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Realism: roots and renewal

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Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Realism: Restatements and Renewal*, Ilford, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1996
Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Roots of Realism*, Ilford, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1996

These two volumes, filled with essays of an unusually consistent high quality, reflect editor Benjamin Frankel's view of realism as 'not a single theory but a family of interpretations'. They also reflect Frankel's view that 'the diversity and richness of realism are a testimony to its vitality and robustness',[1] a position strongly articulated in the essays by Robert Gilpin ('No One Loves a Political Realist') and Michael Spirtas ('A House Divided: Tragedy and Evil in Realist Theory') which open and close *Realism: Restatements and Renewal*.

I read *Roots* and *Renewal* (as I will refer to these volumes) as an effort to rescue realism from Kenneth Waltz's exaggerated (and increasingly sterile) structuralism. *Roots* draws attention to strands in the realist tradition that have recently been ignored or denigrated. The contributors to *Renewal*, however, advance additions and revisions that seek to open realism back up from within a still largely structural approach.

Dale Copeland's 'Neo-realism and the Myth of Bipolar Stability' in *Renewal* inverts Waltz's well-known paean to bipolarity by examining 'dynamic differentials' in power rather than static distributions. Declining powers, Copeland argues, are the principal cause of major wars, especially when their decline seems deep and inescapable. Great-power wars, in this reading, arise because of (impending) *changes* in polarity, and thus lie largely outside the explanatory scope of Waltz's theory. Furthermore, a declining power is likely to initiate war in a multipolar system only if it has military superiority, whereas equality is enough to make war likely in a bipolar order.

Charles Glaser's 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help' presents a complementary critique of Waltz's account of capabilities. Waltz's static, absolute 'strength' conception ignores the relational character of power and the ordinary sense of capability as the capacity to achieve an objective. Capabilities are task-specific, not generic, as the United States found out in Vietnam. Glaser argues that a state's capability to carry out even basic military missions of deterrence and defence rests on (non-structural) variables such as the offence–defence balance. Where offence has a clear advantage and is indistinguishable from defence, and where the risks of being cheated exceed the risks of competition (arms racing), competition is

[1] Frankel (ed.), *Roots*, p. xxiii.

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likely to be inescapable. But in other circumstances, cooperation is a form of self-help fully consistent with a properly specified structural realism.

The contingency of security competition is also a central theme in Randall Schweller's 'Neo-realism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', which revives the distinction between revolutionary and *status quo* powers (shared by realists such as Kissinger, Morgenthau, Carr, Schuman, and Wolfers but rejected by Waltz). If every state sought only to defend its position, security threats would arise only from incomplete information, a constraint that can often be overcome or at least greatly ameliorated. The deeper roots of conflict are the offensive, acquisitive interests of states. Realism, to the extent that it predicts unavoidable political conflict, is *not* simply a theory of defensive positionalism, as neorealists such as Joseph Grieco (and, somewhat inconsistently, Waltz) have argued.

All three essays point to the importance of 'unit-level' variations in state interests and the circumstances of their interactions. Waltz imagines characterless 'units'—not even states—interacting in a void. But revolutionary and *status quo* states may respond very differently to the same 'structure' (as specified by anarchy and polarity). Declining states may respond differently than rising or stable states. And any state may act or react differently depending on the offence–defence balance and variations in the ability to signal intentions. Without considering such factors, neorealist theory has little to contribute to the analysis of international relations.

A more radical challenge to Waltz's effort to 'leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units'[2] is presented in Ashley Tellis's 'Reconstructing Political Realism: The Long March to Scientific Theory' in *Roots of Realism*. Most of Tellis's (very long) essay assesses, through the lens of Popper–Lakatos-style 'critical rationalism', the contributions and shortcomings of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, Kaplan, and Waltz. My interest here, however, is Tellis's programme, announced in the concluding pages of his chapter, of reconstituting realism on an egoistic drive to domination. This would provide a realist equivalent to the microfoundation of utility maximization in neoclassical economics.

Tellis takes Waltz to task for abandoning the logic of economic markets despite his recurrent rhetorical gestures. 'The superiority of structural approaches as theoretical explanatory systems derives from their ability to provide exit-models demonstrating how certain behaviors are logically entailed as a result of entities pursuing some a priori defined preferences'.[3] Neoclassical market theory 'more than adequately explains what any individual firm's behavior would be under a defined market structure with only minimal information about the shape and position of the cost curves facing any particular firm'.[4] Waltz's indeterminate motivational assumptions, however, require him to settle for 'indeterminate predictions'.[5] 'Structure' constrains only in the vaguest and surprisingly loose ways, rather than determines outcomes (as it should in any strong sense of a structural theory).

Waltz, Tellis argues, 'succeeds in denuding his systemic approach of what is most distinctive to every structural explanation: the emphasis on structure as the fully efficient cause of all unit actions. Waltz' causal logic, in contrast, is diffuse and

[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA, 1979), p. 79.
[3] Frankel (ed.), *Roots*, p. 75.
[4] Ibid., p. 76.
[5] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 124, 122, 71.

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dualistic'.[6] This critique complements Alex Wendt's argument that Waltz, for all his pretence of structuralism, ontologically privileges units—capabilities, the distribution of which defines an international structure, are an attribute of units—yet refuses to offer a theory of the state. Waltz's vague and incredibly elastic assumption that states 'at minimum, seek their own preservation and, at maximum, drive for universal domination'[7] cannot replace either a theory of the state or the precise microeconomic assumption of utility maximization.

My own expectation is that the assumption of a drive to domination will yield a general theory of international politics that is just as implausible as a theory that assumes purely defensive positionalism. States pursue multiple interests that either are not lexically ordered or are so ordered only contingently. Whether states are *status quo* or revolutionary powers is largely a contingent historical fact. Whether they are driven primarily by fear, honour, or interest—competition, diffidence, or glory in Hobbes's restatement of Thucydides—varies with time and place, not polarity. And it *varies* while anarchy remains constant.

But even if one continues to seek a general theory based on a transhistorical lexical ordering of interests—a single, coherent theory of human nature—these essays suggest a growing awareness among contemporary realists that Waltz's phobic flight from unit-level contamination cannot be sustained. Tellis, Copeland, Schweller, and Glaser illustrate realists once again recognizing the necessity of properly theorizing the interests of individuals and states. They have in effect recognized that the distribution of capabilities in anarchy alone predicts almost nothing. Hobbesian egoists fearing violent death, Homeric heroes seeking glory through great deeds, Nietzchean individuals driven by a will to power, Christian saints, and *homo economicus* may behave very differently in the same 'structure'.

Glenn Snyder's 'Process Variables in Neorealist Theory' suggests that even some hardcore neorealists are also beginning to move away from Waltz's parallel efforts to abstract from the interactions of states. Snyder begins with the modest admission that Waltz 'is vulnerable to the charge of excessive parsimony, in the sense that the explanatory gain from some further elaboration would exceed the cost in reduced generality'.[8] But he goes on not merely to show the benefits of incorporating process variables but to argue in effect that this is the only way to give structural realism adequate explanatory reach and power. By abandoning Waltz's bizarre insistence on consigning everything except anarchy and polarity to an untheorizable 'unit-level storage bin',[9] Snyder sketches two system-level paths for reinvigorating neorealism.

First, Snyder considers what he calls 'structural modifiers', 'system-wide influences that are structural in their inherent nature but not potent enough to warrant that designation'.[10] Norms, institutions, and military technology are offered as examples. Snyder himself briefly develops an account of nuclear weapons as a system-wide technological change that 'modif[ies] the effects of anarchy by inhibiting aggression and ameliorating the "security dilemma"'.[11] The minor flood of

[6] Frankel (ed.), *Roots*, p. 79.
[7] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118.
[8] Frankel (ed.), *Renewal*, p. 167.
[9] Ibid., p. 169.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 171.

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recent constructivist works has shown that sovereignty is a norm with at least comparable systematic impact on the character of international relations.

Readers without Snyder's attachment to Waltz are likely to chafe at the label 'structural modifiers'. If they really are 'structural in their inherent nature', why not just identify them as part of the structure? The central point, though, is that even Waltz's most generous and sympathetic critics—and 'critic' may even be a description that Snyder would reject—are coming to abandon his conception of structure. The recognition that 'third image' theorizing cannot fruitfully be restricted to anarchy and polarity marks a significant step toward abandoning the wilful theoretical self-mutilation practised by most Waltz-inspired structural realists.

For example, it is obvious, with even the most minimal reflection, that an international system based on territorial sovereignty distributes jurisdiction differently from one based on dynastic sovereignty, while feudal systems and suzerain state systems allocate competences between separate political units in still different ways. Such differences are no less 'structural' than differing separations of powers (allocations of jurisdiction) within hierarchical orders – despite Waltz's insistence that realists ignore them. To take another example, the character of self-help and the security dilemma, the criteria for membership in international society, and the very map of international politics were dramatically altered by self-determination. Waltz, however, perversely insists that the pre- and post-decolonization structure of international relations remained constant.

Snyder's own examples involve military technology. In addition to the nuclear example, he argues that technological changes after about 1870 'increased the speed of mobilization and warfare to the point where it was no longer possible to organize alliances after a war had started',[12] thus profoundly altering the character of nineteenth-century 'multipolarity'. Such a reconceptualization of the system level opens immense new spaces for theoretical inquiry, especially if we take norms and institutions seriously. Allowing a (quasi-) structural place for (at least some) norms and institutions may not make realists all that much more loved, but it is likely to make them less scorned and ridiculed by students of international relations whose eyes are not so resolutely fixed on anarchy and polarity. Realists and non-realists may even be able to begin to converse profitably about issues where a mutual interest has previously been obscured.

Snyder's second path to a more fruitful neorealism stresses 'relationships', which are neither 'structure nor structural modifiers, since they are not system-wide concepts'. Relationships 'lie between structure and interaction', providing 'the situational context of behavior: the conflict, common interests, alignments and power relations that motivate and shape behavioral choice'.[13] Snyder briefly considers the impact of alignments and alliances, patterns of common and conflicting interests, capabilities (understood much as Glaser does), and alliance interdependence.

Relationships allow realists to begin to address the vexed question of change because, as Snyder notes, 'most important changes in international relations, other than the infrequent structural ones, *are* changes in relationships'.[14] Relationships also begin to account for variation in behaviour and outcomes, rather than only

[12] Ibid., p. 170.
[13] Ibid., p. 172.
[14] Ibid., p. 173.

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similarities. For example, Snyder notes that 'the concern about "relative gain", which is, in general, a consequence of anarchy, is far less among allies than it is between opponents'.[15] Anarchy simply is not Waltz's all-pervading, undifferentiated void.

Relationships also provide a theoretical entry to 'internal–external linkages', the systematic pathways by which units and structure interact, and perhaps even mutually shape one another. Relationships 'are the conduit through which structural effects are transmitted to behavior. Likewise, the internal characteristics of states affect interaction largely through their effects on relationships. Relationships are more than a transmission belt for structural and unit effects, however; they also exert independent effects'.[16] For example, Snyder notes that 'alliances both reflect prior interests and create new ones'.[17]

Sharing Waltz's positivist methodology, Snyder presents relationships and structural modifiers as narrowing the range of indeterminacy left by 'structural' constraints. But they can also be seen as an opening from within the neorealist hard core to the kinds of insights constructivists of various stripes (including the English School) have emphasized. Snyder remains a *long* way from Giddens–Wendt structuration theory. He does, however, open spaces for conversations, perhaps even a mutually profitable sharing of insights, that Waltz had closed off.[18]

At this point, however, a realist who had not been bewitched by Waltz might cry out 'Finally, a return to sanity!' Morgenthau, for example, knew of, and emphasized, the importance of alliances, differing patterns in the balance of power, the (real if limited) constraining power of norms and institutions, the difference between revolutionary and *status quo* states, etc. Morgenthau was also acutely aware of the theoretical necessity of a substantive account of human nature or state motivation. From this perspective, the efforts at renewal that Frankel has collected[19] represent self-consciously (social) scientific (neo)realists returning to issues explored by previously disparaged or ignored 'classical' realists. The second volume under review here, *Roots of Realism*, presents a series of arguments for rooting contemporary realism within a classical tradition stretching back to Thucydides.

The three essays on Thucydides, by Paul Rahe, Mark Kauppi, and Laurie Johnson Bagby, challenge the common reading of Thucydides as an arch-realist (seen also in Thomas Johnson's chapter, 'The Idea of Power Politics: The Sophistic Foundations of Realism'). Johnson Bagby presents the most modest critique. Using Michael Doyle's categorization of realists, she contrasts the 'minimalist' realism of Pericles and the 'fundamentalist' appeal to inescapable law-like regularities of the Athenian

[15] Ibid., p. 175.
[16] Ibid., p. 172.
[17] Ibid., p. 178.
[18] Snyder also advocates greater attention to interactions, which Waltz treats as 'an unexamined dependent or intervening variable'. Ibid., p. 187. This is not, however, likely to involve a comparable theoretical opening—or if it did, the resulting (mid-range) theories probably would not be predominantly system level.
[19] The remaining essays in *Renewal* are for my purposes here less interesting, although they are much better than merely solid work. Joao Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the Emulation of Military Systems', examines socialization through emulation, a topic that Waltz raises but never systematically pursues. 'State Interests and Institutional Rule Trajectories' continues Joseph Grieco's efforts to establish the theoretical superiority of defensive positional realism over liberalism. Benjamin Miller, 'Competing Realist Perspectives on Great Power Crisis Behavior', compares power-maximizing, balance-of-power, hegemonic, and international society styles of realism. And Michael Desch explores 'Why Realists Disagree about the Third World (and Why They Shouldn't)'.

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envoys at Melos. Fundamentalism, Johnson Bagby argues, easily degenerates into an ideology that justifies an unlimited, grasping acquisitiveness that is both self-destructive and ultimately incompatible with the moderate and restrained accommodations to necessity that are the core insight of a prudent and defensible minimalist realism.

Rahe takes the argument a step further, suggesting that labelling Thucydides a realist is at once appropriate and problematic.

> Thucydides nowhere simply denies that mankind is capable of governing itself in accord with the dictates of *nomos* [law], *logos* [reason], and *pronoia* [foresight]. But he evidently deems it exceedingly difficult and rare for them to do so. As a consequence, he resorts repeatedly to alpha-privatives to convey the fact that men are forever inclined to give way to *anomia* [lawlessness, disorder], *alogia* [irrationality], and *anoia* [mindlessness] as well as *akolasia* [indiscipline].[20]

In addition, the pursuit of the best risks suffering the worst, as the Athenians do.

> Those who read Thucydides' book with sympathy and care will prefer Athens to Sparta because the former nourishes and the latter stunts human development. Yet it is precisely because Athens gives relatively free rein to the potential for greatness inherent in human nature, that it is Athens, not Sparta, that loses all sense of measure and falls apart.[21]

The fate of Thucydides' Athenians is thus truly tragic, as Cornford argued almost a century ago.

Although Rahe offers a conventional essay in the history of political thought, the other authors make extensive explicit efforts to link classical and contemporary international theory. Kauppi devotes considerable attention to power-transition theories and uses Thucydides to reintroduce issues of national character. Johnson Bagby contrasts Thucydides to contemporary structuralism. Johnson argues that Sophism—an orientation stressing the subjectivity of truth, a pessimistic account of human nature, and the centrality of power in politics—provides a philosophical foundation for realist theorizing that can be traced through Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Carr, and Morgenthau. And Markus Fischer's 'Machiavelli's Theory of Foreign Politics' argues that Machiavelli's theory of human nature (which Fischer sees as very similar to Tellis's drive to domination) offers 'the missing micro-foundation' for structural realism.

There is, of course, much to quibble with in these essays. For example, Johnson's claim that Morgenthau believed that 'all truth is relative'[22] seems to me demonstrably false. There is also plenty of room for interpretative disagreements. For example, Fischer argues that Machiavelli sees political order arising from the desire of clever men to 'dominate and despoil'.[23] This oddly ignores Machiavelli's famous (Polybian) account of the cycle of regimes in *Discourses* I.2, where he argues that the first princes were the best and most just men in the society, and that aristocratic governments initially arose when the few 'subordinated their own convenience to the common advantage . . . in private matters and in public affairs'. As a result, I find that Fischer systematically overstates the importance of domination in Machiavelli. More generally, Fischer and Johnson (and Tellis) rely too heavily for my taste on

[20] Frankel (ed.), *Roots*, p. 139.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., p. 239.
[23] Ibid., p. 255.

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Straussian secondary sources and interpretations, leading them to overdraw the realism of Thucydides and Machiavelli and miss much of the richness and complexity of their work.

Such complaints, however, are far less significant than the powerful efforts of these authors to show that classic sources speak not merely directly but profoundly to contemporary international theory, both directly and by means of contrast. Much the same is true of the three concluding chapters of *Roots*, which offer creative readings of twentieth-century realists.

Jan Willem Honig, in 'Totalitarianism and Realism: Hans Morgenthau's German Years', argues that Morgenthau's radical realism arose largely out of his experience with totalitarianism and represents only one possible line of development out of a more complex and interesting interwar German intellectual environment. Robert Kaufman, in 'E. H. Carr, Winston Churchill, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Us', argues for a 'principled, prudential realism',[24] drawing on Niebuhr rather than either the radical moral relativism of Carr or the scientific aspirations of Waltz. And Patricia Wrightson, in 'Morality, Realism, and Foreign Affairs: A Normative Realist Approach', argues that the characteristic realist orientation toward morality in foreign policy 'is not rejection but ambivalence'.[25] Whatever the particular problems in the arguments of these authors, they effectively problematize some of the certainties with which most of us, critics and exponents alike, come to realism. The Kaufman and Wrightson chapters in particular suggest that seeing realism as aggressively amoral involves a selective reading of the tradition.

All the authors in *Roots* rightly reject treating the classics of the tradition simply as a storehouse of pithy statements and confirmations of well-established views. When they are instead seen as a source of inspiration and new insights, realism comes alive again, for realists and their critics alike. And almost all the contributors to both volumes agree that Waltz's narrowing of the tradition, whatever its contributions, cannot sustain realism in the future.

I myself doubt that either improved social science or greater attention to philosophical foundations will allow realism to fare much better in the new millennium than it has over the past half-century. But with Waltz wearing thin even among realists, the fall is likely to be much less severe than that following Morgenthau's hegemony. And those of us with a fundamentally non-realist orientation are likely to face a more interesting, and challenging, opponent.

Realism, as Wight argued, is *a* perennial tradition of international theory. A new (or older) improved version, even if it (once more) fails to provide an adequate general theory of international relations, has an important place in a more pluralistic discipline. The contributors to these two volumes have taken a significant step toward homesteading a larger, more varied, and almost certainly more fruitful terrain. Whichever side of the realism-and-its-critics divide one lives on, this is a sign of growing health, and hope, for the discipline.

[24] Ibid., p. 351.
[25] Ibid., p. 354.

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