

The Impact of Identity and Historical Context on the Thought of Hans J. Morgenthau.

Written by Sebastiano Sali

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SEBASTIANO SALI, MAY 28 2010

In the field of International Relations (IR), and especially in the subject of Realism and world politics, the figure of Hans Joachim Morgenthau remains among the founding fathers, if not *The* founding father, of such a school. Even though for some decades Morgenthau's work has been put aside, combined with the increasing importance of the Neorealist school of thought began by Kenneth Waltz, it is now regaining renewed attentions by few scholars^[1].

However, this new interest consistently differs from the classical path of inquiry which has characterised the study of Morgenthau's writings. In fact most of the commentators that animated the debate about his thoughts, especially in the forties and fifties, were scarcely interested in his *German works*^[2]. Instead, many elements of his post-war realist doctrine find their seeds in his pre-war thinking^[3].

Along this line, the most recent studies have attempted to highlight previously understudied topics, like Morgenthau's relationship with the work of important German thinkers like Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Nietzsche; the impact of the social background of Weimarian Germany and of the Nazi regime; the role of his Jewish-German identity in Europe and in America^[4].

Starting along this path of investigation, this paper would like to emphasise the importance of Morgenthau's German-Jewish identity against the particular social background in which he began to develop his thought. In this way, without going too deep in analysing Morgenthau's masterpieces, this paper would like to disclose the impact of these factors on the development and evolution of some important elements of Morgenthau's work.

In the first section I will outline which characteristics of Morgenthau's biography allow the paper to stress some peculiar aspects of his private life which had important outcomes on his academic life. In the second paragraph I will briefly introduce the notion of *Bildung* and the Social Identity Theory (SIT), in order to explain how the individual social identity interact with the group social identity and with what kind of consequences. In the third paragraph I will illustrate some major thoughts, concepts and arguments of Morgenthau's works that clearly show the influence of his identity and the relations of such an identity with different historical social contexts.

1. A Tormented Wandering Life

Hans J. Morgenthau was born in 1904 in Wilhelminian Germany, the only child of a Jewish family from Coburg. His childhood was characterised by loneliness and a very authoritative father, who had "*a destructive influence on me*"^[5] as Morgenthau himself admitted. The World War I was the most important event of his early years. He experienced the excitement and the faith in the *just cause* of Germany, as well as pains and shortage of food. Episodes that, as he affirmed, made him mature once and for all^[6]. By 1922 he also started to experience the anti-Semitism that was increasingly spreading across Germany and especially in Coburg where Hitler's success came earlier and stronger than in many other parts of the country^[7].

In 1923 he began his academic journey, that would finish only twenty years later in Chicago, at the faculty of Philosophy in Frankfurt. It was such a disappointing experience that it took him to the faculty of Law at Munich

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University. There, he was introduced to the positivist principles of international law, previously set by Hans Kelsen and embodied in those years by the Weimar Republic. However he also attended lessons of other important scholars, like Wolfflin and Rothenbuchers about Max Weber's political thought and by the Realpolitik historian Oncken. His experience as a Law student however was never enthusiastic; nor was his legal internship after which he even defined jurisprudence as a "superficial" and "ephemeral field of knowledge"^[8].

Once he discovered his vocation for the academia, he was not however able to find a place in any of the German universities because of the economic crisis and of his Jewishness. So his journey restarted towards Geneva, where he was welcome by the anti-Semitic feelings of some of his colleagues; but things were going to get worse. Albeit he succeeded in submitting his *Habilitation*, by 1933 the new German legislation made it clear that there would be no future in Germany for him. Then he was again a traveller, this time to Madrid. That happy period, even though not a very productive one academically speaking, had however a short life. In fact in 1936 Spain's situation deteriorated quickly. Between the fall of that year and the summer of 1937 he and his wife travelled around Europe without money and belongings, until they sailed from the Netherlands to the US^[9].

However his life in America also had an unhappy beginning. He had to wait until 1939 to find a job, in Kansas City, where working conditions were still very poor. His heavy teaching duties at the Liberal Arts College and at Law School did not allow him to develop his primary academic interests. The Pearl Harbor attack persuaded him to look for another job "where I can be of a greater service to the community"^[10]. Finally, in 1943 he was offered a place at the University of Chicago where he settled down once and for all.

Without downplaying the importance of the American background, this paper would like to place greater stress on Morgenthau's early formation. Therefore the next paragraphs will show how the pre-US years affected some of the most important topics of his works, and how, in some cases, such influences have been hidden by Morgenthau himself^[11].

2. The Importance of the Social-Historical Background

Hans J. Morgenthau lived and worked at the core of one of the most troubled but interesting periods of human history. Probably the most stimulating setting for a scholar of world politics.

As suggested by A. J. H. Murray, the first step to approaching Morgenthau's thought is to situate it in its historical context, in order to understand it as part of the academic tradition to which it belongs^[12]. Morgenthau himself states that to understand human conduct, it must be placed into its cultural, historical and social context^[13]. This is even more fundamental in his case, because the two major discrepancies that emerged during the evolution of his thought are very much related to different contexts, thus denoting their impact on his work.

First, the shift from the nihilist vision of the role of human nature and its lust for power to stressing the impact of modern political and technological realities on world politics. That is a concept affected by the European experience of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime and World War II imbued with the German academic tradition, that was no longer compatible with the traditional American liberal optimism, in the stronghold of democracy, in a new foreign policy superpower in search for a meaning for its position^[14].

Secondly, the so-called Thermonuclear Dilemma. In the early post-war years Morgenthau suggested to restore balanced diplomacy by giving up military objectives, in order to avoid another total war. On the contrary by 1950^[15] he called for American rearmament and even for limited strategic nuclear war^[16]; but the evolution of the nuclear age into the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) situation, obliged him to revise once again his thought^[17]. That is, Morgenthau's willingness to shape his individual social identity into the new society he was living in, by providing an answer for the foreign policy role the entire social group was looking for, was no longer compatible with the MAD world evolution.

As Robbie Shilliam points out, it is fundamental to contextualise any political thought in what he called the "international dimension of knowledge production". That is to re-imagine the context as "delineated in and through a

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specific society's interaction with other, differentially developed societies"^[18]. In this way, Shilliam introduces the concept of *Bildung*^[19], a heuristic means that derives directly from the German tradition, especially widespread among Jewish Germans^[20].

Sven Erik Nordenbo defines *Bildung* as the process of development of a student (in Morgenthau's case a scholar) in agreement with a model image, that in educational terms represents an ideal ambition. Therefore, according to such a definition, while on one hand there are general and universal meanings to understand the relations between the self and the world, on the other hand there does exist a particular way in which people behave in their relations with the world. That leads, as exemplified by the evolution of Morgenthau's thought, to the shift from subjective individual belief to objective public knowledge, through the *Bildung* process^[21].

This paper merges the previous ideas into the Social Identity Theory (SIT). The SIT, instead of focusing on the individual into the social group, does the opposite: it explains how the social group affects the definition of the individual's social identity. Moreover SIT suggests that individuals look for positive self-identity by identifying themselves with a group and by positive comparison with other out-groups^[22].

Therefore the next paragraph will sketch out how some of the major topics of his works have been influenced by cultural, historical and social settings.

3. Evidence of Hidden Influences

The years as a student of Law in Munich represent the first stage of Morgenthau's *Bildung* process. In fact, as he himself states, he needed opponents to better develop his thought; and in Munich he found them. The most prominent Law scholars were, at that time, Paul Laband, Georg Jellinek and Hans Kelsen, champions of the positivist school. The young Morgenthau developed a critical stance towards them: '*Laban abandoned political problems to the politician*', Jellinek was not able to suggest '*solutions that matched political reality*' and '*Kelsen's method*' withdraws '*from the reality*'^[23]. On Morgenthau's opinion instead the stake was a very real and political one: the practical interpretation of the Weimarian constitution^[24]. Thus, in general his background as a German lawyer induced him to talk about the distribution of power, rather than the interpretation of law^[25].

The disappointment about Kelsen's *Pure Theory*^[26] lead Morgenthau closer to the representatives of a new school, such as Erich Kaufmann, Gustav Smend and mostly Carl Schmitt. In particular, Morgenthau appreciated that at the core of the schmittian theory there was a concept defined as political, that detached politics from any legal justification and defined it as a struggle for power^[27]. Schmitt's "The Concept of the Political" had such an influence on Morgenthau that afterwards he openly affirmed that his first book was an attempt to deal with Schmitt's argument^[28]. However Morgenthau did not totally agree with the schmittian theory and then developed his own concept of the political^[29], in this way marking his detachment from the German alternative mainstream.

Moreover the German and world political evolutions supported his ideas about international law and politics as a struggle of and for power. The Republic of Weimar and its idealistic democracy failed, giving way to the Nazi regime, feeding Morgenthau's hostility towards forms of universal claims. Ideological crusades showed all their weakness^[30]. The democratic system was not able to prevent public opinion falling in love with Hitler's character. Therefore Morgenthau criticises the positivist doctrine because it did not pay enough attention to the psychological and sociological aspects of society, underestimating the importance of human action^[31]. The Weberian influence of charismatic power, shows here all its effect on Morgenthau's thought, by presenting a political leader overthrowing an entire political system acting outside and against the rules of the system itself^[32].

International developments were no more comforting. Treaty of Versailles' territorial provisions were gradually invalidated, as in the case of German-Polish frontier. Covenant's articles of the League of Nations were continually violated without effective sanctions, eventually leading to a new war^[33]. Morgenthau's scepticism about the League of Nations, and especially its ability to prevent states to waging war, was even reinforced firstly by the Manchurian crisis (1931)^[34], and by Italy's military invasion of Abyssinia (1935/36) afterwards^[35].

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After his move to America and World War II, Morgenthau carried out his idea of a political theory that could materially affect foreign policy. The shift to his normative goal is openly celebrated in his 1952 article, where he defines the national interest as the “*physical, political and cultural identity*” of the nation^[36]. Such a definition enlightens once again the importance of the context. Morgenthau has for a long time considered himself a man without a country, a stranger among his countrymen, as his tormented life demonstrates^[37]. The US was now his country and he therefore felt the necessity to be accepted by it. According to the SIT, his attempt to shape US national interest represents his willingness to substitute his original social group with the new one^[38]. As Americans did not have, at that time, a good opinion of Germany and its citizens, he needed to be identified as part of an American in-group. Thus, nothing was better than being the shaper of the group’s own national interest.

However such behaviour was only the outcome of a long process that, as suggested by the notion of *Bildung*, began well before his move to America. The process of adaptation to a new group in fact, only succeeds if there is no interference by out-group factors^[39]. Nietzsche’s influence on Morgenthau is the best example of this. As has been noted, in all the works and comments about Morgenthau, there are no mentions of Nietzsche’s influence, partially because Morgenthau himself wanted to cover his tracks. This is very clear in “Scientific Man vs. Power Politics”^[40], where even when dealing with the condition of human nature, Morgenthau did not make any mention of Nietzsche’s thought. The same thing happens in his masterpiece “Politics Among Nations”^[41], where Nietzsche is named only in the sixth edition and just once, together with Hitler and Mussolini. Nietzsche’s fellows of quotation, explains well why his impact has been deliberately hidden by Morgenthau: he was not seen as a positive character. Contrary to Weber, Nietzsche did not possess the intellectual and moral qualities universally acknowledged, especially outside the universities^[42]. To openly state an intellectual relation with him would have been a disturbing external element to his *Bildung* process into his new group-society.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the influence of cultural, historical and social contexts on Morgenthau’s thought. In his case, the private life experience has strongly affected the academic one.

The first American work of Morgenthau, “Scientific Man vs. Power Politics”, has been defined as an open critique to “*liberal and Marxian optimism*”^[43]. This paper has suggested that the roots of that critique are very clearly located in the pre-war German-Jewish context of its author. The central theme of the tragic dimension of life can be easily retraced to the tragic experience of Jews during the Nazi period, the scepticism towards idealism and positivism to the sad end of the Weimar Republic and the mistrust to international law to the powerlessness of the League of Nations. Thus, it can be said that Scientific Man, was born in Frankfurt, in Munich, in Geneva, in Madrid and only eventually completed in the US.

So was his second work, “Politics Among Nations”. Once he collected all his pre-war German thought into a book, Morgenthau was then free to develop them from another perspective, another country, another society. In “Politics Among Nations”, he abandons the German-Jewish pessimism, in favour of an attempt to shape US foreign policy^[44]. Such a shift can be attributed to his increased willingness to be “*of a greater service to the community*”^[45], that reached its apogee in 1952, so that he would be accepted by his new social group.

Therefore, to fully understand and appreciate Morgenthau’s theory, its developments and its contradictions, it is of fundamental importance to deeply analyse his private and academic life well before the writing of his most important works. In Morgenthau’s case, probably more than in any other realist thinker, the role of identity and of cultural, historical and social settings, represents the very key to read his writings.

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^[45] See footnote 10, p. 4.

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Written by: Sebastiano Sali
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Campbell Craig
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