

# Realism: Tragedy, Power and the Refugee Crisis

Written by Felix Rösch and Richard Ned Lebow

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## Realism: Tragedy, Power and the Refugee Crisis

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FELIX RÖSCH AND RICHARD NED LEBOW, JAN 18 2018

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Since the end of the Cold War realism has returned to its roots. Realist scholars show renewed interest in their paradigm's foundational thinkers, their tragic understanding of life and politics, their practical concern for ethics, and their understanding of theory as the starting point for explanatory narratives or forward-looking forecasts that are highly context dependent. In this chapter, we do not attempt to map these recent re-readings. Despite their different perspectives on world politics, the writings of Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, E. H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Arnold Wolfers, John Herz, Hans Morgenthau, and Hannah Arendt demonstrate a remarkable unity of thought, as they have been driven by similar concerns about 'perennial problems' (Morgenthau 1962, 19). One of these problems is the depoliticisation of societies. Realists were concerned that, in modern societies, people could no longer freely express their interests in public, losing the ability to collectively contribute to their societies. Consequently, realism can be perceived as a critique of and 'corrective' (Cozette 2008, 12) to this development.

To introduce this perspective of realism and to understand the differences between neorealism and realism (also Bell 2017), we particularly focus on mid-twentieth century realists which are often now identified as classical realists in the literature. This micro-lens on realism is possible because, due to their common war and even migration experiences, their thoughts resonate with each other particularly well. In the first section, we outline realism's tragic understanding of life and how to deal with it. This is followed in the second section by an introduction into one of the core realist concepts – power – before arguing that realism does not promote a world of nation-states. Finally, we discuss the current refugee crisis through a realist perspective.

### The Tragic Vision of Life

Mid-twentieth century realists were a diverse group of scholars. Although their geographical centre was in the United States, with exceptions like Carr and Georg Schwarzenberger in the United Kingdom and Raymond Aron in France, many of them were émigrés from Europe, who had been forced to leave due to the rise of fascism and communism. Although they shared a common humanistic worldview in the sense that they had received similar extensive secondary schooling in liberal arts and they believed that people can only experience themselves as human beings by engaging with others in the public sphere, their diversity is also evidenced in their wide range of professions. Given that IR was only gradually institutionalised in Europe when the first chair was set up in light of the horrors of World War I at the university in Aberystwyth, Wales in 1919, none of them was trained as an IR scholar. Instead, they were historians, sociologists, philosophers, lawyers, and even theologians. Only retrospectively were many of them linked to IR. Even Morgenthau, arguably the most well-known realist, held a professorship for political science and history – not for international politics. Despite this diversity, however, mid-twentieth century realists agreed on a tragic vision of life; a view they shared with many of their predecessors (Lebow 2003; Williams 2005). This is because people, and more so leaders, have to make decisions on the basis of incomplete information, deal with unpredictability of their actions, and cope with irreconcilable value conflicts within and among societies. Above all,

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they recognise that leaders must sometimes resort to unethical means (e.g. violence) to achieve laudable ends, and without prior knowledge that these means will accomplish the ends they seek.

This tragic outlook is understandable if we consider the contexts in which classical realists wrote. Thucydides lived during the times of the Peloponnesian War in which Athens lost its pre-eminence in the ancient Greek world. Machiavelli's life was also influenced by repetitive conflicts in which papal, French, Spanish, and other forces aimed to seize control over Northern Italy during the Renaissance Wars (1494-1559). Modern realists finally experienced with the rise of ideologies the climax of a development that had started almost 200 years earlier. Since the Age of Enlightenment culminating in the French Revolution, people were freed from religious straightjackets, but at the same time had lost a sense of community that ideologies like nationalism, liberalism, or Marxism could only superficially restore, and often only at the cost of violent conflicts. Realists shared public sentiments that losing this sense of community caused a decline of commonly accepted values as exemplified in the German debate on a cultural crisis during the early decades of the twentieth century and it made them more susceptible to the temptations of ideologies. This is because ideologies provide what Arendt (1952, 469) called 'world explanations', enabling people to channel their human drives into them.

John Herz (1951) argued that the drive for self-preservation, which ensures that people care about their survival in the world by seeking food and shelter, provokes a security dilemma because people can never be certain to avoid attacks from others. Morgenthau (1930), by contrast, was more concerned about people's drive to prove themselves, achieved by making contributions to their social-political life worlds. Success is difficult because people have incomplete knowledge about themselves and their life-worlds. Any political decision must always be temporary and subject to revision if circumstances change or knowledge is being advanced. In realising that their ambitions are in vain, another tragic aspect of life comes to the fore. For Morgenthau, accepting this tragic aspect is a first step toward transcending it; people can reflect critically about their existence and come to understand that only through their own efforts can life become meaningful.

In modernity, however, having lost values as a basis to make informed judgements, peoples' lives are characterised by what Stephen Toulmin (1990, 35) called a 'quest for certainty', but only few manage to deal with the hardships self-critical contemplation entails. Most, as Nietzsche noted, content themselves with the illusions of being embedded in some form of community. As Morgenthau (n.d., 2) put it: 'being imperfect and striving toward perfection, man ought not to be alone. For while the companionship of others cannot make him perfect, it can supplement his imperfection and give him the illusion of being perfect.' Therefore, also on the level of nation-states tragedy looms large because both drives urge people to live in political communities which are characterised by the same deficiencies that hamper the human condition.

## **Power and Ethics**

Given that these drives affect people on every level, realists do not distinguish between domestic and international politics. Rather, they focus on political communities however they may be conceived because it is through peoples' relations that these human drives start to affect politics.

In these relations, power plays a decisive role. Due to the drive to prove oneself, a balance of power evolves in interpersonal, intergroup, and international relations to counter the development of hegemonic power (Morgenthau 1948). This balance of power is not stable but evolving because actors face a security dilemma (Herz 1951). Due to uncertainty, actors live in fear and they are constantly striving to amass further power only causing the same reaction in their potential adversaries. Hence, it is less physical or material constraints that lead to a balance of power, but it is the result of emotional insecurity. Ironically, therefore, balance of power works best when needed least because if people and communities share some form of common identity, they can cooperate more easily and would not require a balance of power.

Human drives however have an even more dramatic effect on societies beyond the evolvment of a balance of power, as they can depoliticise them. This concern is central to the realist thought of Herz, Arendt, or Niebuhr. Particularly insightful in this respect is Morgenthau (Rösch 2014, 2015). With his understanding of the political, he

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opposed the more common friend-enemy distinction by the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Morgenthau (2012) defined the political as a universal force that is inherent in every human and that necessarily focuses on others, while at the same time it only comes into being in interpersonal relationships. The resulting discussions, in which people express their interests, create an 'arena of contestation' (Galston 2010, 391). Realising their individual capabilities and experiencing power through acting together, people develop their identities, as they gain knowledge about themselves and their life-worlds. The tragedy of human imperfection, however, endangers the political, as it fosters the development of ideologies. Given that most people cannot face their imperfections, ideologies offer some form of ontological security. This means that ideologies provide people with a sense of order and help them to conceal the initial meaninglessness of life by offering explanations to historical and current socio-political events. Particularly fascism and communism occupied realist thought as they were the most violent ideologies during the lifetime of mid-twentieth century realists, but they were also critical of the hubris of American liberalism and nationalism in general.

For realists, ideologies aim to retain the socio-political *status quo* and any human activity has to be geared towards sustaining this reification. The current socio-political reality is being perceived as given and it cannot be fundamentally altered. The development of the political as an 'arena of contestation', however, endangers this socio-political *status quo*, as it enables people to voice their interests and share their thoughts about the composition and purpose of their political community, eventually opening up the potential of socio-political change. To cope with this depoliticisation, realists advertised what can be called an 'ethics of responsibility' to use Max Weber's term. Although realists were convinced that most people would be unwilling or incapable of taking responsibility for their lives, they still argued for an ethics in which decision-making is guided by 'intellectual honesty' (Sigwart 2013, 429). Thoughts and beliefs have to be contextualised in a self-critical process that demonstrates empathy towards the position of others. The resulting 'discourse ethic', as Arendt called it, can only happen in collectivity and American town hall meetings provided the perfecting setting for Arendt, as they allow all people who share a common interest to congregate. As a consequence, however, people have to be prepared to change their positions and be willing to take responsibility for the moral dilemmas of (inter)national politics.

## The Nation-State and the Possibility of a World State

Contrary to common assumptions, realists are not apologists of the nation-state, but critical of it, aiming to avoid its dangers and transcend its shortcomings by investigating the potential of a world state (Scheuerman 2011).

For a variety of reasons, classical realists considered nation-states to be 'blind and potent monster[s]' (Morgenthau 1962, 61). They are blind because globalisation and technological advancements not only hinder them to fulfill their role of providing security, but they endanger life on earth altogether. Particularly strong versions of this critique can be found in Aron, Herz, and Morgenthau. The latter provided a disenchanted view on the prospects of humanity in one of his last public appearances, arguing that 'we are living in a dream world' (Morgenthau 1979, 42) because nation-states can no longer uphold the claim to have a monopoly of power over a given territory with the development of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the squandering of natural resources threatens the environment, leading to a 'society of waste' (Morgenthau 1972, 23). However, nation-states are also potent because in gaining sovereignty over a specific territory and a specific group of people, they exert violence on these people and on others. Nation-states universalise their own standards and even try to impose them onto others, as evidenced in the rise of fascism during the early twentieth century in Europe. After seizing power in countries like Italy, Germany, Spain, and Croatia, fascist movements not only waged wars internationally as exemplified in Germany's invasion in Poland, leading to World War II, and Italy's Abyssinian War (1935-1936) with the intention to gain control over Ethiopia, but they also exerted violence domestically by ostracising ethnic, religious, and socio-political minorities. Furthermore, technological advancements complicate human life-worlds, accelerating socio-political decision-making processes. This benefited the development of scientific elites, who are unaccountable to the public, but who in their attempt to socially plan the world affect people in their everyday lives greatly.

Given that classical realists were sceptical of the promises of modern nation-states, they argued for the establishment of a world community, eventually leading to a world state. Such a global community can help to transcend the depoliticisation in modern societies and even support 'defenders of the global state to stay sober' (Scheuerman 2011, 150). By enabling people to get together on various different levels, political spheres can

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extrapolate beyond national borders, allowing people to exchange their interests globally and gradually develop an identity that goes beyond that of the nation-state. Their flexibility allows people to accommodate diverse human interests. The resulting self-reflexivity and open-mindedness helps to accept different life trajectories which are influenced by historical, cultural, socio-political or religious factors. In political spheres, people are acknowledged for their differences and, through discussions, a common ground is established that suits everybody. Realists did not arrive at this conclusion straight away. Rather, scholars like Morgenthau and Niebuhr were sceptical at first of the United Nations and the precursors of the European Union, but they realised that they provide the space for the political to gradually evolve, as different actors can get together peacefully and exchange their ideas.

## **Realist Epistemologies and the Refugee Crisis in Europe and the Middle East**

To demonstrate the potential of realism for twenty-first century IR-theorising, we refer to the current refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East. In 2016, more than 4.5 million people were displaced from Syria, of which an estimated 2.5 million were living in Turkey at that time and more than 800,000 applications for asylum have reached the EU (European Commission 2016). Focusing on this crisis might not seem to be an obvious choice, but many realists, who made their career in the United States, were refugees themselves (Lebow 2011). Indeed, Herz (1984, 9) characterised himself as a 'traveller between all worlds' and Morgenthau even was a 'double exile' (Frankfurter 1937) after his expulsion from Germany and later Spain before arriving in the United States in 1937. Our aim is to demonstrate that realism provides useful insights into this crisis, as we can investigate the conditions for a peaceful coexistence of differences. This is important, as refugees have been identified as one of the reasons why the British public has voted to leave the EU in 2016 and the rise of right-wing parties throughout Europe further suggests that refugees are being pictured in security discourses as a threat.

Relating the work of mid-twentieth century realists to this development enables IR-scholarship to understand that security is established in a discursive context, making it dependent on spatial-temporal conditions. This means security has different meanings in different contexts and therefore it is transformative (Behr 2013, 169). This aspect rests on the insights that realists gained through the study of Karl Mannheim's (1985) *Ideology and Utopia* which was first published in 1929. One of the key concepts that we find in this book is the conditionality of knowledge which means that knowledge is always bound to the socio-political environment in which it operates, stressing that universal knowledge is impossible. Applying this notion on the current refugee crisis, we understand that perceiving refugees as a threat to security is the result of human will and political agency. For example, the refugee crisis was one of the dominant drivers of British Brexit-discourses, although the UK received less than 40,000 asylum seekers in 2015. By comparison, more than 400,000 refugees chose Germany as their destination and Sweden received more than 160,000 in the same period, making the latter the European country that has accepted most refugees in relation to the overall population (British Red Cross 2016).

This is not to say that this process always takes place consciously, as we can never be entirely sure how our writings or actions are perceived by others, but classical realism can help us to understand that humans are not only the objects of security, but also its subjects. In public discourses, they have to have the possibility to redefine the substance of security, instead of leaving it to (inter)national foreign policy elites. As mentioned, these discourses have to include all involved people, and given that different interests morph into a common good, they evolve antagonistically without causing violent outbreaks, if, following Morgenthau, all interests are taken into account. To make this process work, however, dialogical learning is required, as contemporary scholarship calls it. This form of learning is based on continuous possibilities of exchange between refugees and local people and it requires refugees and locals to demonstrate open-mindedness and empathy as well as the willingness to challenge one's own positions. As a result, security can be redefined and what is perceived to be a crisis can be eventually understood as an opportunity to create something 'which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination' (Arendt 1961, 151).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have introduced a reading of realism that is probably uncommon. Realism is often confused with neorealism, making students believe that realism provides explanations for the current international political status

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quo. By contrast, it was our ambition to offer a more nuanced picture of realism and to demonstrate that realism helps in developing a more critical awareness of international politics. To demonstrate this potential, the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East was chosen as a case study. Realism does not provide a one-stop solution to this crisis, but it acts as a critical corrective to political discourses that securitise refugees in the sense that they are made into a question of security which in turn justifies the use of extraordinary means to police this threat. Rather, realism encourages to transform the differences that are perceived as a security issue into a potential to create more inclusive societies. Realism is therefore far from being a case for the dustbin of the history of international political thought, as some commentators on realism suggest, but it can serve as a stepping stone to question some of the common assumptions held in the discipline.

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