



Book Briefs

Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Realism

edited by Michael C. Williams
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Writing in the December 1952 issue of the *American Political Science Review*, Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, later founder of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, responded to the controversy in academic and policy circles that had been occasioned by the publication the year before of his *In Defense of the National Interest* and *American Diplomacy* by Ambassador George F. Kennan, who later became honorary chairman of the National Committee. In his essay, Morgenthau succinctly summarized two theories—each one founded on fundamentally differing conceptions of the nature of humanity, society, and politics—that competed in the “great debate” over the conduct of the foreign policy of the United States.

One believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now. It assumes the essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature

and attributes the failure of the social order to measure up to the rational standards to lack of knowledge and understanding, obsolescent social institutions, or the depravity of certain isolated individuals or groups. It trusts in education, reform, and the sporadic use of force to remedy these deficiencies.

The other school believes that the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces which are inherent in human nature. To improve the world, one must work with those forces, not against them. This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but at best approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts. This school, then, sees in a system of checks and balances a universalist principle for all pluralist societies. It appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles, and aims at achievement of the lesser evil rather than the absolute good.

That these lines could well have been written about debates going on today underscores the perennial wisdom and relevance of Morgenthau’s intellectual achievement. It was an attempt to engage the scholar’s thinking that produced the anthology edited by Professor Michael Williams of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations*, which assembles 10 papers, many of which were first presented at a 2004 conference held to commemorate the centenary of Morgenthau’s birth.

The book, regrettably, suffers from three shortcomings that a more rigorous editorial hand might have avoided. First, all but one are by contributors based at European institutions. Although the scope of Morgenthau's work is certainly global, the inclusion of more scholars from this side of the Atlantic—where the subject of the volume not only did his most substantive work but where that work has exercised the greatest influence on international relations as an academic discipline—would have lent greater balance and perspective to the overall project. Second, although each of the chapters in the current collection is individually a worthy addition to today's renaissance appreciation of Morgenthau and his vision, *Realism Reconsidered* as a whole tends to favor heavily the scholarly debate concerning this intellectual tradition at the expense of much consideration for its practical implications on a wide range of contemporary political contestations. Third, although the authors are not necessarily responsible for the long delay in publishing their studies—nearly four years have transpired since many of them were written—the lag has not always been to the advantage of their analyses of international relations and foreign policy. Those three points being noted, *Realism Reconsidered* is nonetheless a valuable anthology that deserves a place alongside Christoph Frei's 2001 *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* and Christoph Rohde's 2004 *Hans J. Morgenthau und der weltpolitische Realismus* in any collection of recent scholarship on the most influential realist of modern times.

In many ways nothing could be more appropriate than a reconsideration of Morgenthau's legacy at the present historical moment. The last two decades have been something of a rollercoaster for both the man and his work. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, not a few have claimed that although the political realism championed by Morgenthau and Kennan was fine as a guiding principle during the cold war, the "end of history" required some other

theory to guide the study and practice of international relations. Some of those voices, many self-identified as "neoconservative," became even more vocal in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the opening of America's "global war on terrorism." However, as the conflict became prolonged—some would charge "distracted" by a war against Iraq and the subsequent occupation of the country—the pendulum began to swing the other way as many pundits self-identified themselves as "realists." In fact, Morgenthau's name has been invoked, talismanlike, against the alleged evils of neoconservative policies with increasing frequency by political commentators as diverse as Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, coauthors of *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World*, on the right and Peter Beinart, author of *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*, on the left.

I surmise that Morgenthau would be rather pleased at the current interest in his work, especially insofar as much of it is related to the challenges that American foreign policy is presently confronting. Although he had a marked preference for philosophy (Anthony Lang and Nicholas Rengger contributed valuable essays to the present volume on the largely overlooked Aristotelian dimension of Morgenthau's thought and the role of tragedy in politics) and his training and background were in the law (the papers by Chris Smith, William Scheuerman, and Oliver Jütersonke examine different juridical themes in his work, the first two delving especially into his engagement with the work of Carl Schmitt), Morgenthau dedicated most of his efforts to international relations, especially after he immigrated to the United States in 1937. As Michael Cox observes in his essay on "Morgenthau and the Cold War" for the present anthology, "there was little room in Morgenthau's world for wishful or optimistic thinking, something he felt too many Americans were inclined to." Convinced that idealism was hopelessly blinded to the

Soviet threat and its reliance on good faith accommodations recklessly naïve, Morgenthau advanced a vision that he believed would guide the virtuous statesman to define and defend the national interest—a task as pressing today as it was nearly six decades ago. (With respect to national interest, it is worth recalling one of Morgenthau’s many felicitous formulations: “It becomes the task of armed diplomacy to convince the nations concerned that their legitimate interests have nothing to fear from [America’s defined] restrictive and rational foreign policy and that their illegitimate interests have nothing to gain in the face of armed might rationally employed [by the United States].”)

Although some have tried to cast Morgenthau anachronistically as an implacable foe of neoconservatives—Williams admits in his introduction that “What Would Hans Morgenthau say?” nowadays comes “naturally, sooner or later” to anyone interested in world politics—the editor is correct in his assertion, contained in his own contribution to *Realism Reconsidered*, that the relationship is much more complex, as are neoconservatism’s links to other forms of modern idealism. Although (especially in light of the ongoing conflict that the United States finds itself in) the neoconservative “persuasion” is popularly associated with the power of America’s remarkable military juggernaut, that “mode of thought”—the formulation is that of the man considered the founder of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol—is also predicated on a belief about the changeability of the human paradigm, one that it ironically but not unexpectedly shares with the other idealistic ideologies to its left and to its right.

Undoubtedly the Morgenthau who warned against a nation pursuing “objectives that are not only unnecessary for its survival but tend to jeopardize it” and inveighed against “great powers which dream of remaking the world in their own image and embark upon world-wide crusades, thus straining their resources to exhaustion” would look skeptically on the dream embraced by many neoconservatives

that the terrorist threat to American national security could be ended by reshaping the Middle East, a transformation that was to begin with an attack on Saddam Hussein, whose Baath regime was in violation of its obligations under a decade’s worth of United Nations Security Council resolutions. But it is also highly unlikely that the same Morgenthau would have much use for slogans about “change we can believe in” because, quite simply, he did not believe change was necessarily desirable, observing in his monumental *Politics Among Nations* that “novelty is not necessarily a virtue in political theory, nor is old age a defect.” Any viable theory of politics should take as its starting point objective laws rooted in human nature—a nature well known to students of classical history and philosophy. Just because “a theory of politics was developed hundreds or even thousands of years ago . . . does not create a presumption that it must be outmoded or obsolete.” Politics and politicians, he held, “must be subjected to the dual tests of reason and experience.” One of those immutable laws of politics that Morgenthau revered is that the concept of “interest defined as power” is what gives shape to politics, although the content of that interest is not itself fixed. Historical and social factors will necessarily influence how interest is defined, as Richard Little notes in his contribution to *Realism Reconsidered*. Furthermore, as Morgenthau argued in *Politics Among Nations*.

Political realism does not assume that the contemporary conditions under which foreign policy operates, with their extreme instability and the ever-present threat of large-scale violence, cannot be changed. The balance of power, for instance, is indeed a perennial element of all pluralistic societies . . . yet it is capable of operating, as it does in the United States, under the conditions of relative stability and peaceful conflict. If these

factors can be duplicated on the international sphere, then international politics can be transformed.

As Campbell Craig's paper on Morgenthau's struggle with the idea of a world state indicates, for the scholar a transformation of such magnitude can occur only if it works through forces in the real world—including interest, power, and morality—rather than depending on some ambiguous sentimentality. In fact, throughout his career Morgenthau often argued that the fundamental error in American foreign policy thinking and implementation was the false antithesis between national interest and moral principles that conflates pedantic moralism with authentic morality while accusing realists of being amoral. Writing in defense of the position that he and Kennan took, Morgenthau put it thus

If an American statesman must choose between the promotion of universal liberty, which is a moral good, at the risk of American security and, hence, of liberty in the United States, and the promotion of American security and of liberty in the United States, which is another moral good, which choice ought he to make? The utopian will not face the issue squarely and will deceive himself into believing that he can achieve both goods at the same time. The realist will choose the national interest on both moral and pragmatic grounds; for if he does not take care of the national interest, nobody else will, and if he puts American security and liberty in jeopardy the cause of liberty everywhere will be impaired.

Although he argued forcefully elsewhere that given the present-day architecture of the international system, “neglect of the national interest can only lead to national suicide” and

thus “there exists even a positive moral duty for the individual nation to take care of its national interests,” he also warned at the very beginning of *Politics Among Nations* against any nation projecting its own interests onto the global stage as some sort of universal norm: “Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspiration of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.” He would, I suspect, nod approvingly at the affirmation by one American presidential candidate that

In such a world, where power of all kinds is more widely and evenly distributed, the United States cannot lead by virtue of its power alone. . . . Our great power does not mean we can do whatever we want whenever we want, nor should we assume we have all the wisdom and knowledge necessary to succeed. We need to listen to the views and respect the collective will of our democratic allies. When we believe international action is necessary, whether military, economic, or diplomatic, we will try to persuade our friends that we are right. But we, in return, must be willing to be persuaded by them.

Richard Ned Lebow, in the final essay in the volume under consideration, observes that “Morgenthau aspired to develop a framework that actors can use to work their way through contemporary problems.” Although not every political realist—much less every reader—will find himself or herself in agreement with all or even most of the interpretations offered by the 10 contributors to *Realism Reconsidered*, all ought to concur with Lebow's final judgment that “Morgenthau, who speaks to us across the abyss of Weimar, the Nazi era, the Second World War, and the Cold War, still has much to teach us.” The present volume is an excellent and stimulating introduction to the thought of the extraordinarily erudite scholar whom even

critics have hailed as one of the principal founders—if not *the* founder—of what one of them, Professor Stanley Hoffman, called the “American Social Science” of international relations.

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The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East

by Kishore Mahbubani
 New York: Public Affairs (2008),
 \$26.00, 314 pages

In the expanding literature on the rise of the East, Kishore Mahbubani’s *The New Asian Hemisphere* stands out in distinction for a number of reasons. First, it places the rise of Asia in a diachronic global context. By 2050, three of the world’s four largest economies will be Asian and in this order: China, the United States, India, and Japan. It names Asia’s march to modernity as one of three possible scenarios for the twenty-first century, the other two being retreat into fortresses by the West, and the less likely “triumph of the West.” Second, the book compares the first two scenarios not only by current growth potentials but, more significantly, by the long-term cultural underpinnings of East and West. Third, it argues that Asia’s [re-]rise represents new opportunities for both

the West and the world at large and that the West should welcome it.

Backed by the data analyzed by British historian Angus Madison, the author notes that for over 18 centuries (1 to 1820 A.D.), the world’s two largest economies were China and India. In the first century A.D., for example, Asia accounted for 76.3 percent of global GDP against Western Europe’s 10.8 percent. The balance began to shift with the Industrial Revolution. The past two centuries of Western domination “are the exception, not the rule, during the two thousand years of global history” (40). Consequently, the re-rise of China and India and Asia as a whole is the “return of history” (chapter 4), not the “end of history” that Western triumphalists trumpeted in celebrating the demise of Soviet power and the alleged perpetuity of Western supremacy. The reemerging Asia is the New Modern Asia.

Despite the irreversible rise of Asia, the West is not celebrating. “Sadly,” Mahbubani laments, “. . . Western intellectual life continues to be dominated by those who continue to celebrate the supremacy of the West” (125). Despite the West’s self-congratulating attitude in 2008, he pontificates, the 5.6 billion people who live outside the West increasingly “no longer believe in the innate or inherent superiority of Western civilization” (129). Mahbubani, who displays the brilliance of a rare historian of ideas, points out a fundamental flaw in the Western triumphalism that emerged from the end of the cold war. The flaw was the belief that the West triumphed over the Soviet Union because of its values. In fact, he argues, the West triumphed because of the strength of its economic system—free market economies—and not because of its political system. He contrasted the failure of Gorbachev’s Soviet Union with the success of Deng Xiaoping’s China. Gorbachev made the wrong choice by prioritizing *glasnost* (political openness) over *perestroika* (economic restructuring). Deng Xiaoping avoided Gorbachev’s mistakes because