique of the (present) International Order' *International Affairs* 98:2, pp.569–86.

Karkour, H. (2023) 'From *The Twenty Years' Crisis* to the climate crisis: Reconsidering Carr's thoughts on nationalism and global reform' *Journal of International Political Theory*, 19:3, pp.317-334.

Karkour, H. and Roesch, F. (2024) 'Toward IR's "Fifth Debate": Racial Justice and the National Interest in Classical Realism', *International Studies Review*, 26:2, pp.1-20.

Mearsheimer, J. and Walt, S. (2016) 'The Case for Offshore Balancing' *Foreign Affairs*, 95:4, pp.70-83.

Molloy, S. (2020) 'Realism and Reflexivity: Morgenthau, Academic Freedom and Dissent." *European Journal of International Relations* 26:2, pp.321–43.

Morgenthau, H. (1960) *The purpose of American politics.* New York: Alfred Knopf.

Morgenthau, H. (1978) *Politics among nations*: *the struggle for power and peace*, 5th edn. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Niebuhr, R. (1932) *Moral man and immoral society.* New York: Scribner.

Schweller, R. (2018) 'Three Cheers for Trump's Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 97:5, pp.133-143.

Solomon, T. (2012) 'Human Nature and the Limits of the Self: Hans Morgenthau on Love and Power'*International Studies Review* 14:2, pp.201–24.

Trump, D. (2017) inauguration speech, Washington DC, 17 Jan. 2017.

About the author:

Haro Karkour is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Cardiff University.