

CHAPTER 7

REALISM

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It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the academic study of international relations is a debate about realism. Realism provides a foil against which many other schools of thought define themselves and their contributions. Take realism out of the picture and the identities of these other schools as well as the significance of their arguments become much less clear. The study of international politics thus is in an important sense inexplicable without a grounding in realism.

Gaining such a grounding, however, is harder than it seems. Precisely because realism is so influential, it is also systematically misunderstood. Whether favorably or unfavorably disposed toward realist ideas and theories, scholars face powerful incentives to make realism into something it is not. As a result, many of the most popular criticisms of realism miss the mark. My purpose in this chapter is to set the record straight (portions of the chapter overlap with Wohlforth 2007).

The most important point is that realism is not now and never has been a single theory—if that term is defined properly. Unfortunately, scholars use the word “theory” to refer to three distinct things: realism (a large and complex tradition of statecraft and scholarship); subschools within realism such as neorealism (complex schools of thought fitting within the realist tradition); and specific realist theories like the balance of power, the security dilemma, or the offense–defense balance (propositions about patterns of relations among states or pressures facing a particular state). In this chapter, I keep these things clear, reserving the term “theory” for specific propositions or arguments. These distinctions are not academic quibbles. The notion that realism—this centuries-old foundational school of thought—can be and has to be reduced to a single, internally consistent, and logically coherent theory is the taproot of the greatest misunderstanding.

1 WHAT IS REALISM?

Political realists typically claim to be part of a tradition that stretches back, through Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, to Thucydides.¹ In the academic study of international relations, which is not much more than a century old, four principal generations can be identified: an interwar and wartime generation, the best-known figures of which were Reinhold Niebuhr and E. H. Carr; a postwar or early cold war generation, symbolized by Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* (1954),² and including most prominently George Kennan and Raymond Aron; a détente generation, best represented by Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979), and including among its leading exponents Stephen Krasner and Robert Gilpin; and a post-cold war generation, led by John Mearsheimer (2001) (whose book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* seems to be emerging as emblematic) and prominently represented in the work of Steven Walt, Randall Schweller, and Charles Glaser.³

Realism is best seen as “a spectrum of ideas... rather than as a fixed point of focus with sharp definition” (Haslam 2002, 249); an “attitude of mind” with “a quite distinctive and recognizable flavour” (Garnett 1984, 110); “a philosophical disposition” (Gilpin 1986, 304); “a ‘big tent,’ with room for a number of different theories” (Elman 1996, 26). C. A. J. Coady (2005, 122) draws a penetrating analogy to a religion, understood as involving “a combination of an often loosely related set of beliefs, a way of thinking and responding, a sometimes desperate desire to preach to the uncomprehending heathen, and a pantheon of canonical exemplars or saints whose very diverse intellectual and practical lives are seen to embody the virtues of the religion.”

Definitions of realism⁴ vary considerably in their details but reveal a striking family resemblance. Realists tend to converge around four central propositions, which in this and the following chapter we will take as providing a working definition of the tradition of realism.

¹ This section was written jointly with Jack Donnelly and was jointly designed as a common introduction for this and the following chapter.

² Although the first edition appeared in 1948, *Politics among Nations* acquired its famous first chapter, which lays out Morgenthau's six principles of political realism, only in the 1954 second edition.

³ These generations are divided by major internal disagreements. For example, Mearsheimer, Glaser, and Schweller are representatives, respectively, of what today are usually called offensive, defensive, and neoclassical realism. This list is quite incomplete: leading figures who could readily be added include Robert Schuman, Nicholas Spykman, Herbert Butterfield, Henry Kissinger, Robert Tucker, Kenneth Thompson, John Herz, and Glenn Snyder.

⁴ In addition to the canonical definitions of Morgenthau (1954, 4–13), Waltz (1979, 117), and Mearsheimer (2001, 30–1), see, e.g., Carr (1946, 63–4), Keohane (1986, 164–5), Frankel (1996, xiv–xvii), Gilpin (1996, 7–8), Grieco (1997, 164–8), Crane (1998, 64–71), Nicholson (1998, 67), Haslam (2002, 12, 17, 250), and Schweller (2003, 322–9).

1. *Groupism*. Politics takes place within and between groups. Group solidarity is essential to domestic politics and conflict and cooperation between polities is the essence of international politics. To survive at anything above a subsistence level, people need the cohesion provided by group solidarity, yet that very same in-group cohesion generates the potential for conflict with other groups. Today the most important human groups are nation states and the most important source of in-group cohesion is nationalism. For convenience, I shall use the term “states” henceforth. But it is important to stress that realism makes no assumption about the nature of the polity. It may apply to any social setting where groups interact.⁵
2. *Egoism*. When individuals and groups act politically, they are driven principally by narrow self-interest. This egoism is rooted in human nature. Its expression, though, may be exacerbated, moderated, or even temporarily overcome by national and international political structures, institutions, and values.
3. *Anarchy*. The absence of government dramatically shapes the nature of international politics. Anarchic political systems of self-help both impose distinctive constraints on the ability of international actors to achieve their purposes and exacerbate group egoism.
4. *Power politics*. The intersection of groupism and egoism in an environment of anarchy makes international relations, regrettably, largely a politics of power and security.⁶ Once past the hunter-gatherer stage, human affairs are always marked by great inequalities of power in both senses of that term: social influence or *control* (some groups and individuals always have an outsized influence on politics) and *resources* (some groups and individuals are always disproportionately endowed with the material wherewithal to get what they want). Key to politics in any area is the interaction between social and material power, an interaction that unfolds in the shadow of the potential use of material power to coerce. As Waltz (1979, 186) put it, “The web of social and political life is spun out of inclinations and incentives, deterrent threats and punishments. Eliminate the latter two, and the ordering of society depends entirely on the former—a utopian thought impractical this side of Eden.” One corollary, to which the following chapter is devoted, is the characteristic realist skepticism toward pursuing moral objectives in international relations.

⁵ This point is often misformulated in the claim that states are the central actors of international politics. If by “state” we mean a particular kind of polity (defined, for example, by territorial sovereignty), then this is clearly not essential to realism. Quite the contrary, no realist believes that the theory is restricted to a particular form of polity. But if by “state” we mean polity or group, we should simply say that in order to avoid confusion.

⁶ Rationality is the other premise most frequently identified (e.g. Keohane 1986, 164; Frankel 1996, xviii; Mearsheimer 2001, 31). The rationality assumption, however, is either in a thin sense shared by almost all theories of international politics (except certain psychological theories) or in a thick sense not actually essential to realism (cf. Schweller 2003, 324–5).

Note that groupism and egoism apply to both domestic and international politics. In fact, canonical realists such as Thucydides and Machiavelli made no categorical distinction between the two, and in the twentieth century Niebuhr and Carr advanced realism as a general approach to the study of politics. Over the past century, however, most have treated realism as pertaining mainly to international politics. In this understanding, anarchy—or, more precisely, government or its absence—qualitatively transforms politics,⁷ making power politics characteristic principally of international relations. Given the focus of this volume, in both this and the following chapter, without denying the possibility of applying realist analysis to domestic politics, we focus on realism as an intellectual tradition for understanding international politics.

2 REALISM'S UNITY: THE SIGNATURE ARGUMENT

If you believe the world generally works by these four rules, then many important consequences follow for how you think about international politics: that the main groups with which people identify—be they tribes, city states, empires, or nation states—will exert a major influence on human affairs and thus that it pays analytically to focus on the most powerful (that is, most resource-rich and influential) groups at any given time; that the group's collective interest, however defined, will be central to its politics, and thus that it pays analytically to be skeptical toward professed aims of foreign policy other than the state interest; and that necessity as the group interest defines it will trump any putatively universal morality, and thus that it pays to look beyond rhetoric to the power realities that realists expect nearly always underlie policy. In analyzing international relations, realists thus look for where the power is, for what the group interests are, and to the role power relationships play in reconciling clashing interests.

Certain types of thinkers tend to share similar bets about how the world works. Critics like to say that the kind of person most likely to accept the core realist propositions is a congenital pessimist and cynic. Realists counter that these propositions are simply realistic—based on the dispassionate observation of human affairs the way they are as opposed to the way we might wish them to be. There is a degree of truth to both views, and they add up to produce a unity of realist thought that links the writings of the highly diverse thinkers realists claim as their canon.

⁷ Herbert Butterfield (1950, 31) put the point in a particularly striking form: "the difference between civilization and barbarism is a revelation of what is essentially the same human nature when it works under different conditions."

For international relations theory, the most important intellectual thread that provides coherence to the realist tradition is what might be called realism's signature argument: If human affairs are indeed characterized by groupism, egoism, and power-centrism, then politics is likely to be conflictual unless there is some central authority to enforce order. When no authority exists that can enforce agreements—"anarchy"—then any state can resort to force to get what it wants. Even if a state can be fairly sure that no other state will take up arms today, there is no guarantee against the possibility that one might do so tomorrow. Because no state can rule out this prospect, states tend to arm themselves against this contingency. With all states thus armed, politics takes on a different cast. Disputes that would be easy to settle if states could rely on some higher authority to enforce an agreement can escalate to war in the absence of such authority. The signature realist argument is therefore that anarchy renders states' security problematic and potentially conflictual, and is a key underlying cause of war.

The four general propositions and the arguments they yield provide coherence to the realist tradition, while debates about the relative importance or priority of each proposition, their overall implications, and the conditions under which they apply generate diversity. In explaining the recurrence of war, for example, some realist writings stress egoism, arguing that human nature is the prior and main cause, while others insist that the condition of anarchy takes explanatory priority (Spiras 1996). Some writings derive from the four propositions the implication that all states will always seek more power, while others hold that power-seeking is far more variable. Some stress the potential of very powerful states to impose a rudimentary political order that may constrain power politics, while others stress the severe limits of that potential. Some stress agency, contending that enlightened or particularly skilled statesmen can ameliorate the destructive potential of power politics. Others stress structure, highlighting the constraints generated by the interaction of egoism and groupism in anarchy.

In short, scholars who agree with each other on the centrality of the core realist premises have nonetheless built out of these premises a bewildering array of arguments, theories, and debates. To organize this diversity, it helps to consider it along two dimensions: theoretical schools within realism, and specific realist theories.

3 REALISM'S DIVERSITY: THEORETICAL SCHOOLS

Scholars routinely describe the recent development of realist thought as a linear succession of attempts to fashion comprehensive theories of international politics,

sometimes called “grand theories” or “research programs.” In this portrayal, by the 1960s Morgenthau’s initial attempt to pull together classical realist thought into such a theory was widely seen as a failure. In the late 1970s, Waltz tried again, with a new, revived realist theory that came to be called “neorealism.” For a time during the 1980s, neorealism “ruled the theoretical seas,” but it soon began to wither in the face of theoretical critiques and empirical setbacks. By the 1990s, it was widely seen as a “degenerating” research program, and a key indicator of that degeneration was the emergence of a proliferation of new realist schools: offensive realism, defensive realism, and eventually neoclassical realism.

This story is mainly mythical. It has been sustained for so long in part because realists themselves have often bought into it, agreeing that the evolution of their scholarly tradition ought to be viewed as a succession of single integrated and internally consistent theories.⁸ In reality, realist research has always been highly diverse, even in neorealism’s heyday. There is nothing new about the existence of multiple schools within realism. What is new—and helpful to scholars seeking to survey the literature and chart developments in research—is that these schools now have names.

3.1 From Classical to Neorealism

After the development of neorealism in the 1980s, scholars began referring to all the realist works of the interwar and early cold war years as classical realism (Ashley 1986). In recent years, scholars have even widened the term to include all realist works from Thucydides to Morgenthau (e.g. Lebow 2003). Classical realism is thus not a subschool; it simply *is* the realist tradition in all its diversity as it unfolded prior to the publication of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. For the subsequent development of international relations theory, however, one classical realist text stands far above all others: Morgenthau’s *Politics among Nations*. This book inaugurated the practice of seeking to translate the realist tradition of scholarship and statecraft into what Morgenthau, in the famous first chapter of his text, called “a realist theory of international politics.”⁹

In one sense, Morgenthau came closer to the Holy Grail of a realist theory of international politics than any of his successors. His major text brings realist arguments to bear on a very large number of phenomena: war, peace, cooperation, international law, diplomacy, ethics, international organization, world public opinion, and more. Even though Morgenthau left out some important aspects of international politics—notably what we would today call international

⁸ Or, as Waltz (1991) himself rather grandly pictured it, the replacement of classical realist “thought” with neorealist “theory.”

⁹ Carr’s *Twenty Years’ Crisis* (1946) does seek to advance international relations as a science, but does not explicitly articulate an overarching theory.

political economy—none of his subsequent imitators came close to matching his comprehensiveness. Where Morgenthau more obviously fell short was in convincing the scholarly community of the plausibility and internal logical coherence of his theory. Even fellow realists found Morgenthau's theory beset by "open contradictions, ambiguity and vagueness" (Tucker 1952, 214). Key concepts such as the "national interest" or "the balance of power" were either undefined or defined in multiple and mutually contradictory ways. And, not surprisingly, arguments deployed in different issue areas did not always cohere.

As scholarly criticisms of realism mounted and the interest in the scientific approach to the study of politics grew (especially in the United States), Waltz sought to revivify realist thinking by translating some core realist ideas into a deductive, top-down theoretical framework that eventually came to be called neorealism. Waltz (1959) held that classical realists' powerful insights into the workings of international politics were weakened by their failure to distinguish clearly among arguments about human nature, the internal attributes of states, and the overall system of states. His *Theory of International Politics* brought together and clarified many earlier realist ideas about how the features of the overall system of states affect the ways states interact.

Waltz's text had a profound influence on the development of international relations scholarship in general and realist thought in particular. But it is not really a theory of international politics. It does not address in any explicit way most of the phenomena that are encompassed by that term. Rather, by restating in the clearest form yet realism's signature argument about how the mere existence of groups in anarchy can lead to powerful competitive pressure and war—regardless of what the internal politics of those groups might be like—Waltz presented a theory that purported to answer a few important but highly general questions about international politics: why the modern states system has persisted in the face of attempts by certain states at dominance; why war among great powers recurred over centuries; and why states often find cooperation hard. In addition, the book forwarded one more specific theory: that great-power war would tend to be more frequent in multipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of three or more major states) than bipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of two major states, or superpowers).

Waltz left to others the task of exploring his book's implications for all other questions of international politics, both general (for example, theories of alliances, arms races, rivalries, international institutions, and so on) and specific (for example, why the cold war began and why the superpower rivalry waxed and waned). The overwhelming majority of scholars seeking to address those questions not surprisingly found Waltz's theory—constructed to address different and usually much more general questions—insufficient. Most responded by using Waltz's work as a foil for developing self-consciously nonrealist explanations of specific puzzles or, more ambitiously, for developing alternative theoretical schools, most notably

institutionalism (Keohane 1984) and constructivism (Wendt 1999). But some responded by developing their own realist theories even as they endeavored to make use of Waltz's. For example, in seeking to explain alliance behavior, Walt (1987) integrated insights from Waltz into a new, related but clearly distinct "balance of threat" theory (discussed below), while Glen Snyder (1997) combined Waltz's theories with other complementary theories. In explaining cooperation, Joseph Grieco (1988) supplemented Waltz's theory with propositions from game theory. And a great many scholars used Waltz's theory as part of more complex explanations for more specific puzzles or events.

Thus, even though Waltz, like Morgenthau, presented his work as a single stand-alone realist "theory of international politics," the natural development of scholarly inquiry led to the development of neorealism as a complex subschool within realism encompassing many Waltz-inspired theories. What linked the research of these scholars was a common bet that Waltz's reformulation of realism was the best place to start inquiry, even if it was never the place to end it. To be sure, these links were often unclear, and the boundaries of the school debatable. But the term neorealism captures the profound influence Waltz had on the thinking and research of many other realist scholars.

Even in its heyday of the 1980s, neorealism never subsumed all realist research. Waltz and his followers focused on a few core realist ideas, especially those that helped explain basic continuities in international politics. They downplayed or ignored theories of change that were also part of the classical realist canon. Two years after Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, Gilpin (1981) published *War and Change in World Politics*, which sought systematically to bring together realist ideas about hegemonic war and change in international politics. Conceived and written independently of Waltz's *Theory*, this book could not possibly be seen as somehow derivative of it. It could hardly have been clearer that neorealism was but a part of a larger, ongoing, and vibrant realist scholarly tradition. Yet, wedded as they were to the idea of single dominant theories or research programs, both realists and their critics tried either to shoehorn Gilpin's work into the neorealist scheme or to downplay it.

3.2 Offensive and Defensive Realism

The advent of neorealism caused scholars to think much harder and more clearly about the underlying forces that drive international relations. Realists working with Waltz's theory discovered that, depending on how they thought about the core assumptions, and what they saw as the most reasonable expectations about real-world conditions, neorealism could lead to very different predictions. Written in a highly abstract manner, Waltz's neorealism ignored important variations in

international relations, including geography and technology. Depending on how one conceptualized those factors, the very same neorealist ideas could generate widely disparate implications about the dynamics of inter-state politics. Out of this realization were borne two new theoretical subschools, each of which built on the basic insights of neorealism.

Defensive realists reasoned that under very common conditions the war-causing potential of anarchy is attenuated (Taliaferro 2000–1). Proceeding from the core realist assumption about groupism, these theorists argued that the stronger group identity is—as in the modern era of nationalism—the harder it is to conquer and subjugate other groups (Van Evera 1999). And the harder conquest is, the more secure all states can be. Similarly, technology may make conquest hard—for example, it is hard to contemplate the conquest of states that have the capacity to strike back with nuclear weapons. Thus, even accepting all Waltz's arguments about how difficult it is to be secure in an anarchic world, under these kinds of conditions states could still be expected to find ways of defending themselves without threatening others, or could otherwise signal their peaceful intentions, resulting in an international system with more built-in potential for peace than many realists previously thought (Glaser 1997). The result was to push analysts to look inside states for the domestic/ideational causes of war and peace.

Offensive realists, by contrast, were more persuaded by the conflict-generating, structural potential of anarchy itself. They reasoned that, with no authority to enforce agreements, states could never be certain that any peace-causing condition today would remain operative in the future. Even if conquest may seem hard today owing to geography, technology, or group identity, there is no guarantee against the prospect that another state will develop some fiendish device for overcoming these barriers. Given this uncertainty, states can rarely be confident of their security and must always view other states' increases in power with suspicion. As a result, states are often tempted to expand or otherwise strengthen themselves—and/or to weaken others—in order to survive over the long haul. The result is to reinforce the classic realist argument about the competitive nature of life under anarchy, regardless of the internal properties of states.

Defensive and offensive realism emerged in the 1990s as outgrowths of Waltz's neorealism. In keeping with the tradition established by Waltz and Morgenthau, many of the scholars who developed these theories saw them as articulating *the* realist theory. Thus, scholars framed much defensive realist theorizing as developments of Waltz's neorealism. And, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer portrays offensive realism as *the* successor to Waltz's neorealism, which he equates with defensive realism. But it is impossible to put the genie of realism's diversity back into the bottle. It is clear that defensive and offensive realism coexist as distinct subschools. And those two subschools hardly exhaust realism's diversity, for many other realist theories fall outside both of them.

3.3 Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism is a problem-focused subschool within realism that embraces rather than denies realism's diversity. Works in this subschool share two features: a focus on the explanation of specific puzzles or events; and the effort to recapture important realist insights lost in neorealists' obsessive search for the one overarching realist theory of international politics. As clear and elegant as neorealism and its immediate outgrowths were, it remained unclear just how relevant they were to any given foreign-policy problem. So focused were realists on defining the single best and most universal formulation of their theory that it began to seem as if the development of realism had taken a completely different path from the analysis of foreign policy. Waltz (1996) himself argued famously that "international politics is not foreign policy," implying that theory development and foreign-policy analysis had become two distinct endeavors with little connection to each other.

Neoclassical realism seeks to rectify this imbalance between the general and the particular. It accepts from neorealism and its descendants the basic utility of thinking theoretically about the international system as distinct from the internal properties of states (Rose 1998). Having carefully specified their assessment of the international conditions particular states face, however, neoclassical realists go on to factor in specific features of a given situation to generate more complete explanations. They seek to recapture the grounding in the gritty details of foreign policy that marked classical realism while also benefiting from the rigorous theorizing that typified neorealism.

Neoclassical realists are not driven by the dream of creating the one universal theory of international politics. For them, the question is: Which realist school or theory (if any) is most useful for explaining a given puzzle or analyzing issues of foreign policy at a given place and time? To some extent, the choice of theory is a contextual issue. For example, offensive realism provides a powerful shorthand portrayal of the incentives and constraints states faced in parts of Europe for long stretches of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. In other periods, and for some groups of states in Europe, defensive realism arguably provides a more accurate model of the international setting. For some problems and issues, the theory presented in Gilpin's *War and Change* may be far more relevant.

The degree to which a theoretical picture of the international system really applies is a matter of judgment, based on the analyst's reading of the context. Neoclassical realists remain agnostic over which theoretical proposition may apply; they bring to bear those theories that are arguably relevant. While they are agnostic over which theory or theoretical school may apply, they agree that theory helps strengthen analysis. From the perspective of realism, a basic set of questions constantly recurs in foreign-policy analysis. To what degree is state X's policy a

response to external pressures and incentives as opposed to internally generated? If a new party were to come to power, how much would the policy change? Would state X respond more favorably to incentives or threats? To answer these questions, one has to imagine what any state would do in X's position. The key contribution of neorealism and its offshoot subschools of offensive and defensive realism is rigorous thinking about exactly these questions. For neoclassical realists, theoretical structures like offensive and defensive realism are not always and everywhere true or false. Rather, they make it easier to perform the key mental experiments that lie at the core of foreign-policy analysis by helping analysts frame their assessments of the external constraints and incentives states face.

4 REALISM'S DIVERSITY: THEORIES

Theoretical subschools do not capture realism's full diversity. Equally important are specific theories about the fundamental constraints and incentives that shape behavior and outcomes in international politics. Subschoools help you figure out the intellectual connections among scholars, how various arguments are related, and how scholarship progresses. But when the issue at hand is a real explanatory problem—such as the effort to explain some puzzling foreign-policy behavior—reach for the specific theories that appear to be relevant.

Arguably the best-known theoretical proposition about international relations is *balance-of-power theory*. Given the basic problem that under anarchy any state can resort to force to get what it wants, it follows that states are likely to guard against the possibility that one state might amass the wherewithal to compel all the others to do its will and even possibly eliminate them. The theory posits that states will check dangerous concentrations of power by building up their own capabilities ("internal balancing") or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances ("external balancing"). Because states are always looking to the future to anticipate possible problems, balancing may occur even before any one state or alliance has gained an obvious power edge. Thus, Britain and France fought the Russian Empire in Crimea in the middle of the nineteenth century less because they saw an immediate challenge to their position than because they reasoned that, if unchecked, Russian power might someday be a threat to them. However wise or unwise it may have been, the thinking in London and Paris at that time strikes many historians as being entirely consistent with the expectations of balance-of-power theory.

Balance-of-threat theory adds complexity to this picture. As its name implies, this theory predicts that states will balance against threats. Threat, in turn, is driven by a combination of three key variables: aggregate capabilities (that is, its overall military

and economic potential), geography, and perceptions of aggressive intentions. If one state becomes especially powerful and if its location and behavior feed threat perceptions on the part of other states, then balancing strategies will come to dominate their foreign policies. Thus, the United States began both external and internal balancing after the end of the Second World War, even though the Soviet Union remained decidedly inferior in most categories of power. Ultimately, the Western alliance overwhelmed the Soviet-led alliance on nearly every dimension. Balance-of-threat theory holds that it was the location of Soviet power in the heart of Europe, as well as the threat inherent in its secretive government and perceived aggressiveness, that produced this outcome (Walt 1985).

Security-dilemma theory. The “security dilemma” is a term coined by John Herz (1950) for the argument that in arming for self-defense a state might *decrease* its security via the unintended effect of making others insecure, sparking them to arm in response. In a hugely influential article, Robert Jervis (1986) showed how this consequence of anarchy could lead security-seeking states into costly spirals of mistrust and rivalry. He argued that the severity of the security dilemma depends on two variables: the balance between offense and defense, and the ability to distinguish offense from defense. Thus, although anarchy is theoretically a constant, “there can be significant variation in the attractiveness of cooperative or competitive means, the prospects for achieving a high level of security, and the probability of war” (Glaser 1997, 172). The article prompted a major debate among realists that eventually ended up in the two subschools of offensive and defensive realism.

Offense-defense theory is an offshoot of Jervis’s development of security dilemma theory. As developed by Glaser, Stephen Van Evera, and others, this is a set of theoretical propositions about how technology, geography, and other factors affect the ease of conquest as opposed to defense, as well as the ease of distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures.

Hegemonic stability theory builds on the observation that powerful states tend to seek dominance over all or parts of any international system, thus fostering some degree of hierarchy within the overall systemic anarchy. It seeks to explain how cooperation can emerge among major powers, and how international orders, comprising rules, norms, and institutions, emerge and are sustained. The theory’s core prediction is that any international order is stable only to the degree that the relations of authority within it are sustained by the underlying distribution of power. According to this theory, the current “globalization” order is sustained by US power and is likely to come undone as challengers like China gain strength.

Power transition theory is a subset of hegemonic stability that seeks to explain how orders break down into war. Building from the premises of hegemonic stability theory, it deduces that dominant states will prefer to retain leadership, that lesser states’ preference for contesting that leadership will tend to strengthen as they

become stronger relative to the dominant state, and that this clash is likely to come to the fore as the capabilities of the two sides approach parity. Applied to the current context, the theory posits that the stronger China gets the more likely it is to become dissatisfied with the US-led global order. It predicts that a war or at least a cold war-style rivalry between the United States and China will become likely unless China's growth slows down or Washington finds a way to accommodate Beijing's preferences.

There are numerous other realist or realist-related theories, but even this list makes my main point: Realist theories, which do the real work of explanation, are far more diverse than any one theoretical subschool. Neither the security dilemma nor hegemonic stability nor power transition figured in Waltz's neorealist theory. The development of defensive realism owes as much if not more to Jervis as it does to Waltz. Equating any one subschool with realism as a whole lets important and potentially useful theories fall through the cracks.

5 MYTH-INDUCED MISCONCEPTIONS

The foregoing discussion suggests that many of the most common criticisms of realism miss the mark in part because of myths of a monolithic and universally valid realism—myths propagated with the willing connivance of many self-proclaimed realists.

The monolithic myth leads to a tendency to equate diversity with degeneration. Many scholars want to think of international relations scholarship as a neatly defined competition between grand theories or paradigms, where each such paradigm is internally consistent, focused on contrasting core principles, and highlighting mutually exclusive sets of explanatory variables (see, e.g., Vasquez 1998; Legro and Moravcsik 1999). Diversity within realism undercuts this vision and makes the world of scholarship messier and harder to organize, and so is portrayed as degeneration, a sign of decline. The problem with this vision is that it is normative, not positive. It is how some scholars think their profession *ought* to work, not how it actually does. Hence, it is profoundly misleading.

The universalistic myth leads to a failure to see the contingent nature of realist theories (see, especially, Brooks 1997). No single subschool or theory is always right or always the source of the master explanation to which others are subservient. Different strands of realism are more or less relevant to different problems and cases. The question for contemporary researchers is which subschools or specific theories apply to a given problem or case? The answer lies in being clear about how the various parts of any theory fit together.

Recall the signature realist argument I spelled out above: groupism, egoism, and power-centrism conspire to make politics under anarchy conflictual. Many realists and critics of realism make the mistake of universalizing one or all components of this argument. For example, many assert that conflict is an assumption that defines realism. This is wrong, and leads to major analytical mistakes on the part of scholars both favorably and unfavorably disposed toward realism. Realists do not assume conflict. Rather, realism contains theories that identify the conditions under which inter-state interactions are likely to be conflictual. Two simple but commonplace misconceptions follow.

First is to deny variation in the salience of any part of the argument. To clarify their theories, scholars seek pure and clean conceptual building blocks. In other words, they strive to put the basic ideas out of which their theories are built in the clearest possible way so that the basic logic at work is clear for all to see. The notion of "anarchy" is an example. Theorists require a clear understanding of anarchy in order to construct a coherent theory of what international politics in an anarchical setting looks like. Scholars mainly interested in building theory are thus very resistant to understanding anarchy as a matter of degree. Hence, realist scholars squabble over whether the logic of anarchy spelled out in defensive or offensive realism is universally valid. And critics of realism cite this squabbling as irrefutable evidence of realism's degeneration.

If you think anarchy is really a constant, then you are likely to think realist theories that highlight anarchy apply equally strongly to all states everywhere. But in practice anarchy varies. States' ability to rely on some authority to enforce agreements is a matter of degree. For example, great powers sometimes seek to enforce order among nearby small states. For those smaller states, anarchy is attenuated. On some set of issues, those states might reasonably expect the local great power to enforce agreements. Realist theories that highlight anarchy, therefore, would not apply particularly strongly to those states on that set of issues. Thus, for example, the United States in Central America, the European Union in the Balkans, and perhaps Russia in Central Asia may all perform this anarchy-attenuating role (albeit in very different ways). The only way to know where and to what degree anarchy is attenuated is to acquire in-depth knowledge about specific states. Only then can the analyst know which realist theories apply.

The second kind of error is to confuse assumptions with predictions. If you mistakenly think that conflict is a core assumption of realism, you might well conclude that whenever states are nice to each other, realist theories must not apply. But this is not necessarily so. Because realist theories explain war, they also explain peace. For realists, peace results when the key causes of war are absent. Thus the amity you might observe among some group of states may be a result of the attenuation of anarchy among them caused by a local order-providing great power. Or amity among one group of states may arise from their shared need to oppose another state or group. In either case, realist theories predict that the absence of conflict is

contingent on a particular configuration of power and that conflict might return when that configuration changes.

6 REALISM TODAY

I have argued that realism is not now and never has been a monolithic and universal "theory of international politics." It has always been diverse, even its grandest theories contingent in scope if not name. The chief development of the last fifteen years is a greater recognition of this fact, as well as a possibly associated decline in realism's centrality to the discipline. In the United States, hopes and fears for a new universal approach have largely turned to formal theory, which has ascended to a dominance of the country's top journals that realists never experienced. With the advent of neoclassical realism, meanwhile, realist research has become more problem focused, and its interactions with research from other traditions more complex and arguably more productive. To be sure, the publication of Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* has led to further elaboration of offensive realism as a new candidate "theory of international politics." But given changes in the discipline and within the realist tradition, it is unlikely that this approach will attract the aspirations and illusions occasioned by Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.

As a result, three key trends are evident. First is a *reduced salience of inter-paradigmatic competition*. Like all scholars, realists are often motivated by dissatisfaction with existing (often nonrealist) explanations, but the impulse to prove the overall explanatory priority of realism over other theoretical approaches has receded. Instead the focus is increasingly on what realist theories might add to knowledge about more specific problems or issues. Most recent realist research represents attempts either to answer general empirical puzzles or to explain particular events or behavioral patterns whose causes and implications remain matters of debate.

The declining salience of paradigm wars has facilitated a second trend: *more productive interactions with other theoretical schools*. Scholars always operate in a competitive scholarly world, where theories and schools of thought are often seen to be competing against others. Adjustments to a theory, recognition of its contingent nature, may be seized upon by intellectual rivals as admissions of the theory's weakness or irrelevance. Realism is often the fulcrum of these academic debates. Most other schools of thought and theories are written in one way or any other as a response to realism. Perhaps responding in turn, realist scholars sometimes have been very reluctant to acknowledge the contingent nature of their theories or the degree to which the explanation of key phenomena requires theories from many

different traditions. At the same time, inter-paradigm rivalries fed the pernicious notion that certain explanatory variables are the special province of particular theoretical approaches. Domestic politics is for liberals, ideas are for constructivists, power is for realists, and so on. Scholars sometimes wrote as if any explanation that incorporates variables from the other side of the paradigmatic fence was somehow suspect.

Competition is inevitable and necessary in scholarship, but there is a difference between competing over the best universal theory and competing over the explanation of specific phenomena. As scholars move increasingly toward the latter approach, the incentives and opportunities for productive interchange increase. In practice, both realists and their counterparts adhering to other research traditions show sensitivity to the complexity of the social world they seek to explain, the contingent nature of all theories, and the consequent premium on integrating arguments and variables long associated with different theoretical traditions. This has been particularly evident in the cross-fertilization of ideas and conjectures between neoclassical realists and constructivists (e.g. Sterling-Folker 2002; 2004; Jackson and Nexon 2004). In addition, works by self-identified realists increasingly incorporate theory and findings from other disciplines, notably psychology (e.g. Wohlforth 1993; Taliaferro 2004).

Third and most important is the *cumulation of new and important research by scholars working within the realist tradition*. This includes work that seeks to account for general phenomena, such as the origins of war (Copeland 2000); suboptimal provision of security by states (Schweller 2006); great-power military interventions (Taliaferro 2004); threat assessment (Lobell 2003); the origins of revisionist state preferences (Davidson 2006); the constraints on peace settlements after major wars (Ripsman 2002); and the dynamics of unipolarity (Wohlforth 1999; Pape 2005), to mention only a few. It also includes research explaining more discrete events or behaviors, such as US foreign policy in the cold war (McAllister 2002; Dueck 2006); the end of the cold war (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000); US, South Korean, and Japanese strategies vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear crisis (Cha 2000); the evolution of US monetary policy after the demise of the Bretton Woods monetary system (Sterling-Folker 2002); the origins of the George W. Bush administration's approach to foreign policy and the invasion of Iraq (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006), and many others.

These works are eclectic. Most avoid chest-thumping advocacy on behalf of realism. Yet, if they had to be classified as being in one theoretical school, all would end up in the realist column. All have in common sensitivity to realist core insights, a central role for the four key propositions that define realism, and an appreciation of how neorealism and its successor subschools can aid in the mental experiments that lies at the core of causal explanation of international phenomena. At the same time, most are open to the insights of classical realism and lack dogmatic attachment to one theory or the other. While they hardly represent the last word

on their respective subjects, in aggregate they stand as testimony to the ongoing contributions realism makes to the discipline.

7 CONCLUSION: THE ADVENT OF MODEST REALISM

The decline of the aspiration for a monolithic and universal realist theory of international relations may well be associated with the relative decline of realism's centrality in the discipline. In the years ahead, the contention with which I began this chapter—that international relations is in many ways a sustained debate about realism—may well read as an anachronism. Diehard realist partisans may regret that development and pine for the days when neorealism seemed to some to have a claim as the field's "master theory." And diehard antirealists may miss the days when an overreaching realism made it easy to tout the most banal observation as a major contribution. But if the interest is in productive scholarship, such regret would be misplaced. Realism's diversity is increasingly transparent, realist scholarship is more problem focused, more empirical, more historically and methodologically sophisticated, and more open to other traditions and disciplines than it ever was in the heyday of classical or neorealism. As a result, scholars working within the realist tradition are arguably adding more to knowledge about their subject today than ever before.

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