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# The End of Open Society Realism?

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**Abstract:** Does the ‘Zeitenwende’ herald the beginning of a new and as yet undefined open society realism? The present essay argues this question requires critical discussion of nature and value of realist political theory, particularly at a time where international society is accelerating to somewhere which is itself as yet unclear. Adding to revisionist research on political realism in International Relations (IR) theory I sketch how a political vision I call open society realism may be developed out of Classical realism, in sharp distinction to academic IR neo-realism for methodological and political reasons. To strip foreign policy realism from Continental philosophy, law, and history risks that we become what political liberalism ought to avoid: a closed society with a good conscience retreating from world politics, hiding behind the ‘national’ interest as if strategic great power management is a methodic function of structure rather than the politics of an ethically conscious diplomacy.

**Keywords:** classical realism, diplomacy, great power politics, liberalism, method, neorealism

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this essay is to sketch in a short space—no more is possible here—how the political idea that I call open society realism may be developed out of Classical conceptions of political realism in political and International Relations (IR) theory.

By open society realism I mean a political vision of power and interests that applies to liberal ideas of peace through law. In my book *Hans Kelsen’s Political Realism* (2021) I indicated how from Kelsen’s pure theory of law, state,

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and international legal order a vision of open society realism might be developed for the purpose of getting foreign policy realism right (Schuett 2011, 2015). In this essay my sketch of open society realism is wider in scope and adds an account of its politics and method. Even though my conceptions of open society and political realism are as wide open to criticism as any other such claims, a further aim of this essay is to re-energize our political thinking about what it means to be an open society realist in a new era of authoritarian populism and great power competition.

Here I understand open societies as being democratic peoples that are committed to the rule of law and aspire to be morally decent, and political realism as being a practical leadership ethics of diplomacy where power struggles and questions over interests and legitimacy are in a constant tension. If that is so, we must ask: Where are the reasonable limits of a realistic foreign policy that an open society can live with, to be drawn?

This is a big question for an essay to be asking, but not too big for the moment. Not only since Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine has realism become a lightning rod for the fears and divisions of the post-Cold War mind. Throughout the Fukuyamian 1990s and the neo-conservative Bush-Blair years realism seemed to be losing the battle of ideas. If one believed in laws of historical progress, manifesting themselves either through Nature, Reason, God, or the barrel of a gun, there was little room for the darker sides of international life. Today, realism is as embattled an approach to foreign affairs as political studies have ever been. At the same time tribalized politics on the left and right, where there are only either friends or foes it seems, is threatening the fabric of open societies. So we must also ask, literally at times of war: How do we get out of this alive?

In this essay I proceed in three stages. In the first Section 2 make three preliminary remarks why bringing realism back to the centre of IR debates is important. In the second Section 2 state how we can make better sense of realism in the theory and practice of international relations. My focus is on politics and method, and I apply critically the contours of open society realism to neorealism by replying to John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which is a false promise. In the third Section 2 offer more comments on the sketch how the political vision of open society realism may be developed out of Classical realism's conception of political agency understood as human agency: which is based on three pillars, each one of them is both methodological and political: a Kelsenian concept of the state; a conceptualization of power and interests rooted in Morgenthau's realism; and the ideal of a Rawlsian/realism statesman.

I should add that in setting out the bearings of an open society realism, my situatedness as a former career civil servant may be relevant. Broadly I share E.H. Carr's (1939, 19) observation that there is a dividing line between intellectuals and bureaucrats: "the former trained to think mainly on *a priori* lines, the latter empirically". In this essay I am, once again, somewhere in-between the two, perhaps disappointing both camps while hoping to bring them closer together.

## 2 Political Realism: Three Preliminary Issues

Before sketching how open society realism may be developed out of Classical conceptions of foreign policy realism (as I begin in Section 3), it is important first to demystify realism. Few ideas provoke our sensibility like the claim that international politics, like all politics (in democracies and autocracies alike), is the realm of conflict and power. As Michael C. Williams (2005, 1) said: "To some, being a Realist represents the height of wisdom: the mark of a clear-sighted ability to understand the world the way it is" and yet to others, it "is a mark of failure: morally obtuse and historically anachronistic". I see three reasons why questioning the methodological and political standing of realism is important.

1. The first one is the resurgence of interest in realist political thinking over the last two decades. In political theory a new generation of thinkers challenges the high liberalism of Rawlsian philosophy as being too abstract, moralist, procedural, legalistic: as too unpolitical. The study of political behaviour—reflected in populism, nationalism, authoritarianism across Western democracies—shows that the ideal of thoughtful citizens who make informed decisions in the polling booth based on rational preferences is misleading (Achen and Bartels 2017); it is dangerous to hold on to such ideals because in the elitist though realistic words of E.H. Carr (1936, 854) there is "limited capacity of the elephant for aviation". By that I don't mean we exploit the elephants for whatever political purpose. To the contrary, democratic peoples must ensure the greatest possible degree of an open, comprehensive civic education.

Yet it is IR theory that matters most, for here the realist revival has led to a huge proliferation of new labels. Perhaps the one downside is that it is now unclear what realism is as a theory and method, for what ideas it stands, and where it politically belongs. Conceptions of it range from it being an analytical theory (Donnelly 2019) to realism being a philosophical disposition (Gilpin 1986) or a *Weltanschauung* (Rosenthal 2002), to name but a few. To this day I have counted twenty different some such epistemological conceptions of foreign policy realism. To engage with realism means also that we see how the politics of realism is contested: different types of realism (I have found twenty-five in the literature)

lead to different policies. For example, where an aggressive realism (Snyder 1991) is about military power in structural anarchy, wilful realism (Williams 2005) is about relational possibilities in search of power and security, consent and legitimacy. Of all the realists John J. Mearsheimer, recipient of the American Political Science Association's 2020 James Madison Award for distinguished scholarly contributions to political studies, is the most prominent one, but there is more to the question of what makes foreign policy realism than meets the eye.

The point is that, given there has been such a great deal of interest in the history, theory, and politics of realism from Thucydides to our time, its nature is hugely contested. Yet while competing interpretations are essential to help get students, theorists, pundits, and practitioners to the core of realism, the problem is that some of these conceptions and types are so far apart from one another, some so nuanced, others so crude, that it is hard to state the meaning of realism, particularly in today's compartmentalization of political science where behaviouralist IR theory and normative political theory are on different intellectual planes. Realism may have escaped from its prison of Machiavellianism and *realpolitik* (Schuett and Hollingworth 2018), but still suffers at the hand of its commentators.

2. The second reason why the question, *What is political realism?* should be the centre of today's debates is that nowadays everyone either is seen as, or wants to be, a realist. By that I do not mean to imply that realism ought to be an exclusive club, borrowing the apt phrase from Daniel Drezner (2016). Rather I want to emphasise that realism goes way beyond the conventional canon comprising the likes of Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans J. Morgenthau as well as Kenneth N. Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and John J. Mearsheimer. At a moment where authoritarian populists threaten open societies, where certainties of power and diplomacy in international society are giving way to something as yet undefined, where realists make a perfect "bogyman" (Porter 2022), I would argue there has never been a more serious need for a calm and balanced relaunch of—a Classical inspired—realism. But who can do that?

Options, intellectual or political, are plentiful. The historian Robert Kagan (2020), a known neoconservative, calls himself a liberal realist these days and George W. Bush has been re-branded as a crusading realist (Colucci 2009). Barack Obama, who famously referred to Reinhold Niebuhr as his favourite philosopher, is seen as a progressive realist (Scheuerman 2011), by others as anything but a realist (Walt 2016). Even Donald J. Trump gets realist credentials, that of being a principled realist (Anton 2019). And Joe Biden, a most ardent institutionalist, is hailed a personality realist because of personal foreign policy style (Clemons 2016). At the darker side of politics the realist label is stuck on Xi Jinping and Wladimir Putin: the former is said to be a party-state realist (Tsang 2020), the latter a supreme realist (Friedman 2015). Recall also John J. Mearsheimer's (2005a)

legendary E.H. Carr Memorial Lecture delivered at Aberystwyth in the autumn of 2004 where he claimed that the British IR community has turned into one of pure idealism: which is questionable to say the least (Mearsheimer et al. 2005), but points to the fact that realism can be many things.

At this point I leave aside the difficulties of interpreting different realisms attached to different figures though I take it as clear enough that from within the broader context of open society ideals, few would recognize the majority of the above renderings as decent visions of realism or leading to good foreign policy. Here I want to reinforce the problem I noted in the previous part: Where everyone's a realist, then no one is—or we all are. It looks as if the definition of realism is now so broad that its meaning has become meaningless.

3. The third reason why we need to get realism right is that if we allow conventional views of realism to re-produce itself, the critical edge of a once critical mode of political thinking is lost. Consciously or inadvertently, we allow standard accounts of realism justifying what from the standpoint of open society realism is bad thinking, irresponsible foreign policy, and closed-minded ideology. Note here that I do not say Conservative-minded ideology is the worry; for I assume (in my sketch) that open society realism does not belong to any political party, as long as centre left/right parties are committed to the basic principle of being procedural pillars of democratic peoples and behave accordingly in their internal and external dealings (if it did belong to any political party *per se* it would be mere ideology, but again, it is not one). It is the myth of closed society, cloaked in the language of a Schmittian friend versus foe romanticism, that is dangerous.

Therefore, I am by and large agreed with Brands and Feaver (2017) when they criticize that while realism used to be intellectually rich and stood for prudence, internationalism, and world order, today's pseudo-realists (my term not theirs), above all Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, want to retreat from the world with a good conscience. The situation is bizarre. Following the lead of Ken Booth, people like Richard Ned Lebow, Michael C. Williams, and William E. Scheuerman, as well as Barry Buzan, Chris J. Brown, Anthony F. Lang, Richard Little and others have shown the subtleties of Classical realism—as opposed to neorealism, which at best is a “parody of science” (Lebow 2008, 26) and at worst, degenerates into Mearsheimer's vision of a 21st-century great power militarism that wrongly hopes to prevent another 1914-moment. Despite these efforts, neorealism gets all the attention. Today it is still commonplace to treat Classical realism and neorealism as like-minded, and to think of realism as the least complex IR theory (see Schimmelfennig 2017, 66), which is true for neorealism but not for the political thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans J. Morgenthau, John H. Herz, E.H. Carr, George F. Kennan, or Henry A. Kissinger.

To demystify realism then is, first, to emphasize its breadth and depth, and second, to state that real realism has at its core an inbuilt sanity, rooted as it is in its unparalleled longevity and sense of history (Hollingworth and Schuett 2018). One might say realism is content-neutral. It looks at each and every policy problem from the vantage point of all stakeholders relevant to the case; and whether it is power that matters, or ideas, or a combination thereof, and whether it is prudent at any given point in history to answer with brute force or meaningful diplomacy, or a combination thereof, is a function of real politics made by real people (or in Kelsenian parlance, by state organs), not a function of reified structures of an impersonal international anarchy (see Schuett 2021, 127–31). That, in turn, is what makes Classical realism broadly compatible with open society ideals.

### 3 The False Promise of Neorealism

With these three preliminary issues settled, I turn to a notion of foreign policy realism out of which I believe the political vision called open society realism may be developed. I do this in three steps.

First I argue the two dominant ways of conceptualizing realism are wrong. Then I go back to the 1950s and make two claims in a second step: I do this not because I am interested in the historiography of 20th-century realism. Rather I want to argue that how Classical realists thought of method and politics is a good starting point for working out (in this essay a sketch) what may be characteristic principles of an open society realism. There may be other roots we might draw upon, but since mid-20th-century realists were thoughtful about working towards global reform (Scheuerman 2011), they offer a decent idea of realism within the intellectual context of open society ideals. In a third step then, using the contours of an emerging open society realism, I reply to John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism: his is a false promise, methodologically and politically.

1. There are two dominant ways how to make sense of realism. One is traditionalism, the other: essentialism. Both are not false, but not correct either. Perhaps the need to present realism to students, scholars, pundits, and practitioners in digestible ways is unavoidable, for after all we talk about a 2000-year long history of realist political thought from East to West. Still, conventional accounts tend to obscure more than to clarify, particularly about the intellectual richness and subtleties of Classical proponents.

According to traditionalism, realism can be explained through historical reconstruction. Each one of the alleged realists old and new are understood to

be part of a coherent research programme dealing with the analysis of political behaviour as it is, not as it ought to be for that is the normative realm of the so-called idealistic jurists, theologians, and other Kantian moralists (Elman and Jensen 2014; Tellis 1996). It is said there is a straight line stretching back to Thucydides, the origin of realism as we know it, and that realism has, through the likes of Machiavelli and Hobbes, Morgenthau and Waltz, evolved into what is today's structural realism and its offshoot, neo-classical realism. Along with what are too convenient descriptions of realist political thinking comes the heavy-handed argument by today's advocates that everything written prior to Morton Kaplan (1957) and Waltz (1959, 1979) are merely philosophical-historical reflections rooted in speculative assumptions about human nature. What is more, while Classical realism is sidelined by today's neorealists on methodological grounds, it is used for political window dressing. Think of the Thucydides' Trap as regards Sino-American relations (Allison 2017) or Mearsheimer's (2005b) invocation of Morgenthau's opposition to Vietnam in order to bolster his argument why the Iraq War of 2003 was not in America's national interest. Here the problem is eclecticism.

According to what may be called a form of essentialism, realism is best explained not in terms of its evolution from political thought to Americanized IR theory (Waltz 1990) but by identifying a shared analytical core or essence. The idea is that you are what you think. Despite differences among realists about theory, methodology, and politics, it is said you are a realist if you think of foreign affairs as the competitive national interest realm of great powers and sovereign political communities who behave according to the dictates of power, anarchy, egoism, and nationalistic groupism (Wohlforth 2008, 132–34). Or in the formulation of Robert Gilpin (1986, 289–91), widely used as well: Realists share the Hobbesian notion that international relations is like being alone in an anarchic jungle; social reality is one of states and nationalism not individuals (liberalism) or classes (Marxism); human motivation follows the Thucydidean triptych of honour, greed, and fear. Everyone familiar with the standard literature will recognize some such canonical essentialist definitions. Here the problem with the essentialism account of realism is its superficiality over substance.

One way to rectify this twin problem of eclecticism and superficiality is by revisiting the forefathers who are said to be part of the canon, and in doing so, make the distinction between classical realism and structural realism (as in two respective chapters by Ned Lebow (2020) and John J. Mearsheimer (2020) in Dunne, Kurki, and Smith (2020)); between classical realism and post-classical realism (Schuett 2010); or focus entirely on what is conventionally thought of as Classical realism as the one real realism there is (as in Schuett and Hollingworth 2018). Whatever the degree of sharpness over the classical/structural

divide, once we dig deeper it becomes clear that to speak of a coherent realist tradition is misguided.

Here it suffices to recall that Thucydidean realism is about complexities and uncertainties in international life, not about laws of human and collective behaviour (Morley 2018). Likewise, taking another look at how Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli thought of human nature, structural determinism, and at whether prudence and morality are separate kinds of reasoning reveal the selectivity with which today's structural neorealists reach back to Classical realists to support their case against idealists; but as Erica Benner (2018, 11) writes with beautiful simplicity, "it is hard to distinguish structures from the people who create and sustain them" (a Freudian interpretation of Classical realists' methodological individualism is Schuett 2007, 2010: 23–54).

2. Another way to arrive at more sophistication about realism is to move from explaining it in traditionalist or essentialist terms to understanding it as realists have thought of what makes good realist political thinking. My aim is simple and (over)ambitious. I want to restate the Classical case made by a reform-minded generation of interwar, postwar, and early cold war theorists, intellectuals, and practitioners in the United States to re-envision the political thinking of an earlier form of realism as an intellectual source in the attempt to sketch, and eventually to work out in full, the position of an open society realism.

Here I can do no more than to focus on the twin notion of a real realism being a specific political method and a specific politics of liberalism. The background to the description I offer here is Nicholas Guilhot's (2011) volume about the seminal Rockefeller Foundation sponsored event in Washington, D.C. in 1954 where an astonishing set of people, among them Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann, George F. Kennan, Paul Nitze, and Hans J. Morgenthau, set out to formulate a coordinated programme to shield a realistic study of international relations from the methodological and political strictures of an increasingly influential American science of politics. This is not a history tale, because not only do today's Classical minded realists struggle with so-called rigour and parsimony, but so does the English School (Little 2003; Troy 2018; Williams 2015; with Buzan 1993 as a possible exception)—which has perhaps the most sophisticated view of world affairs (a matter for another time).

First, to say realism is a method means it is a specific way of doing political studies. Among the luminaries who met at the Rockefeller's two-days Conference on International Politics, it is above all Morgenthau who thinks of theory in terms of *theoria* in the Greek sense (Lang 2004; Troy 2018, 86): all political and international relations theory is both descriptive and normative. Like his fellow Classical realists, Morgenthau feared the rise and self-assuredness of an abstract behaviouralist scientism that claimed it can solve political problems



through manipulating the dealings of sovereign powers with scientific precision, particularly in an age of total destruction by nuclear weapons. Pseudoscientific theories (Morgenthau 1970, 252) are one thing, the reality of power struggles is quite another. The former lures us into a false sense of security in our thinking and acting, the latter is the forever greyish and tragic realm which requires analytical and predictive humility. We have little access to understanding the dynamics of the political other than through a sharp methodological individualism and a soft interpretive-hermeneutical approach: together, they help us study politics as something accidental, contingent, unpredictable yet consequential in terms of war or peace. As Morgenthau writes in his explosive 1946 book *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*: “Politics must be understood through reason, yet it is not in reason that it finds its model.” (10)

Second, to say realism is a form of liberal politics means that these Classical realists wanted not only to save political science from intellectual obscurity. Also they actually wanted to save political liberalism—albeit by other means. As Nicolas Guilhot (2011, 129) writes, their “battle over method was also a battle over politics”. To Morgenthau, who witnessed authoritarianism, fascism, and Nazism in Europe and who was lucky enough to make it out alive, the task of any real realism was three-fold: to bring analytical order and meaning to the forces that shape international relations through the concept of interest defined in terms of power; to be a critical safeguard against the intellectual fallacy that political conflict, violence, and war can be subdued or eradicated by either a Kantian liberal reason, a Kelsenian peace through law, a Marxist withering away of the state, or a Schmittian friend-foe extremism; and third, to counter nationalistic universalism, crude geopolitics, and authoritarian militarism and instead, against the backdrop of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to work unceasingly towards a post-statist world order, speaking truth to power whenever the ideals of democracy, liberalism, and peace are being threatened domestically or internationally. If this all sounds idealistic from the standpoint of today’s neorealism and like a far cry from Mearsheimer’s offensive realism, then because it is.

3. Before offering a more precise idea on how my sketch of an open society realism may be developed out of such Classical foreign policy realism (as I do in Section 4) we need to be sure that above realist political thinking is the most suitable we have. This means I must show that neorealism is incompatible with open society ideals. For two reasons I choose John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism as the one version of neorealism to which I apply critically the emerging contours of open society realism. First, it is by far the most prominent version and given his criticism of American/Nato/EU foreign policy over Ukraine and pessimism about Sino-American relations, the most controversial one. Second, I believe it is time to make the case that he is not a

realist, at least not in a way that satisfies the aspirations of democratic peoples for which realists such as Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Herz, and so many others, fought passionately.

For the sake of balance, I want to start by pointing out what I think we ought to appreciate about the political scientist John J. Mearsheimer. He writes good, communicates ideas clearly, develops novel theory, peers into the future, goes against conventional wisdoms, is not afraid of intellectual fights. Where stakes are high domestically and internationally and where, as I see it, the academic study of politics is too well-behaved for its own good and the growing theory-practice gap is alarming (Desch 2019; Nye 2008), Mearsheimer's thoughts give us a lot to think and re-think, just as it should be in the realm of science. Nevertheless, he is wrong about many things and in particular about the politics and methodology of what may be good, decent realism.

Here my focus is on his manufacturing an offensive world, repudiation of the political, and giving up on a liberal politics in terms of seeking a better world. Since Mearsheimer (2014, 2022) is, at the time of writing this essay, the recipient of criticism over his argument that the alleged triple failure of Nato enlargement, EU expansion, and active U.S. regime change policy has led to the 2014 crisis and eventually to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, I should like to make a couple of remarks. One is that this is all rather trivial. For if he means that foreign policy makers in the West should have expected Russia going to war once the Kremlin perceives its core national interests (however rational or irrational their logic may be to us) threatened, then that is an assessment that any observer with a deep understanding of Russian history, nationalism, and irrationalism (recall here most notably Mr. X's long telegram (Kennan 1946)) would share (similarly Lieven 2022). My other remark concerns what I try to show next: that while Mearsheimer's argument has a legitimate critical core, his project of offensive realism appears to be rejecting the whole notion of Western values—and open society values—in contemporary world politics: which is not a vision that is morally acceptable.

First, one might say that Mearsheimer is a wilful producer of trouble in the sense that he is manufacturing an offensive world from the intellectual standpoint of what I think is militaristic and crudely Schmittian. As an IR theorist operating on the third level of analysis, he thinks of foreign affairs in terms of an international system where great powers are the dominant actors and where there is no escaping from the fact that no matter who sits in the White House, in the Kremlin, or is General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, the structural twin certitude of anarchy and uncertainty over each other's intentions forces everyone to accrue maximum military power (Mearsheimer 2001). Yet when political reality does not conform to structural theory he moves to the second level, contradicting core analytical

tenets of offensive realism and the subordinate role it gives to domestic power play in explaining international relations. What we get to see is Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt's (2007) infamous argument that Washington's alleged inability to do a foreign policy of restraint through offshore balancing, their preferred strategic course, is caused by a powerful Israel lobby in U.S. politics that has hijacked the American foreign policy establishment. I leave it to readers to decide whether there is an antisemitic undertone to that line of argument (an altogether balanced view of Mearsheimer's project provides Kaplan 2012).

What is even worse—at least from the standpoint of a Classical realism and the idea of an open society realism in particular—is how Mearsheimer brings in his one single killer argument from the first level: human nature! Liberal internationalism, as is the main thrust of his 2018 book *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, can never succeed and our attempts for real global reform are doomed from the start because the forces of nationalism always win: they do so because nationalism “is based on a more accurate understanding of human nature” (Mearsheimer 2019). This is methodologically and politically dubious. For one he ridicules Morgenthau's so-called “human nature realism” because it is (at least according to this simplistic grasp of Morgenthau) “based on the simple assumption that states are led by human beings who have a ‘will to power’ hardwired into them at birth” (Mearsheimer 2001, 19), stressing over and over again how structural factors explain war and peace, not psychology or politics. Second, given that his few comments on human nature leave us actually with a broadly liberal Enlightenment notion that You and Me are reasonable social beings (Mearsheimer 2018, chap. 2; Schuett 2010, 72–7), it is unclear how on the basis of a rather idealistic human psychology, Mearsheimer's world is one of relentless power-security competition and is a forever dark place even for conventional realists' standards. We might ask then whether Mearsheimer seeks to make reality conform to theory and whether he manufactures an offensive world that does not derive from any level of empirical analysis, but looks like a function of his ideology.

Second, what is worrying about Mearsheimer's analytical thoughts and policy recommendations about war and peace is his repudiation of the political. Whereas to Classical realists it is all about the political and foreign politics understood in terms of professional diplomacy, we find little if not nothing of that kind in Mearsheimer's world of black boxes and billiard balls. A quick juxtaposition suffices. Whereas Morgenthau derives the political from human and collective psychology as starting point for understanding the forces of world politics, the problem with Mearsheimer is his over-reliance on structural causation on an alleged impersonal systems level: this not only reifies Westphalian sovereignty, which is a historical product of diplomacy not a naturalistic one

(nothing is in politics), but de-politicizes the realms of the state and international relations, which are, from first to last, political and therefore, contingent and malleable. Whereas Morgenthau's approach is carefully interpretive-hermeneutical, historical, and reflexive, in Mearsheimer's hard-edged offensive realism there is a noticeable selection bias: the world may be greyish but is not only made up of excessively aggressive powers such as Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and imperial Japan that we saw in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Also, whereas Morgenthau knew that it is the political element or human experience in all social affairs that sets limits to what we can know, rather than heeding the warning of predictive humility Mearsheimer's de-politicized determinism make us believe that IR theory can predict the future—of course it cannot, which is perhaps the one most important methodological vice that every Classical realist in the history of political thought has sought to warn his or her contemporaries about: we are humans.

Therefore, third, Mearsheimer's offensive realism gives much suspicion of an ideological repudiation of Western liberal politics, and along with that, of being fundamentally at odds with open society values. Recall here what the leading Classical realists at the time huddled together at the 1954 Rockefeller conference were aiming at methodologically and politically: to inspire on American soil a realistic study of international relations that is intellectually equipped to save political liberalism at home and abroad, for the world just survived fascist Europa and Nazi Germany and there was the looming threat of Communism in the East. Sure, one way to read Morgenthau is to focus on his critique of interwar legalism and moralism, yet another way—not mutually exclusive but part of the same story—is to emphasize why that was: because he feared that we repeat the mistakes that led to two world wars and that this time, in the nuclear age, democracy might not survive another one. Indeed, Morgenthau's foreign policy realism is part of his wider practical political philosophy that aimed at countering anti-democratic extremism, populism and authoritarianism in all its forms and disguises (Reichwein 2021; Schuett 2021; Troy 2018, 89).

Compared to such a normative liberal democratic core, what Mearsheimer advocates under the awkward term 'live-and-let-live liberalism' (2021) seems morally bankrupt. In the third part of his Henry L. Stimson Lectures on World Affairs delivered at Yale in the autumn of 2017, he talks openly about what his vision of an American foreign policy of restraint would entail should U.S. foreign policy take the analytical and prescriptive elements of offensive realism at their word: As regards Europe, Washington should no longer be "interested in preserving the peace . . . just worried about a dominant power in the region" and correspondingly: "if someone wants to create a Fascist state: Why should we

care?” This is not something we could possibly deduce from each of the Classical realisms represented by Morgenthau, Lippmann, Kennan and Niebuhr. As Morgenthau (1948, 134) says, “It is a dangerous thing to be a Machiavelli. It is a disastrous thing to be a Machiavelli without *virtù*.”

## 4 More Comments on Open Society Realism

Recall from Section 2, part 3, that I stated realism is content-neutral. And yet in Section 3 I argued that Classical foreign policy realism is both method and politics. Is this not contradictory? And if that can be solved, how does it relate to the political vision that I call open society realism?

In this final section, a concluding reflection how this essay’s sketch of an open society realism may be turned into a fully developed practical ethics of politics, I proceed along three themes. First, I don’t think neorealism is fit, neither morally nor politically, to offer us any decent future foreign policy guidance. Second, reaching back to Kelsen’s concept of the state and to Morgenthau’s view of power and interests, helps us avoid the dangers of naturalistic pessimism and historical optimism. And more: any form of open society realism recognizes that real people do the good, bad, and ugly in real politics: therefore, more than ever, professional and calm, balanced and clear statesmanship matters. Three, coming full circle, where You and Me will draw the line what is morally acceptable in foreign policy and what is not, is not a function of Nature, Reason, God, causality, or any telos, but in the end has to be a political result—not of a Schmittian kind though.

1. For the sake of balance I stated (in Section 3, part 3) that Mearsheimer’s (2001, 2011, 2018) work in political science and IR theory deserves praise and I would argue the same goes for Walt’s (1987, 2018) balance of threat theory and his speaking truth to power, that is, critique of American foreign policy. At the same time, I fear (and I hope I am wrong) they are headed down a path of scholarly self-destruction. Forever the cool-headed analytical mind and a most sophisticated realist that the late Robert Jervis (2020) was, he hits the nail on its head: It is one thing to say that since the end of the Cold War, Washington has made one foreign policy mistake after another, it is quite another thing to make such a claim without the support of standard social scientific methods of verification: most notably, Mearsheimer (2018) and Walt (2018), who in essence react in different ways against what they think is a naive and dangerous U.S. foreign policy liberalism of global democracy promotion, lack any counterfactuals as to possible ideological origins of Putin’s geopolitical revanchism and other realistic scenarios as regards Afghanistan and Iraq (also Lebow 2022, 128–32).

The main problem is not always or necessarily what they say, but how they make their case and frame the debate. Admittedly, particularly when compared to Jervis' above line of a critical yet gentle reasoning, my view of today's self-styled champions of hard-nosed foreign policy realism is sharper if not also—note—polemical because it is yet also a political battle. From where I stand I am concerned these realists throw the baby out with the bathwater as they seem to get caught up in a vicious circle: Every counter-criticism that their worldview may be too clinical given human diversity (Linklater 2020); that they may be too certain that there is only one strategic reality out there given civilizational diversity (Buzan and Acharya 2022); that they may be too self-assured about where international relations are headed given theoretical diversity (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2020); that they may be too fixed on the notion that government buildings in the United States and EU and Nato offices in Brussels are staffed with people from the liberal Blob given bureaucratic diversity (Horwitz 2021); all that is taken as proof that in IR theory and the practice of International politics, it is like the realists against the rest: in the famous words of Robert Gilpin (1996), “No one loves a political realist”, or as Mearsheimer (quoted in Kaplan 2012) puts it: “people hate people like me”—for what it is worth here: I don't.

Yet there is a real danger that comes with that kind of friend/foe rhetoric. It is an “academic realism gone astray” (Brands and Feaver 2017) but there is more to the breaking away of today's retrenchment realists from the Classical realists advocating global engagement that has been triggered by the end of the Cold War. It is that the former—given what they say and write, put in their blog posts and tweets—withdraw deeper and deeper into a belief system that appears to be an awkward mix of a depoliticized isolationism, neo-militarism, and nationalism, adopting a quasi-conspiratorial tone about a kind of realism that has become so dangerously unrealistic that they would not even listen to Henry Kissinger: “No serious realist should claim that power is its own justification” (2005), or even more forcefully: “There is no realism without an element of idealism. The idea of abstract power only exists for academics, not in real life.” (2009)

I take this to mean that an open society realism must be able to say how we might work toward the ideal while living with the real.

2. Recall that I stated in my introductory remarks that in this essay I offer a sketch of what an open society realism might look like once fully developed but that I can do no more here than focus on some basic methodological and political aspects by revisiting Classical realism as a potentially rich source out of which a new and as yet undefined open society realism may emerge. I said also that by open societies I mean democratic peoples committed to the rule of law and aspiring to be morally decent, and that by a content-neutral political realism I mean a practical ethics of diplomacy where power struggles and questions over interests

and legitimacy are in a constant tension. Therefore, we must ask, how—in terms of methodology and politics—might we arrive at open society realism? Here we may reach back to how Classical realists had at the core a concept of the political that was all about power and at one and the same time, all about human agency.

To say that Classical foreign policy realism is content-neutral (as opposed to neorealism which seems to have everything from empirical analysis to prescriptive policy inbuilt in its structuralist logic) does not mean it is morally arbitrary, only that it is ‘political not metaphysical’ (as in Rawls 1985). By that, in turn, I mean that open society realism has to have at its roots a conception of the state that is realistic and normative. Realistic not in the sense of anthropomorphizing the state as factual *Machtstaat* (see Grzybowski and Koskenniemi 2015, 27) or conscious being (as in Lerner 2021), but rather to mean that the political and the state are two sides of the same Kelsenian coin: that of a human nature realism which has it that You and Me are such that for a peaceful living together we need the coercive elements of power and law respectively. The state, however, is from first to last normative where state and law are one and the same: the state wills what positive law wills (Schuett 2021, 73–79). This may seem trivial but it is not. For where today’s academic IR realists think of states as endogenously driven billiard balls or black boxes, they lack the methodological means—and political sensitivity—to contemplate the moral meaning of states: that is, the myriad moral meanings of statehood to which the political gives rise.

Classical realists knew better and were in that sense idealists because by and large they had a Kelsenian understanding of law and state. Surely as foreign policy realists they were sceptical to say the least of Kelsen’s (1944) thesis of a peace through law, but in terms of state theory they resided with Kelsen (not with the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt). For example, E.H. Carr (1939, 189) noted state personification “is a fiction”. Niebuhr (1932, 54) spoke of it as “an abstraction”. And in *Politics among Nations* Morgenthau (1948/1967, 97), after all Kelsen’s Habilitand in 1930s Geneva, wrote for good reasons that the state “is obviously not an empirical thing” and really “the legal order of society” (489). Neither from Nature, Reason, or God—or any given structure of what is an historical international system or society of states or world society—can be deduced, at least not from the standpoint of political liberalism or open society, what a state is to do, let alone ought to do in foreign politics. When I said Classical realists were content-neutral then it was another way of saying that there is nothing, neither methodologically and politically, that would pre-determine—as natural-law theories or the Schmittians would have us believe—what states would want to will or would predestine the substantive actions of state organs when faced with real or imagined challenges: Nothing is ever over in international politics, as George Friedman (2015: 258) warns us with urgency and care, and yet to that we must add: Nothing is inevitable

and foreign policy, like all politics in general, is the normative realm of choices: to be sure, political choices under serious constraints but choices nonetheless.

From such a Kelsenian legal positivism's theory of law and state, flows directly a Classical realist's fixation on the concept of national interest, albeit with a morally decent and politically progressive twist to it. That I think is most clearly articulated, methodologically, in Morgenthau's formulation of political realism. On the level of theory he introduces the concept of interest defined in terms of power as a means to discriminate between political facts in international relations from non-political ones. What he really does though is give us a tool to discriminate between good and decent statesmanship and its opposite. Just as Kelsen's focus is the concept of the norm and legal validity, Morgenthau (1951, 242) appears to be obsessed with the concept of the national interest and tells students, scholars, pundits, and practitioners of foreign policy and global politics alike:

And, above all, remember always that it is not only a political necessity but also a moral duty for a nation to follow in its dealing with other nations but one guiding star, one standard for thought, one rule for action: The National Interest.

Yet just as Kelsen's norm is empty because its content is the product of the procedural politics of law-making in any given political community, thus is Morgenthau's formalistic notion of the national interest.

With that Morgenthau is hard on us because forever the *political* realist, not a structural one, his realist theory of international politics does not—and cannot and must not (it is a political theory not Schmittian political theology)—tell us what the national interest is, ought, or can be. Here he seems to be following Kelsenian positivist methodology. There is no such thing as a self-evident or timeless *raison d'État* or a genetic and objective verifiable national interest of a state. Rather what a state wants is what the representatives of its government want, which is the “result of a highly subjective value judgment” (Kelsen 1957, 48). The national interest is a methodological fiction understood in terms of power, where the political context of any given polity at any given point in history makes for this or that set of subjective list of interests that the Schmittians and other ideologues want us to believe are eternal or fixed, or in today's language, are ‘alternativlos’—to be sure, in all political life nothing is without alternative. Although a most important point all too often neglected, Morgenthau (1948, 9) is clear enough:

The goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.

And to make sure that we do not confuse methodology with politics, he adds at once:



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. (1948, 8)

Compared to the inbuilt complacency, statism, and pessimism of most of today's structural realists as regards change in global affairs, open society realism can tap a rich vein of ambitiously reformist aims and proposals that are hidden in Classical realist political thinking—albeit within limits.

These limits are three. The first one concerns human nature, as any open society realism has to make sure it is rooted on firm anthropological premises if it is to be taken seriously as realist political and IR theory. Although it seems that Classical realists like Morgenthau and Niebuhr on the one hand, and open society 'idealists' such as Karl Popper and George Soros (2019) on the other, are on different planes, a second look suggests the former two are not as pessimistic as is conventionally believed and that the latter are not naive when it comes to human fallibility (Norman 1993; Stokes 1995), which I believe is a core principle of open society realism because it speaks to democratic peoples' skepticism of an ultimate Truth. The second challenge is to square a Classical realist conception of political studies method with that of a Popperian unity of science approach. Famously—and not entirely without any justification—Popper (1963, 458) accuses Morgenthau's political realism as that of a disappointed romantic who goes too far in his criticism of rationalism and scientism as a means to bring power under control (see Jütersonke 2010, 171–72). But then, within open society theory there is George Soros's (2013) position that may function as a bridge. What he calls the human uncertainty principle, which is recognizing both human fallibility and human reflexivity in all social life, means, contra Popper, two things: first, to claim for the social sciences a flexible methodological space distinguished from natural science in terms of rigour and parsimony and, second, to claim for social and political theory one extra purpose: not only to understand reality, but to change it.

This concerns a third theme (among others) that needs to be worked out in greater detail, but which I think can be done also: the notion of decent statesmanship. Again, that is not as trivial as it may seem, because it was neorealism's adoption of a structural systems theory perspective on the third level of analysis that claimed there is little need to talk about the fuzzy realm where politics, bureaucracy, and civil society intersect as regards what's in the national interest and how to pursue it, while in fact Classical realist political thinking has been from first to last all about the nature and ethics of foreign policy decision making and executing it in prudent ways (Bessner and Guilhot 2015; Kissinger 2022; Zhang 2017). At least at first sight surely the idea of open society, where the real

lives of real human beings are key, seems to have little in common with foreign policy realism which (it is said) is about the interests of states. But then, there is something peculiarly realistic about both positions in analytical and moral terms. It is acknowledging that (to paraphrase the early Freudian realist Walter Lippmann (1915, 60) here) primitive feelings, the house, the street, the hills, the loves and hates, pleasure and pain, the narcissism and inferiority, the early injustices and other frustrations etc. are the real stuff out of which social life, and hence all political and international life, is made (see Schuett 2010, 38–43). Only recently, Ken Booth (2019, 374) made a similar point:

Our own situatedness in a middle-class globalized profession tends to distance academic IR from the daily lives of the vast majority of the world's population, for whom the old realities are the only ones they know: states and their interests, nations and nationalism, borders and their power, capitalism and its demon genius.

#### 4.1 To This We Must Add—Violence And War

Yet it is not states that do violence and war to one another, it is human beings that do that to other human beings (Innes 2022). They may be state organs to be sure (at least broadly understood), but the decision to fight and the fighting itself—for whatever reasons—is done by people like You and Me. And thus the real question is not one of anarchical structures or billiard balls but of good, bad, or ugly state(wo)manship. In the age of a 24/7 social media illusion of gamifying social and political reality, it may sound dated to refer to statesman as the agents of war and peace, but they are. One might say that Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* is a nearly 600 pages long explanation why, and how, a statesman “must lead” (548). Not even the realistic utopia of Rawls' *Law of Peoples* (1999) can escape to not believe in the ideal of the good statesman: for they are the ones who “guide their people in turbulent and dangerous times” (97). How statesmen guide, and to where, is as contingent, unpredictable, and consequential as it has always been. But whatever aims and means statesmen pursue in their diplomatic dealings with one another, to either do this or that (out of a range of possible options) has been their political choices and for that they must bear not only political responsibility but also a moral one. Presidents, prime ministers and other government officials may lament the constraints and tragedies of politics and international relations as often as they like. Nothing will take away from them the burden for confronting themselves and You and Me with what may be the most realistic way of stating what the real problem is: it is not that there were given international structures that allegedly force our hands. It is more simple than that and yet all the more complicated. As George Soros (2003) said it long ago: “in the end, open society will not survive unless those who live in it believe in it”—and act accordingly.

3. Looking back at the course of my claim that we bring back in Classical *political* realism (as opposed to structural realism) for both methodological and political reasons, let's recall that besides sketching how the political vision that I call open society realism may be developed from such Classical view, a further aim of this essay was to re-energise our political thinking about what it means to be an open society realist in a new era of authoritarian populism and great power competition: Where might You and Me reasonably draw the line with what kind of foreign policy realism we can live (or cannot tolerate) as an open society?

Here the answer must necessarily be disappointing—or liberating. For one I did not attempt to present such a line of reasoning. And what's more, second, from where I stand (at least at this very moment) my doubts are whether this question can be answered *a priori*. Sure there are the sharp limits that a legal monism in terms of the rule of law, domestic and international, provides us with; and yet questions of legitimacy at home and abroad, economic interests and social justice, human survival in the nuclear age and the time of climate change catastrophe, what is shared (or not shared) morality in international or world order, are much harder and so messy that I fear an open society *realist* would be inclined to say that they are to be answered in the political context in which they are taking place. Which is perhaps a gentler way of saying that they are political questions, and that therefore, cannot have any fixed meaning or *a priori* answer. As the iconic British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1859) once said: "Finality is not the language of politics". And thus, for an open society not to be headed down the path towards closed society—and there's only a thin line between the two—we must never give in to the temptation to retreat from this world (in a real and figurative sense) and into the comfort zones of an absolute metaphysical truth or an absolute justice that natural-law theories and Schmittian political theology claim to possess, even not—or particularly not—in the fight against evil.

Yet what this leaves us with in the open society, no more but no less, is a sound moral conviction that foreign policy realism is rooted in what Morgenthau (1946, 13) calls a pluralistic conception of You and Me which translates into a style of political thinking where we hold the statesman accountable that he or she does act neither as "beast", nor as "fool" or a "saint". Put differently, following Niebuhr (1932, 30), a realist accepts that world politics, like all politics, is "where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises". If today's academic IR neorealists think that's too fuzzy a notion of foreign policy realism, and that scientific parsimony and rigour is a more important concern than the subtleties of human existence, one may hear the generations of earlier realists spinning in their graves—just like generations of humans who have perished not

because of an over-stretch of power but because too many bystanders have been hiding behind the walls of ‘national’ interests.

If neorealism wins the battle of ideas within contemporary realism it may be the (premature) end of an open society realism, we so badly need to understand the political problems—and manage the moral challenges—that humanity is facing.

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