

# Can Realism be a Critical Theory?

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MARCO MARILLI, APR 13 2011

### Can Realism be a Critical Theory? Discuss with reference to Hans Morgenthau

The adjectives 'critical' and 'realist' are habitually presented, in the field of International Relations Theory, as antithetical.[1] Due to the definition of Critical Theory given by Robert Cox and other theorists, mainly as opposed to realism, it is now tacitly accepted that a critical approach of International Relations can be labeled as such if it opposes the basic assumptions of realism. For Cox, 'being critical' in IR means normatively and factually challenging the existing order and firmly believing in a possible human emancipation.[2]

Nevertheless, the recent debate on this topic suggests that there might have been a misunderstanding among critical theorists with regard to their definition of realism. Critical theorists have not been able to underline the importance of the critical side of classical realism, especially in Hans Morgenthau's theory. For him, a realist theory of International Relations includes two linked dimensions: a descriptive one, which seek to explain how the system works, and a normative one, whose aim is to criticize the existing *status quo*. What critical theorists might have misunderstood is the nature of the normative attitude in Morgenthau's writings, which, rather than being implicit and unintentionally hidden, is clearly explicit and rooted on the claim that political science is a subversive force which should challenge the existing order.

In 1984 Richard K. Ashley suggested that Morgenthau's realism contained rudiments of a critical theory of international relations, contributing to a theory heralding fundamental transformations to the existing state system. Regardless the skepticism and the hostile reception of Ashley's analysis, his portrait of Morgenthau remains unsatisfactory as he was not able to suggest all the critical aspects of Morgenthau's writings.[3]

In recent times, an indicative amount of scholars has endorsed the importance of Morgenthau's assumptions as a source of change for the standard interpretation of realism, particularly challenging its unalterable distance from any attempt to bridge it with a critical dimension.

### Modern critical theory

Before analyzing realism as a form of critical theory, it is necessary to make a distinction within the common definition of critical theory. As Chris Reus-Smit underlines, there are two variants within the branch of Critical International Theory: modern, intellectually rooted to the critical social theory as conceived in the Frankfurt School, and postmodern, explicitly influenced by constructivist approaches of the 1990s. The former, focusing on normative and epistemological concerns, condemning value-neutral theorizing, rejecting the technical for an emancipatory knowledge and adopting what Mark Hoffman calls a 'minimal foundationalism',[4] is the more likely to be considered when reevaluating the critical side of classical realism.

Exemplificative, with regard to the critical aspects of a theory of IR, is Robert Cox's distinction between a 'critical theory' and a 'problem-solving' theory. The former is admittedly normative and endorses a conception of possible structural transformations, following a historical approach; the latter is a mere 'guide to tactical actions'[5] which believes in the 'permanency of existing structures' and presents itself as a value-free theory, following a positivist approach.[6] Nevertheless, it is Cox himself to admit that classical realism, having its roots in a 'historical mode of

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thought', was a preliminary attempt to develop a critical approach.[7] He refers to Friedrich Meinecke's interpretation of *raison d'état* as a contribution to critical theory, to the extent that he ascribes the conduct of states to specific historical circumstances. Nevertheless, Cox argues, the historical context, that has been an important aspect for many realist theorists (E. H. Carr *in primis*), has been abandoned since the emergence of American scholars, namely Morgenthau and Waltz, after World War II. In his early writings Cox refers to Morgenthau and Waltz as the 'American scholars who transformed realism into a form of problem-solving'.[8] Anyhow, in his later writings, Cox himself affirms the existence of a distinction between classical realism and Waltz's realism, but he does not consider deeper the critical dimension in Morgenthau's ideas.

## Classical realism as a critical theory

### *Morgenthau from the Weimar-era to the II World War*

Early commentators have often argued about a dualism in Morgenthau's theory: as already mentioned, Murielle Cozette demonstrates the existence of a descriptive and a normative dimension. Richard Rosecrance asserts that Morgenthau's arguments can be differentiated between those which claim a static and ahistorical 'struggle for power' and those which dynamically present the historical progression of the state-nation system.[9] Therefore, it is possible to state that Morgenthau's mature theory always engaged the dynamical role of history with the static character of human nature. Many scholars argue that a truly comprehensive acknowledgment of Morgenthau's theory and, particularly, of his change of direction after the end of the Weimar-era and again in the 1960s-70s, can only be fully acquired with reference to his early biography.

William E. Scheuerman's useful outline of Morgenthau's academic and intellectual commitment while at the University of Frankfurt as a lawyer between 1928 and 1932, is particularly enlightening as far as the influence of that *milieu* for Morgenthau's mature writings is concerned. In Frankfurt, the young Morgenthau participated, as one of the most prominent members, to the so-called 'Sinzheimer School', a movement that followed the Weimar Left's major intellectual and legal voice of the lawyer Hugo Sinzheimer. Grounding his ideas on Sinzheimer's belief that a 'social substance' could and should have fulfilled the potentialities of modern democracy, bridging the gap between 'freedom and equality' in formal law and 'dependence and inequality' in the empirical reality, Morgenthau endorsed the importance of International Law as a dynamic force of the International system. He stated International Law could allow significant adjustments to power relations by peaceful means, and could minimize the dangers of interstate violence, but yet needed to develop a flexible framework. Equality – among states – was the normative core of Morgenthau's early work, and had to be achieved through the constructive role of International Law.[10]

However, with the decline of the Weimar government from the mid-30s, most left-wing Weimar scholars reconsidered their earlier reformist impulses. This led Morgenthau to surrender the potentialities of International Law to bring order and peace in the international system; a characteristic of his subsequent new brand of realism became, as Scheuerman argues, 'its skeptical view of international law, especially when envisioned as a device for challenging great power political privilege and reorganizing the international system'.[11] In Morgenthau's mind, psychology and philosophical anthropology became the roots for his subsequent theory of realism, attributing historically unchanging patterns of human experience to the pathology of the international politics.

What Scheuerman implicitly suggests is the existence of some critical tendencies in Morgenthau's mature realism (especially in his reaction to the Vietnam War and to the nuclear arms race) that are clearly influenced by his early engagement with the critical social and legal thought in the Weimar-era. Furthermore, it is impossible to negate the existence of a common soil for both Morgenthau's realism and the Frankfurt-oriented critical theory as they grew in – and developed their ideas from – the same intellectual Frankfurt-based *milieu*, influenced alternatively or contemporaneously by the works of Marx, Freud and Weber.[12]

This statement can be fully and deeply assimilated if enriched with Morgenthau's ethic of scholarship and his concepts of Truth and Power. Morgenthau interprets that of scholars as a profound role: to find out the Truth behind

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Power (explanatory side) and then speak this Truth to Power itself (critical side) so that they can bring a change through action. Morgenthau distinguishes between Science and Politics: the former is directed towards the quest of the truth, and is therefore a scholar's commitment; the latter, by contrast, seeks power, which needs to hide behind moral values to appear legitimate. Therefore scholars have the moral responsibility to unmask power, and this commitment is clear, as Murielle Cozette underlines, in *Politics Among Nations* where Morgenthau states that the true nature of power will always hide behind moral justifications.[13]

Furthermore, Morgenthau argues about a dual commitment from scholars: both to seek the objective truth, and to commit themselves to the 'great political issues of the contemporary world'.[14] Which means that political science should not be conceived as separated from the crucial political matters of its time. Cozette traces a clear bond between Morgenthau's 'moral duty to commit oneself in one's time' and his tendency to assert different claims at different times. Therefore classical realism is not seen as a static theory but, on the contrary, is clearly perceptible its flexible nature. As Cozette craftily underlines, this is perfectly shown in Morgenthau's shifts during the Cold War. This flexibility of realism, Cozette states, is linked with its critical dimension, as far as the scholar's commitment is concerned: to intervene actively to speak truth to power in a concrete political situation in order to challenge the *status quo*. [15]

Hence the normative component of Morgenthau's realism: '[The intellectual] tells power what it can do and what it *ought to do*, what is feasible and what is required' [italics added]. [16] The normative core of realism is commonly not considered or underestimated by critical theorists, and, as Stefano Guzzini argues, Morgenthau himself, already in his early writings, was 'not innocent in regard to the progress of less historical and less normative approaches', proposing a positivistic legal position. [17] Nevertheless, other academics state the centrality of this normative core. As Robbie Shilliam argues, in Morgenthau's realism there are the resources with which to 'critically write a normative moment back into the constitution of IR theory'. [18]

Morgenthau's normative assumptions are based on the promotion of universal moral values, independent from the state system. He refers to theology and talks about a 'moral code' which is grounded on those objective principles ordered by God. As for the substance of these values, Morgenthau asserts the existence of 'a spiritual destiny for mankind as expressed in the European values'. [19] These values are the liberal ideals on human rights, freedom and justice, which, as Scheuerman argues, represent Morgenthau's 'idealist' element that he never fully abandoned in his mature 'critical realism'. [20] He thus repeatedly asserts the concept that whether freedom or human life are threatened by the state-centric system, scholars should seek alternative political organizations. His reaction to the nuclear weapons race and the critic of the Vietnam War during the Cold War sheds light on the critical side of Morgenthau's realism endorsed by these academics.

## *Morgenthau in the Cold War era*

Morgenthau by the 1960s not only criticized the nuclear race (explanatory task) but he also suggested an utopian model for the transnational control of nuclear weapons (critical task). By the 'reconsideration of the nation-state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence', Morgenthau turned to an 'idealistic' moment which, according to some critics, 'exacerbates' his critical impulses, far from being latent. [21] As a matter of fact, as early as in the publication of his first edition of *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau states:

Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the political world into nation states will be *replaced* by larger units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the *moral requirements* of the contemporary world [italics added]. [22]

This assumption sheds light on the legitimacy of those academics who sustain the existence of a critical dimension of realism, against those critical theorists who on their side affirm the existence of a hidden normative aspect in the theory of realism aimed to preserve the *status quo*.

As early as 1965, at least three years earlier than other intellectuals, Morgenthau expressed his critic of the Vietnam War. He mostly claimed that the US should not appeal to ideology as the base for their foreign policy. He thought that

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ideology by itself could not be a clincher in the Cold War – although he recognized the importance of it – as it was considered to be a mask behind which national policies could hide their real aim: power.[23] Besides, Morgenthau stated the existence of a more potential danger coming from the US commitment in Vietnam: the damaging of American reputation abroad, due to its turn from a nation that pursues ‘equality in freedom’, to a sort of ‘counter-revolutionary force’ against communism.[24] Prudence is for Morgenthau a needed quality in any political activity, but it was challenged by technology (nuclear weapons) during the Cold War and finally abandoned by the US with its commitment in Vietnam.[25] Ronald Osborn states that Morgenthau bases his polemical claims on a ‘pragmatic’ soil, where the role of power as the only mean that ‘can possibly constrain the powerful’ is still predominant.[26] Yet Osborn argues that although Morgenthau’s response to the Vietnam War is ambiguous – paradoxical to some extent –, its normative aspect should encourage scholars to revive his critical tendencies.[27]

## Conclusion

Commentators have shown the complex and ambiguous nature of Morgenthau’s theory and the difficulty to pigeonhole him into the category of ‘classical realism’. His reconsideration of realist assumptions by the 1960s and the engagement with ideas he had previously declined as idealistic, fit uneasily in the orthodox version of realism he is intimately associated with.[28] It has been demonstrated that the influence of Morgenthau’s early ties to the Weimar Left could probably be seen as one of the causes of his mature theoretical tensions. His early theorizing included both the possibility of historical alterations to the state system and radical ‘idealistic’ reforms to the system itself. After the demise of the Weimar government, he abandoned his early radical ideas to embrace those elements of the realist theory that made him famous in the postwar America. Notwithstanding, many academics see in Morgenthau’s mature theory both a realist and an idealist moment which suggests that he never abandoned his internal conceptual tensions.[29]

Moreover, academics suggest, the flexibility Morgenthau employed *vis-à-vis* concrete political situations, following the normative assumption to speak Truth to Power, is intimately linked with a critical function. ‘Change’, far from being a typical feature of ‘critical’ approaches opposed to realism, is, to this extent, a characteristic of classical realism. By the same token, its normative commitment is not hidden, as many critical theorists argue, but is explicit. Cox’s statement that (neo)realism seeks to present a value-free theory seems groundless if linked with Morgenthau’s attack to academics who utilize science as a purpose itself and not as a ‘servant’ of higher values.[30] To this extent, as Cozette argues, ‘Morgenthau is close to the proponents of the Frankfurt School, and in particular to Horkheimer [...]’.[31]

Possibly, these interpretations of Morgenthau’s realism are well-grounded. The critical theorists’ assumption that, as Mark Hoffman puts it, ‘the normative foundation [...] is implicit in the structure of social action and discourse that it [critical theory] seeks to analyze’,[32] cannot be read as a distinctive feature of a Critical Theory with capital letters. As many academics illustratively argue, Morgenthau’s realism should not be *a priori* denied the possibility to be labeled as a critical theory.

In the end, underling the critical dimension at the core of the realistic project as formulated by Morgenthau, demonstrates that the adjective ‘critical’ could not only be used to denote an opposition to realist assumptions.

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