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# Best Friends Forever? Classical Realism and Critical Theory

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FELIX RÖSCH, JUN 20 2014

In *The Realist Case for Global Reform*, William Scheuerman (2011) introduces his readers to Ernie, a fictitious student writing an exam on IR theories. Ernie is asked to provide a concise definition of realism and like many students before and after him, Ernie writes an essay in which the terms nation-state, war, and anarchy feature prominently. Although Ernie is a fictitious character, I am sure that many scholars teaching IR theory are regularly confronted with similar student essays conflating neo-realism with classical realism. This leaves the reader with a face that resembles *Sesame Street*'s Bert; once again losing the battle with textbooks which still perpetuate such a reading. Yet, both approaches stem from different intellectual contexts. Whereas neo-realism is an American positivistic science, classical realism largely originates out of discourses that dominated the Central European humanities during the interwar period. Consequently, we should not be deluded anymore by the mutual usage of the term "realism". Rather, IR scholars should seek to rethink links between classical realism and other modes of thought that are suspicious about universalistic promises of positivistic science and that aim to transcend dichotomic, sectarian, and essentialist thinking that characterizes much of the discipline to date. The relation between classical realism and critical theory is one such link, and a Leverhulme Trust research network, headed by Hartmut Behr, is currently further investigating it with the intention to contribute to a rejuvenation of IR discourses on some of the most pressing world political problems of our time.

The intellectual connection between classical realism and critical theory should not be surprising if we consider their historical and geographical proximity. Hans Morgenthau, one of the leading classical realists, finished his doctoral thesis at the University of Frankfurt during the late 1920s, when the Institute for Social Research was equally rising under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, who, together with Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, turned the Institute into the center for critical theory. In Frankfurt, Morgenthau was working as a clerk for the prominent Weimar labor lawyer Hugo Sinzheimer; as did Ernst Fraenkel and Franz Neumann. As we know from Morgenthau's biographer, Christoph Frei (2001), Sinzheimer introduced him to people at the Institute and he equally got to know scholars like Paul Tillich and Karl Mannheim. Morgenthau, however, was not the only classical realist who had personal connections with critical theorists and/or scholars who are frequently used by critical theorists in their work. John Herz, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, and Arnold Wolfers similarly engaged in their work with luminaries of Weimar humanities, such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and Hans Kelsen.

Experiencing the downfall of the Weimar Republic personally, classical realists, then at the beginning of their academic career, particularly aimed to contribute to the discourse on the political that dominated much of Weimar humanities (for a discussion, see Gangl 2009). Morgenthau, for example, wrote several published and unpublished studies on the political, as he had realized in his doctoral thesis that societies are riddled with problems for which there are no legal solutions, but which need to be publicly debated if one of the -isms is not to silence any critical voice (Morgenthau 1929, 1933, 1934-35). However, this does not mean that Morgenthau would have endorsed the most well-known conceptualization of the political of that era: Schmitt's distinction between friend and enemy. For Morgenthau, agreement or disagreement about a subject matter was irrelevant. Rather, what mattered was that the political is conceptualized as a collective affair in which people have the possibility to temporarily come together to pursue their interests. Hence, people need to be able and to be encouraged by other society members to express their interests. The political was, therefore, for Morgenthau (2012, pp.126; for other realists, see Owens, 2005) like

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for other classical realists, a speech-act process: a discussion through which interests are gradually aligned in order to formulate a common good.

This personal and intellectual proximity encouraged Scheuerman (2009) to further investigate if Morgenthau and classical realists at large held concrete intellectual connections to critical theory. The tenability of such links, however, was recently contested by Daniel Levine's (2012) reading of Morgenthau, which urged the epistemological dissonance between classical realism and critical theory. Levine argues that, even though Morgenthau spoke in favor of self-reflexivity, particularly, but not exclusively, his later works are characterized by a lack of it. However, Levine's claim of lacking self-reflexivity can only be made if we agree with him that Morgenthau aimed to construct a grand IR theory. In fact, this is common among contemporary critical theorists and it constitutes an *a priori* element of their basic ontological assumptions. However, Morgenthau failed a task, writing such a grand theory, that he never wished to engage in. Classical realists do not intend to produce grand theories, but are cautious about their feasibility. While Levine is right to argue that Morgenthau – like any classical realist – was no critical theorist, we still can discern overlaps between them. In the remainder of this piece, I want to touch upon on three of what I believe to be the most promising connections between classical realism and critical theory.

Epistemologically, classical realism and critical theory operate with what Karl Mannheim (1985) called the spatio-temporal conditionality of knowledge. This means that knowledge depends upon and only has significance in the historical, cultural, and socio-political context in which it was created. Within this context, characteristic thought-styles evolve that determine the creation and direction of knowledge. For classical realists and critical theorists, any claim for universal knowledge and absolute objectivity is, therefore, ill-founded and a source of 'epistemological imperialism' (Behr & Rösch, pp. 73, 2010). Rather, they promote what we find in Morgenthau as perspectivist objectivity (Behr & Rösch, pp.44, 2012). This kind of objectivity is established in a hermeneutical process in which reality is analyzed through clearly defined concepts. They not only help to distinguish features of an object, but these features can only be recognized as such through concepts. For this reason, classical realists argue that concepts cannot have a fixed meaning, but are epistemological tools that help scholars to approach reality by categorizing and analyzing its elements. The meaning of these concepts depends upon the specific historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts and consequently changes.

Normatively, I see proximity between classical realism and critical theory in their critique of modernity, as both their scholars criticize modernity for establishing an imaginary, to use a term by Cornelius Castoriadis. The imaginary 'gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world'. It is the 'source of that which presents itself in every instance as indisputable and undisputed meaning, the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not' (Castoriadis, pp.145, 1987).

This implies that the imaginary constitutes social life-worlds, as it prescribes the realm of meaning upon which socio-political orders are being shaped. This is not problematic, *per se*, because people cannot exist without some degree of security and any imaginary promises an element of carefreeness because it structures social life-worlds. However, classical realists and critical theorists problematize modernity, as it leads to moral decline. This is the case because modernity neither considers questions of morality nor emotions; consequently, both theoretical stances aim to focus on the human condition of politics again. This focus on the human helps to explain current readings of classical realism as political theology, although this reading is not without its problems because it excludes the human potential for meaning-autopoiesis, as evidenced in Morgenthau's and Arendt's notion of power. [1] Still, their concern of modernity depriving people of the ability to experience themselves in their subjectivity can be interpreted as a contribution to manifold attempts to re-instill spirituality in people and overcome the "transcendental homelessness" of modernity (Lukacs, pp.41, 1963).

Being concerned about the effects of modernity on human beings, educationally, classical realists as well as critical theorists support dissent by promoting what Karl-Heinz Breier (pp.7, 2011) calls, in reference to Arendt, a *Bürgerwissenschaft*. Classical realism and critical theory do not believe that knowledge can provide absolute answers to political questions and they do not support academic attempts to socially plan the world. Rather, they aim

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to support people in their ambition to live freely in the sense of being able to critically reflect on the current political *status quo* and have the opportunity to create their life-worlds (cf. Pin-Fat 2005; Cozette, 2008; Klusmeyer, 2011; Rösch, 2013). To establish this kind of scholarship and to help people engage critically in and with the public sphere, classical realists like critical theorists argue that scholarship has to be a corrective of the political *status quo*. This happens through discerning people's interests through discussions and by establishing fora in which the political can evolve. Therefore, scholars have to act as facilitators in the public sphere through which people can transcend various constraints in modern societies in order to free them in their thought and action and to help them creating their life-worlds. However, convincing others of their capacities by challenging vested interests causes discomfort among the public because habitual ways of thinking are questioned. During the height of the Cold War, for example, when McCarthyism was striving in the USA, critical thinking was not well-received because questioning the foundations of common beliefs was considered a societal threat. Consequently, many early classical realists and critical theorists faced personal and professional consequences. [2] Forced to the fringes of academic, and sometimes even societal, life, however, helped them to rethink (world) politics whose potential the discipline is just beginning to explore.

## Notes

[1] Felix Rösch (2014) *Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics: Hans Morgenthau's Dualistic Concept of Power?* *Review of International Studies* 40 (2): 349-365. On Morgenthau's concept of power, see as well: Seán Molloy (2004) *Truth, Power, Theory: Hans Morgenthau's Formulation of Realism*. *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15 (1): 1-34; Robert Schuett (2007) *Freudian roots of political realism: the importance of Sigmund Freud to Hans J. Morgenthau's theory of international power politics*, in *History of the Human Sciences* 20 (4): 53-78; and Ty Solomon (2012) *Human Nature and the Limits of the Self: Hans Morgenthau on Love and Power*. *International Studies Review* 14 (2): 201-224. On religion and emotions, see amongst others: Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow (eds.) (2012) *Tragedy and International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Nicholas Rengger (2013) *On Theology and International Relations. World Politics beyond the Empty Sky*. *International Relations* 27 (2): 141-157; Andrew Ross (2013) *Realism, Emotion, and Dynamic Allegiances in Global Politics*. *International Theory* 5 (2): 273-299; Vassilios Paipais (2013) *Necessary Fiction: Realism's Tragic Theology*. *International Politics* 50 (6): 846-862; Seán Molloy (2013) *Spinoza, Carr, and the Ethics of The Twenty Years' Crisis*. *Review of International Studies* 39 (2): 251-271; and Jodok Troy (ed.) (2013) *Religion and the Realist Tradition. From Political Theology to International Relations Theory and Back*. London: Routledge.

[2] Morgenthau is here a case in point. Not only was his application for presidency of the American Political Science Association (APSA) hampered in the early 1970s, but there was also an "Operation Morgenthau" of the FBI to collect imputations against him. See, amongst others: Michael Cox (2007) *Hans J. Morgenthau, Realism, and the Rise and Fall of the Cold War*. In *Realism Reconsidered*, edited by Michael C. Williams. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 184.

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