

## Review article

# Realism: rational or reasonable?

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**Realist constructivism: rethinking International Relations theory.** By J. Samuel Barkin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010. 173pp. Index. Pb: £19.99. ISBN 978 0 52112 181 1. Available as e-book.

**Rational theory of international politics: the logic of competition and cooperation.** By Charles L. Glaser. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. 281pp. Index. Pb: £19.95. ISBN 978 0 69114 372 9. Available as e-book.

For better or worse, since the publication of E. H. Carr's *Twenty years' crisis* in Britain in 1939, and Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among nations* in the United States in 1948, 'Realism' has been the default setting for International Relations (IR) theory.<sup>1</sup> The core insight of Carr, Morgenthau and their successors—that the international order and the foreign policies of states are, at a fundamental level, shaped by considerations of power and interest—has been repeatedly challenged but remains at the heart of the discipline of International Relations; it also, not coincidentally, tends to be the way in which both practitioners and informed publics think about matters international. But the price of this dominance is that the clarity which Carr and Morgenthau sought two generations ago has been lost. There are now many varieties of Realism on offer, and many theories that once were thought of as antithetical to Realism have adopted Realist ideas; navigating the field has become a job for specialists. The direct descendants of Carr and Morgenthau think of themselves as 'classical Realists' (or, if Reinhold Niebuhr is acknowledged as a major influence, 'Augustinian Realists') as opposed to the 'Structural Realists' who take their lead from Kenneth Waltz's master work *Theory of international politics*.<sup>2</sup> Structural Realists in turn divide into 'defensive Realists' and 'offensive Realists', and are also closely related to 'neo-classical Realists'; to make matters worse, 'liberal institutionalists', who, in principle, are the modern version of the traditional opponents of Realism, have adopted from Waltz the notion of the 'anarchy problematic' and from some perspectives have

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Carr, *The twenty years' crisis*, with a new introduction by Michael Cox (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, 4th edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral man and immoral society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Joel Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1991), is a good guide to Niebuhr's influence on Realist thought.

become part of the Realist big tent. So confusing is this spectrum of theories that, on the one hand, John Vasquez can claim that the ‘power of power politics’ is such that Realism still dominates the field, while, on the other, liberal institutionalists Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik can ask ‘Is anybody still a Realist?’—and John Mearsheimer, perhaps today’s most prominent Realist, can regard himself as a lone figure in an academic field dominated by ‘idealism’.<sup>3</sup>

The two books under review are situated within this complex of theories and a certain amount of ground-clearing is needed before we can see where the contributions of Samuel Barkin and Charles Glaser fit in. The starting-point here must be the distinction between classical Realism and the family of Structural Realist approaches—put crudely, the distinction between the Realism of Carr and Morgenthau and their immediate successors, and the Realism of Kenneth Waltz and his successors. The first obvious difference, which will be returned to later in this article, is that whereas the Structural Realists are firmly situated within the academy and direct their work to the academic discipline of International Relations, the older generation of Realists addressed their arguments to foreign policy practitioners, and to what they hoped to turn into an informed public opinion. When he wrote *Twenty years’ crisis* Carr held the prestigious Woodrow Wilson Chair of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, but seems not to have allowed this to interfere overmuch with his life as a London-based upmarket journalist and commentator. Hans Morgenthau was rather more committed to the academy and his *Politics among nations* became an important textbook, but it was originally intended to be much more than that, a direct intervention designed to educate the American political class in the realities of diplomacy and statecraft.

Because of their desire to reach a wider audience, the classical Realists wrote in an approachable style and covered a wide range of material. They presented both a theory of foreign policy and an account of the meaning of international law and international institutions. Also, while they stressed the importance of interests and power, they did not deny the normative dimension of international relations—Morgenthau in particular was deeply sensitive to the moral dimension of political action, the continual tension between ‘moral command and the requirements of successful political action’,<sup>4</sup> but, *contra* his reputation, Carr also was aware of the importance of retaining a utopian dimension to political action.<sup>5</sup> This sensitivity meant that they were very resistant to a messianic approach to foreign policy; as Morgenthau put it in his fifth principle of political Realism, ‘political Realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation

<sup>3</sup> John Vasquez, *The power of power politics: from classical Realism to neotraditionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Is anybody still a Realist?’, *International Security* 24: 2, 1999, pp. 5–55; John J. Mearsheimer, ‘E. H. Carr vs. idealism: the battle rages on’, *International Relations* 19: 2, June 2005, pp. 139–52.

<sup>4</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> On Morgenthau, see the essays in Michael C. Williams, ed., *Realism reconsidered: the legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*. It is no accident that a portrait of Morgenthau can be found in the boardroom of the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, of which Joel Rosenthal is president. On Carr’s ‘utopian Realism’ see Ken Booth, ‘Security in anarchy: utopian Realism in theory and practice’, *International Affairs* 67: 3, July 1991, pp. 527–45.

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with the moral laws that govern the universe'.<sup>6</sup> Nor, finally, were they wedded to the nation-state as the key actor in international relations; Carr's preference was for larger groupings of states, while Morgenthau believed that the nuclear revolution made world government an imperative if humanity was to survive.<sup>7</sup>

All this suggests a complex and fruitful approach to international politics; unfortunately, as the academic discipline of IR emerged, particularly in the United States, this complexity was flattened out and the Realist theory of IR that was taught in the universities in the 1950s and 1960s presented a much less nuanced and sophisticated account of the world. It posited the nation-state as the key, unitary actor in world politics, regarded military power as central, and drew a clear distinction between domestic and international politics. This crude version of Realism may have been useful in the classroom, but during the 1960s, and especially the 1970s, it came to be seen as increasingly out of touch with the real world, where new international actors such as multinational corporations were thriving, where brute military power was unable to deliver a victory in the Vietnam War, and, in particular, where developments in the world economy were challenging at a fundamental level the idea that there was a clear-cut distinction between domestic and international politics. Moreover, even the more sophisticated versions of Realism which might have coped with such changes were being challenged by the development of an expectation that the social sciences should adhere to the same standards of evidence and theory-building as the natural sciences—figures such as Morgenthau and Carr claimed to be 'scientific' but by the new canons of American social science they could offer only a 'wisdom literature', backed up by anecdotal history. In short, Realism seemed passé, an outmoded, old-fashioned approach—the new game in town was pluralism and the theory of 'complex interdependence', which relaxed the assumption that states were unitary actors, focused on international economic relations as much as on international politics, and blurred the distinction between domestic and international politics.<sup>8</sup>

Enter Kenneth Waltz and *Theory of international politics*, the most influential book of IR theory of the last 30 years. Waltz saved Realism by redefining it and limiting what it could be expected to explain. For Waltz, Realism is a theory of the international *system*, not a theory of foreign policy, or a general theory of international relations. He starts from the premise that there are two kinds of political order: *hierarchical* (where the actors are differentiated according to the functions they perform) and *anarchical* (where actors are functionally similar but differentiated in terms of capabilities). Domestic political systems are hierarchical, but the international system is anarchical and thus can only be understood in structural terms rather than in terms of the attributes of its component parts, i.e. states (whence 'Structural Realism', a term for this approach that is preferable

<sup>6</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 10. This is the fifth of Morgenthau's 'six principles of political Realism'.

<sup>7</sup> See E. H. Carr, *Nationalism and after* (London: Macmillan, 1945), and Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a new Leviathan: total war in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and interdependence: world politics in transition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977).

to the somewhat pejorative ‘neo-Realism’ favoured by Waltz’s critics). States are ‘like units’, that is to say they occupy the same place within the structure irrespective of their domestic regimes. The only thing we need to assume about states is that they are egoistic, that is that they wish to survive; this being so, they will need to respond to changes in the power of other states by creating some kind of balance, not because they regard such a balance as desirable in itself, but because failure to respond to the imperatives of the system in this way would put in doubt their survival—the balance of power *is* the ‘theory of international politics’ to which the book’s title alludes. Of course, Waltz acknowledges that there are many actors other than states, and that states engage in all sorts of economic and social interactions which have nothing directly to do with creating balances of power. His argument is that none of this activity undermines the basic point that in the absence of effective world government the international system is anarchical; we live in a ‘self-help’ system and this conditions all other relationships, even if prosperous states in time of peace allow themselves to forget this basic feature of the world.

The beauty of this approach is that it can be developed further in a number of different directions. Waltz himself denies that he makes any kind of assumption about the rationality of states, but most of his successors do assume that because states want to survive they will act rationally to increase their security; unfortunately this can create security dilemmas, situations which emerge when one state’s drive for security is perceived as undermining another state’s similar desire to be secure.<sup>9</sup> ‘Offensive Realists’, of whom John Mearsheimer is the most prominent, assume that such dilemmas are unavoidable; states are bound to attempt to maximize relative power and this is certain to create conflict even though such conflict is unwanted—this is the ‘tragedy of Great Power politics’ to which the title of his most influential book refers.<sup>10</sup> ‘Defensive Realists’ such as Stephen Walt and Stephen Van Evera, on the other hand, believe that this tragic outcome need not happen—circumstances may favour a defensive stance towards other powers.<sup>11</sup> The dispute between defensive and offensive Realists has obvious real-world implications when it comes to, for example, the implications of the rise of China to world power; offensive Realists believe that conflict is certain while defensive Realists believe that China’s rise can be managed peacefully.<sup>12</sup>

Both defensive and offensive Realists believe that all states are essentially security-seekers and therefore a theory of foreign policy is unnecessary to an understanding of the dynamics of world politics—since all states are assumed to behave in the same way, we do not need a theory as to how states behave. ‘Neo-classical Realists’ disagree; they accept the broad outlines of the anarchy problematic but believe that foreign policy considerations cannot be disregarded, because some

<sup>9</sup> See Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The security dilemma: fear, cooperation and trust in world politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Van Evera, ‘Offense, defense, and the causes of war’, *International Security* 22: 4, Spring 1998, pp. 5–43; Stephen M. Walt, *The origin of alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté Jr, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds, *Offense, defense, and war*, International security readers series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), is the best source for these debates.

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states may not simply seek security—in effect they reintroduce the old Realist notion of a distinction between ‘status quo’ and ‘revisionist’ powers, hence the ‘neo-classical’ tag.<sup>13</sup> Finally in this *tour d’horizon*, the scale of Waltz’s achievement in rewriting Realism can be seen in the extent to which non-Realists have adopted his basic ideas. Thus 1970s pluralists became 1980s liberal institutionalists by virtue of accepting that the task of theory was to explain the behaviour of egoistic actors under conditions of anarchy—the difference between their position and that of Waltz being the liberal belief that such actors could successfully cooperate, albeit sub-optimally.<sup>14</sup>

Not everyone was convinced, however. The Waltzian reshaping of Realism stimulated a great deal of opposition as well as support. Whereas classical Realism had much to say about norms, values and identities, Structural Realist was (deliberately) silent on such matters; unsurprisingly, given the obvious importance of such features, this has led to the development of approaches such as constructivism and the English School, which filled the spaces left by this evacuation of territory that Realism had once claimed as its own. Equally, the Structural Realist proposition that anarchy is an unyielding real-world phenomenon led to a variety of approaches that denied that this was so: anarchy, Alexander Wendt famously declared, is what states make of it.<sup>15</sup> We live in a ‘world of our making’ and should resist the positivist assumption that this world can be studied as though it were unaffected by our investigations.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, in tune with these critiques, the last decade has also seen the revival of classical Realism, with major studies lauding the work of Morgenthau in particular, and, implicitly or explicitly, deploring the influence of Waltz and other Structural Realists.<sup>17</sup>

Into this complex picture step the two books under review. While Glaser’s *Rational theory of international politics* is clearly located within the Structuralist Realist family—even the title is a kind of homage to Waltz’s masterwork—Barkin’s *Realist constructivism: rethinking International Relations theory* is equally clearly designed to resist any easy categorization. Barkin acknowledges that the term ‘Realist constructivism’ will seem oxymoronic to those readers who rely on introductory textbooks to get their fix on IR theory; most constructivists have been, and are, opposed to Realism, while most self-proclaimed Realists reject constructivism, so it is not surprising that summary accounts of the field present the two positions as antithetical. In fact, as Barkin points out at some length, this opposition is strictly contingent and to make it fundamental involves a misunderstanding of the nature of both approaches. Realism is a substantive theory of

<sup>13</sup> See Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds, *Neo-classical Realism, the state, and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, ‘Achieving cooperation under anarchy: strategies and institutions’, *World Politics* 38: 1, Oct. 1985, pp. 226–54, marks this redescription of 1970s pluralism.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’, *International Organization* 46: 2, Spring 1992, pp. 391–426.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Onuf, *World of our making* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989)—still a key text in constructivist IR theory, and due to be reissued by Routledge later this year.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., Williams, *Realism reconsidered*, and Craig, *Glimmer of a new Leviathan*. This revival has also owed much to a desire to combat neo-conservative ideas with the weapons of classical Realism.

international politics, constructivism is not; constructivists are making a general point about the nature of knowledge in the human sciences, i.e. that it is reflexive and intersubjectively created, and this general point may or may not be compatible with one or other variety of Realism—there is no necessary hostility between the two camps. Indeed, thinking about IR theory in terms of ‘camps’ or, as Barkin puts it, ‘paradigms’ is, he argues, at the root of the problem here. Scholars in IR theory regard their paradigms as castles that need to be defended, leading them to treat contingent differences as though they were more serious than in fact they are. Instead of thinking in terms of paradigms, he argues, we should look to the core concepts of Realism and constructivism; if we do so we will readily see that there is no necessary opposition here.

What are the core concepts in question? The core concept of Realism, Barkin writes, is power politics. Anticipating perfectly my immediate reaction, he remarks that some will think this ‘obvious to the point of banality’ (p. 17), but by thinking of power as relational and ascribed to corporate actors one can avoid definitions of Realism which stress the analytic centrality of the state, or the primacy of material capabilities, or the assumption of rational action, thereby opening the door to a relationship with constructivism that these other definitions would keep closed. Still risking the accusation of banality, he describes constructivism as focused on the social construction of international politics, which he construes as involving intersubjectivity and co-constitution. International politics is subjectively constructed rather than objectively given; ‘it is the fact that we hold ideas and understandings in common, rather than any objective status of these ideas and understandings, that matters in international relations’ (p. 27). Constructivists may differ as to whether there actually is a social reality that exists outside our intersubjective understandings and can be accessed or at least approximated through scientific methods, as scientific realists assert, or whether, as post-modernists hold, intersubjective structures cannot be studied objectively, but, either way, intersubjectivity is definitional of constructivism. Co-constitution addresses the agent–structure problem, arguing that agents and structures need to be viewed as simultaneously constituting each other. As with Realism, this apparently banal definition—intersubjectivity plus co-constitution—actually has the merit of defining constructivism in its own terms rather than in opposition to something else. Thus, definitions that posit that constructivism is idealist in opposition to Realist materialism or that constructivism deals with logics of appropriateness as opposed to Realism’s focus on logics of consequences, are designed to mark out a territory for constructivism that is necessarily contrary to Realism—but this is precisely what Barkin wants to avoid. By defining both Realism and constructivism in their own terms he aims to show how a creative relationship between the two positions could emerge.

Having set out his stall in the first 30 pages or so of what is actually quite a short book, Barkin elaborates these positions, devoting a chapter each to materialism vs. idealism, and the two logics of consequence and appropriateness, before proceeding to explore the notion of the public interest, ideas of historical contingency and

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agency. The final three chapters focus on the limits of Realism and constructivism respectively, before reprising the argument as a whole. The basic thesis throughout is that while Structural Realism (Barkin prefers the term neo-Realism) does indeed hold positions that cannot be considered consistent with constructivism, the same is not the case with classical Realism. Constructivists reject the methodological individualism of Structural Realists, and the limited notion of rationality that this position promotes (on which see the concluding paragraphs to this article), but they have no quarrel with the wider sense of rationality/reasonableness that the classical Realists used to define notions such as the national interest. Once the idea that they are constrained by their membership of competing tribes is put to one side, (classical) Realists and constructivists have much to offer one another. Constructivist notions of intersubjectivity and co-constitution can sharpen Realist conceptualizations, and the Realist emphasis on the political and on power can be a useful corrective to the constructivist tendency to produce an apolitical account of the social.

There is much to admire here, but this is still a slightly disappointing book. The picture it presents of IR theory as a complex matrix of approaches rather than a set of competing castles is very attractive, but it would be good to have been given a bit more of a preview of what kind of theories might be expected to emerge from such a new take on the field; more to the point, what insights might this different kind of IR theory bring to bear on real-world problems? The classical Realists, whom Barkin regards as working in ways compatible with constructivism, were very much oriented towards the actual practice of diplomacy and statecraft; as noted above, the books they wrote were directed to, or designed to create, an informed public—*Realist constructivism*, by way of contrast, is very clearly directed towards the academy and in particular towards a relatively small group of academics, including the present writer, who make a living teaching, writing and thinking about IR theory. It starts out by addressing a problem that exists not for the world at large but for this small sub-set of scholars working within the academic discipline of IR, and it ends in the same place.

Interestingly, and to its credit, although Charles Glaser's *Rational theory of international politics: the logic of competition and cooperation* (hereafter *Rational theory*) is also very much a product of professional IR theory, and, indeed, a contribution to the Structural Realism that Barkin deplures, it actually begins with a problem that anyone, whether inside or outside the academy, can recognize as central: why do states sometimes compete with one another and wage war, while at other times they cooperate and make peace? Glaser's answer to this traditional question draws from most of the theories outlined earlier in this article to create something genuinely new, the most impressive work of Realist IR theory at least since Mearsheimer's *The tragedy of Great Power politics*, and possibly since Waltz's *Theory of international politics*.

The first point to be noted is that Glaser's approach is resolutely normative in one sense of the term; he is offering a rational, strategic choice theory, which sets out the policy stance that states *should* adopt, all the while acknowledging that often

they will not behave in this way. By the same token, his title is a little misleading—he is actually offering a rational theory of *foreign policy*, at least if the latter term is understood as referring to Grand Strategy. His theory posits that there are three types of variables that will be crucial in evaluating the correct, rational, stance to take *vis-à-vis* other states. First, the choosing state's own *motives* need to be examined. States may be 'security-seekers' concerned to defend what they have, or they may be 'greedy', desiring to expand. This will obviously affect their stance towards the rest of the world. Then, the international environment needs to be examined. This involves *material* variables, which essentially concern the state's military potential relative to the mission it would be expected to perform, be that offensive or defensive, and relative to the military potential of other states. Then *information* variables will also be crucial, information, that is, about the motives of potential adversary states, and what it believes those potential adversaries believe to be its own motives. A state's strategic choices will be rational if it pays attention to, and correctly assesses, each of these sets of variables.

What choices are this process of assessment likely to declare rational? As we have seen, offensive Realists argue that, even if in fact all states are security-seekers, they will be obliged to compete with one another because they cannot know that this is actually the case—they have to assume the worst about other states because the potential costs of failing to compete are so high. Glaser disagrees. He argues that a rational assessment of the three sets of variables will be just as likely to lead to the adoption of defensive, cooperative strategies. The central point here is that while offensive Realists are very conscious of the costs of a failed cooperative strategy, they do not take into account the costs of competition. Thus, for example, states that compete by engaging in arms-racing may actually lose the race, and, even if they do not, they will incur costs that have to be taken into account when determining whether it was sensible to go down this path in the first place.

Looking at this in a bit more detail, when it comes to assessing the relevant material factors in a state's environment, the 'offence–defence' equation is crucial. Particular technologies may be relevant here—thus, Glaser argues, very plausibly, with nuclear weapons an assured second-strike capability favours the defence—but equally to the point are geostrategic factors—thus, for example, the continental isolation of the United States is highly favourable to the defence. As to motivational matters, whereas many Structural Realists assume that we cannot know what is in the minds of potential adversaries, Glaser assumes, again very sensibly, that actually there are ways in which states can signal their motives and intentions to each other. Add these points together, and it becomes clear that it is a mistake always to assume the worst; even when security dilemmas exist they may be of varying levels of importance and severity—there will always be a degree of risk, but some risks are worth taking. Also, and somewhat counter-intuitively, Glaser argues that all of these considerations apply with equal force to 'greedy' states. There are circumstances where it makes sense, rationally, for greedy states to cooperate rather than compete, and there are circumstances where security-seekers should cooperate with greedy states. Appeasement is not always a bad



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policy—assuming low levels of greed, and high costs associated with resistance, cooperation may make more sense than competition.

This general argument, and some extensions to it, are set out quite concisely in the first three substantive chapters of *Rational theory*. Glaser then presents counter-arguments, most drawn from offensive Realism and focusing on problems with the ‘offence–defence’ balance and with the informational variables, before going on to place his argument in the context of existing IR theories. As he acknowledges, his theory has some affinities with both defensive Realism and neo-classical Realism, but he can rightly claim to provide a more elaborate theory than the former and to be less focused on greedy states as the driving force than the latter. The next three chapters are exercises in evaluation and application. Glaser re-examines the internal logic of the argument, then considers some important past and present cases. These are very rich chapters, illuminating such standard topics as Japanese and German Grand Strategy in the first half of the last century and superpower conflict in the Cold War, but also addressing current concerns with the rise of China. As to the latter, Glaser argues that whether China’s rise is peaceful will depend in large measure on policy choices made by the United States, the current dominant power; he continues that there is no reason why those choices should be for competition rather than conflict. The United States has no reason to think that China has grand expansionist objectives, and, in any event, the width of the ocean that lies between China and the US plus the American nuclear arsenal give the defence such an advantage that competition is unnecessary. This is one case where the declining power has no reason to respond competitively, much less violently, to the rising power.

All told, *Rational theory* presents a very powerful set of arguments. Where are the problems? Within its own terms two seem important, one anticipated by Glaser, the other not—and then there is a question about those terms that needs to be raised. As to the former of the two internal criticisms, it is acknowledged throughout that what is being theorized is what it would be rational for states to do—but are states actually rational decision-makers in the way that the theory has to assume they are? Glaser himself admits that there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that they are not. It is worth recalling that Waltz claims not to assume that states are rational—instead, his claim is simply that states that do not respond rationally to systemic imperatives will be punished. Glaser cannot be satisfied with this, but this leaves him vulnerable to the charge that he is effectively providing a theory of foreign policy that does not explain how foreign policy is actually made, a rather uncomfortable position to be in. Of course, being able to assess what would be the rational strategic choice is itself something very valuable, but clearly needs to be completed by an account of when and why rationality is departed from.

Rather more compelling is a second criticism, which is that much of the analysis that Glaser presents seems strangely divorced from the real content of contemporary international politics. Let us agree that territorial disputes are still important, even when it comes to Great Power politics—think of China and Taiwan—and that conventional military alliances still need to be taken seriously—think of the

recent attempts by the US to strengthen its ties with a number of states in the Asia-Pacific which are worried by the growth of China's power. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao spend too much time worrying about the territorial integrity of their respective states. China may be a rising power, the United States a declining power (although neither proposition should be taken for granted), but it seems unlikely that they imagine the consequences of these shifts in relative power will be felt in territorial terms. Happily, Glaser suggests that a preventive war in response to China's rise would not be a good idea, but the very notion that such a response could be considered is surely risible. In short, at times he seems to be offering a set of rational strategies for playing Risk or Diplomacy, rather than anything that modern statespersons might recognize as connecting with their experiences of international cooperation and competition.

Fortunately, and what makes the book the important work it is, there is no need to take Glaser's talk of wars of conquest and territorial defence too seriously—instead we can read *Rational theory* in a much more general way, as providing a good guide to the rational strategy to be adopted in less dramatic situations. He offers a set of considerations that any rational strategist ought to consider whether dealing with low politics or high. Knowing when it is rational to cooperate and when to engage in conflict is the kind of knowledge that can be applied in many circumstances, and the fact that Glaser confines his analysis to Grand Strategy does not mean that we, his readers, are similarly constrained.

There remains, however, one respect in which we are constrained if we accept, as Glaser does, the basic terms of the Waltzian anarchy problematic: namely, we are constrained to accept that states are essentially egoists, capable we hope of rational self-interest, but egoists nonetheless. It would be foolish to deny that there is some truth in this—indeed, the enduring appeal of Realism reflects this truth—but critics of the cruder versions of Realism have always wanted to insist that states are capable of more than simple egoism, that notions such as the common interest and the rule of law are not always simply ideological covers for the interests of the privileged but can sometimes reflect the reasoned interests of all states.<sup>18</sup> Some of the classical Realists, some of the time, understood this and if the Constructivist Realism that Barkin wishes to promote gets off the ground, there is a good chance that its adherents will also grasp this wider sense of what the notion of the national interest might involve. Unfortunately, the kind of rationality that is described in Glaser's excellent book precludes consideration of the notion that the national interest of a particular state ought to encompass a reasonable appreciation of the interests of others. This is a serious limitation not simply of this book, but of the Structural Realism approach taken as a whole, and the reason why Barkin's book, although less immediately satisfying, may in the long run prove to be the more important of the two.

<sup>18</sup> On this see Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Rethinking the "inter" in international politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35: 3, Sept. 2007, pp. 495–511.