

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

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.

## The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/15/the-cuban-missile-crisis-the-importance-of-power-and-knowledge/>

TOM THORNLEY, AUG 15 2011

Is it more important to explain the 'script' of world politics, or how the existence of this specific script is possible? Does the scholar write the 'reviews' and critique the 'performances' in world politics, or does she write the script and frame 'the shots'? If politics is centrally concerned with power, where does power reside? Does power reside 'out there' where state actors perform their 'roles', or is there no 'out there' and instead only a 'right here' in which power shapes 'roles'? In each question, I contend the answer is the latter, and this is largely due to the role that knowledge plays in world politics. Knowledge best explains world politics because it is only through knowledge of the world that world politics and its constitutive events and actions become possible. Through examination of the construction and dominance of the dominant U.S. 'reality' of the Cuban Missile Crisis[1], I argue that knowledge of the world *is* 'reality', and that this 'reality' is socially constructed through discourse. I then argue that dominant 'realities' stay dominant through the operation of discursive power.

As Realism claims to provide important insights into the workings of power in world politics, and because it is the dominant paradigm within International Relations (IR), I first analyse a Realist power-central approach to explaining world politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis[2] (Schmidt, 2007; Sterling-Folker & Shinko, 2007). Second, I explain how the realisation that the 'reality' of world politics is socially constructed means that knowledge is of central importance, and I offer a knowledge based constructivist influenced approach to explain how discursive knowledge practices of constructing the 'reality' of events shaped conceivable U.S. action in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Finally, I explore the ways in which dominant understandings of the world (specifically the Cuban Missile Crisis) persist and continue to shape action and perception of 'the possible' in world politics.

Realists theorise about a separate '*real-world*', a timeless reality consisting of "ontologically prior" events exhibiting essential existence and finite meaning (Zalewski, 1996, p. 343) Conclusions and theories of this '*real-world*' are, "reached inductively by the study of international relations of the past and the present." (Schwarzenberger, 1964, p. 13) IR thus becomes akin to the natural sciences, reality exists independently of our *knowledge of reality* (Zalewski, 1996). Just as Newton's apple falls regardless of the knowledge of gravity, for Realists our *knowledge* of world politics, of events like the Cuban Missile Crisis, has no causal impact. Thus, 'to know' the Cuban Missile Crisis is to appeal to 'the facts', the facts of events separate from, and un-constituted by knowledge of these 'facts' (Weldes, 1999). For Realists the facts, the *reality* of world politics is characterised by the problem of anarchy, a problem only 'solvable' by the accumulation of power. For Realists the Cuban Missile Crisis is merely another episode in the bitter reality of world politics; it supposedly reinforces the processes they describe and the solutions they offer.

For Realists, power best explains world politics, for all world politics[3] is necessarily power politics[4]. "[O]ntology lies at the beginning of any enquiry", and for Realists an international realm devoid of over-arching authority induces functionally similar sovereign states to maximise power, "because there exists no consistent, reliable, process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy." (Cox, 1992, p. 132; Waltz, 1959, p. 238). Power is understood in non-contextualised military strategic terms and located in objects such as nuclear missiles that have an effect on others (Schmidt, 2007; Sterling-Folker & Shinko, 2007). Realists depict states as centrally concerned for their own security and for relative gains. Thus, in this self-help environment Realists expect balances of power; the formation of coalitions of states roughly equivalent in power to prevent any

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

one state from becoming hegemonic (Waltz, 1979). Realists “abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities [power]”, and it is the distribution of power[5] alone which differentiated one state from another. Consequently, the structure of world politics is, “defined not by all of the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones”, where the major actors wield the greatest power i.e. the great powers are the objectively important global actors (Waltz, 1979, pp. 99, 93). A Realist would conclude that for a state to act upon the Realist conception of the world is “neither moral nor immoral, but... merely a reasoned response” to an international system based on distrust, fear and naked self-interest (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1981; Waltz, 1959, p. 238)[6]. This ‘reality’ of world politics explained by the structurally induced power-accumulating imperative, is allegedly timeless, and Realists would claim that their conceptual framework best explains the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Looking through the Realist lens, the Cuban Missile Crisis becomes an affair of two rationally acting Great Powers locked in a power struggle owing to the inducements of a bipolar anarchic international system. The U.S.S.R.’s placement of the nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the U.S.A.’s balancing response to this increase in an adversary’s effective coercive power[7] over the U.S.A. were both rational (but perhaps misjudged given relative power differentials) and in line with the power maximising inducement of the system and the power balancing concern of states[8]. The covert placement of missiles in Cuba and the U.S.’s decision to conduct ‘quarantine’ were not immoral, as ethics has no currency in world politics and is only ever a smokescreen for interest (Carr, 2001; Weldes, 1999). Cuban agency is ignored and Cuba rendered no more than a locale not for ideological reasons, but rather Cuba’s objective insignificance in relation to the important and powerful U.S.A and U.S.S.R. (Laffey & Weldes, 2008; Weldes, 1999). Indeed, for Realists the Cuban Missile is seen as a victory for Realist theory. Through power diplomacy and brinkmanship; by standing firm, checking power with power and possessing a greater nuclear arsenal, a strong U.S. did what it had the power to do and comparatively weaker U.S.S.R. had accept it had to accept (Thucydides, 1972). Although some elements of the Realist power-politics approach influenced member of ExComm[9], the Realist account does not fully account for why the missiles in Cuba were utterly intolerable and the only possible U.S. response was to orchestrate their removal (Weldes, 1999).

To explain world politics is to explain political action. Although explaining the decisions of states is a necessary part of explaining world politics, political action is more than decision-making. Explanations, therefore, must go beyond positioning ourselves as the statesmen and determining: “what are the rational alternatives from which a state may choose” and, “which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman is likely to choose” given the relative power of his state in light of the potential of others (Morgenthau, 1967, p. 5). These are the wrong questions to ask. “Political thought is itself a form of political action”, thus the first act to explain is how the “rational alternatives” of which Morgenthau speaks come to be the *only* conceivable (and only rational) alternatives (Carr, 2001, p. 6). The Realist separation of reality from knowledge is untenable; knowledge of the world *constitutes* reality, it explains reality, and this knowledge-reality is socially constructed (Shaw, 2004).[10] [11] Hence, a full explanation of political action, of world politics, must explain how the, “subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions [characteristic of world politics] were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible” i.e. explain how the reality of world politics is constructed, diffused, reproduced and maintained (Doty, 1993, p. 298).

The ‘*reality*’ of world politics is, in actuality, only *knowledge* of phenomena which have “a being independent of our own volition (‘we cannot wish them away’)”, knowledge is thus fundamental to explaining world politics, for our knowledge of world politics *is* world politics (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 13). The phenomena constituting the Cuban Missile Crisis have an unquestionable ‘it-ness’, but in themselves they do not constitute the reality of the Cuban Missile Crisis because the world is devoid of intrinsic meaning (Norval, 2000; Weldes, 1999). However, the phenomena of world politics do not constitute reality in themselves. Only once meaning has been imparted onto the chaos and strangeness of the world, i.e. only once knowledge of objects and their relations is formed does any substantive *reality* exist. The first (unconscious) foreign policy act of ExComm was to construct an interpretive framework; to conceptually construct the international system and populate it with meaningful objects with meaningful relations. Through this discursive process objects are labelled, categorized and rendered meaningful, hence; the world becomes bipolar and defined by the Cold War, the Soviets become “inscrutable”, Castro becomes a “communist menace”, Cuba and the U.S.S.R. become “partners in deceit”, the missiles become offensive and their deployment aggressive intervention in the Western hemisphere, the Soviets become determined to capture Berlin, and so forth. The meanings and relations of objects determine what objects need to be protected and what objects

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

constitute threats; the 'national interest' is inbuilt as the ExComm 'constructors' cannot help but have the national interest in mind (Weldes, 1999). Through their construction of a singular understanding of the unfolding events ExComm produced the conceivable policy alternatives and provided themselves with the "monolithic certainty" of meaning that is an "unavoidable feature of the political *decision*." (Freedon, 1996, pp. 76, 77) For ExComm the monolithic certainty was that missiles in Cuba were simply intolerable, and they *had to be removed*. Constructed realities of world politics do not burst into spontaneous existence, they are constructed socially and draw upon a 'geopolitical culture' (or security imaginary) of pre-existing knowledge and meanings (Ó Tuathail, 2006; Weldes, 1999). Knowledge now is shaped by knowledge past.

The ideational 'raw materials' of knowledge-reality construction reside in the 'geopolitical culture', a cultural 'bank' of pre-existing interdependent webs of knowledge and understandings about the 'reality' of world politics. Historical understandings (knowledge, of self and other, of history, of international 'roles', and so forth) shape current constructions; history, "bears and determines us", its meaning and perceived lessons shapes present knowledge-reality (Foucault, 1980, p. 114). In ExComm deliberations, for instance, there was much use of the 'Munich analogy' (Weldes, 1999). The dominant understanding of appeasement is very clear: "The 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged ultimately leads to war." (Kennedy, 1962) Hence, a policy response of appeasement to the missiles in Cuba was unconscionable. Some pre-existing understandings and meanings are more influential than others; the unambiguous lessons of Munich and the conceptual impact it had on ExComm is indicative of the power of this understanding. The uneven influence of understandings is a manifestation of power, indeed, Foucault goes as far to argue that, "the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of *power*, not relations of meaning." (1980, p. 114)[12] Discursive power relations become evident when "attempts are made to bring ambiguity under control, where a privileged interpretation emerges, or where conduct is disciplined and discourse limited" (Sterling-Folker & Shinko, 2007, p. 250).

"[T]hat our...dominant ways of thinking and acting in the world will be reproduced as 'reality'" is problematic because knowledge-reality construction is not neutral (Zalewski, 1996, p. 351). Although we are all involved in the discursive process of constructing world politics,[13] we do not equally take part in this process, indeed to understand the construction of world politics, "one must understand the social organisation that permits [certain] definers to do the defining" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 134). Based on their claims to specialist knowledge, the authority to define and construct knowledge about the world is passed on to 'experts', i.e. scholars, commentators, policy makers. Cox (1981) argued that there is, "no such thing as theory...divorced from a standpoint in time and space", "theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose". As the national interest is 'naturally' produced during reality construction, ExComm's constructed 'reality' of the Cuban Missile Crisis favours the U.S. This reality constructed by ExComm has become (and remains) dominant, and indeed has become taken-for-granted fact (Laffey & Weldes, 2008). The persistence of this 'reality' has been maintained by disciplinary power: "when we choose to comprehend the world in a certain way, we thereby impose an order on it which must inevitably be held in place by power, a power which simultaneously produces us as 'knowers' of the world and disciplines us to know the world in accordance with an established mode of certitude." (Sterling-Folker & Shinko, 2007, p. 250)

Academia has the greatest claim to 'knowing' 'reality', and practices and tendencies herein assist in perpetuating the dominance of certain knowledge-reality constructions. As documented above, 'knowledge' drawn from pre-existing understandings was constitutive of the 'reality' constructed by ExComm, but, as Laffey & Weldes (2008) argue, accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis continue to be constitutive of events after the fact. Early accounts, in particular, constitute 'heroic history'[14], but even later accounts, whether intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuate and reinforce the dominant ExComm view of events either intentionally or unintentionally. This occurs in two ways; first by the adoption of the language and categorisation initially used by ExComm members, and second, by reproducing the 'realities' constructed during and after the crisis (Laffey & Weldes, 2008). Indeed, the discipline of IR in general "by use of political assumptions masquerading as technical ones", "recreates and reinforces" certain socially, culturally and historically specific 'realities' and "present[s] [them] as timeless, as natural, as empirical." (Smith, 2004, pp. 503, 505) The manner in which knowledge-realities are accepted as natural and taken-for-granted is representative of power relations embedded in knowledge-reality construction, diffusion, reproduction and maintenance. A discursive, disciplining power, wielded perhaps unwittingly, conditions and shapes how the world is understood, what is

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

conceivable and ultimately what happens in world politics.

Realists and Constructivists conceive of knowledge and its relations to reality quite differently. The former conceives of reality as ontologically prior to knowledge, conceived as “a *noun*”, whereas the latter regards knowledge as “a *verb*” constitutive of reality, and indeed that any given ‘reality’ is contingent upon specific historical circumstances (Zalewski, 1996). I reject the Realist conception of the relations between knowledge and reality and its subsequent consequences for the nature of explanations world politics, because of its fundamental explanatory deficiencies. Instead, I believe that knowledge is more important in explaining a discursively constructed ‘reality’. For, knowledge of reality *is* reality. The ontological map constructed by discourse explains world politics for it explains the forms that world politics takes. This, however is not to erase the importance of power, because the disciplining power of dominant pre-existing constructed meanings impacts upon how current frameworks of meaning, current ‘realities’ of world politics, are constructed through the emergence of ‘natural’, ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge. Coming to ‘know’ and continuing to ‘know’ are, “productive practice[s] of constructing identities and relationships, and power inheres in this.” (Doty, 1996, p. 146)

## Bibliography

Bailyn, B. (1974). *The ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Baldwin, D. A. (2002). Power and International Relations. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse & B. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (pp. 177-191). London: Sage.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality : a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* . Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Blight, J. G., & Welch, D. A. (1990). *On the brink : Americans and Soviets reexamine the Cuban missile crisis* (2nd ed.). New York: Noonday Press.

Carr, E. H. (2001). *The twenty years' crisis, 1919-1939 : an introduction to the study of international relations* . New York: Palgrave.

Cox, R. W. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126-155.

Cox, R. W. (1992). Multilateralism and World Order. *Review of International Studies*, 18.

Donaldson, R. (Writer) (2000). *Thirteen Days*. USA: New Line Cinema.

Doty, R. L. (1993). Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines. *International Studies Quarterly*, 37(3), 297-320.

Doty, R. L. (1996). *Imperial encounters : the politics of representation in North-South relations* . Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Dougherty, J. E., & Pfaltzgraff, R. L. (1981). *Contending theories of international relations : a comprehensive survey* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power-knowledge : selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* . Brighton: Harvester Press.

Freedon, M. (1996). *Ideologies and political theory : a conceptual approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kennedy, J. F. (1962). The U.S. Response to Soviet Military Buildup in Cuba. In D. o. State (Ed.) (Vol. Series 80).

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

Laffey, M., & Weldes, J. (2008). Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis. *International Studies Quarterly*, 52, 555-577.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1967). *Politics among nations : the struggle for power and peace* (4th ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Norval, A. J. (2000). The Things We Do with Words – Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Ideology *British Journal of Political Science*, 30(2), 313-346.

Ó Tuathail, G. (2006). General Introduction: Thinking Critically about Geopolitics. In G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby & P. Routledge (Eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader* (2nd ed. ed., pp. x, 302 p.). London: Routledge.

Schmidt, B. C. (2007). Realism and facets of power in international relations. In F. Berenskoetter & M. J. D. Williams (Eds.), *Power in world politics* (pp. 43-63). London: Routledge.

Schwarzenberger, G. (1964). *Power politics : a study of world society* (3rd ed.). London: Stevens.

Shaw, K. (2004). Knowledge, Foundations, Politics. *International Studies Review*, 6(4), 7-20.

Smith, S. (Writer) (2004). Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11 [Article], *International Studies Quarterly*: Blackwell Publishing Limited.

Sterling-Folker, J., & Shinko, R. E. (2007). Discourses of power: Traversing the realist-postmodern divide. In F. Berenskoetter & M. J. D. Williams (Eds.), *Power in world politics* (pp. 244-264). London: Routledge.

Thucydides (1972). *The Peloponnesian War*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Walker, R. B. J. (1993). *Inside/outside : international relations as political theory*. Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Waltz, K. N. (1959). *Man, the state and war : a theoretical analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.

Weldes, J. (1999). *Constructing national interests : the United States and the Cuban missile crisis*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Zalewski, M. (1996). 'All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up'. In S. M. Smith, K. Booth & M. Zalewski (Eds.), *International theory : positivism and beyond* (pp. 340-353). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[1] 'The Cuban Missile Crisis' with which I deal with here is only one conception of certain events. Alternative narratives of the events exist, namely 'The Caribbean Crisis' and the 'The October Crisis' (Weldes, 1999).

[2] It should be noted that some supporting information about the Cuban Missile Crisis is derived from the film *Thirteen Days* (Donaldson, 2000). While, I accept that this is of dubious accuracy, I do believe it to be adequately representative of the dominant American view of events to be of merit.

[3] Realists conceive of an 'international' realm for world politics, which is distinctly separate from domestic politics and economics.

[4] "[A] type of relation between States in which certain patterns of behaviour are predominant; armaments, isolationism, power diplomacy, power economics, hegemony, imperialism, alliances, balance of power, and war"

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge

Written by Tom Thornley

(Schwarzenberger, 1964, p. 13)

[5] “[W]ar-winning ability” is “the standard by which states are...ranked” and differentiated (Baldwin, 2002, p. 183; Schmidt, 2007).

[6] Besides, as Carr argues: “politics are not...a function of ethics, but ethics of politics...morality is the product of power.” (2001, p. 82)

[7] Claims of the offensive or defensive nature of the missiles are largely irrelevant, because in either case it is a relative gain in power for the U.S.S.R and its allies.

[8] This assumes that there was balance before deployment, and that deployment of missiles in Cuba altered this balance. The view of ExComm member Douglas Dillon: “So while the Cuban installations didn’t add very much to their numbers and didn’t change the overall balance very much, my impression at the time was that they radically altered the numbers of *deliverable* warheads, and in that sense they significantly increased Soviet capability.”(in Blight & Welch, 1990, pp. 30-31)

[9] In the film *Thirteen Days* (Donaldson, 2000) , for example, there is dialogue evoking Thucydides and suggesting an acceptance of the power maximising logic:

Dean Rusk: “Mr. President, I believe my team is in agreement...The Russians are trying to show the world they can do whatever they want, wherever they want, and we’re powerless to stop them.”

And there also seems to be some acceptance and regard for the balance of power:

General Taylor: “The Joint Chiefs’ consensus is that this is a massively destabilizing move, upsetting the nuclear balance.”

The necessity of the removal of the missiles was merely a response to this logic.

[10] A Realist could, perhaps, argue that in some way knowledge could be quantified and treated simply as another element of power.

[11] The ‘best of all possible worlds’ that Realists regard as ‘reality’ is itself a construction. Hobbes’ state of nature is a production, it is not natural (Shaw, 2004). The use of power, and the acceptance of power as the common currency of world politics is only possible because ‘reality’ has been constructed in such a way as to render power meaningful. Indeed, “the critics of neorealism have argued that the structures of the international system which is, in fact, the specific consequences of particular historical conditions.” (Walker, 1993, p. 105)

[12] Carr alludes to a similar point: “The popular paraphrase ‘Might is Right’ is misleading only if we attach too restricted a meaning to the word ‘Might.’ History creates rights, and therefore right. The doctrine of the survival of the fittest proves that the survivor was, in fact, the fittest to survive.” (2001, p. 86)

[13] Again, Carr makes an similar and astute observation: “Everyone who reads the political columns of a newspaper or attends a political meeting or discusses politics with his neighbour is to that extent a student of politics; and the judgement which he forms becomes...a factor in the course of political events.” (2001, p. 5)

[14] Heroic history accounts, “are highly moral; the struggle they present is between good and bad; and they are highly personified; individuals count overwhelmingly; their personal qualities appear to make the difference between victory and defeat”. (Bailyn, 1974, p. viii)

—

# **The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Importance of Power and Knowledge**

Written by Tom Thornley

*Written by: Tom Thornley  
Written at: SOAS, University of London  
Written for: Dr Mark Laffey  
Date written: March 2009*