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Where are the idealists in interwar International Relations?

LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH*

Abstract. International Relations (IR) textbooks often make reference to an idealist paradigm in interwar IR. This article argues that an idealist paradigm did not exist, and that interwar references to idealism or utopianism are contradictory and have little to do with defining a paradigm. Not only is there no idealist paradigm in IR at this time, but authors from the interwar period that have since been dismissed as idealists rarely share the attributes assigned to idealism or utopianism by later writers. If IR scholars are serious about understanding the history of their discipline then they will have to stop applying misleading and anachronistic terms like idealism.

One of E. H. Carr's most quoted comments from *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is the distinction between the utopian and realist phases in the development of a science. The utopian phase is marked by the dominance of aspirations over a hard-nosed understanding of the world, and is a sign of immaturity. A gloss on Carr's interpretation of science might argue that the mark of a mature science is when it stops thinking in absolutes and regards each issue as complex. This is certainly true of Carr's own subject of history, where simplistic Whig histories – to use Herbert Butterfield's phrase – have given way to complex multilayered readings of the past. Unfortunately, in International Relations (IR) the historical analysis of our own disciplinary history is riddled with oversimplifications and a Whig history that interprets the past only in terms of the present. In a world where current foreign policy initiatives are frequently justified by the drawing of analogies with events in the recent past, IR's incapacity to understand its own history and past role in world affairs is particularly unfortunate.

What I intend to do here is to concentrate on one oversimplification in IR's auto-history, that is the idea that we can talk about an idealist school in IR prior to the Second World War. It is this oversimplification that has crippled attempts to understand the place of IR scholarship in the policy debates of the interwar period. At least two authors have already dealt with the issue of the non-existence of a realist-idealist debate.[1] The

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[1] See, for example, Peter Wilson, 'The Myth of the First Great Debate' *Review of International Studies*, 24(1998); Lucian M. Ashworth, *Creating International Studies: Angell, Mitrany and the Liberal Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), ch. 5; Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Did the Realist-Idealist Great Debate Really Happen?' *International Relations*, 16 (2002), pp. 33–51; Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf*: *A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the concept of idealism not only does not accurately reflect IR's past, it also does an extreme disservice to those who are written off as idealists. The list of idealist traits that appear in introductory IR textbooks, more often than not, bear no relationship to the actual ideas professed by those who have been labelled as idealist. While this is also, to a certain extent, true of those who have been labelled as realists (E. H. Carr and Martin Wight, for example, often fit rather poorly with the list of realist attributes found in introductory texts), the problem with the label idealist is worse. Idealism as a concept in IR is inaccurate, confusing and is often used to describe such a diverse group of people as to be intellectually worthless.

I have three major problems with the term idealism in IR. The first is that the presentation of the concept of idealism does not accurately describe the writers who have been called idealist. The second is that the term obscures major theoretical and policy debates between the vast number of writers written off as idealists, while also overplaying the differences between the supposed realists and idealists. I will explore these two issues in the other sections of this article, beginning with an analysis of the use of the term idealism in interwar IR, and following this with a look at how the concepts of idealism and realism developed in IR afterwards. After this I will assess the writings of five authors who have been generally regarded as idealists by contemporary IR, and argue, using three definitions of utopianism drawn from E. H. Carr, that none fit the category of idealist. The five authors that I have picked are Norman Angell, H. N. Brailsford, Leonard Woolf, Philip Noel-Baker and David Mitrany. All five have been regarded, at one time or another, as idealists by contemporary IR. Four of the five are included in Long and Wilson's *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis*, while all but Mitrany feature in A. J. P. Taylor's *The Trouble Makers.* Angell was one of the authors criticised by E. H. Carr in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, and Woolf and Angell were amongst the most vocal critics of Carr.[2] The fact that Carr is silent on the work of four of the five shows that to treat *The Twenty Years' Crisis* as a comprehensive study of the interwar period is a gross disservice to both Carr and to the period.[3] On another level, what also makes the charge of idealism hard to sustain is that all five were also active participants in the debates and politics of the time. Mitrany dabbled in Balkan and German politics, Noel-Baker served in successive Labour governments, Woolf and Noel-Baker wrote Labour Party policy documents, and all five were at one time or another in the Labour Party's Advisory Committee on International Questions. As Peter Wilson has pointed out, 'the gap between advocacy and analysis' in interwar IR 'was rarely wide'.[4] These authors have also been chosen because I believe that it is particularly inappropriate to call them idealists. A better understanding of their work reveals the complexities of the story of interwar IR, and the consequent need for categories other than idealism and realism to explain the period. There are some for whom the epithet is more appropriate. Certainly people like George Lansbury and Arthur Ponsonby,

[2] David Long and Peter Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-War Idealism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (London: Panther, 1969).

[3] Carr has been well served by some recent reappraisals of his work. See Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr 1892–1982* (London: Verso, 2000).

[4] Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth Century Idealism* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p. vi.

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both Labour Party pacifists and writers on international affairs, fit the definition better.

The third problem is that idealism, as used in IR, gets confused with the more specific use of the term in political theory. The problem here is that the vast majority of writers that have been written off as idealist in IR are, from a political theory point of view, materialists rather than idealists. By materialist I mean that these writers either tended to see thought and ideas as a reflection of matter and material conditions, or they believed that thought should be shaped by changes in material conditions.[5] This is particularly true of writers on the political left. A related confusion here is that a number of those called realists, such as E. H. Carr who was influenced by the British idealist Bernard Bosanquet, have philosophical idealist moments. The Hans Morgenthau of *Scientific Man v. Power Politics* is also strongly philosophically idealist, at least in the first two-thirds of the book. The term idealism would, in fact, be better employed in describing those writers, many of them realists, who have criticised materialism and scientism in IR. In this sense, the 'second great debate' of the 1960s between behaviouralists and traditionalists might be better described as a materialist-idealist debate.

This confusion with philosophical idealism is doubly problematic since the interwar generation of IR scholars were trained in an atmosphere that had witnessed an intellectual contest between the British idealist followers of T. H. Green and their many detractors. While Alfred Zimmern had drawn on the idealist tradition for his inspiration, Leonard Woolf and David Mitrany were influenced by G. E. Moore and L. T. Hobhouse respectively.[6] Both Moore and Hobhouse had been particularly vocal critics of British idealism. Thus, the contest over the validity of idealism – what Hobhouse called the metaphysical theory of the state – was a direct theoretical influence on the writers of the twenty years' crisis. The important point here, however, is that there is no direct correlation between the position that these writers held over the philosophical idealism debate, and where they were slotted by later writers in the presumed realist-idealist debate. There is more work to be done on the links between British idealism and IR, but unfortunately there is not the space in this article to pursue it properly.

A definition of idealism?

Any attempt to refute the charge of idealism in IR is immediately hampered by a lack of consensus about what idealism means. This is not helped by the frequent substitution of the term utopianism – Carr's preferred term – for idealism. Generally, the terms are used interchangeably both then and now, even though the two terms can carry subtly different meanings. Peter Wilson, in his analysis of the international

[5] For a particularly overt and well developed materialist approach, see the arguments in Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage* (Toronto: McClelland and Goodchild, 1911); and H. N. Brailsford, *The War of Steel and Gold: A Study of the Armed Peace* (London: Bell, 1914). Both of these books were reprinted many times in the interwar period.

[6] See Paul Rich, 'Alfred Zimmern's Cautious Idealism: The League of Nations, International Education and the Commonwealth', in Long and Wilson, *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 80; Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, p. 1; Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, p. 76.

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theory of Leonard Woolf, dedicated a whole chapter to the question of 'what is idealism?' before he was able to refute the use of the label to describe Woolf's work.[7] A further layer of confusion is added by the loose use of the terms idealism and realism in the interwar literature itself, although it has to be pointed out that until the later 1930s realism and idealism were not very common labels to apply to IR scholars and their work, except when hurled as very anti-intellectual insults. Interestingly, the future Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, in his review of the socialist movement in 1911, uses 'idealist' and 'utopian' to describe political views that are positive and progressive.[8] A similar interpretation of idealism was later to be taken up by US President Woodrow Wilson, when he frequently praised United States foreign policy as idealist. The implication here is that to be idealist is to think in terms of achievable goals for the common good. In both cases idealism is used as a broad description, rather than as a paradigm. These positive connotations, however, were largely overshadowed by their use as terms of disparagement. In this sense idealism and utopianism became useful rhetorical devices for opponents of change in international affairs. In 1917 Leonard Woolf complained that the charge of Utopian was used by the opponents of any reform in order to discredit change: 'Everything is Utopian until it is tried' was his response to these charges.[9]

The terms idealism and realism in the interwar period were often used in contradictory and inconsistent ways. Sometimes they would be used to describe specific modes of thought, and at other times to describe particular groups. For example, in 1923 Brailsford used realist and liberal idealist to describe two groups of supporters of the First World War. Brailsford's intent was to refute both the supporters of the old diplomacy (realists) and the liberals who saw the war as an opportunity to establish a new order (idealists), and subsequently to argue his own socialist criticism of the postwar order. By contrast, in 1924 Brailsford used the terms realist and idealist to describe two methods of thought that were necessary for good policymaking: 'To see the world as realists, and yet to keep the driving force of our own ideal – that is the test for Labour come to power'.[10] He returned to this theme of compatible modes of thought in 1928.[11] Eight years earlier, in his condemnation of the Treaty of Versailles Brailsford complained that it 'is not the unbending logic of the idealist which has made this sweeping settlement. Fear and ambition . . . have wrought these catastrophic changes'.[12] Here idealists are interpreted as a specific group that had no influence on the construction of the 1919 peace. In 1924 Alfred Zimmern, returning to MacDonald's positive definition of 1911, wrote approvingly of the 'fundamental idealism' of the British people,[13] while a month earlier J. A. Hobson saw hope for international cooperation in the revival of idealism in the United States.[14] A similar use of idealism to denote progressive ideals was applied to

[7] Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, ch. 2.
[8] James Ramsay MacDonald, *The Socialist Movement* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), p. ix.
[9] Leonard Woolf, 'Introduction', in Leonard Woolf (ed.), *The Framework of a Lasting Peace* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), pp. 57–8.
[10] H. N. Brailsford, 'False Road to Security', *New Leader*, 23 March 1923, p. 4; and 'The Other France: A Realistic Study of the Outlook', *New Leader*, 15 February 1924, p. 9.
[11] H. N. Brailsford, *Olives of Endless Age. Being a Study of this Distracted World and its Need of Unity* (New York & London: Harper, 1928), ch. XIV.
[12] H. N. Brailsford, *After the Peace* (London: Parsons, 1920), p. 32.
[13] Alfred Zimmern, 'I Have Joined the Labour Party', *New Leader*, 15 August 1924, pp. 3–4.
[14] J. A. Hobson, 'Is America Moving?', *Foreign Affairs*, 5(1923), p. 3.

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Russian policy in the Balkans by C. Delisle Burns,[15] while the journalist and peace activist Helena Swanwick wrote of the failure of those who cling to the old pre-Great War fallacies of the militaristic international anarchy, and call themselves realists.[16] Idealism is given a more neutral, and descriptive definition by David Mitrany in 1925, when he refers to German supporters of a Pan-Europa plan as a 'more idealistic group'.[17]

Generally, though, the 1920s saw little use of the term idealist and realist, and when they were used it was primarily as adjectives to describe particular policies, and certainly not as paradigms. In the future Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton's 1928 book *Towards the Peace of Nations*, which had a strong influence on the policy of the Second Labour Government,[18] the terms realist and idealist are never used, mainly because they had little to add to the many debates over the form and structure of the contemporary international security architecture.[19] For the most part, those who were later derided as idealists spent too much of their time writing nuts and bolts studies on specific questions to dwell on abstract labelling. David Mitrany wrote on international sanctions,[20] Philip Noel Baker on disarmament and the Geneva Protocol,[21] William Arnold-Forster on arbitration[22] and, in the United States, James T. Shotwell studied the Kellogg-Briand Pact.[23] The major exception to this comes from the right of the political spectrum, where realism and idealism were used as labels for separate modes of thought. The most famous example of this from the 1920s is F. E. Smith's often-quoted rectorial address given at Glasgow University in November 1923. Smith was a major figure in the Conservative Party, and he used this opportunity to denounce what he saw as a flawed intellectual attitude in British foreign policy circles. Smith defined idealism in three ways: it was 'the spirit which impels an individual or group of individuals to a loftier standard of conduct'; the philosophical view that 'in external conceptions the objects immediately known are ideas'; and the antithesis of the 'school of self interest'.[24] The first two, according to Smith, are specific and generally neutral descriptions, but the third is a dangerous creed that is undermining British foreign policy. This idealist school – no members are specified – is contrasted with a realist school that accepts the primacy of self-interest as the driving force of human relations. Realism, for Smith, was firmly

[15] C. Delisle Burns, 'British Foreign Policy – The Next Moves', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 July (1924), p. 9.
[16] H. M. Swanwick, 'An Alternative Policy to the Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March (1924), p. 171.
[17] Letter from David Mitrany to William Gillies dated 15 May 1925, p. 3. James Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 3069, National Archives, Kew, London.
[18] Dalton's influence will be discussed in more detail in my forthcoming book *International Relations Theory and the Labour Party*. Certainly, the book is frequently quoted by Labour sources of the time.
[19] See Hugh Dalton, *Towards the Peace of Nations: A Study in International Politics* (London: Routledge, 1928).
[20] David Mitrany, *The Problem of International Sanctions* (London: Humphrey Milford & OUP, 1925).
[21] Philip Noel Baker, *Disarmament* (London: Hogarth, 1926); and *The Geneva Protocol* (London: King, 1925).
[22] William Arnold-Forster, *Arbitrate! Arbitrate! Arbitrate! The Case for All-Inclusive Pacific Settlement of International Disputes* (London: Labour Party, 1927).
[23] James T. Shotwell, *War as an Instrument of National Policy and its Renunciation in the Pact of Paris* (London: Constable, 1929).
[24] F. E. Smith, 'Idealism in International Politics', in William Camp, *The Glittering Prizes: A Biographical Study of F. E. Smith First Earl of Birkenhead* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), pp. 207–8.

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based on an understanding of a fixed and knowable human nature.[25] Interestingly, though, Smith sees the period *before* the First World War, when British public figures were too willing to accept German assurances of peaceful intent, as the period in which 'Idealism became rampant with those in power'.[26] Smith brings his analysis to a conclusion with a defence of what he sees as the ultimate British realist policy: 'the road of our Imperial destiny'.[27] This comes closest to the conceptions of realist and idealist found in current IR texts, but it must be pointed out that no liberal or socialist writer accepted Smith's categories.

After 1931, in response to the rise of fascism and the seeming inactivity of the Western democracies, realism and idealism began to reappear as terms of abuse. In 1933, in the light of the weakening of the League and the rise of fascism, the socialist H. N. Brailsford associated the dichotomy between idealism and realism with the question of the value of League collective security: 'To spend further time in elaborating the League's charter of paper safeguards against war would be to show a lack of realism', and later in the same piece: 'We have tasks more urgent than the mapping of Utopia.'[28] A year later Gilbert Murray, in his presidential address to the 1934 International Studies Conferences in Paris went out of his way to condemn what he called realist ideas of a static power-hungry human nature and the primacy of national interest. These 'realist' ideas that Murray attacked had been advocated by a representative from Fascist Italy at the conference.[29] In the late 1930s realism came to mean those who advocated a return to what was regarded at the time as the pre-1914 norms of diplomacy such as the balance of power, military alliances and secret diplomacy (despite F. E. Smith's 1923 opinion on that period's idealist credentials), and idealist came to be used as a pejorative for those who supported the League collective security system. An exception is E. H. Carr's analysis of the Treaty of Versailles, originally written in 1937, which refers, despite Brailsford's 1920 claim to the contrary, to 'a substructure of genuine idealism' in the League system, that created institutions that were 'a regular and essential part of the new world order'. Idealism, for Carr, was seen as unhappily blended with 'the exigencies of the victorious Powers' in the other parts of the Treaty.[30] Here, the implication is that idealism was a positive influence, even if its mix with the *realpolitik* of the Allies was an unhappy one. By contrast, in 1938 Salvador de Madariaga saw realism as an atavistic and non-intellectual attempt to return to the pre-1914 diplomacy, and a failure to realise that international relations had changed since the war.[31] Looking back to the Munich agreement of 1938, A. L. Rowse in 1940 criticised the Chamberlain government for claiming that its disastrous appeasement policy was 'realism', and collective security against Hitler was 'midsummer madness'.[32] These

[25] Smith, 'Idealism in International Politics', pp. 208–10.
[26] Ibid., p. 213.
[27] Ibid., p. 216.
[28] H. N. Brailsford, 'A Socialist Foreign Policy', in Christopher Addison et al., *Problems of a Socialist Government* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), pp. 285–6.
[29] Maurice Bourquin (ed.), *Collective Security: A Record of the Seventh and Eighth International Studies Conference, Paris 1934–London 1935* (Paris: International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, 1936), pp. 458–9.
[30] E. H. Carr, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars (1919–1939)* (London: Macmillan, 1948), p. 5. Originally written in 1937.
[31] Salvador de Madariaga, *The World's Design* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), pp. 54, 82–5, 125.
[32] A. L. Rowse, 'The End of an Epoch', in A. L. Rowse, *The End of an Epoch: Reflections on Contemporary History* (London: Macmillan, 1947), p. 69.

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later 1930's attitudes are summed up by Michael Foot in 1944, where realism is the intellectual tool of the right. The intent of the right, in which group Foot includes Carr, is to refute the supporters of collective security on the left, while advocating a return to the discredited pre-1914 diplomacy. This, for Foot, is a strategy that can only lead to fresh conflicts and future slaughters.[33] In the same year Leonard Woolf denounced the ' ''realist'' statesmen and Tory nationalists . . . who] are living in a world which had already disappeared with the stage-coach and tallow candle'.[34] What is interesting about the 1930s is that the term realism is more frequently used than idealism, and when idealism is used it is almost always a term of abuse levelled either by conservatives at the liberals and socialists, or by some socialists at pacifists and (increasingly) supporters of the League.

Thus, the interwar definitions involve three not completely unrelated definitions of idealism. It is the intellectual yoke-mate to realism that allows us to progress; it is a refutation of the belief in a static aggressive human nature and the primacy of self-interest; and it is a description, by their enemies, of the supporters of collective security through the League, who oppose a return to pre-1914 diplomatic practices. E. H. Carr's use of the term utopianism takes aspects of these three interpretations of idealism, although he reverses the association of realism with the right/reactionary and idealism/utopianism with the left/progressive. What is important to note, however, is that the terms realist and idealist are used infrequently prior to 1939, and when they are they are employed as loose descriptions, rather than hard and fast scientific terms. Certainly in Britain it was far more common to use the more familiar terms conservative, liberal and socialist if your intention was an intellectual description, rather than just plain abuse.[35] To interwar writers these were clear and distinct paradigms that were applicable to the domestic and the international realms equally. Conservatism tended to be linked, especially by its enemies, to the old prewar diplomacy that had caused the war; liberalism was linked to both free trade and the development of international institutions; while socialism supported liberal aspirations of transcending the old diplomacy, but believed that questions of economic imperialism and control had to be dealt with before an equitable order was possible. These tended to exist independently of the pacifist tradition, and the presence of pacifists in all three political paradigms created a second, paradigm-crossing, cleavage within IR. When used merely to describe two necessary modes of thought, realism and idealism became separate attributes of all three political ideologies, although idealism as a positive progressive attitude was frequently seen as a defining attribute of liberalism and socialism, albeit tempered by an equal, and necessary, dose of realism. When describing particular groups, realism was most frequently used to describe the conservatives; idealism was often attached to the liberal; while socialist writers, like Brailsford, liked to see themselves as a balanced mixture of both realism and idealism. Just to confuse things, idealism and utopianism as insults were also used

[33] Michael Foot, 'Introduction', in Konni Zilliacus, *The Mirror of the Past* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1944), pp. 13–4.

[34] Leonard Woolf, *The International Post-War Settlement* (London: Fabian Publications and Victor Gollancz, 1944), p. 6.

[35] H. N. Brailsford, for example, preferred to refer to his tradition of thought as socialist. See his contributions to Henry Brinton (ed.), *Does Capitalism Cause War?* (London: H & E. R. Brinton, 1935), pp. 18, 37, 40–1.

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to describe the disparate pacifist traditions. In his 1937 evaluation of the Labour Party, for example, the historian A. L. Rowse refers to the pacifist wing of the Party as 'unrealists'.[36]

Part of the reason why Carr's work created so much debate at the time of its publication was the novelty of his labels. Dropping the tripartite conservative-liberal-socialist categories, his notions of realism and utopianism consciously crossed ideological divides. His definitions of realism and utopianism, however, were based on previous uses of the terms. Carr, following the earlier definition of realism and idealism as modes of thought, presents realism and utopianism as two necessary elements in IR. Utopianism provides the positive side to the dialectic, while realism provides the negative. In *The Twenty Years' Crisis* Carr sees the need for both modes of thought, but is deeply critical of the current manifestation of utopianism. Carr's criticism of the utopians in interwar IR follows much of the same pattern as the criticism that the 'realist' right directed towards the supporters of the League. In this part of his argument he reverts to using the terms as descriptions of actual writers. Despite his occasional association with the left, Carr's criticism of the Utopians follows the same ground as the conservative supporters of the old diplomacy, although many socialists are included in the realist camp, while virtually no liberal is. Not surprisingly, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* favoured the Chamberlain Government's policy of appeasement, especially the recent Munich Agreement.[37] In later works, in which Carr does provide visions of the way the world should work, he clearly favours the 'mode of thought' interpretation of realism and utopianism. In *Nationalism and After*, for example, he proposes a functional system of international government that he sees as a good combination of the recognition of realist power realities and utopian goals.[38] In short, the interwar writers, including E. H. Carr, do not really give us a clear idea of whether idealism is a mode of thought – a tool open to any thinker or group of thinkers – or a way of defining a particular group of thinkers. Prior to Carr most writers on international affairs in Britain preferred to define themselves using the more common ideological epithets.

The post-hoc development of an idealist paradigm

Despite these confusions, the terms realist and idealist came to define the interwar period for future IR scholars. This led to a series of definitions of realism and idealism by the authors of textbooks and reviews of the discipline. Summaries of these various definitions of idealism can be found in two recent publications.[39] The major difference is between those writers, particularly in 1950's America, who saw realism and idealism as two parts of the predominant realist paradigm; and those, particularly textbooks, that saw idealism as a separate paradigm with its own specific writers. The first group includes John Herz's 1951 book, Herbert Butterfield's 1951 article, Arnold Wolfers' short 1969 piece and, more recently, Martin Griffith's 1992

[36] A. L. Rowse, 'The Prospects of the Labour Party', in Rowse, *The End of an Epoch*, p. 112.
[37] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1939), especially pp. 278, 282.
[38] E. H. Carr, *Nationalism and After* (London: Macmillan, 1945), pp. 47–74.
[39] Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, ch. 5; Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, ch. 2.

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book.[40] All four stress idealism and realism as natural tensions within a broader realist-dominated paradigm. For Herz idealism is linked to the use of rationalist solutions to solve problems, while Butterfield contrasts the scientific and moralistic approaches to international affairs. Arnold Wolfers' concern was to create a synthesis between realism, which concentrates on the quest for power, and an idealism that seeks to eliminate power relations through the promotion of universal principles. Martin Griffiths, by contrast, interprets the approaches of Morgenthau and Waltz as idealist, and compares them to the realism of the English school. A different take on this approach can be found within the British Labour Party after the Second World War. The influential Socialist Union pamphlet of 1953, *Socialism and Foreign Policy*, which includes a foreword by Philip Noel Baker, uses realism and idealism as two elements in the evolution of Labour attitudes to the world. The idealism is the essential socialist underpinnings, which were made workable by Labour's acceptance of the realism of power relations from 1914 onwards. Rather than competing poles, realism and idealism become necessary parts of a successful progressive foreign policy.[41]

By contrast, the other set of modern writers regard idealism as a fully fledged, albeit largely defunct, paradigm with recognisably non-realist proponents. Of the writers in this group Hedley Bull is the closest to an accurate view of interwar IR. For him idealism was marked by 'progressivist doctrines'. The plural here is important. Bull recognised that there was not necessarily any agreement on what that progress was. This said, he does list a number of points that he sees as characteristic of idealism, which include democratisation, a more international mindset, the creation of the League, a stronger international law and the work of 'men of peace'. The role of international relations, in Bull's definition of idealism, was to assist these changes.[42] Although Bull's definition brings together a number of disparate points (and authors, since not all of Bull's list of points were agreed to by all those classed as idealists), the central characteristic of a progressive outlook does unite the authors often classed as idealist. Although it should be pointed out that it would also unite them with much of Carr's writing too. In the bulk of the rest of the literature idealism becomes a parody, in which its central tenets seem to be defined by whatever the author sees realism as not being. In Kenneth Thompson's 1977 survey, for example, idealism becomes (1) the belief that institutions can change people's behaviour; (2) that idealism distinguishes between good and evil; and (3) that 'justice is a pre-eminent concern'.[43] While (1) is true of some writers like Mitrany, (2) and (3) are not characteristics of the vast majority of the writers of the period, and certainly not of those most often classed as idealists like Angell, Zimmern or Woolf. Both John Vasquez and Trevor Taylor define idealism (or, in Taylor's case, utopianism) as

[40] John H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Herbert Butterfield, 'The Scientific Versus the Moralistic Approach in International Affairs' *International Affairs*, 27 (1951), pp. 411–22; Arnold Wolfers, 'The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference', in James N. Rosenau (ed.), *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 176–9; Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism and International Politics* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[41] Socialist Union, *Socialism and Foreign Policy* (London: Book House, 1953), especially ch. 1.

[42] Hedley Bull, 'The Theory of International Politics', 1919–1969', in Brian Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 33–6.

[43] Kenneth W. Thompson, 'Idealism and Realism: Beyond the Great Debate', *British Journal of International Studies*, 3(1977), pp. 199–209.

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having a faith in reason to create a peaceful global polity. For Taylor reason leads to a belief in a single moral code and a common concept of justice, while Vasquez repeats Carr's charge of the harmony of interests.[44] While this faith in reason is true for some (Woolf and Angell, for example), it was not true for all (Mitrany and Brailsford). For Anne Tickner idealism is described as a 'legalistic-moralistic . . . approach', which is implicitly linked in her analysis to 'the misguided morality of appeasement'.[45] As we shall see later in our analysis, this supposed link between appeasement and writers written off as idealist is complete nonsense.

There is also confusion in the modern literature about what happened and when. Groom and Olson, who single out Alfred Zimmern as an idealist,[46] argue that in the 1920s idealism was largely an attribute of non-professional IR writers (a reference to the many popular tracts written by political activists), rather than of the 'mainstream literature'. Talking of the pre-1931 textbooks in IR, Groom and Olson ask the question 'to what extent was this literature ''idealist internationalist?'' The short answer is ''not much.'' '[47] They see, like Carr, a major change after 1931, but then make the surprising claim, that certainly does not seem true of British IR, that there was a 'relative dearth of mainstream literature in the depression decade'.[48] This seems to suggest that they did not regard Brailsford, Angell, Mitrany or Woolf as mainstream thinkers. Admittedly, of these four only Mitrany had an academic position at the time. Others, in contrast to Groom and Olson, assume that idealism was the dominant paradigm in IR prior to the 1930s, and that after that it was challenged by realism. Michael Banks talks of realism as a victor in a Great Debate with idealism in the 1930s; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff see the 1930s as characterised by 'a growing recognition among international relations of the gap between the ''utopians'' and the ''realists'', which was best summarised by Carr'; Steve Smith states that the 'response to the failure of idealism to explain the dominant events of the 1930s was the emergence, in good Kuhnian fashion, of an alternative paradigm, realism'; while James Der Derian sees realism as cast 'from idealism's failure to stop Hitlerism'.[49] In a later publication Steve Smith relocates the debate between realism and idealism to the later 1930s and early 1940s,[50] which does correspond to the publication of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* and its many critics, as well as a flurry of more realist texts in the United States.

[44] Trevor Taylor, 'Utopianism', in Steve Smith (ed.), *International Relations: British and American Approaches* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 92–107; John Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 13–19.

[45] J. Ann Tickner, 'Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17(1988), p. 433.

[46] A. J. R. Groom and William C. Olson, *International Relations Then and Now: Origins and Trends in Interpretation* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 73–4.

[47] Ibid., p. 69.

[48] Ibid., p. 93.

[49] Michael Banks, 'The Inter-Paradigm Debate', in Margot Light and A. J. R. Groom, *International Relations: A Handbook of Current Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1985), p. 10; James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations. A Comprehensive Survey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), pp. 6–7; Steve Smith, 'Paradigm Dominance in International Relations: The Development of International Relations as a Social Science', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Summer (1987), p. 192; James Der Derian, 'Introduction: Critical Investigations', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 1.

[50] Steve Smith, 'The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Oxford: Polity, 1995), p. 14.

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Were the idealists really idealist?

What comes out of this summary is a general air of confusion amongst those who refer to idealism and utopianism. There is no agreement about what idealism is (is it an attribute of realism, a mode of thought along with realism, or a separate paradigm?), what it stood for (is it a belief in institutions, or a common morality, or justice, or reason, or science?) where it lay on the political spectrum (conservative, liberal, socialist, or moralistic pacifist?) or when it existed (pre-1914, 1920s, 1930s or 1940s?). Even Carr's definitions of utopianism are not always consistent. Peter Wilson manages to distil three common charges against idealism, largely taken from Carr's definition of utopianism. These are:

1. Utopians 'pay little attention to facts and analysis of cause and effect, devoting their energies instead to the ''elaboration of visionary projects for the attainment of ends which they have in view'' . . .'
2. Utopians 'grossly underestimate the role of power in international politics, and overestimate the role, actual and potential, of morality, law, public opinion, and other ''non-material'' sanctions . . .'
3. Utopians 'fail to recognise that their espousal of universal interests amount to nothing more than the promotion and defence of a particular *status quo* . . . utopians fail to appreciate the self-interested character of their thought'[51]

Let us take a look at each of these three charges in turn in relation to five thinkers regularly accused of being idealists:[52] Norman Angell, Leonard Woolf, Philip Noel Baker, H. N. Brailsford and David Mitrany.

The first charge does not seem to have any applicability to these five writers. The attention to factual details that is a common attribute of much of their writings during this period is a clear refutation of this charge. The interwar writings of all five are often deeply concerned with cause and effect. In the 1920s worries about the effect that the peace treaties would have on future relations is an example of this, while the common concern amongst these writers about the effects of the British National Government's policies towards the League is another. Despite the common normative thread that links writers such as Angell, Woolf, Brailsford, Noel Baker and Mitrany, there are precious few 'visionary projects' amongst them. In all five cases their concerns were with gradual reform, rather than imaginary utopias. There is no grand final vision in Angell's thought. His concern is far more with people's failure to recognise the facts of the changing nature of our new globalised economy.[53]

[51] Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, p. 20.

[52] All of these writers, at one time or another, have been singled out as idealists, although the only one to come under sustained attack from Carr was Angell. Woolf was not mentioned by Carr, but he did write two criticisms of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* [Leonard Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly*, 11(1940), pp. 167–82, and Leonard Woolf, *The War for Peace* (London: Routledge, 1940)]. All but Brailsford appear in Long and Wilson, *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis*, while all, including Brailsford, have featured in modern lists of idealists. I would like to stress that the following is not a refutation of Carr's thesis *per se*, but rather a challenge to those who, since Carr, have used some or all of Carr's categories to describe an 'idealist paradigm' that is meant to have included these five writers. For more detailed recent analyses of Carr's work, see Jones, *E. H. Carr* and Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity*.

[53] This was the main theme in his prewar classic *The Great Illusion* (quoted above n. 2). He returned to this theme regularly. See, for example, his summary of his ideas in Norman Angell, 'The International Anarchy', in Leonard Woolf (ed.), *The Intelligent Man's Way to Prevent War* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), pp. 19–66.

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Brailsford does have a vision of a more peaceful world populated with democratic socialist governments, and certainly David Mitrany criticised him for his over-optimism on this score,[54] but he did try and back this up with arguments, borrowed from J. A. Hobson, for why he thought capitalist states were more war-prone.[55] Mitrany has a vision of a world made up of interconnected functional organisations, but he presents reasons why he thinks that this can, and is, happening, and he also argues why he thinks it conforms to the 'spirit of the age'.[56] Woolf, as befits his Fabian background, is obsessed with backing up his arguments with facts, and his most visionary pronouncements about decolonisation actually became British colonial policy from the 1940s onwards.[57] Noel Baker's concern with making the League of Nations work hardly seems visionary. Rather, it was a recognition that the League existed, and despite its flaws was the only serious means for establishing an alternative to an international system based on war.[58] His knowledge of the realities of League politics, along with his attention to detail on such questions as the Geneva Protocol and British war aims during the Second World War, do not seem to make him an idealist in terms of the first charge.[59]

The charge of underestimating the question of power all depends on how you define power. Certainly, one of the major differences between the pessimism of conservatives and the optimism of progressives is the assumption amongst the latter that power has a positive social side, in addition to a negative exploitative side. All five writers had this progressive view of power. The import of Carr's charge, however, is that the utopian writer is one that wilfully ignores the problem of power relations in the world around them, and assume that other, weaker, forces will suffice to cancel out the 'pole of power', to use Wolfers' phrase. This charge could certainly be levelled at George Lansbury, the leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party from 1931 to 1935 and a confirmed pacifist, whose strong faith in leading by example convinced him that the way to answer the rise of fascism was to disarm as a show of our own peaceful intent. For Angell the very existence of irresponsible power, coupled with his low opinion of the public mind, made some kind of international authority like the League a necessary precondition of a more peaceful world.[60] Morality, for Angell, was a transitory thing that was a reflection of legal norms, while the law required some form of powerful authority to

[54] Letter from David Mitrany to H. N. Brailsford, 14 September 1945; Letter from H. N. Brailsford to David Mitrany, 23 September 1945; Letter from David Mitrany to H. N. Brailsford, 25 September 1945. From the Mitrany Papers at the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London School of Economics.

[55] H. N. Brailsford, *Property or Peace?* (London: Gollancz, 1934).

[56] David Mitrany, *The Progress of International Government* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933).

[57] See, for example, Leonard Woolf, *Empire and Commerce in Africa: A Study in Economic Imperialism* (London: Labour Research Department and George Allen & Unwin, 1920), especially his final chapter on the future of Africa.

[58] See, for example, his popular, *The League of Nations at Work* (London: Nisbet, 1927).

[59] See Noel Baker, *Geneva Protocol*. For Noel Baker's work on the Labour Party's policy on war aims during the Second World War, see the papers of the Labour Party International Sub-Committee of the National Executive for September–October 1939 and September 1943–April 1944, in the William Gillies Papers, Labour Party Archives, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, UK. See also the correspondence between Noel Baker (or 'Noel-Baker' as he was signing himself by then) and Hugh Dalton in the Hugh Dalton Papers at the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London School of Economics, Dalton IIE 7/10.

[60] See his *The Fruits of Victory* (New York: Garland 1972), especially pp. 61–70 and 300–1. Originally published in 1921. See also his *Preface to Peace: A Guide for the Plain Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1935).

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make it work, and public opinion was too easily led by jingoism towards irrationality.[61] Brailsford's concerns about power reflected Carr's. His international thought was influenced by a deep mistrust of the powerful capitalist classes, which he saw as having a vested interest in the system of modern war.[62] Rather than 'grossly underestimating power', Brailsford was extremely worried about the role played by the powerful both domestically and internationally. It was the very existence of powerful state interests that led Mitrany to reject federalism as utopian, and to present his functional approach as an alternative that was compatible with the power relations as they currently existed.[63] Hans Morgenthau certainly seems to have thought that Mitrany's ideas were realistic, since he endorsed Mitrany's functional approach in 1966.[64] Mitrany's approach was also intensely materialist, basing his arguments on the concept of human needs, and firmly rejecting reason as a unifying force.[65] Noel Baker saw the League as essential in a world where, left to their own devices, states would revert to power politics. A League with teeth, therefore, was a necessary alternative to the violent world of independent states.[66] Noel Baker was not entirely convinced that the League, as it was currently constructed, was up to the job, and regarded a series of reforms as vital if the League was to succeed in creating a less violent world.[67] Woolf's analysis of interstate relations reveals that he certainly did understand the role played by power politics, although he did not see it as permanent or even desirable.[68] For example, in his 1940 response to Carr he recognised that the world was going through a time when 'the use of power, force, or violence is playing a predominant part in human society'.[69]

The final charge, the failure 'to appreciate the self-interested character of their thought', is on the face of it more problematic. One part of the charge, however, is easily dismissed: that their ideas were used to promote and defend the *status quo.* All were normative thinkers, who were deeply critical of the *status quo.* In each case their ideas were used to promote radical changes to the way that international affairs were conducted. In this sense these five writers fit better into the earlier definition of idealism and utopianism as progressive, rather than conservative, modes of thought. What can be sustained in many cases is the charge of failing to recognise that the espousal of universal principles masks the sectional interests behind those principles. Certainly, both Angell and Woolf saw concepts like security, peace and justice as universal in the modern world. Angell's work on the optical illusion of war was premised on a belief in a common human reason that often seemed far too close to

[61] See Norman Angell, *The Public Mind. Its Disorders: Its Explanation* (London: Noel Douglas, 1926).
[62] See his contributions to Henry Brinton (ed.), *Does Capitalism Cause War?* (Maidstone: H & E. R. Brinton, 1935), pp. 13–19, 37–41. This was an edited collection of an exchange of letters in *The New Statesman* between 9th February and the 6th April 1935.
[63] David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organisation* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs/Oxford University Press, 1943).
[64] Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Introduction', in David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle, 1966).
[65] See the argument in Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, pp. 38–41 and ch. 4.
[66] Noel Baker, *Geneva Protocol.*
[67] Noel Baker, *League of Nations at Work*, pp. 128–34.
[68] See Wilson's discussion on this point in *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, pp. 73–4.
[69] Leonard Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly*, 11 (1940), pp. 167.

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the interests of developed Western states.[70] Yet, Angell and Woolf were certainly not uncritical of their own thought. Angell's writings after 1918, which were never used by Carr in his *Twenty Years' Crisis*, take a much more critical line on the possibilities of a universal reason,[71] while Woolf's 1940 attack on the concept of the harmony of interests gives a good defence of his support for the development of rules to govern security at the international level.[72] In David Mitrany's case, his use of the concept of human needs, and his gravitation to the functional approach as a response to the failings of security policy in the interwar period, was a product of his deep distrust of universal principles such as human reason or an abstract justice.[73] H. N. Brailsford's ideas were rooted in the socialism he shared with Carr, and consequently he was also suspicious of claims to universal truth made by what he saw as a capitalist elite. Rather, his analysis is rooted in discussions of the question of naked self-interest, especially the clash between the interests of capitalists and the rest of the world's population.[74] For Noel Baker, on the other hand, his faith in the League of Nations resided in his mistrust of the idea that some kind of universal concept of justice or ethics was enough to bring about a working security system.[75] Lorna Lloyd, in her analysis of Noel Baker's work, does point out, though, that he had a strong conviction that progress and the 'twin power of reason and of public opinion' would eventually lead us to more peaceful alternatives based on law.[76] So, while this charge is somewhat substantiated, it is not proved in any comprehensive way that might lead us to say that these thinkers formed a coherent idealist paradigm. Flipping this argument around, it could be said that Carr's views in 1939 were themselves an unconscious defence of the *status quo*, represented by the conservative foreign policy of the so-called National Government of Neville Chamberlain.

Thus, Carr's criticisms of utopianism are hard to use against the five writers that I have singled out above. The problem with Carr's analysis is not that his methodology was wrong *per se*, although his immediate grasp of the international situation proved horribly wrong, it is more that he was pushing at an open door. His vision of a science of IR that combined a realistic grasp of the world as it was, as well as a commitment to a sensible and progressive utopianism, already existed in the interwar period. The problem for Carr, and it is a big one, is that they had not agreed with his support for Chamberlain's foreign policy. The people he classes as utopians were opponents, not supporters, of the policy of appeasement. Perhaps the biggest failing of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is that, while at one level it works forward from Carr's dislike of the 1919 Peace, it also simultaneously works backwards from a support for appeasement. Because of this it also tends to lump the large group of anti-appeasers it discusses into one amorphous mass: 'Again and again he seizes the

[70] See the discussion of his argument from *The Great Illusion* in Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, pp. 112–3.
[71] See especially his *The Public Mind*, quoted above.
[72] Leonard Woolf, *The War for Peace* (London: Routledge, 1940).
[73] Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, ch. 4.
[74] See his analysis of British foreign policy in H. N. Brailsford, 'The Tory Policy of Peace', *The Political Quarterly*, 9 July–September 9(1938), pp. 325–33.
[75] *League of Nations at Work*, especially 131.
[76] Lorna Lloyd, 'Philip Noel Baker and Peace Through Law', in Long and Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 47–8.

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opportunity to trounce the opponents of Mr Chamberlain's policy as utopians'.[77] This actually detracts from Carr's sophisticated theoretical point about the particular interests of supposedly universal theories. It also successfully poisoned the wells of interwar IR by presenting a picture of a realist-idealist conflict where none existed. By glossing over the differences between many of the people classed as utopians, as well as downplaying their similarities with his own thought, Carr's analysis did not present a rounded picture of the debates of the interwar period. But, of course, it was never Carr's intention to do that. His argument is a deliberate overstatement intended to contradict the arguments of his colleagues in the nascent subject of International Relations. The failure to see beyond Carr's polemics lies with those later writers who took *The Twenty Years Crisis* at face value without bothering to look any deeper at the book's context.[78]

Understanding interwar IR

So what were the big splits in English-speaking IR in the interwar period? The first point to make is that the state of the debate was different in Britain than it was in the United States, although there was a certain intellectual overlap.[79] The second is that the common parody of the interwar period seems to assume that the same issues were relevant throughout. That, in a curiously anachronistic way, the problem was always how to deal with Hitler, or someone like him. This is a gross distortion. To support pooled or collective security under the League had very different connotations in 1920, 1929 and 1938.[80] The context of international relations changed so rapidly over the two decades of the interwar period that the various debates over foreign affairs, especially in British circles, tended to shift dramatically. In all, there were four distinct phases. The first, from 1918 to 1924, is dominated by the hopes and failures of the peace treaties. During this period the major points of discussion within IR focused on the shape of the new order; the prospects for, and disappointment with, the new League of Nations; and, for many on the left, the possibilities for renegotiating the peace treaties to make them less punitive. The period ends with the French occupation of the Ruhr and the election of centre-left governments in Britain and France. The second period, between 1924 and 1931, saw a marked drop in calls from the left for the revision of the League and the peace treaties, and a growing commitment to work within the realities of the League. The major issues were German reparations and inter-Allied debts, copper-fastening the pooled security system by outlawing war, and sorting out the relationship between arbitration, League sanctions (including League-approved military intervention) and disarmament. The period began with the normalisation of Franco-German relations, and the

[77] Rowse, *The End of an Epoch*, p292.
[78] Jones, *E. H. Carr*, is particularly useful in understanding this side of Carr.
[79] There is not enough space here to do justice to the American debates of the period, but a good analysis is provided by Brian Schmidt in *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).
[80] Pooled security was the commonly used phrase before the mid-thirties. Collective security only became the preferred term in the last six years of peace. See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Troublemakers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792–1939* (London: Panther, 1969), pp. 163–4. Taylor's conclusions about the reason for this change are misleading, however, and he ignores the common use of the older and alternative phrase of pooled security.

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abortive Geneva Protocol, continued with the Kellog-Briand Pact and the Locarno Treaties (seen as a weaker form of the Geneva Protocol by many on the left, and as a return to power politics by others),[81] and ended with an abortive disarmament conference, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the economic crisis sparked by the Wall Street Crash. The third period between 1931 and 1936 marks the overlap between the period when the League offered a viable alternative world order and the confrontation with fascism. The League was still seen by many writers (Angell and Woolf among them) as a realistic option around which to organise resistance to fascism, but the reluctance of the British and French governments to use the League, the growing independence of the British Dominions, and America's continued semi-isolation led to the League being increasingly sidelined in relations between the democracies and the dictatorships. The electoral disaster of 1931 hamstrung the British Labour Party, which had been a major supporter of the League system since 1924, and left British policy in the hands of a National Government that tended to be suspicious of League collective security, and was increasingly committed to a policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Finally, 1936 to 1939 saw many of the pro-League commentators on international affairs switch to advocating rearmament and collective defence arrangements to isolate Germany. The original opponents of League collective security, as well as many pacifists who had been suspicious of the League from the beginning, supported policies of peaceful change and the appeasement of Germany. The interwar debates, especially in Britain, cannot be understood without first grasping the way that the changing international environment altered and informed the debates.

The major split on the left in the English-speaking world was the debate over whether or not capitalism was the cause of war. It reached its zenith in Britain with an exchange of articles in the *New Statesman and Nation* from February to April 1935, which, amongst others, pitted Brailsford and Harold Laski against Woolf and Angell. The debate was published in book form in the same year. The major difference centred on whether, as Brailsford claimed, capitalism created the conditions that made war likely, or whether the causes of modern war lay more in intangible problems like xenophobic nationalism. In this sense the debate could be called a materialist-idealist debate, although at least one side of this debate saw it as pitting socialism against non-socialists.[82] A second debate within the left centred on the value of the League of Nations. The League had started off deeply unpopular with the left in Britain, but many had reconciled themselves to making the best of a bad job.[83] Others, especially the communists, continued to see the League as a bourgeois institution serving imperialist interests.

In Britain the main split between the left and the right did go part of the way towards resembling a realist-idealist debate. The major figures in the Conservative Party, many of which would go on to develop the policy of appeasement, wanted a return to the pre-1914 diplomatic system, and resented Britain being tied into any

[81] The British Labour Party, for example, cautiously supported the Locarno treaties, with Leonard Woolf and the bulk of the membership of the Advisory Committee on International Questions being particularly supportive. George Lansbury was opposed, as were many left-wingers.

[82] For example, H. N. Brailsford wrote of 'the differences that divide Socialists from Sir Norman Angell'. In Henry Brinton (ed.), *Does Capitalism Cause War?*, p. 13.

[83] For the unpopularity of the League amongst the British left up to 1924, and the subsequent change of heart in the mid-1920s, see Henry R. Winkler, *Paths Not Taken. British Labour and International Policy in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill, NE: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

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kind of pooled security system. An exception to this was Robert Cecil, who remained the strongest voice for League collective security amongst the Tories, and to a lesser extent Anthony Eden. Interestingly, Cecil was retained by the Labour Government in 1929 as an advisor to the Foreign Secretary. Amongst supporters of League collective security the major debate remained the question of League sanctions. Did an international body need, or even have the right, to use force against a sovereign state? Underlying this was the question of the viability of the concept of sovereignty in the modern world, and the role of the nation-state in a viable alternative to power politics. This debate became less pronounced after 1936 with the failure to sustain League sanctions against Italy after the invasion of Abyssinia. It was superseded by the debate over the question of how to deal with the dictators, and the issue of rebuilding a more limited collective security system to confront Germany and Italy. A major distinction has to be drawn between those, like George Lansbury or Stafford Cripps, whose positions remained unchanged even as the international context fluctuated wildly, and those such as Brailsford, Woolf, Angell, Noel Baker and Mitrany, who altered their positions as events unfolded. If there can be said to be a group of idealists or utopians, in Carr's sense, then perhaps it should be used to describe those who failed to modify their positions to fit the new realities. What is remarkable about the five writers mentioned above was the extent to which they did react to changing realities. Brailsford's switch to supporting the League in 1928, despite his deep reservations expressed in 1920,[84] or Woolf's sidelining of the League in his Labour Party memoranda from 1936 onwards, are good examples of this realistic appreciation of the changes occurring around them.[85]

What is interesting about this split between the conservative supporters of the old diplomacy and the liberal and socialist supporters of the new is that between 1924 and 1936 there was largely a consensus on the importance of the League of Nations. The question was more one of how the League should be used. Some writers in IR that have looked at the interwar period have sometimes made the mistake of assuming that the conservatives were deeply suspicious of the League, while the liberals and all but the extreme socialists supported it in one way or another.[86] This is only partially true. In fact the majority of the leadership of the British Conservative Party supported the continued use of the League. Where they differed from the major liberals and socialists was in how they saw the League being used. For them it was a tool for the continuation of the old diplomacy of interstate balance of power.[87] This should not surprise us, considering that it was Conservative politicians who helped to forge the League, as a League of cabinets, in the first place. Initially it was the disappointed liberals and socialists who attacked the League, and interestingly many liberals and socialists abandoned the League system in the 1930s, while many conservative commentators continued to see it as a weak, yet functioning, institution within the broader context of power politics. To see support of the League as a hallmark of an idealist approach, therefore, is to stretch the concept of idealist to

[84] Compare the argument in H. N. Brailsford, *After the Peace* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920), with H. N. Brailsford, *Olives of Endless Age* (New York: Harper, 1928), especially ch. 3.
[85] Leonard Woolf, 'Memorandum on the Attitude which the Party Should Adopt to Proposed Reforms of the League', Labour Party Advisory Committee on International Questions memo, no. 468, July 1936. Labour Party Archives, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, UK.
[86] See, for example, Ashworth, *Creating International Studies*, p. 125.
[87] Zilliacus, *Mirror of the Past*, pp. 281–2.

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include the self-styled realists of the British Conservative Party. It would also mean excluding from idealism such writers as Angell, Woolf and Brailsford from about 1936 onwards.

In all, though, the concept of idealism does not help us understand our subject in the least bit. The various disparate and contradictory concepts associated with the term idealism do not describe the writers of the interwar period in any meaningful way. Nor does idealism help us understand the varieties of thought that existed at the time. The concept of idealism also underpins a Whiggish version of history that ignores the complexities and changes that have occurred over the twenty years of the interwar period in order to construct a simplified history that serves modern concerns. For those who consider themselves realists the concept of idealism offers a failed other with which to favourably compare themselves. For overworked educators realism and idealism (or liberalism) offer a convenient dialectical pair for class debates.[88] In fact, there seems to be no reason for keeping the term idealism in the IR lexicon at all. It is, to use Hayek's phrase, a weasel word with so many contradictory meanings that its single useful purpose seems to be to obscure rather than to reveal. In the case of idealism it acts as a convenient way to write off a whole generation of progressive writers.

So, having demolished the main tool by which academic IR has understood the interwar period, we need a new ordering principle around which to organise our thinking. The best replacement for a Whig history, which orders its narrative around modern concerns and oversimplifications, is a history that tries to recreate the complexities of the past through detailed studies of particular parts of the story. If IR scholars are serious about understanding the history of their discipline then misleading blanket overgeneralisations need to be replaced by a myriad of in-depth studies, each illuminating aspects of what is a complex and still largely untold story.

[88] See for example the panel entitled 'Why it Matters to You. Are you a Liberal or a Realist?', in W. Raymond Duncan, Barbara Jancar-Webster and Bob Switky, *World Politics in the 21st Century*, 3rd edn. (New York: Pearson, 2006), p. 42.

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