

Student Feature - Theory in Action: Classical Realism and Migration

Written by Felix Rösch and Richard Ned Lebow

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/08/05/student-feature-theory-in-action-classical-realism-and-the-migration-crisis/>

FELIX RÖSCH AND RICHARD NED LEBOW, AUG 5 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

Since 2011, millions of people have become displaced from Syria due to the civil war there. This has been exacerbated by migration flows coming from other states in Africa and the Middle East due to various political and economic circumstances. By 2015 the issue had been declared a crisis in Europe – the destination for many of the migrants. Focusing on this crisis might not seem to be an obvious choice, but many realists were refugees or migrants themselves. Indeed, Herz (1984, 9) characterised himself as a ‘traveller between all worlds’ and Morgenthau was even a ‘double exile’ (Frankfurter 1937) after his expulsion from Germany and later Spain before arriving in the United States in 1937. Beyond this point, realism provides useful insights into this crisis as we can investigate the conditions for a peaceful coexistence of differences. This is important, as the refugee issue has been identified as one of the reasons why the British public voted to leave the European Union (EU) in the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. It has also been implicated in the rise of right-wing parties throughout Europe and the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. Refugees and migrants are clearly being pictured in security discourses as a threat – and to measurable effects.

Syrian Refugee Crisis: All Your Questions Answered

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/07/syria-refugee-crisis-150709120935092.html>

Relating the work of mid-twentieth century ‘classical’ realists to this modern development enables IR scholarship to understand that security is established in a discursive context, making it dependent on spatio-temporal conditions. This means security has different meanings in different contexts and therefore it is transformative (Behr 2013, 169). This puts realist thought into affinity with the critical theories that ostensibly seem opposed to it. Given that both groupings found stimulation in the same sources, one of which was Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), this is unsurprising. One of the key concepts in Mannheim’s book is the conditionality of knowledge. This means that knowledge is always bound to the socio-political environment in which it operates, stressing that universal knowledge is impossible. Applying this notion to the current refugee crisis, we understand that perceiving refugees as a threat to security is the result of human will and political agency. For example, the refugee crisis was one of the dominant drivers of British Brexit-discourses, although the UK received fewer than 40,000 asylum seekers in 2015. By comparison, approximately 890,000 refugees chose Germany as their destination the same year, making Germany the European country that accepts most refugees in relation to the overall population.

Between ‘Swarms’ and ‘Security’: How media report on migration

This is not to say that this process always takes place consciously as we can never be entirely sure how our writings or actions are perceived by others, but classical realism can help us to understand that humans are not only the objects of security but also its subjects. In public discourses, people have the opportunity to redefine the substance of security, instead of leaving it to international foreign policy elites. These discourses can evolve violently, as they

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include the interests of all involved people. To avoid this looming danger, realists stress the possibility of dialogical learning, as current scholarship calls it, to increase the potential to morph these discourses into a common good. This form of learning is based on continuous possibilities of exchange between refugees, migrants and local people and it requires all groups to demonstrate open-mindedness and empathy as well as the willingness to challenge one's own positions. As a result, security can be redefined and what is perceived to be a crisis can be eventually understood as an opportunity to create something 'which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination' (Arendt 1961, 151).

On the Influence of Migration on the Brexit Vote

Recall that classical realists were sceptical of the promises of modern nation-states and argued for the establishing of a world community, eventually leading to a world state. Such a global community would help to transcend the depoliticisation in modern societies and even support 'defenders of the global state to stay sober' (Scheuerman 2011, 150). Such sobriety would be beneficial to add to the academic and political debate on migration. After all, the root of the migration crisis in Europe was that certain states, and certain influential groups within them, decided to enforce the metaphorical and physical walls of their borders and limit (or block) migrants from entering due to perceiving them as a security threat to their nation. By enabling people to get together on different levels, political spheres can extrapolate beyond national borders, allowing people to exchange their interests globally and gradually develop an identity that goes beyond that of the state. It also allows for different images of the migrant, or the refugee, to gain traction – to replace the negative ones that became widespread in Europe by 2015.

The flexibility found within the classical realist literature allows people to accommodate diverse human interests. The resulting self-reflexivity and open-mindedness helps life trajectories influenced by different historical, cultural, socio-political or religious factors to be accepted. In political spheres, people are acknowledged for their differences and, through discussion, a common ground is established that is at least acceptable to citizens at a basic level. If this can be done within each state, then it is possible that it can be done at the global level. If such an end can be attained then there will be no migration crises in the future as a global citizenry will exist. Classical realists did not arrive at this conclusion straight away. Rather, scholars like Morgenthau and Niebuhr were sceptical at first of international organisations like the United Nations and the early forms of the European Union. However, they soon realised that they provide the space (if used as they had hoped) for the political to gradually evolve, as different actors can get together peacefully and exchange their ideas at the international level.

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