

Reclaiming the critical dimension of realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the ethics of scholarship

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Abstract. This article investigates Morgenthau's views on the ethics of scholarship and argues that all his works should be read in the light of his central goal: speaking truth to power. Doing so demonstrates that for Morgenthau, a realist theory of international politics includes two dimensions: it is supposed to explain international relations, but it is also, fundamentally, a critical project which questions the existing *status quo*. While the explanatory dimension of realism is debated at great length, its critical dimension is consistently overlooked by the more recent, self-named 'critical' approaches which tend to present the two adjectives 'realist' and 'critical' as mutually exclusive. This amounts to an insidious high-jacking of the very adjective critical, which in most cases merely signals one does not espouse a realist perspective. This is highly problematic as it obscures the fact that for Morgenthau, the founding father of realism, political science is by definition a subversive and revolutionary force critical of the existing order. Highlighting the critical dimension that lies at the core of the realist project as formulated by Morgenthau therefore challenges the current narrow use of the adjective 'critical' in the discipline and leads to reclaim it for the realist tradition.

'I am a latent revolutionary'

*Hans J. Morgenthau, Personal Diary*¹

Introduction

This article concentrates on Morgenthau's views on the ethics of scholarship and argues that all his works must be read in the light of his central goal: speaking truth to power. Morgenthau wrote at length, and held very specific views about, the role and function of scholars in society. It is therefore legitimate to claim that, as a scholar himself, Morgenthau attempted to live up to his very demanding definition of scholarly activity, and his assertion that scholars have the moral responsibility to speak truth to power informed all his major works. While Morgenthau's conception of the ethics of scholarship is generally ignored or neglected, it is, however,

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¹ Morgenthau, quoted in Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau – An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University Press, 2001), p. 158.

indispensable to take it into account when approaching his writings. Indeed, it demonstrates that for Morgenthau, a realist theory of international politics always includes two dimensions, which are intrinsically linked: it is supposed to *explain* international relations, but it is also, fundamentally, a normative and *critical* project which questions the existing *status quo*.

While the explanatory dimension of realism is usually discussed at great length, its critical side is consistently – and conveniently – forgotten or underestimated by the more recent, self-named ‘critical’ approaches. However diverse these recent approaches may be in their arguments, what unites them all is what they are supposedly critical of: the realist tradition. The interpretation they provide of realism is well known, and rarely questioned. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to review it at length, it is worth stressing some of the main features which are constantly emphasised.

First then, realism is a state-centric approach, by which is meant that it stresses the importance of anarchy and the struggle for power among states. From this, most critical approaches jump to the conclusion that realism is therefore strikingly ill-equipped to deal with the contemporary era where the state is increasingly regarded as outdated and/or dangerous, because it stands in the path of different, more emancipatory modes of political organisation. Realism, it is also argued, pretends to be objective and to depict ‘things as they are’: but this cannot obscure the fact that theories are never value-neutral and constitute the very ‘reality’ they pretend to ‘describe’. This leads to the idea that realism is in fact nothing but conservatism: it is portrayed as the voice of (great) powers, with the effect of reifying (and therefore legitimising) the existing international order. This explains why Rothstein can confidently argue that realism ‘is . . . implicitly a conservative doctrine attractive to men concerned with protecting the status quo’, and that it is a ‘deceptive and dangerous’ theory, not least because it ‘has provided the necessary psychological and intellectual support to resist criticism, to persevere in the face of doubt, and to use any means to outwit or to dupe domestic dissenters’.² Such views represent a fundamental misunderstanding of the realist project, but are nonetheless widely accepted as commonsense in the discipline.

A typical example of this is the success of Cox’s famous distinction between ‘problem solving’ and ‘critical’ theory. Unsurprisingly, realism is the archetypal example of a problem-solving theory for Cox. His account of the realist tradition sweepingly equates Morgenthau and Waltz, who are described as ‘American scholars who transformed realism into a form of problem-solving theory’.³ Thereafter in his famous article ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders’, Cox refers to the works of both scholars by using the term ‘neo-realism’. Problem solving theory (and therefore realism) ‘takes the world as it finds it . . . as the given framework for action’, while by contrast, the distinctive trait of ‘critical theory’ is to ‘stand apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about’.⁴ Problem-solving theory, says Cox, ‘serves particular national sectional or class interests, which are

² Robert L. Rothstein, ‘On the Costs of Realism’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 87:3 (1972), p. 359.

³ Robert Cox, ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders’, in R. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 211. Later, Cox acknowledges that talking about realism without distinguishing between Morgenthau and Waltz is problematic, and simply makes it clear that his main target is Waltz.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

comfortable within the given order', which therefore means that its purpose is 'conservative'.⁵ Problem-solving theory also pretends to be 'value free', while Cox is keen to remind his reader that it contains some 'latent normative elements', and that its 'non normative quality is however, only superficial'.⁶ By contrast to what Cox presents as a problem-solving theory, being 'critical' in IR means being openly normative, challenging the *status quo*, and seeking to advance human emancipation(s), however this concept is to be defined.⁷ The picture Cox proposes is therefore simple: critical theory is named as such because of its commitment to 'bringing about an alternative order' and because of its openly normative stance, while realism, by contrast, is presented as a theory which in effect reproduces and 'sustain[s] the existing order'.⁸

To be fair, not all critical theorists promote such a simplistic vision of what realism stands for – Cox himself, in some of his later works, recognised that classical realism possesses an undeniable critical dimension. In 1992, providing a more nuanced analysis of the school, he thus accepted that 'classical realism is to be seen as a means of empowerment of the less powerful, a means of demystification of the manipulative instruments of power'.⁹ He did not, however, investigate the critical dimension of realism in much depth, and failed to identify its emancipatory dimension. Other critical theorists demonstrate an awareness of the richness and subtlety of Morgenthau's ideas. The best example remains Ashley's famous piece on the poverty of neorealism, where he justly argues that the triumph of the latter has obscured the insights provided by classical realism. Ashley's analysis remains, however, problematic as his interpretation of Morgenthau does not identify all the critical dimensions of his writings, and ultimately continues to present classical realism as the 'ideological apparatus' of one particular ruling group, that of statesmen, which remains essentially incapable of realising its own limitations. As he writes:

It is a tradition whose silences and omissions, and *failures of self critical nerve* join it in secret complicity with an *order of domination* that reproduces the expectation of inequality as a motivating force, and insecurity as an integrating principle. As the 'organic intellectuality of the world wide public sphere of bourgeois society, classical realism honors the silences of the tradition it interprets and participates in *exempting the 'private sphere' from public responsibility*.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

The 'picture' of classical realism which is provided by Ashley therefore does not adequately capture its inherent critical dimension, as it ultimately presents it as reproducing the existing order and silencing dissent.

Cox's distinction clearly echoes the now classic one between 'orthodox' and 'critical' approaches (a label broad enough to include the self-named Critical Theory, Feminism, Normative theory, Constructivism and Post-Structuralism). The diversity of critical approaches should not obscure the fact that crucially, what allows them

⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

⁷ Ibid., p. 210.

⁸ Ibid., p. 210.

⁹ Robert Cox, with Tim Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 505.

¹⁰ Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), p. 281.

to think of themselves as critical is not simply a set of epistemological (usually ‘post-positivist’) or ontological assumptions they may share. It is also, fundamentally, the image *they* think lies in the mirror when they turn it to realism. In most cases then, it seems to be enough to oppose a simplistic picture of realism like that provided by Cox to deserve the much coveted label ‘critical’. This leads to the idea that it is impossible to be at the same time a realist scholar *and* critical, as the two adjectives are implicitly presented as antithetical.

This clearly amounts to an insidious high-jacking of the very adjective ‘critical’, which more often than not merely signals that one does not adopt a realist approach. The meaning of the adjective is therefore presented as self-evident, and realism is denied any critical dimension. This is highly problematic as this reinforces a typical ‘self-righteousness’ from these ‘critical’ approaches, which tend to rely on a truncated and misleading picture of what realism stands for and conveniently never properly engage with realists’ arguments. The fact that Waltz is always the primary target of these approaches is no coincidence: this article demonstrates that realism as expressed by Morgenthau is at its very core a critical project.

In order to challenge the use of the adjective ‘critical’ by some who tend to think of themselves as such simply by virtue of opposing what they mistakenly present as a conservative theoretical project, the article highlights the central normative and critical dimensions underlying Morgenthau’s works. It does so by assessing his views about the ethics of scholarship. The article is divided into two parts. First, it investigates Morgenthau’s ideal of the scholarly activity, which rests upon a specific understanding of the relationship between truth and power. Second, it focuses on some features which, for Morgenthau, constitute a ‘betrayal’ of this ideal (a term he borrowed from Julien Benda).

The article demonstrates that contrary to the common interpretation of realism as a theoretical outlook that holds an implicit and hidden normative commitment to the preservation of the existing order, Morgenthau’s formulation of realism is rooted in his claim that political science is a subversive force, which should ‘stir up the conscience of society’, and in doing so, challenge the *status quo*. For Morgenthau, IR scholars have the responsibility to seek truth, against power if needed, and then to speak this truth to power even though power may try to silence or distort the scholar’s voice.¹¹ Giving up this responsibility leads to ideology and blind support for power, which is something that Morgenthau always saw as dangerous, and consistently opposed. His commitment to truth in turn explains why, according to him, political science is always, by definition, a revolutionary force whose main purpose is to bring about ‘change through action’. In complete contrast to what ‘critical approaches’ consistently claim, the realist *project* is therefore best understood as a critique of the powers-that-be.

¹¹ While the article concentrates on Morgenthau’s views about the relation between truth and power, it does not pretend to undertake an in-depth analysis of the concept of Truth itself. Nor does it address how one can reach truth – this would deserve another article. These two issues are not directly relevant for the purpose of the article, which is to demonstrate that one cannot decently argue that realism has no critical dimension and is a conservative theory in the sense that it would reinforce the existing order.

Morgenthau on Truth and Power: the role and function of realist intellectuals as critics of the *status quo*

Truth and power

Following Arendt, Morgenthau asserts a fundamental distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.¹² It corresponds to that of thought and action, and ultimately to that of truth and power. Morgenthau therefore provides an ideal of scholarly activity which rests upon a differentiation between the sphere of action (that of politics) and the sphere of thought (that of science). The two realms are fundamentally at odds with one another as they are oriented towards different goals.¹³

Science is oriented towards the pursuit of truth. The distinction between what is true and false lies at the core of scholarship and gives it its specificity as a ‘distinct human activity’.¹⁴ Academics thus perform a crucial and unique function: they are ‘the professional guardians of the truth’.¹⁵ This is clearly more than a job for Morgenthau: it represents a lifetime commitment which should logically influence all aspects of the scholars’ life: ‘this is a profession which requires the dedication and ethos of the whole man. Of such a man, it must be expected that he be truthful not only between 9 and 10 am when he teaches, but always’.¹⁶

By contrast, politics, which belong to the sphere of action, does not seek truth but power.¹⁷ This is why the pursuit of truth necessarily conflicts with the requirements of power. Power always tries to subvert truth, as it represents a danger: it reveals what power is composed of, how it works, while power ‘in order to be effective, must appear as something other than what it actually is. Deception – deception of others and of self – is inseparable from the exercise of power.’¹⁸ Power can only work smoothly by successfully hiding under moral clothes so that its actions appear legitimate. This leads Morgenthau to assert that the first task of a scholar worthy of the name is ‘to speak truth to power’, and in doing so, to unmask power for what it is, relations of domination.¹⁹

This moral responsibility to unmask power is crucial for Morgenthau, and is particularly clear in *Politics Among Nations*, where he emphasises that power will

¹² Hans Morgenthau, ‘Thought and Action in Politics’, *Social Research*, 38:4 (1971), p. 143.

¹³ Hans Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?* (New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 7: ‘science that is undertaken for its own sake and exclusively for the purpose of knowing complies with the ideal of science, and the scientific enquiry is the closer to this ideal the more it is indifferent to purpose and free from function, which are alien to the pure purpose of knowing’.

¹⁴ Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Hans Morgenthau, ‘The Great Betrayal’ (1959), in Hans Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960), p. 342.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

¹⁷ Even though truth and power constitutes two different and incommensurable spheres, they nonetheless entertain a complex relationship as they are also ‘potentially intertwined’. This is because power has an interest in truth, and in turn the conditions of the search for truth may be affected by power. See *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15. It is worth noting that this highlights an important ambiguity that Morgenthau never really managed to solve: indeed, while arguing that scholars must unmask power for what it is, he also asserts that power needs to be effective, and therefore requires a certain amount of secrecy. This is particularly clearly expressed in Morgenthau’s views on diplomacy. I am indebted to Prof. Richard Ned Lebow for pointing this out during our conversations.

always use moral justifications as it cannot afford to appear for what it truly is: ‘The true nature of the policy is concealed by ideological justifications and rationalizations’.²⁰ This is why he repeatedly stresses that the use of moral claims by states is always to be regarded as a disguise for power politics, and consequently denounced as such: power lies when it pretends to be the embodiment of Truth or Justice. Morgenthau never tired of arguing that the Cold War should not be seen as a contest between good and evil, but for what it was, that is, a classic contest for power where the United States had to face an equally classic Russian expansionism.

A realist theory is particularly well equipped to unmask Power and its claims to Truth, as it contains two intrinsically linked dimensions. First, it analyses power for what it is – social relations characterised by a will to dominate others. As Morgenthau writes, ‘the truth of political science is the truth about power, its manifestations, its configurations, its limitations, its implications, its laws’.²¹ This is the explanatory side of realism: it wants to understand what power is, how it works, what it seeks. Stemming from this explanatory dimension is the critical one: from this understanding of power, realism can then unmask power’s claims to truth and morality by permanently emphasising their instrumental dimension to disguise power politics. It can never be, therefore, as some present it, a defence of power *qua* power. By permanently reminding Power that it lies when it pretends to embody Truth or Justice, a realist theory is in essence a critical weapon turned against power.

The realist scholar as an ‘intellectual conscience’: the normative side of realism and the issue of commitment

Arguing that the scholar’s main role is to speak truth to power stresses the inherent normative component of realism: it is not so much that the scholar must explain what power does, or does not. The scholar must also tell power what *ought* to be done. This raises the issue of the scholar’s commitment to political struggles. While realism is usually defined as a school of thought which puts a premium on ethics of responsibility and thus logically thinks ‘for politics’, always paying attention first and foremost to the consequences of political action, it is striking to note that Morgenthau openly admits that as a scholar, his role is not simply to tell power what can be done, but also what *ought* to be done, regardless of the consequences this has for power:²²

[The intellectual] tells power what it can do and what it ought to do, what is feasible and what is required. What he has to say about politics may have political consequences, which he may welcome or deplore as the case may be. But these consequences are a mere by-product, hoped for but not worked for, of his search for the truth.²³

²⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), p. 101.

²¹ Quoted in Sean Molloy, ‘Truth, Power, Theory: Hans Morgenthau’s Formulation of Realism’, *Diplomacy and Statescraft*, 15:1 (2004), p. 8.

²² See also Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, p. 204, on the normative side of Morgenthau’s writings.

²³ Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Power. Essays of a Decade 1960–1970* (London: Pall Mall, 1970), p. 15.

This definition of the scholar's task as telling power what *ought* to be done, and the apparent neglect of what may result from the intellectual's admonitions seem characteristic of Julien Benda's conception of the role of intellectuals. This is no coincidence, as Morgenthau read Benda's works, and openly refers to them when developing his own views on the ethics of scholarship. Benda's famous pamphlet, *La Trahison des Clercs (The Betrayal of the Intellectuals)*, published in 1927, violently attacked the French intellectuals of the time for committing themselves to the defence of 'contingent' truths instead of upholding eternal and universal values like Truth, Justice and Reason.²⁴ Clearly, Benda claims that intellectuals betray their function if they engage into political and partisan debates in order to defend political ideas: by definition, their *raison d'être* is to stand above these and to defend eternal values regardless of the consequences this may have – whether on intellectuals themselves, or on their country.

This could imply that Morgenthau, like Benda, ultimately argues for the preservation of an intellectual 'ivory tower', impervious to political constraints and requirements, and simply advocating what should be done 'in theory'. This is arguably of little help for statesmen faced with agonising decisions which are never clear-cut, as they choose what must be done from a political (contingent) point of view against what ought or should be done from a moral (universal and objective) one. This raises the issue of how much the scholar should commit himself to the issues of the day.²⁵ Morgenthau was passionately involved in the contemporary political debates of his time, and remained all his life a keen observer and commentator of international politics.²⁶ He certainly does not advocate a political science aloof from the crucial political issues of its time. What he proposes is a dual commitment from the scholar:

The intellectual in general, and the political scientist in particular, to be true to their mission, must be committed in a dual way. They must be committed to the objective truth, and they must be committed to the great political issues of the contemporary world. They must descend into the political arena not on behalf of government or any other political interest but on behalf of the objective truth as they see it.²⁷

The scholar thus has a right – and a duty – to commit himself to the 'great political issues of the contemporary world', while at the same time upholding truth. In other worlds, his commitment must be a commitment in his time, not a partisan one in favour of one political party against another.

The moral duty to commit oneself in one's time is central for Morgenthau, and explains why he ultimately defines scholars as the 'conscience of their time'. Such a definition is important for two essential reasons. First, it illuminates Morgenthau's

²⁴ See Julien Benda, *La Trahison des Clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1975), p. 121.

²⁵ This issue has been the subject of a discussion between Wallace, who clearly argues along Morgenthau's ideas that scholars should adopt an attitude of 'semi detachment' toward politics, and Booth and Smith who challenge his conception of truth and power. See William Wallace, 'Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 22:3 (1996), pp. 301–23; Ken Booth, 'A Reply to Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, 23:3 (1997), pp. 371–7; Steve Smith, 'Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, 23:4 (October 1997), pp. 507–16.

²⁶ See for example Michael Joseph Smith, 'Hans Morgenthau and the American National Interest in the Early Cold War', *Social Research* (Winter 1981), p. 766.

²⁷ Hans Morgenthau, 'The Purpose of Political Science', in James C. Charlesworth (ed.), *A Design for Political Science: Scope, Objectives and Methods* (Philadelphia, PA: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1966), p. 79.

perception of his own works: he clearly conceives of his realist theory as a *corrective* to what he then thought was a misguided interpretation of international politics. It is the duty of the social scientist, as an ‘intellectual conscience’ to warn against what he perceives as a flawed understanding of international relations.²⁸ Second, the notion of commitment in one’s time also explains why Morgenthau made different claims at different times, depending on what he regarded as the most pressing requirements of the day. While realism tends to be portrayed as a rigid and static theory which consistently defends the same old arguments regardless of the context in which inter-state relations take place, Morgenthau emphasises the great flexibility of realism, as its primary function, like all political science, is that of a ‘social balancer’:

When the times tend to depreciate the elements of power, [political science] must stress its importance. When the times incline towards a monistic conception of power in the general scheme of things, it must show its limitations. When the times conceive of power primarily in military terms, it must call attention to the variety of factors which go into the power equation and, more particularly, to the subtle psychological relation of which the web of power is fashioned. When the reality of power is being lost sight of over its moral and legal limitations, it must point to that reality. When law and morality are judged as nothing, it must assign them their rightful place.²⁹

This quote is a perfect description of Morgenthau’s shifts during the Cold War. In *Politics Among Nations*, first published in 1948, and throughout the 1950s, Morgenthau forcefully argued that the national interest defined in terms of power should be the ‘guiding star’ of US foreign policy. Morgenthau emphasised power politics at a time when he perceived that foreign policy in the US was dominated by liberal thinking, and the element of power consequently downplayed. Morgenthau saw it part of his ‘educational mission’ to stress its importance, even though that was bound to be quite unpopular with an American audience. Then, from the end of the 1960s onwards, Morgenthau highlighted the importance of ideals, values and purposes in foreign policy. He did so as, ironically, decision-makers seemed to have taken his injunction to ‘follow the national interest defined in terms of power’ too literally for his own liking, and only conceived power in military terms.³⁰ Morgenthau’s commitment to the ethics of scholarship led him to warn against a simplistic understanding of power, and to provide a definition of it that is not simply material, but clearly centred around notions of prestige and reputation, even ideals that a country has to live up to.

Speaking truth to power, from a realist perspective, therefore means telling power what it can and cannot do, and letting power know of its limits. It is not the task of the state to indiscriminately spread its moral values on a global stage, as this can always result in murderous moral crusades which cannot be won, and which are most detrimental to the national interest defined in terms of power. But decision-makers should also be warned against cynicism, which conceives of politics as being uniquely about a struggle for power defined in military terms. Both tendencies are dangerous for Morgenthau, as both indicate a complete lack of political wisdom.

²⁸ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 259.

²⁹ Morgenthau, ‘The Purpose of Political Science’, p. 77.

³⁰ See Kenneth Thompson, ‘Introduction’, in Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), p. iv. See also Frei, *Hans J Morgenthau*, p. 211.

The flexibility of realism is intimately linked to its critical function. Indeed, for Morgenthau, ‘all great political theory from Plato and Aristotle and the biblical prophets to our day, has been practical political theory that intervenes actively in a concrete political situation with the *purpose of change through action*’ (italics added).³¹ Scholars are therefore not supposed to speak truth to power for the sake of it, but in order to ‘stir up the conscience of society’ so that the *status quo* can be challenged. The idea of advocating ‘change’ – however this change is to be defined – is too often characteristically presented as a distinctive feature of ‘critical’ approaches as *opposed* to realism.³² It is crystal-clear, however, that it is far from being that distinctive a feature when compared to classical realism.

The idea of ‘change through action’ also illuminates what Morgenthau means when he argues that truth has a message that is relevant to power. Indeed, Morgenthau does not simply define science by a distinction between truth and falseness: more specifically, science is about distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant knowledge:

Scientific ability is not only the ability to distinguish true from false; it is first of all the ability to select from among the truths accessible to us those that ought to be known. What makes a true scholar . . . is the moral strength to raise the question of the meaning of knowledge itself and to answer it by searching not for knowledge of any kind, but for the knowledge that is worth knowing.³³

One can understand the distinction between ‘what is worth knowing’ and what is not in relation to Morgenthau’s definition of political science as a ‘subversive force’ designed to unmask and unsettle power in order to bring about change. Even though Morgenthau was clearly pessimistic as to whether power would ever listen to truth, he believed in the power of ideas to change the existing order, and was convinced that ‘truth can make people see a lot of things in a new light. And when people see things in a new light, they might act in a new way’.³⁴ Scholars are therefore not supposed to speak *any* truth to power, but only relevant truths, that is, one that *threaten* or challenge power.

Morgenthau’s admonition to speak a truth that is relevant to power has one important implication: this means, at the end of the day, letting power know when it gets things wrong, so that it can do better. In other words, the truth that Morgenthau speaks potentially has the effect of reinforcing power: it can make it more effective, if power takes this truth into account. Advocating, as Morgenthau consistently does, speaking a truth that is ‘relevant’ for power therefore can foster the accusation of conservatism: if it is, indeed, relevant, then power can ensure it acts more efficiently, and maintain a *status quo* that works in its favour. Morgenthau was not unaware of this problem. He does not argue that power is incapable of listening to truth, but on the contrary claims that truth must permanently restrain power by reminding it of its limits – and must do so whatever power does, as power can never be the embodiment of truth. This is a never-ending task:

³¹ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 257.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³³ See for example Krause, Keith, Williams, Michael (eds.), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, p. xii: ‘. . . critical theory takes the question of change at its foundation, in both an explanatory and an evaluative sense’.

³⁴ Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 11.

Truth may even challenge the *status quo* of power on the level of practical politics if it is supported by sufficiently powerful interests. Once those interests have won the struggle for power, yesterday's truth becomes today's ideology, justifying, rationalising and covering up for the new powers-that-be. Then a new cycle begins, and truth again challenges power.³⁵

Realism is therefore best described as a permanent critique of the powers-that-be that constantly challenges the *status quo* and the ideological apparatus upon which it rests.

The realist scholar as a heroic figure

Morgenthau is aware that truth represents a mortal danger for power: 'Truth, by unmasking the pretension of power, at the very least disturbs the power-that-be: for it puts power on the intellectual and moral defensive. Furthermore, it questions the purposes and processes of power and thereby endangers the very framework within which power operates'.³⁶ It therefore comes as no surprise that power always tries to silence the scholar and the truth that he speaks. There are many ways in which power can do so, the most radical being to kill scholars, as happened to Socrates. In the contemporary world, at least in democratic countries, such attempts translate into power courting academics and providing them with social and professional rewards so that they become subservient to its claims and needs. Some intellectuals will always be tempted to replace the search for truth by the search for social rewards. Clearly, for Morgenthau, their popularity is inversely proportional to their intellectual integrity.

He conceives the scholar as a heroic figure, who should be ready to sacrifice everything to his mission. He emphatically stresses that 'a political science that is true to its moral commitment ought at the very least to face the risk of unpopularity'.³⁷ Indeed, speaking truth to power always comes at a price, and scholars should accept this price. Morgenthau also admits that the ultimate sacrifice of one's life or wealth may be a daunting prospect, as not everyone possesses the moral strength of a Socrates.³⁸ However, Morgenthau maintains the Socratic figure as an ideal for scholars, who even if they fall short of the model, must nonetheless 'be aware of its existence' as it defines their function.³⁹

Being morally committed to truth, and accepting to pay the price for speaking this truth to power, should prevent scholars from yielding to one of the most pernicious temptations, namely conformism. For Morgenthau, this is a temptation that is particularly strong in the United States. As he writes, 'it is in the measure of the degree to which political science in America meets the needs of society rather than its moral commitment to the truth that it is not only eminently respectable and popular, but – what is worse – that it is also widely regarded with indifference'.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Morgenthau's understanding of the role of scholars bears the mark of what he

³⁵ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ Morgenthau, 'The Purpose of Political Science', p. 72. Morgenthau personally experienced this under Johnson. See George Eckstein, 'Hans Morgenthau: A Personal Memoir', *Social Research* (Winter 1981), p. 650. See also Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 22.

³⁸ Morgenthau, 'The Purpose of Political Science', p. 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

experienced in Germany in the 1930s: Nazi intellectuals are the archetypal example of scholars who betrayed their moral responsibility to speak truth to power and who ended up justifying the unjustifiable as they bowed to social and political conformism instead of exercising their function as permanent critiques of the society they lived in.⁴¹

Morgenthau's extremely high regard for his profession and his definition of scholars as heroic figures were best expressed in 1959 during the Van Doren Scandal. Charles Van Doren was a lecturer in English at the University of Columbia. He became a contestant in one of the most popular TV game shows of the time, *21*, where candidates had to answer questions related to general knowledge. Van Doren acquired a real star status in America as he kept on winning week after week, displaying an impressive knowledge of a whole range of subjects as diverse as George Washington's life, Shakespeare, Broadway musicals and baseball. He famously made the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1957. Rather presciently, the lead article mentioned that 'some viewers get the feeling that he knows most of the answers immediately and simply makes the audience squirm for the money he gets'.⁴² As it happened, that was exactly the case: in 1959 an enquiry revealed that the whole game had been a fraud, as Van Doren was fed all the answers in advance. When the scandal broke out, Van Doren's initial reaction was to claim his innocence, including to a grand jury investigating the case. He eventually confessed his involvement in the fraud. Immediately after, Columbia University accepted his resignation.

Following Van Doren's resignation, Morgenthau wrote an article, aptly entitled 'The Great Betrayal', in which he applauded the decision of Columbia University. This is an unusually passionate text by Morgenthau where his fury at Van Doren's actions is palpable. He stresses that in the sphere of politics for example, corruption is (sadly) to be expected: politics seeks power, and wealth represents a form of power. Therefore, even though it is entirely deplorable that politicians are corrupted, their corruption is treated with 'complacency'.⁴³ The case of Van Doren is different as he is a scholar and a teacher, and as such, belongs to a profession which is defined by its moral commitment to truth. By consistently lying and by accepting to participate in a fraud, Van Doren 'is not so much the corrupter of the code by which he is supposed to live as its destroyer. This is the peculiar enormity of his outrage, which sets his deed apart from the common corruption of power and wealth.'⁴⁴

Most interesting is Morgenthau's reaction to students' attitudes on the occasion. Following Morgenthau's article on the case, several students sent him letters protesting against his position, stressing that Van Doren was a very good teacher, and that consequently, his dismissal was quite unfair. Revealingly, most asked Morgenthau not to mention their name if he was to write on the topic again, or simply did not sign their letter. Morgenthau's reply to the students is a superb one. In an open letter he entitled 'Epistle to Columbians', Morgenthau starts by expressing his puzzlement at the students' request to remain anonymous, especially as the views they put forward in their letters were in fact those held by the majority of

⁴¹ I am grateful to Professor Richard Ned Lebow for bringing this point to my attention.

⁴² 'The Wizard of Quiz', *Time Magazine*, 11 February 1957, available at: (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,809055,00.html>).

⁴³ Morgenthau, 'The Great Betrayal', in *The Purpose of American Politics*, p. 343.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

students at the time. There was, consequently, nothing controversial about them. Morgenthau directly addresses the students and asks them: ‘What are you afraid of?’ He goes on to explain:

I will tell you what frightens you. You are afraid of your shadow in the sunlight. You are afraid of the sound of your voices in the silence of the crowd. You are afraid of yourself. You are afraid to speak what is on everybody’s lips as long as it is only you who would speak. Only when your voices merge into the chorus of the mass do you cease to be afraid.⁴⁵

This display of conformism is unacceptable for Morgenthau, who then reminds the students of the great figures they, as students, should seek to emulate:

The great men whose lives and works you study are remembered exactly because they were not anonymous, because they showed their faces above the crowd and spoke in a loud voice all by themselves. What they spoke was more often than not the opposite of what the crowd believed and wanted to hear, and many of them lived in prison or in exile, and died in disgrace or on the cross.⁴⁶

Clearly then, the true scholar for Morgenthau is a *dissident*, as he works and thinks against power, and also against conventional wisdom.⁴⁷ The scholar’s voice is of necessity a lonely one, as it raises above the crowd, which always comes at a price. It is precisely the central commitment to truth and the inherent risks it carries which gives the scholarly activity both its *raison d’être* and its grandeur.

Morgenthau and the Vietnam War

Morgenthau does not simply preach this ideal to his students, he lived up to it, especially during the Vietnam war which he, along with many realists, opposed. What is most striking in Morgenthau’s critique of the Vietnam war is the fact that he expressed it as early as 1965, while many intellectuals waited until 1968, after the Tet offensive, when it became quite clear that the war could not be won, to voice their concern about the conflict.⁴⁸ This political courage is wholly consistent with Morgenthau’s ideal of the scholarly activity: scholars must speak truth to power, and accept the inevitable price they will have to pay for doing so. As Falk notes, ‘Morgenthau understood from his initial utterances that this early public opposition to the Vietnam war would deny him future access to official circles in Washington, but he never hesitated, upholding his sense of the academic vocation as devoted above all to integrity, objectivity and principle’.⁴⁹ Morgenthau repeatedly flayed the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 344.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 352–3.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that such conception is not so different from that of ‘post-structuralist’ approaches, which emphasise a posture of ‘dissidence’ as characteristic of their theoretical stance. While the meaning these approaches ascribe to the word dissidence may differ from Morgenthau’s understanding of the term, what they both share is a commitment to ‘stir up the conscience of society’ as Morgenthau puts it. It should therefore be more clearly acknowledged that realism advocates dissidence from the powers-that-be, and that such a posture is in fact intrinsic to realist scholarship as defined by Morgenthau.

⁴⁸ Richard Falk, ‘Hans Morgenthau on Two Wars of America in Vietnam and Iraq’, in G. O. Mazur (ed.), *One Hundred Year Commemoration to the Life of Hans Morgenthau (1904–2004)* (New York: Semeneko Foundation, 2004), p. 28.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

cowardice of some of his colleagues, who while privately disagreeing with US foreign policy in Vietnam, remained strangely silent in public about their views. This is a feature of the betrayal of the intellectuals for Morgenthau as it testifies to the ‘conformism of American society, personal ambition, and inducements that the government holds out to those who do not openly dissent’.⁵⁰ Particularly representative of the above is the fact that pro-war supporters ensured Morgenthau never became president of the American Political Science Association.⁵¹

Morgenthau’s opposition to the Vietnam war was especially unpopular with the Johnson administration. This administration was at the same time courting intellectuals and casting those who disagreed with his political choices as ‘enemies of America’. It created a special operation, aptly entitled ‘Project Morgenthau’ in an attempt to damage Morgenthau’s reputation. Morgenthau recalls how Johnson tried to discredit him as a scholar by presenting him as an ‘urbane, European intellectual’, thus ‘exploiting a residual American xenophobia in order to question [his] credentials’.⁵² Morgenthau then certainly spoke truth to power, and paid the price for doing so.

It is worth noting that what explains Morgenthau’s opposition to the Vietnam war provides the best example of how inseparable the explanatory and critical dimensions of realism are. Indeed, Morgenthau certainly forcefully claims that America should not base its foreign policy upon ideologies, notably that of opposition to ‘communism’, as this leads to intervene anywhere, against any ‘communist’ country without regard to the strategic importance of each for the US. But this is not the only reason why Morgenthau opposed this war. In fact, he makes it clear that its most potentially dangerous outcome is to damage US reputation abroad, and ultimately to turn the US into a counter-revolutionary force, while its unique purpose is ‘equality in freedom’, by itself a revolutionary and emancipatory call. In *Vietnam and the United States*, a book that is a devastating critique of the American intervention, he describes the uniqueness of the US in those terms:

This nation, alone among the nations of the world, was created for a notable purpose: to achieve equality in freedom at home and thereby set an example for the world to emulate . . . It is exactly for this reason that our prestige has suffered so disastrously among friends and foes alike; the world did not expect of us what it had come to expect of others.⁵³

This belief in American exceptionalism precisely explains why Morgenthau opposes moral crusades: not only because they cannot be won, but also, and perhaps above all, because he regards them as characteristic of the USSR. If the US were to launch moral crusades in defence of their ideals, Americans would ‘jeopardize [their] external security, promote the world revolution [they] are trying to suppress, and at home make [themselves] distinguishable perhaps in degree, but not in kind from those with which [they] are locked in ideological combat’.⁵⁴ Aside from concerns over national security then, Morgenthau makes it clear that what matters most in the end is what a country represents, the values it holds, and whether it acts in accordance to

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵¹ Michael Cox, ‘Hans J Morgenthau, Realism and the Rise and Fall of the Cold War’, 47th Annual International Studies Association, San Diego, 23–25 March 2006, p. 24.

⁵² Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 23. See also p. 22.

⁵³ Hans Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1965), p. 20.

⁵⁴ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, p. 89.

these values.⁵⁵ US foreign policy must therefore be judged against the yardstick of the American purpose: to the extent that it betrays it by becoming a ‘leading counter revolutionary force’ instead of being true to its founding ideal, namely to realise ‘equality in freedom’, US foreign policy must be condemned as misguided, and ultimately self-defeating.

In the end, Morgenthau’s views about truth and power and the ethics of scholarship shed light on the critical function that intellectuals perform in any society. In fact, political science is almost inevitably at odds with the demands of society, as it unmasks power, and necessarily goes against conventions which are socially contingent. Morgenthau clearly thinks that political science is in essence critical of the *status quo*. It cannot simply be an explanation of ‘things as they are’, but it must constantly challenge claims to truth emanating from power. In doing so:

... it cannot help being a subversive and revolutionary force with regard to certain vested interests ... for it must sit in continuous judgement upon political man and political society, measuring their truth, which is in good part a social convention, by its own. By doing so ... it becomes a political threat to the defenders or the opponents of the status quo. For the social conventions about power, which political science cannot help subjecting to a critical – and often destructive – examination, are one of the main sources from which the claims to power, and hence power itself, derive.⁵⁶

It is therefore clear that to accuse realism as a whole of preserving the *status quo* misses the point: Morgenthau thought of political science as an activity which is in essence subversive, and which is bound to challenge the existing order. This quote illuminates another *critical* dimension of a realist theory of international politics: it maintains that power is not, and cannot be the measure of all things, and that it must be judged according to standards and ideals that transcend it.

Truth, Power, and universal moral values

Realism is ritually accused of glorifying the state, or at least, of viewing it as the ultimate repository of moral values. It is also presented as a theoretical outlook whose normative commitments are ‘hidden’, as it presents itself as ‘value neutral’. This leads to the argument, alongside Cox’s line, that realism has in fact a hidden commitment to the preservation of the *status quo*. It matters to note that, according to Morgenthau, the realist project is, at its very core, a normative one, clearly centred around the promotion of universal moral values – and that this is spelled out by Morgenthau himself.

Morgenthau was deeply aware of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ diagnosed by Weber, and recognises that ‘the state had become indeed a mortal god, and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal god, the state becomes the only god there is’.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Kennan echoes Morgenthau: ‘Our diplomacy can never be stronger than the impression we contrive to create on others, not just by virtue of what we do but rather – and even more importantly – by what we are’. Quoted in John Coffey, *Political Realism in American Thought* (London: Associated University Press, 1977), p. 60.

⁵⁶ Morgenthau, ‘The Purpose of Political Science’, p. 72.

⁵⁷ Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 197.

But this assertion is not to be understood as affirming that the state constitutes the ultimate source of value.

For Morgenthau, truth does not depend upon power relations: there is separation between truth and power, even if the two spheres are also intertwined. That there is something like truth is precisely what renders the critique of power possible and relevant. Getting rid of the idea of truth as an absolute standard against which things have to be measured means in the end the triumph of power: as there is no standard above power, everything becomes defined by power, and the only option left is to abide by power: 'Without the assumption that objective, general truths in matter political exist and can be known, order and justice itself become the mere byproduct of ever changing power relations'.⁵⁸

Morgenthau clearly believes in the existence of universal values, which are not dependent upon the state system, even though he was rarely explicit about what these values are.⁵⁹ He asserts the existence of a 'universal law that govern all nations', and of 'one moral code'. As for the foundation of this moral code, Morgenthau goes back to theology. The objective moral principles are those enacted by God, which by definition apply to all human beings. Man alone cannot be trusted to discover this higher moral code, he has to look for it in the divine: 'there exists a moral order in the universe which God directs, the content of which we can guess'.⁶⁰ Morgenthau therefore clearly asserted a 'belief in a higher, spiritual destiny for mankind as expressed in the European values'.⁶¹

As for the content of these values, as Frei argues, these 'European values' in fact refer essentially to liberal ideals about human rights. Already, in 1935, Morgenthau had claimed that 'the goal is order, peace . . . the integrity of life, the freedom of the individual'.⁶² He further reasserted the point in 1958 when writing that the values that can be regarded as universal in his view are 'the preservation of life and freedom in the sense of the Judeo Christian tradition and, more particularly, of Kantian philosophy'.⁶³ Sanctity of human life is affirmed as each single individual, alongside Kantian lines, should be regarded as an end, never as a means. So Morgenthau never argued that anything is permissible to ensure the survival of a state, or that any action that further the national interest is to be regarded as morally good. On the contrary, he emphatically stresses that 'moral rules do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency'.⁶⁴ Political success alone then cannot be the ultimate yardstick of action in the sphere of politics. The protection of human life and freedom are given central importance by Morgenthau, and constitute a 'transcendent standard of ethics' which should always animate scientific enquiries. Tellingly, it is on this particular point that Morgenthau completely disagrees with Carr's analysis. He is highly critical of his views concerning the inescapable social

⁵⁸ Morgenthau quoted in Greg Russell, *Hans J. Morgenthau and the Ethics of American Statecraft* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University Press, 1990), p. 60.

⁵⁹ For a very good overview of Morgenthau's stance on values, see Frei, *Morgenthau*, pp. 145–77, where Frei notably shows how Morgenthau argued for the necessity to defend some values, especially when confronted with Nazism in Germany.

⁶⁰ Morgenthau, quoted in Russell, *Morgenthau*, p. 209.

⁶¹ Morgenthau, quoted in Frei, *Morgenthau*, p. 167.

⁶² Morgenthau, quoted *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶³ Morgenthau (personal letter), quoted *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁶⁴ Morgenthau, quoted in Russell, *Morgenthau*, p. 162.

conditioning of all values. This Morgenthau sees as an extremely dangerous slippery slope: without ‘a transcendent point of view’:

The political moralist transforms himself into a utopian of power. Whoever holds seeming superiority of power becomes of necessity the repository of superior morality as well. Power thus corrupts not only the actor on the political scene, but even the observer, unfortified by a transcendent standard of ethics.⁶⁵

Morgenthau certainly does not think of himself as a utopian of power, and maintains that the ‘transcendent standard of ethics’ that protects the humanity of man should be upheld by scholars. This logically means that if the state-centric order threatens freedom and human life, the moral duty of scholars is to seek alternatives forms of political organisations that go beyond it. This is exactly what Morgenthau argued at the end of his life, when reflecting upon nuclear weapons. For him, nuclear war is not, and cannot be, a rational instrument of foreign policy: ‘nuclear power provides governments with a destructive force transcending all possible rational objectives of foreign policy’.⁶⁶ Should a nuclear war be waged, it would ‘prove to be catastrophic in the very vital sense of the survival of the Western civilisation, if not humanity’.⁶⁷

Faced with this prospect, Morgenthau asserts that ‘it is at this point that the realistic and utopian approaches to politics in general, and to international relations in particular, merge’.⁶⁸ It is so as what is required is to adapt to these new conditions and to think of the possibilities to avoid a nuclear disaster. This task is therefore openly normative, and the questions to be answered are both: What can actually be done? And: What should be done? Here again the two dimensions of realism, explanatory and critical, are clear. Thinking about nuclear weapons implies, by definition, transcending the nation-state. This admission is not problematic for Morgenthau, as he always stressed that the nation-state was a historical construction that is not to be regarded as eternal. Morgenthau explicitly states that ‘threatened by the unsolved political problems of the day, we have come to think more and more in terms of a supranational community and a world government, a political organisation and structure that transcend the nation state’.⁶⁹

To think and envisage these new forms of political organisations is regarded as a moral duty for Morgenthau, as without this informed thinking from scholars and decision-makers, the survival of humanity is at risk. He clearly perceived and denounced the potentially destructive power of technology and modern science when it is not oriented towards the transcendent standard of ethics that upholds the dignity of human life. His normative commitment, far from being hidden or implicit, is thus clear. It is also equally misguided to present realism as a ‘state centric’ theory when this is understood to mean that realism is incapable of thinking beyond the state-centric system. As Morgenthau writes in the very first pages of *Politics Among Nations*, ‘Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the political world into nation states will be replaced by larger

⁶⁵ Morgenthau, ‘The Political Science of E. H. Carr’, *World Politics*, 1 (October 1948–July 1949), p. 134.

⁶⁶ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 260. See also Hans Morgenthau, ‘The Fallacy of Thinking Conventionally about Nuclear Weapons’, in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *Arms Control and Technological Innovation* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 255.

⁶⁷ Morgenthau, ‘Fallacy’, p. 264.

⁶⁸ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 260.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the *moral* requirements of the contemporary world' (emphasis added).⁷⁰ While realism maintains the centrality of the state as an actor in international politics, it never thought of the state as the impassable horizon of political and moral life. To pretend so signals a fundamental misunderstanding of the realist project which is, ultimately, to speak truth to power so that the humanity of man is permanently upheld. Going beyond the state-centric system when the situation demands it is therefore regarded as a moral duty from a realist perspective.

Morgenthau and the betrayal of intellectuals

It has been shown that Morgenthau defines the role of scholars as seeking truth, against power if needed, and then speaking this truth to power so that they can bring about change through action. This explains why Morgenthau thought of himself as a permanent critique of power, of the order it imposes, and of the *status quo* it maintains. While Morgenthau had a very specific conception of the intellectual's role and function in society, he had an equally precise idea of what constitutes a betrayal to these. This is the last aspect of Morgenthau's views of ethics of scholarship which shall now be investigated.

Scholars as ideologues

The first problem that Morgenthau identifies is that of corruption by power. Truth by definition unmasks the pretensions of power and shows its real nature, so truth is obviously threatening for power. Power must hide under the guises of morality in order to be effective, and for its actions to appear legitimate. In this task, power is likely to court scholars because of their role as the guardians of truth. Power will do its best to corrupt scholars and to lead them to justify power politics, or in Morgenthau's words, to 'use truth as a means to [its] ends'. By blindly condoning the actions decided by power, scholars cease to be scholars but turn into ideologues: they provide justifications and rationalisations of power politics, which in turn make it seemingly appear for it is not, that is, morally good. They provide an 'intellectual gloss upon power which is made to appear as the objective truth'.⁷¹ Morgenthau repeatedly warned intellectuals against the danger of becoming ideologues subservient to power. While the scholar's function is to seek truth, the ideologue is defined as 'a political agent, subject to the criteria of power. He invests popular passions with the dignity of reason and power with the appearance of truth. He justifies what politicians do in terms not only of necessity, as did Machiavelli, but also of truth and virtue'.⁷²

In the same text Morgenthau unsurprisingly openly refers to Benda's betrayal of intellectuals and attacks these ideologues of power on the same grounds: that is, not

⁷⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 26.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

so much for advocating ideas that favour power and the *status quo* (this signals corruption), but more fundamentally, for doing so while drawing upon their prestige and reputation as scholars (which is when corruption becomes betrayal): ‘it consists in the exploitation of one calling on behalf of another, in the false pretence of politicians, dedicated to the pursuit of power, who make it appear as though they were still intellectuals dedicated to the pursuit of truth’.⁷³ What remains then, is simply a distinction between ‘what is politically relevant and what is not’.⁷⁴ By turning into ideologues and justifying power, scholars present it as the repository of moral values and imbue it with a moral quality that it does not possess. In the end, the very idea of a superior standard to judge power vanishes: ‘the political scientist transforms himself into a dialectically adept, politically dishonest defender of whomever happens to have, and appears likely to have, power, denying any standard transcending politics – a Jesuit who no longer believes in God’.⁷⁵

IR theory and the production of innocuous knowledge

Morgenthau also denounces the tendency of political scientists, and of IR scholars more specifically, to produce a knowledge that is not threatening for power. As previously noted, Morgenthau draws a key distinction between ‘relevant’ (that is, threatening) and irrelevant knowledge, and subsequently repeatedly attacks a certain form of political science, infatuated by the need for collecting more and more data on any possible topic. Clearly for Morgenthau, there are some pressing issues on which one must concentrate, but some studies in social sciences do not really address them. It follows that ‘there is an enormous amount of empirical investigation in sociology, in economics, in political science that is completely meaningless because it has no relation to what anybody would like to know and that is worth knowing’.⁷⁶

Morgenthau also warns academics against what he calls a ‘new scholasticism’ which he saw typical of IR. This expression refers not to the pursuit of truth and to the production of a knowledge that can then be spoken to power, but to ‘an intellectual exercise, frequently executed with a high degree of acumen and sophistication, that tells us nothing we need to know about the real world’.⁷⁷ For Morgenthau, political science should not forget its practical purpose and should not confine itself to the production of fruitless (and endless) purely theoretical controversies which are not relevant to power. He flayed IR theory for this very reason: it has retreated under a ‘protective shield’, behind the academic walls, and indulges in pointless, even though high pitched, ‘non-controversial theoretical pursuits’.⁷⁸ Their non-controversial quality is most obvious when academic debates revolve around methodological issues, using obscure terminologies that only some happy few fellow academics understand – and enjoy. As Morgenthau puts it, ‘Clarity of expression

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁴ Morgenthau, *Science, Servant or Master?*, p. 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50–1.

⁷⁶ Hans Morgenthau, ‘Politics and Political Science’, in Anthony Lang (ed.), *Political Theory and International Affairs: Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle’s The Politics* (Westport, London: Praeger, 2004), p. 24.

⁷⁷ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 246.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

may be . . . disadvantageous, for it is difficult to argue against something one does not understand'.⁷⁹ In fact, this complicated terminology ends up in a truly 'esoteric language and method that allow the trivial to appear important and sloppy reasoning to take on the appearance of precise demonstration'.⁸⁰ Academia thus turns into a close world, only preoccupied by issues or debates which are strikingly non-threatening for power because of the very little relevance they bear to the real empirical and political issues of the day. This is what Morgenthau refers to as 'secularised Talmudism'.⁸¹ While Morgenthau understands the academic fear of being too close to political circles, he argues that this is too often used as a convenient excuse to evade the crucial political problems scholars have the responsibility to address, so that they can speak truth to power in a meaningful way. What one ends up with, therefore, is 'theorising for theorising's sake', or critique for the sake of critique, which constitutes in both cases 'an innocuous pastime engaged in by academics for the benefit of other academics, without effect upon political reality and unaffected by it'.⁸²

Linked to this tendency to praise complicated terminology, and to regard it as advancing science, is the over-production of academics in terms of publications, which is also denounced by Morgenthau. In fact, 'to have discovered or simply published something, whatever it may be, becomes in itself a mark of a scholarship that has lost its transcendent meaning'.⁸³ What Morgenthau attacks is therefore the rationale behind academic publications: they do not so much constitute the outcome of a genuine search for truth, but merely attempts to advance one's career or to ensure one's promotion. By devoting their time to methodological debates which do not address the political issues of the day (or in such an indirect way that they cannot have the slightest impact upon these), by relying on obscure terminologies which mask the poverty of the real insights provided and which conveniently prevent most people from engaging with their arguments, and by publishing works whose only function is to advance career prospects, some IR scholars thus betray their function of intellectual consciences.

*'Dare to know: IR theory for the future'*⁸⁴

Last, and unsurprisingly, Morgenthau also attacks academics who present their findings as 'value free'. This he dismisses as a fallacy: science finds its ultimate purpose not in itself, but in higher philosophical values which it should serve. One key problem for Morgenthau is precisely that science seems to have lost this transcendent sense of direction. On this point, Morgenthau is close to the proponents of the Frankfurt School, and in particular to Horkheimer, as he shares their critique

⁷⁹ Morgenthau, *Science, Servant or Master?*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 247.

⁸¹ Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 20.

⁸² Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 261.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁴ The title of the heading is adapted from Booth's chapter 'Dare Not to Know: IR Theory versus the Future', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, pp. 328–51.

of a purely instrumental reason that can potentially degenerate into totalitarianism.⁸⁵ For Morgenthau, ‘science without meaning’ is one of the most dangerous features of the modern world, and signals the failure of scientific rationalism when it is not oriented towards higher goals: ‘What has failed is . . . man’s control of science because he has been unable to set science tasks that affirm life and enlarge it’.⁸⁶ Such failure partly originates in the positivist belief in a value-neutral science which Morgenthau denounces. Science must be directed by transcendent values (the protection of freedom and life for Morgenthau), and a true scientific enquiry is always animated by the desire to promote these. It is therefore absurd to pretend science can ever be value-neutral. As Morgenthau repeatedly stresses, science, by deciding what is worth knowing, always conveys specific values ‘about the meaning of the reality with which it is concerned’.⁸⁷ To pretend otherwise is yet another way of escaping one’s responsibility as a scholar.

Once again, the difference between such an assertion and some ideas advanced by the self-named ‘critical’ approaches is tenuous at best. At this stage, it is worth remembering Cox’s assertion that ‘theory is always for someone and for some purposes’,⁸⁸ and his subsequent claim that it is partly because of its awareness of the impossibility of having anything like a value-free enquiry that critical theory is in fact critical – as it clearly commits itself to seeking alternatives to the existing order. Cox is confident that (neo) realists completely missed this point, and feels the need to remind them of this basic idea: that science is not value-neutral and that because of this, one should be committed to the promotion of values which uphold the dignity and the emancipation of mankind. This, however, was consistently and forcefully advocated by Morgenthau, and cannot possibly constitute a distinctive feature that would allow critical theory to be so-called as *opposed* to realism.

The firm belief that science should be oriented towards the pursuit of truth, and should be animated by a strong normative commitment and sense of purpose equates the realist project with the Socratic one: ‘dare to know’.⁸⁹ In opposition to what Booth once claimed, then, the motto of IR should certainly not be ‘dare not to know’ and IR should not make a virtue of celebrating ‘confusion’.⁹⁰ IR should be about the analysis of power for what it is, relations of domination; it should address the important political issues of the day in a democratic way, which means, among other things, giving up complicated terminologies and submitting itself more often than it

⁸⁵ See for example Mark Hoffman, ‘Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 16:2 (1987), p. 233.

⁸⁶ Morgenthau, *Science, Servant or Master?*, p. 29.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ Cox, ‘States, Social Forces and World Orders’, p. 207.

⁸⁹ Morgenthau, ‘Thought and Action in Politics’, p. 161.

⁹⁰ See Ken Booth, ‘Dare Not to Know: IR Theory versus the Future’, in *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 330. ‘The implications of saying “dare not to know” in international relations are profound. They entail a revolution in the ontology, epistemology and agenda of the discipline. Dare not to know means: re-examining basic concepts; opening up what has been closed out; re-humanising what has been dehumanised, de-gendering what has been gendered; celebrating confusion rather than certainty; dethroning the logic of anarchy with the logics of anarchy; denaturalising established common sense; populating the frontier zones between International Relations and other academic disciplines; ideologising the supposedly ‘objective’; re-imagining the humanly constituted; contextualising the tradition; making normativity a norm, and listening carefully to the subject’s screaming silences.’ Morgenthau would certainly agree with many of Booth’s suggestions, but he would fundamentally oppose his claim to ‘dare not to know’, and his injunction to ‘celebrate confusion’.

actually does to empirical tests. It should uphold the idea that man engages into scholarship because he is a man, that is, because he wants to know the meaning of things, even if he can never fully grasp the totality of this truth. To assert that one may err in the quest for truth is one thing, but to argue that confusion should be celebrated is another. Complexity, rather than confusion, should be emphasised, and a realist theory is as well equipped as the more recent approaches in this task.

In the end, for Morgenthau, the scholar represents the 'supreme genuine man'. Supremely genuine he is, if he remains true to his function, because in his search for truth, he 'stretches out toward the infinite to merge with it in thought. In the dialogue with the infinite, he is in his epoch the only one to realise in the mission of science also the mission of man'.⁹¹ Against those who argue that man, as a finite being, is incapable of finding anything like the truth, or against those who profess that there is no such thing as everything is ultimately contingent upon cultural particularisms or power relations, Morgenthau reminds his reader of what makes man 'a divine being', or of what makes him truly human: the longing for truth, and the quest for it, even if this quest is never to be entirely fulfilled. Indeed, the quest for truth advocated by Morgenthau is best defined as a Kantian horizon, something always to be striven for, even if never fully achieved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if one takes into account Morgenthau's view on truth, power and the scholar's responsibility, it is obvious that the realist project is openly normative and critical. For Morgenthau, the role of IR scholars is to seek truth, against power if needed, and then to speak this truth to power. A realist theory of international politics, far from supporting the *status quo* and from promoting social and political conservatism, is on the contrary to be conceived as a first-rate critical weapon to unmask power and its claims to truth. To present realism as a conservative theoretical outlook signals a fundamental misunderstanding of the realist project, as it only focuses on its explanatory dimension which needs to be related to the critical one. The foundations of the now classic distinction that is made, within the discipline, between 'orthodox' approaches (which is where realism is consistently located) and critical ones appear particularly shaky in this respect. They tellingly only rests upon an analysis of Waltz's ideas, and fails to engage with realism as a whole. In the end, highlighting the critical dimension that lies at the core of the realist project as formulated by Morgenthau demonstrates that the meaning of the adjective 'critical' as it is currently used in IR should not simply be used to denote an opposition to realist views. This high-jacking of the adjective critical is most detrimental to the debates that take place within the discipline: it signals an impoverishment of the word itself, and all too often prevents really engaging with realism.

Indeed, while scholars are keen to point (quite rightly) that the very word 'realism' is 'value laden', and implicitly leads to label those who do not adopt a realist approach as day-dreamers or idealists, which is a very potent way to discredit their position in the first place, it is equally true that the very expression 'critical theory'

⁹¹ Morgenthau, *Science, Servant or Master?*, p. 72.

is extremely value-laden itself, and operates through radical exclusions, something upon which its main proponents consistently fail to reflect. By labelling themselves critical in opposition to realism, critical theorists deny realism any critical dimension, and by contrast provide an extremely appealing picture of what they stand for. Such a picture, however, is distorted by the very fact that they do not seriously engage with what they are so prompt to reject. In fact, the simplistic account they provide of realism, and their logical rejection of it, do these approaches a complete disservice. First, it discredits their claims: while debating realist ideas is perfectly legitimate, some of the major arguments of ‘critical approaches’ against what *they* portray as a conservative theoretical outlook are highly problematic: they display a striking misunderstanding of what they are supposedly critical. It becomes therefore hard, for anyone who read Morgenthau at length (or indeed, E.H Carr or Raymond Aron), to take these claims seriously.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, by failing to engage with realists arguments and by missing their critical potential, critical approaches weaken their own case. While Morgenthau’s formulation of realism is certainly radically at odds with the post-structuralist vein of critical theory, it shares some important assumptions with the ‘modernist’ wing, and in particular with scholars who work along the lines of the Frankfurt school.⁹² In the struggle against conservative forces to envisage new, more emancipatory forms of political organisation, realism, far from being the archetypal conservative foe as it is usually portrayed, is a valuable and rather strong ally of the ‘modernist’ critical theory.

Third, taking realist arguments seriously – which means, among other things, recognising the critical dimension – would also actualise the commitment of ‘critical approaches’ to ‘pluralism’ and ‘diversity’ in the study of IR, something they are usually so keen to advocate, but which more often than not remains a pious mantra never implemented in practice. It is indeed most striking that numerous calls for more ‘inclusionary’ practices in IR or for increased ‘pluralism’ have in fact resulted in new exclusionary practices, which ended up in a domination of the discipline, at least in the United Kingdom, by these ‘critical’ approaches, to the detriment of other approaches which are flatly denied any critical potential and thereby automatically castigated as conservative. Mearsheimer made this point clear in the E. H. Carr memorial lecture he delivered at Aberystwyth in 2004. Mearsheimer claimed that in the UK, the discipline is dominated by what he calls ‘idealism’ (the term referring to what the article defines as ‘critical approaches’), which created a new ‘hegemonic discourse’ with the result of wiping realists out of the discipline.⁹³ Lamenting that he ‘cannot identify a single realist theorist in Albion’, he goes to explain that ‘the idealist enterprise is all about domination, not peaceful coexistence, and certainly not about an open debate designed to advance our understanding of contemporary policy problems or enduring historical tendencies’.⁹⁴ His diagnosis is unfortunately mostly correct, and the domination of ‘idealist’ thinking has been greatly eased by the use

⁹² See Christian Reus-Smit, *The Constructivist Turn: Critical Theory After the Cold War*. ANU: Working Paper no. 1996/4 (August 1996), p. 3, where Reus-Smit summarises the main characteristics of the two main variants of critical theory, namely modern approaches, which rely on ‘critical interpretivism’ and accept ‘a posture of minimal foundationalism’, and postmodern ones, which radically reject any idea of foundation and adopt ‘radical interpretivism’.

⁹³ John Mearsheimer, ‘E. H. Carr vs Idealism: The Battle Rages On’, *International Relations*, 19:2 (2005), p. 146.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

and misuse of the adjective ‘critical’, and by the subsequent relegation of realism to ‘conservatism’ – the word being too often employed against anyone who simply disagrees with the views promoted by ‘critical’ approaches.

That the simplistic account usually provided of realism by these so called ‘critical’ approaches has gradually become common sense is both quite extraordinary and most detrimental to the debates that take place within the discipline. As a result, realism has indeed become what other approaches have made of it, an impoverished theoretical account supposedly relying on simplistic assumptions which are then easily attacked, and equally easily dismissed. Rediscovering the voices of realists themselves is badly needed: they directly challenge the common interpretation of realism as a crude theory of power politics and demonstrate, if need be, the richness, variety and subtlety of the insights realism as a whole provides in the analysis of international politics.

Indeed, realists themselves, not their critics, should be listened to when it comes to define what realism is, or is not. For Morgenthau, the founding father of the school, realism is most definitely not a paradigm, least of all a problem solving theory which rests content with the given order of things. It may be defined as a theory revolving around core assumptions, but it is much more than this. In fact, realism is best conceived as an intellectual attitude towards the world one lives in, which accepts its constraints, does not negate its ambiguities, constantly highlights its complexities, and does uphold a profound normative commitment to some fundamental values. The very least that recent approaches can do is to acknowledge this, which should logically lead to more productive and fruitful dialogues between realists and non-realists.

To consider Morgenthau’s views on ethics of scholarship has one last implication: while one may disagree with his conception of truth, for example, or challenge his views about the relation between truth and power, his conception of the role and function of academics within any society can be accepted by many different perspectives within IR. What Morgenthau upholds is the duty, for intellectuals, to practice an ethos of permanent criticism.⁹⁵ His definition of what this entails may be debated, but not his commitment to promote this ethos, regardless of how each scholar may understand it. This is why in the end, being a realist means being critical in the broadest sense of the term: realism recognises the commitment it shares with other approaches to practice this ethos of permanent criticism. It is hoped that critical approaches in IR will soon return the favour.

⁹⁵ I am grateful to Véronique Pin-Fat for pointing that out in our conversations.