Does Realism Constitute a Recipe for a More Dangerous World?

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Ruthlessly pursue the national interest, seek to add as much power as possible, whilst taking care not to introduce any ethical considerations. Alongside a large helping of pessimism vis-à-vis human nature, following these stages in the implementation of foreign policy could provide the perfect recipe for a more dangerous world. Realism, the dominant theory of International Relations, is commonly, yet erroneously, viewed as not only constituting but also advocating this recipe in order to achieve state security in an anarchical world. Partly due to its synonymy with a brutal form of Realpolitik, adherents of this view see the core assumptions of the realist paradigm as dangerous and potentially damaging to the achievement of international cooperation and thus world peace. Rather than being merely a descriptive doctrine, they interpret realism as fostering an offensive, violent and expansionist attitude, which predisposes statesmen to approach international politics from a narrow-minded and selfish disposition. Institutionalists refute the state centricity inherent in realism, regarding it as out-dated since the end of the Cold War and detrimental to the growing role of international institutions. Meanwhile, Liberalism and Cosmopolitanism disdain at realism's myopic and amoral focus upon power at the expense of social and moral concerns, while others see this emphasis in modern realist thought as leading to hubris and consequently tragedy.[1]Yet, despite the apparent popularity in rendering realism the scapegoat of IR theory, this essay intends to argue that these criticisms are waged against straw men and largely based upon the inaccuracy of viewing neorealism and realism as synonymous. It will seek a deeper reading of realism; particularly the work of Hans Morgenthau to show that classical realism is surprisingly moral, intensely critical and regrettably misunderstood. It will explore its ambiguity as well as its re-emergence as a prudent and essential theory of IR, to conclude that classical realism could in fact constitute a recipe for a more peaceful rather than dangerous world.

Realism has rarely ceased to rouse controversy within the study of IR and therefore it is of little surprise that it habitually provokes questions comparable to the one at hand. It has been described as, "the cynical calculus of pure power politics"[2], "the antithesis of ethical reflection"[3], and contrary to Rosenthal's claim that it is a compliment to be called a realist[4], it even inspired article titles such as, 'No one loves a political realist'.[5] This calls for one to uncover when, why and how realism became "a cipher, a codeword, generally for opprobrium"[6] and to be mistakenly seen as a recipe for a more dangerous world. It is therefore necessary to untangle what is meant by realism. Realism is commonly thought of in terms of a paradigm. Simplified, a paradigm is a set of fundamental assumptions and theories about the world and the way it works, creating a lens through which one interprets reality. Vasquez defines it as, "the assumptions scholars make about the world they are studying."[7]Subsequently, realist scholars are seen to share the following core assumptions about the world: 1) the centrality of states—states are the most important actors in IR, with institutions serving only as instruments to reflect their interests. 2) The world is anarchic—there is no overarching authority to impose order. 3) International relations is primarily a struggle for power and peace 4) Power is the defining feature of IR 5) States are rational, unitary actors pursuing their own ends. Many believe that the above assumptions lead to the perpetuation of conflict and hinder the transition to a more peaceful world; that it nurses mistrust between states and thus forms a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet, recent scholars refute the suitability of this 'paradigmatic' reading of realism, which can lead to oversimplification of a very complex theory, and thereby forms a reason for critics of realism to view it as leading to a more dangerous world. Yet, understanding realism in this way, they further argue, does not show that realism causes a dangerous

world. It rather shows "the inappropriateness of techniques of presentation and analysis (mistakenly) derived from the philosophy of science, which present realism as a series of axioms under the cover of a paradigm [8] and [that] present analyses based on these straw-man notions, robs realism of its complexity and value, distorting and debasing a realist tradition…" [9] Specifically, the envisaged problem lies in the identification of realism as synonymous with neorealism, due to the inadequacy of numerous textbook portrayals of realism present in the secondary literature. As we will see, it is useful to make the distinction and "get realism out of the Waltzian straightjacket."[10] In fact, there is a growing movement amongst more contemporary realist scholars calling for a rereading of realism, as many including, Murray, Lebow, Molloy and Scheuerman believe that neorealism robs realism of its ethical dimension.

To aid this rereading we will focus on Morgenthau's discussion of political realism to counter the most prevalent assumptions against realism. Realism does not argue that the world is conflictual because they like it that way. They do not promote ways for keeping it that way—they merely seek to reflect the world as it is. To say that they provide a recipe for a more dangerous world because they question the view that peace can be achieved via international institutions and the spread of universal moral principles is unsound. A pessimistic awareness that, "the complexities of international affairs make simple solutions […] impossible"[11] is not in itself dangerous. Instead, it would be dangerous to take all of the "protestations of selfless and peaceful intentions at their face value" and remain naïve to the motives of states and grotesque abuse of morals and rights. It is unfair to approach realism with this bias.

Firstly, realism's focus on power does not make it dangerous; to think so would be to confuse Morgenthau's idea of power. Morgenthau insists, however, that power means only, "the mutual relations of control among the holders of public authority"[12] or "anything that establishes and controls the control of man over man"[13]—this is political power; the use of physical violence is military power and the two are not synonymous. When violence/force is put into play, this represents the abandonment of political power for military power, of which, as Rosenthal clarifies, Morgenthau was sceptical, due to the difficulty in calculating outcomes, and therefore is not promoted as often thought. To understand IR, however, is to understand that it is governed by power in the political sense. Man by nature is driven by the lust for power. One may question, however, why, if we can overcome our selfish drives and lust for power within society, can we not hope to overcome it on the international level. Morgenthau says that this is because suppressed power drives at the domestic level are projected onto the state. Whilst uneasily deterministic, it does arguably hit an uncomfortable home truth that man is at his core an egoist, born of a dual and competing nature. Due to this, states above all seek power.

This has led numerous theorists to presume this is an endorsement of the pursuit of power at all costs, but this is not the case; Morgenthau highlights two ways, via which peace can be preserved. 1) The Balance of power and 2) Normative limitation, which includes peace through limitation, peace through transformation and peace through accommodation. At present only the latter is effective—as Morgenthau argues, "diplomacy can make peace more secure than it is today."[14] It also contributes to the growth of the world community, on the foundations of which, a world state could eventually be established and, consequently, world peace. Specifically, Morgenthau explains how diplomacy can best perform this vital role by providing 9 principles, the first 4 of which are fundamental: 1) Diplomacy should be divested of crusading spirit. 2) Foreign policy objectives must be defined in terms of the national interest. 3) Diplomacy should look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations. 4) Nations should be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them. This is clearly a very clear recipe for a more peaceful world and according to Morgenthau, "it is the best means of preserving peace which a society of sovereign nations has to offer."[15]

Turning now from its focus on power to the claim that Realism is an amoral theory, Caney[16] claims that realism is openly hostile toward global human rights. If this were correct, it would imply that realism prescribes policies that deny, have little regard for or actively violate human rights. Something, which would indeed lead to a more dangerous world, as acts of aggression would not be morally constrained. However, Scheuerman appropriately counters Caney's argument by highlighting that it is built on false premises. Caney argues that realism is opposed to human rights because they believe that they are selectively applied. This is certainly not the case. He too fails to realise that Morgenthau saw past the current nation state system, and that in the conclusion of 'Politics Among Nations', he claimed that the protection of humankind required a restructuring of state sovereignty at the international level.

Secondly it is not detrimental that realists argue that human rights suffer from a selectivity lacuna—this is based on the large discrepancies in the adherence to international law at the international level. Scheuerman is correct in arguing that realist criticisms, hardly amount to a dangerous attack on the idea of global human rights. Instead, he claims that realism actually provides a valuable "corrective to naïve cosmopolitanism" which lauds our developing human rights regime, and side steps its ambiguities and failures. By not letting us forget the deep inequalities plaguing the global political economy, realism creates a recipe for a more vigilant and perceptive world.

It is true, as Molloy points out, that realists do criticise a certain type of moral thinking, that of moral universalism, which Caney appears to promote—i.e., the idea of appealing to abstract moral laws to govern behaviour. Yet, this does not make realists amoral, "unless one insists on the infallibility of a single ethical code". This could in fact render realism a recipe for a more peaceful world, as not dwelling in abstraction for too long avoids the crusading spirit. Morgenthau was able to draw a close parallel between the Wilsonian notion of launching a moral crusade for democracy with the religious crusades of the middle ages; the same parallel could now be struck with America's more recent foreign policy agenda. Realism avoids the self-righteous impulse to impose a particular set of ethical standards on the world. Standards that arguably cloak illegal wars, such as in Iraq, in a veil of morality, and which encourage terrorism and hostility between the Middle East and the West—a *real recipe* for a more dangerous world.

Furthermore, whilst Waltz's focus on structure excludes moral factors, this is not the case in Morgenthau's classical realism. Morgenthau could give us a lesson we need now more than ever; that moral behaviour comes from a sense of proportion. "There can be no political morality without prudence; that is without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action." He dedicates the whole of chapter 5 to 'Ethics, Mores, and Law as Restraints on Power". He states that "political systems which have made the lust for power their mainstay have proved impotent and self-destructive", implying that he is certainly not promoting a theory that encourages just that. He admits that certain moral rules intercede and create an absolute barrier to the pursuit of certain ends by certain means and that this political morality, world public opinion and laws limit and control immoral acts. Also the pursuit of the national interest above all does not have to be dangerous. National self-preservation is a moral duty, according to Morgenthau; the statesman has a moral duty to protect the interests of those he was trusted to represent. Following the national interest is a rule without recourse to any abstract values, thereby preventing the statesman from following his own desires. In the wise words of Benjamin Frankel, "Realism has consistently provided the most reliable guidance for statecraft."[17]

The distinction between classical realists and especially offensive neorealists makes immense difference to the influence on foreign policy for example Jonathon Kirshner[18], convincingly argues that classical realist approaches propose fundamentally different policy recommendations than neorealism, especially Mearsheimer's offensive realism. The article strengthens the aforementioned point, that one can be a realist whilst seeing neorealism as "hostile and dangerous". Kirshner argues that classical realism would accommodate rising powers particularly China, based on their belief that "politics matters" and the future is unwritten. This according to Kirshner is a significant break from neorealism. Mearsheimer does seem to encourage a more dangerous world, he is adamant that China cannot rise peacefully; it will become an aggressive state as its capabilities increase and he urges the US to do everything within its power to slow it down. Following this line of thought would lead to grave hostility between the US and China. It is painfully clear that if Mearsheimer convinced statesmen, this would be a recipe for an extremely dangerous world- as China would become "a wounded, hostile adversary."[19] Whereas classical realism despite being wary would, according to Kirshner, advocate accommodating the peaceful rise of China therefore it could be persuasively argued that neorealism constitutes a recipe for a more dangerous world, but classical realism does not.

Moreover, as Trachtenberg[20] argues, power politics does not necessarily have to lead to conflict. Therefore realism does not constitute a recipe for a more dangerous world. He claims that George Kennan believed that stability depended on states to pursue realistic foreign polices based on power. What actually led to danger was policy motivated by emotion and ideology. He points to Adam Smith's idea of the invisible hand, that "by pursuing his own interest" the individual "frequently promotes that of society more effectively than he really intends to promote it." By analogy, if states followed the dictates of reason and prudence and acted in power political terms they would seek to have as many friends and as few enemies as possible as this would be in their best interest. Those avoiding conflicts would be at an advantage. In other words, most dangerous conflicts emerge when statesmen are driven by their

passions, and realism can clearly avoid this. According to Trachtenberg, there is a strong emphasis on moderation and restraint and the language of power allows powers to converse on "a business like basis". And since they all would speak the same language, compromises would be more easily established.

Before closing, however, let me also note that the above is not to say that classical realism is free of problems and dangers, as it can be easily manipulated and it is incredibly susceptible to misuse; many times it has been dismembered with different parts being carried off to serve the will of those who want to undertake aggressive pursuits—partly it itself responsible due to its ambiguity, and particularly Morgenthau's definition of power and the national interest. In this way it does provide key ingredients which if not mixed together and served in the exact way that Morgenthau advises it could result in negative consequences. Yet, there is more to following a recipe than merely putting all of the ingredients into one bowl—one also needs to add precise quantities and follow guidelines. The ingredients necessary to create a more dangerous world are present in realism, but, so too are many others besides—prudence should clarify the quantities and techniques to use. It could also be argued that there is now immense dissatisfaction with international institutions and recent humanitarian interventions. Realism may bring us back to the crux of the problem—that without the backing of states we are unlikely to see fundamental change and movements toward cooperation, and peacekeeping will not reap the fruits of their efforts. The solution could then become to focus on the manipulation of the state. If enough of the population can be mobilised behind a certain policy proposal, it could be made detrimental for the state to ignore this demand. In fear of civil unrest and their reputation abroad, it could then be within the dictates of prudence for the state to represent the desire of the people at large. In becoming aware of the power realities, it is arguable that individuals and groups can more easily find loopholes and pressure points. By speaking the language of power it may be more effective for the masses to get their state to project their interests abroad and in this way promote a more peaceful world.

In conclusion, rather that promoting insecurity and consequently conflict between states, realism could instead encourage policy makers to remain aware that each state pursues power, and, like individuals in the social world, will not take kindly to acts of aggression or overly offensive tactics. This awareness that each state is led by the same desires as one's own, could then force one to act cautiously, tread carefully and follow the dictates of prudence. Realism is a theory, which requires a much deeper reading and always remains loyal as a tool to challenge existing and emerging theories. It never ceases to provoke discussion, which in turn generates new ideas and challenges. In this way it keeps international relations theory healthy and dynamic, avoids complacency and facilitates more debates in which channels for cooperation could emerge. It is therefore unlikely to constitute a recipe for a more dangerous world.

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