

Nietzsche, Morgenthau, and the Roots of Realism

Written by Michael Laurence

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/06/24/nietzsche-morgenthau-and-the-roots-of-realism/>

MICHAEL LAURENCE, JUN 24 2015

Thucydides. Hobbes. Machiavelli. Realists have (re)turned to these thinkers time and again in order to construct and fortify the basic contours of their theories of global politics. From their texts, realists have extracted and put to use a series of ontological arguments concerning the nature of power, the human, the state, and the global milieu through which these forces traverse. The consequent interpretations of global politics tend to be ones that dramatize a tragic and unending struggle for power among nation-states that takes place under a condition of anarchy and insecurity, where morality holds little hope for redemption. While the discourses of realism substantiate this agonistic sense of global politics with rotating reference to a pantheon of classical and modern philosophical figures, they nonetheless consistently fail to mention one particular name: Nietzsche. This is a remarkable absence considering the fact that Nietzsche was the most decisive intellectual influence for realism's principal modern architect, Hans J. Morgenthau. It was Nietzsche, more than any other thinker, who served as Morgenthau's 'foremost intellectual authority' (Frei 2001: 94). From his lifelong encounter with Nietzsche, Morgenthau developed his basic way of looking at people and things, the ontological and conceptual coordinates that would ground the realist paradigm (Frei 2001: 94). This intellectual convergence between Nietzsche and Morgenthau presents a serious challenge to realists. It reveals to them that one of their most important philosophical forerunners remains a little known figure, an unnamed origin.

In this short paper, I would like to begin to drag Nietzsche from the shadows, to uncover and interrogate the forgotten roots of realism and to ask what kind of an interpretation of Nietzsche has realism secretly been constructed upon. This is, I believe, a dangerous endeavor. For Nietzsche is a multiplicity, and his writings are potentially explosive when confronted with identities that appear as stable and coherent. In other words, I am not offering a history of ideas, nor a progressive narrative whereby Nietzsche influences Morgenthau and the realist paradigm is successfully generated as an accumulated effect. The recovery of Nietzsche in relation to contemporary realism is not a move that adds grounding or stability to the identity of the paradigm. Nietzsche does not offer confirmation of the realist worldview. Rather, I argue, Nietzsche destabilizes the very ontological categories that realism stands upon. His recovery is necessarily fatal to realism. He reveals the superficiality and sterility of its ontological presuppositions and shows the unrealistic and reactive nature of its political vision. To put it simply, realism has been built upon an unacknowledged (mis)reading of Nietzsche at the level of ontology. Consequently, for realism to survive as a coherent and effective identity and mode of thought, it must suppress or forget its origins. Indeed, it has successfully done so for over half a century. Onward then, in the direction of a disruption of this practice of forgetting; toward an act of weaponized remembrance.

The Nietzsche-Morgenthau Nexus

It is difficult to forget one's first encounter with Nietzsche. Perhaps this is because reading him is a bodily and affective experience as much as it is an intellectual one. As a reader, one does not consume Nietzsche but is consumed by him. One is seduced and devoured. One feels Nietzsche. When the young Morgenthau accidentally leafed through Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* as a law student in 1926, he was immediately consumed in this way (Frei 2001: 99). He saw in Nietzsche a 'kindred soul,' a man of 'startling closeness of thought and feeling' (Frei 2001: 99). In his diary, he wrote of this magnificent discovery as one of the luckiest accidents of his life. He attributed a religious and spiritual effect to Nietzsche's words, and declared that it should be a duty to read him daily in order for human beings to achieve greater things and live better lives (Frei 2001: 99). The floodgates had opened. For the next forty months, Morgenthau worked tirelessly through Nietzsche's complete works (Frei 2001: 99). He even began to

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imitate Nietzsche's style, writing aphorisms of his own. This was the beginning of a lifelong relationship.

Through Nietzsche, Morgenthau felt as if his experience of the world was affirmed. He found in Nietzsche a solitary figure much like himself, a man who stood apart from the crowd and relied on his own inner strength to succeed. Even more, he found a keen diagnostician concerned with how things really were and not with how they ought to be. Morgenthau was captivated by what he perceived as Nietzsche's steadfast refusal to take flight from reality (Frei 2001: 102). It was from this basic attitude that the realist paradigm was built. Yet in order to begin this construction, Morgenthau turned away from Nietzsche's emphases on great politics, the *Übermensch*, and the radical transformation of culture and society. By means of an insistence upon the categorical split between *the way things are* and *the way things should be*, between the descriptive and normative tasks of thought, Morgenthau falsified the complexity of the movement of Nietzsche's thought. His admiration for Nietzsche as a detached, diagnostic, and sober analyst who revealed how things really were, took precedence at the cost of the directionality of Nietzsche's thought, its futuristic orientation, the way it opens up to a new horizon beyond Christian culture and morality. Under the flag of the hard-nosed diagnostician, Morgenthau smuggled through the back door the cynical conviction of the non-negotiable status of pre-existing political and subjective forms.

Morgenthau's basic ideas concerning the nature of reality constitute a significant departure from Nietzsche in two specific senses: (1) they overlook Nietzsche's understanding of the ontological productivity of power, and (2) they consequently ignore Nietzsche's theory of the subject and of subject production. In other words, the worldview that would become realism was developed on the back of Nietzsche but without fidelity to the nuanced conceptual and ideational landscape of his actual texts. Nietzsche's productive and process-oriented ontology of power and the subject is obliterated in Morgenthau's writings and replaced by a (meta)physics of conflicting identities that pre-exist the constitutive operations of power. This divergence has been missed at least once in the past. Ulrik Enemark Peterson, for example, went so far as to lump Nietzsche and Morgenthau together, claiming that Morgenthau's conception of power is identical to Nietzsche's *will to power* (1999:100). For Peterson, Morgenthau is concerned with the ways in which power precedes and produces identities, much like contemporary critical thinkers such as William Connolly (1999:111). He is, in this regard, and according to Peterson, a thinker whose work is fundamentally incompatible with contemporary realism (1999: 110). The problem with claiming Morgenthau as a critical theorist, however, is that there is nothing in his actual texts to support this thesis. Rather, Morgenthau is precisely the inverse of a critical theorist. He appeals to 'reality' in order to prevent it from being surpassed. Furthermore, nowhere in his writings is there evidence of Nietzsche's *will to power* interpreted as a force that is non-anthropocentric or non-identity based. Everywhere is the assumption and discussion of pre-formed entities, both subjects and states, from which an axiomatic and limitless lust for power emanates (see Morgenthau 1993: 4-16). Life appears pre-defined rather than in the making. Yet Morgenthau seems to mirror Nietzsche's affirmative stance towards struggle and conflict as constitutive of the political sphere. He appears to join Nietzsche in an affirmation of the tragic sense of life. He preaches along with his intellectual master about the need to face with courage the hard truths of reality, the ineradicable nature and ubiquity of power. Yet Morgenthau disregards Nietzsche by confining his understanding of reality to the level of pre-composed identities. His reading of Nietzsche misses the fact that no other thinker 'extended the critique of all forms of identity further than Nietzsche' (Deleuze 2006: x). Consequently, realism emerges as an effect of a deformed and incapacitated Nietzsche. It offers a cynical Nietzsche that is incapable of envisioning the self-overcoming of man or the transvaluation of all values. Instead of the *Übermensch*, who for Nietzsche signifies the transformative overcoming of identity and the movement towards new forms of life, Morgenthau exclaims the centrality of the statesman, who signifies nothing less than a reactive servitude to the state form. In place of a Nietzschean politics of exuberance and the affirmation of life, Morgenthau offers a politics of *ressentiment*.

This deformation of Nietzsche can be shown through a comparative analysis of the differing conceptions of power that operate throughout the texts of both thinkers. For Morgenthau, power is "...anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man" (1993: 11). It has to do with man's "...control over the minds and actions of other men" (1993: 30). Power is rendered ubiquitous throughout the social field in this sense, referring to anything from physical violence to subtle psychological relations. The struggle for power, writes Morgenthau, is consequently "universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of existence" (1993: 36). Its origins, however, are to be found in human nature. In fact, the entire political realm stems from what Morgenthau calls *the animus dominandi*, a lust for

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power without limits that exists universally as an inner force, an element of the human soul (1947: 158). Morgenthau even uses the Nietzschean term, *will to power*, when discussing this limitless lust (1947: 158-159). He explains that although inherent in human nature, this lust cannot exist in isolation from others; it is inseparable from social life. This is because it is a force that is necessarily directed towards others, one that seeks to 'maintain, increase or demonstrate the range of one's own person with regards to others' (1947: 158). In this way, the lust for power is not concerned with survival but with one's position or standing within a particular environment. It is concerned with what Nietzsche scathingly refers to as *representation*: power as the object of a representation, as a will to get oneself recognized in accordance with the values that already exist in a society (Nietzsche 2000: 559). Power politics at the global scale is a consequence of this operation of power at the scale of individuals in society (Morgenthau 1947: 40).

Overall, when Morgenthau speaks of power he means a force that operates ubiquitously, relationally, and through representation. Power emerges, for Morgenthau, from within pre-formed individuals. It does not make them. It is not ontologically productive. Life, for Morgenthau, is already made. And when Morgenthau speaks of life in flux or in transition, he necessarily means the flux or transition of pre-constituted forms and identities (1947: 11). For Nietzsche, on the other hand, power is productive of the forms and identities that constitute reality. Nietzsche even has a specific term for the ontological productivity of power: *the will to power*. It is important not to misunderstand this term. For Nietzsche, *the will to power* does not mean that the will wants power as an end, or that the will is motivated by power (Deleuze 2006: 74). Power is not what the will wants. There is, for Nietzsche, no unified will that could want power (Nietzsche 1969: 138). This is because the will is not the will of an individual. It is not anthropomorphic. Instead, *the will to power* is an event, or rather, a situation characterized by a differential relationship of forces that confront one another directly (Deleuze 2006: 79). It is the name for the process by which force operates upon force, or will upon will, resulting in relations of command and obedience that generate new realities and new values. It is fundamentally creative. Only a metaphysical interpretation of *the will to power* would reduce it to a unity authored by a subject. Only a slavish interpretation would ground it in the subject's desire to be recognized in terms of already existing values. As such, *the will to power* has nothing to do with Morgenthau's lust for power, a lust that presupposes a subject that lusts or wills, a subject that desires recognition. For Nietzsche, this is a sickly or slavish understanding of *the will to power*. Nietzsche's concern, on the other hand, has to do with force relations that exist beneath the so-called stability of forms and identities; modes of life that come into existence, and whether they are ascending or descending modes, as well as how new modes can be created. Morgenthau's way of speaking about power, on the other hand, precludes this entire theatre of force relations and ontological production.

Morgenthau's failure to account for the productivity of power can be understood as a consequence of his conceptualization of human nature. The human, he claims, is a political animal by nature (1947: 138). This means for him that man is born to seek or lust for power, in the slavish sense discussed above (1947: 138). Morgenthau writes in this vein that human nature has not changed since classical times (1993: 4). The lust for power is presented as perennial and ubiquitous. It is presented as the reason for man's corruption of soul (Morgenthau 1947: 182). Yet Morgenthau's theory of human nature merely counters the liberal-scientific presupposition of human nature as rational, perfectible, and good with an equally implausible and problematic conception of human nature as lusting, self-interested, and sinful. Morgenthau and his liberal nemeses merely offer two sides of the same coin; both presuppose the human as given, pre-constituted, and beyond the process of ontological production. This has two problematic effects: first, it renders his theory impractical, divorced from the nuances of historical context in a way that mirrors the impracticality of the liberal scientific paradigm that he so energetically condemns in texts like *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. Second, it commits Morgenthau to a reactive politics for the securitization of pre-constituted identities, whether subjects or states. The absence of a theatre of ontological production in his writing means that the subject is naturalized and rendered non-negotiable in its essence: it is taken as 'is', in sin, as evil, motivated by a lust for power. The state is merely added on after the fact, an entity that reflects this naturalization on a larger scale (Morgenthau 1947: 154). In the end, ontological privilege is afforded to what is already constituted by means of the negation of the process of the genesis of reality, what philosophers such as Gilbert Simondon and Alberto Toscano have called *ontogenesis* (Toscano 2006: 199). Morgenthau does not take into consideration this process. He does not consider the force relations by which individuals and identities are produced and come to appear as natural. The political consequence is that his thought remains firmly committed to the ways in which things already exist, at the cost of the ways in which things could exist otherwise.

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'I am Not a Man. I am Dynamite.'

Realism is the dominant approach in the field of International Relations. Despite the richness and complexity of this paradigm, the many forms it takes, it remains committed to existing identities and forms of reality by way of the negation of the ontological productivity of power. In an effort to account for the complexity of realist scholarship, Michael R. Doyle divides the paradigm into four main schools of interpretation: complex realism, fundamentalist realism, structuralist realism, and constitutionalist realism (1997: 44). While each school differs from the others in important ways, they all nonetheless share a set of views about reality that form a common identity (Doyle 1997: 43). They share the assumption of international society as a condition of anarchy where independent states and other actors contend with one another for power (Doyle 1997: 43). They also share the commitment to a politics of *ressentiment* by way of an ontology of identity and its representation, whereby life is pre-defined and the subject pre-composed. This is especially true for realists of the fundamentalist school, who, following Morgenthau, contend that the anarchy of global politics is ultimately rooted in the power-seeking activity of individuals. Nietzsche, on the other hand, compels us to put ontology in motion, to think beyond the subject and the fixed categories of identity.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche exclaims: 'I am not a man. I am dynamite' (2000: 782). He speaks of himself as a man of calamity, and foretells the coming of upheaval, of earthquakes, of the explosion of old power structures (2000: 783). To affirm life, to be a creator, one must first be a destroyer. Nietzsche combines the creator and the destroyer in one figure: Dionysus. It is Dionysus who will destroy and overcome Christian morality and all of its slavish manifestations. His writings hold this Dionysian capacity to incinerate the reactive ontology from which realist theory operates. Realists, in the interest of self-preservation, are therefore correct to keep him at arm's length, to keep his name in the shadows, to let the monster sleep, in so that their slumber can continue undisturbed. The irony is that contemporary realism can only maintain its theoretical and ontological coherence by means of suppressing its origins. The Nietzschean theatre of power and subject production is the explosion at the beginning. From this explosion a new (anti)realism can be developed; one that does not reactively serve the securitization of pre-existing identities; one that opens up toward a different future, toward a politics of self-overcoming. One that can reclaim the future from *ressentiment* and cynicism. Such Nietzschean efforts are already well on their way.

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About the author:

Michael Laurence is a PhD candidate in Political Theory at Western University, Canada. He teaches Political Theory at Mount Allison University, Canada. His research aims to rethink democracy as a vitality that exceeds and overcomes the reactive politics of the state form.