

The enduring dilemmas of realism in International Relations

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After the end of the Cold War, realism has been again on the defensive. In recent years, two major discussions have been waged about it. The first debate was triggered by a piece John Vasquez¹ published in the *American Political Science Review*. In this blunt attack, Vasquez basically argues that realists reject the systematic use of scientific criteria for assessing theoretical knowledge. Vasquez charges (neo)realism either for producing blatantly banal statements or for being non-falsifiable, i.e. ideological. For him, much of the post-Waltzian (neo) realist research results are but a series of Ptolemaic circles whose elaborate shape conceals the basic vacuity of the realist paradigm.

The second debate followed an article by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik in *International Security*.² There, realists were asked to accept that their recent work is only good, because they have been incorporating ideas and causal variables from other approaches. On the one hand, this critique is less harsh than Vasquez's insofar as realism is not denied a scientific status. But on the other hand, by being allotted a small and usually insufficient terrain on the academic turf, realism would become structurally dependent on a division of theoretical labour defined elsewhere.

The present article will argue that these debates are but the last manifestation of two enduring dilemmas, realism is facing ever since its inception in International Relations. I will call the two dilemmas the "identity dilemma" or the distinctiveness/determinacy dilemma, and the "conservative dilemma" of realism. In both cases, realism has continuously tried to avoid facing them, i.e. it wanted to have the cake and eat it, too. Consequently, the ambiguity of its position has systematically produced criticisms of which this last round after the Cold War is just another incidence.

Realism's "identity dilemma" is indirectly visible in the paradoxically

¹ Vasquez 1997.

² Legro and Moravcsik 1999.

rather difficult definition of realism. A recent textbook compares different definitions which leaves it with little more than a family resemblance or a certain “style”, such that “we may not be able to define [realism], but we know it when we see it”.³ Indeed, since early realists tended to confuse realism with the matter of IR *tout court*, they unproblematically relied on assumptions which were not unique to itself, such as the micro-assumption of rationality⁴ or the macro-assumption of anarchy, both widely shared among so-called idealists. Rather than thinking in exclusive terms, realists understood themselves as closer to a purely materialist pole of the rationalist theory of action and to a more pessimistic vision about anarchy, that is, a cyclical vision of history without progress.⁵ These two assumptions, and in particular the latter, helped much to overcome the endemic identity crisis of the nascent discipline of International Relations by setting it apart from (domestic) political science and hence produced the easy confusion between the boundaries of realism and the discipline of IR proper.⁶

As successful as they are in their paradigmatic function, I will claim that these strictly realist assumptions produce causally indeterminate theories, however. Hence, in order to make determinate and empirical claims, realism always needed to be supplemented by elements alien to realism. From here stems its identity dilemma. Contemporary realism can either be distinct from other approaches, but theoretically vacuous, or explanatory more determinate, but then indistinguishable from some other approaches in IR. As this article will show, the reason is to be found in the indeterminacy of its central concepts, like power, which can simply not bear the theoretical weight assigned to them. In other words, Legro’s and Moravcsik’s finding is no coincidence of only recent realist research, but conceptual necessity in an enduring theoretical dilemma.

Following Kissinger’s analysis of Metternich, I would propose to call the second enduring dilemma of realism the “conservative dilemma”⁷ or the

³ Donnelly 2000, 9.

⁴ There is considerable confusion around this issue, since the rationality assumption does not imply that actors always act rationally. It simply means that realists have usually been in the Weberian tradition (e.g. Morgenthau) assuming rationality as a measuring rod with which to make sense of individual behaviour.

⁵ For the importance of this assumption, see Bobbio 1981.

⁶ Guzzini 1998, chapter 1.

⁷ Kissinger 1957, chapter XI.

science or justification/tradition dilemma of realism. Faced with criticism about realism's scientific character or its findings, it has been a recurring feature of realists to lean towards less stringent understandings of their own theory. Realism then refers to a philosophical tradition or more generally "an attitude regarding the human condition".⁸ Yet, when realism wants to retreat to a traditional position, it is caught by a dilemma which exists since its origins in International Relations. Despite Morgenthau's early insistence on the intuitions of statesmen and the "art" of politics⁹, realism derived much of its appeal from its claim to understand reality "as it is". But ever since the foreign policy maxims of Realpolitik are no longer commonly shared knowledge and legitimate politics, realism can not refer to the "world as it is" and rely on its intuitive understanding by the responsible elites. Instead, it needs to justify the value of traditional practical knowledge and diplomacy. To be persuasive, such a justification comes today in the form of controllable knowledge. Moreover, since realism self-consciously refers to the world as it is (and not as it should be), it necessarily requires a kind of objective status. In other words, by avoiding justification, realism loses its persuasiveness in times of a rational debate it decides not to address. But taking the other way by consistently justifying a world-view that should be natural and taken for granted, realist defenses testify to its very demise. Today, there is no way back to paradise when realism needed little justification.

In a last section, I draw some implications of these two dilemmas. I will argue that IR realism seems pitted to return to these dilemmas if it does not give up its own identity of the so-called first debate between realism and idealism. It is this relentlessly re-produced opposition which drives IR realism to be an impoverished branch of political realism more generally. For political realism is defined not only by the counterposition to a (utopian) ideal, whether or not this has really existed in IR, but also to an "apparent" masking existing power relations. It is a double negation, both anti-idealist and anti-conservative. By giving up its classical IR identity, and getting out of the "first debate", IR realism would be free to join in a series of meta-theoretical and theoretical research avenues, which it leaves to other schools so far. The need felt to defend IR "realism" seems therefore too costly on strictly intellectual grounds – for realists, but also for IR at large.

⁸ Gilpin 1986 [1984], 304.

⁹ Morgenthau 1946.

**The identity dilemma, or:
the choice between determinacy and distinctiveness**

The present debate witnesses a perhaps astounding impreciseness about the relationship between, if not conflation of, realism and International Relations writ large. The two authoritative debates around realism mentioned above nicely represent the two tendencies. One type of definition tends to make realism so comprehensive that it can hardly be distinguished from classical IR approaches in general. Vasquez, for instance, defined the realist paradigm through three tenets, namely the assumptions of anarchy, of statism, and of politics as the struggle for power and peace.¹⁰ This has been acknowledged by Holsti, who, like Vasquez, used the Kuhnian idea of a paradigm, as well as the very same three tenets for defining the major paradigm, but who came up with a different category.¹¹ Rather than to “realism”, he referred to this as “the classical tradition” in IR, which subsumes classical realist and idealist scholars. In a slightly different vein, the Elmans define *neorealism* through a set of criteria which prominently includes the unit level, rationality, as well as perception into the analysis¹², something Waltz so vehemently opposed in “reductionist” scholars like Aron and Kissinger. Also their definition is perhaps best understood as a return to the classical realist research programme as it existed long before Waltz was allowed to lock up realism (and IR) in his theory. After all, realism as rationalism was an old hat in deterrence theories, and perception was certainly not something which escaped realist diplomatic observers.¹³

Partly for this reason, there is a second tendency in defining realism rather narrowly. This narrower view is the logical result of typologies which do not subsume realism with some other classical approaches under one label (as Holsti does), and who need therefore to distinguish something specifically realist. Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* provided such a much needed narrow definition. Yet, despite providing an identity to scholars in search of it, this theory has never been the great hero of classical realist scholars (at least in Europe), since its very narrowness seemed to impoverish “realism”.

¹⁰ Vasquez 1998, 37.

¹¹ Holsti 1985.

¹² Elman 1997.

¹³ See respectively Aron 1963 and Kissinger 1965.

Consequently, there has been a consistent drive to re-appropriate more classical insights – incurring the risk of including again also non-specifically realist items.

Hence, although a narrow definition might look skewed in favour of realism's critiques – and this has been the charge against Legro's and Moravcsik's definition – it does not result from the ill-will of scholars from contending schools; it is endemic in realism ever since it needed to define itself not with regard to the discipline as such, but as compared to competing schools within IR. For the debate on realism, the Inter-Paradigm Debate¹⁴ has produced a constant replay of a counterpoint without a finale. On the one hand, a distinct realist definition which, because too narrow, needs to be followed by some ouvertures to classical concerns and competing schools. On the other hand, a wider and richer definition of "realism" can claim sound empirical work, but little support for something specifically realist.

In other words, this problem stems from a basic dilemma at the heart of realism: formulations of realism can be either distinct or determinate, but not both.¹⁵ As I will argue, the fundamental reason for the realist dilemma between determinacy and distinctiveness lies in the underlying concepts that drive realist explanations. Realism's central concept include at the macro-level the idea of anarchy and at the micro level the idea of interest (power). Those concepts together are crucial for articulating realism's materialist theory of action. Yet, as the following two sub-sections want to show, there are by now classical pitfalls in the relation of these concepts.

Realist indeterminacy at the macro-level: anarchy

Many classical scholars, including realists, have insisted that "anarchy" and the balance of power are categories too void to capture important characteristics of international politics. They all heavily qualified what they meant by anarchy and what the balance of power could mean. Given the nature of the concepts (anarchy and balance of power), this is unavoidable.

A first strategy consisted in qualifying anarchy through defining different types of international systems not reducible to simple power polarity or polarisation. Wolfers theorized along the continuum of the pole of power and pole of indifference, of amity and enmity, Kissinger distinguished revolutionary

¹⁴ Banks 1985.

¹⁵ This critique builds on Guzzini 1998, especially chapter 3.

from legitimate international systems, and Aron contrasted homogeneous from heterogeneous systems.¹⁶ The result is put rather crudely in a famous quote by Wolfers used again by Legro and Moravcsik:

One consequence of distinctions such as these is worth mentioning. They rob theory of the determinate and predictive character that seemed to give the pure power hypothesis its peculiar value. It can now no longer be said of the actual world, for example, that a power vacuum cannot exist for any length of time; a vacuum surrounded by “satiated” or “*status quo*” states would remain as it is unless its existence were to change the character of these states and put them into the category of “imperialist”, “unsatiated”, or “dynamic” states.¹⁷

This argument that anarchy as such is indeterminate in its effects, advanced by a realist himself, has been echoed again and again.¹⁸

The effect of the majority of these studies was not to deny that under some specific conditions, realist expectations seem applicable. What they all argue is that there is nothing of necessity and that therefore one needs to define the scope conditions when realist expectations apply. To take the above examples, Aron saw homogeneous systems, Kissinger legitimate systems, Wolfers systems at the pole of indifference or characterised by amity, as an anomaly for the Hobbesian power politics case. From this perspective, Keohane and Nye’s *Power and Interdependence* did nothing else, but to specify again, in the light of the transnationalist literature, under which conditions power politics and under which complex interdependence applies.¹⁹ Also Alexander Wendt’s second part of his *Social Theory* is just another more elaborate attempt to circumscribe the applicability of realist (and liberal) insights.²⁰ All these approaches, however, go far beyond Waltz in specifying the criteria for establishing scope conditions.

Also those theorists who started from the balance of power, found the approach too crude to be useful. Early institutionalist writers have been

¹⁶ See respectively Wolfers 1962, chapter 6; Kissinger 1957, 1-3; Aron 1962, 108-113.

¹⁷ Wolfers 1962, 86. For earlier references to this quote, see also Griffiths 1992, 61 and Guzzini 1998, 42.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Alker 1996 [1986], Axelrod 1986, Milner 1991; 1992.

¹⁹ Keohane 1977.

²⁰ Wendt 1999.

criticising balance of power theories for assuming a single international power structure. They showed that if power is segmented, that is, if capacities are issue-specific, then the positioning of power in a general balance is guess-work. As Baldwin has shown already long time ago, a single international power structure relies either on the assumption of a single dominant issue area or on a high fungibility of power resources. Since both are of little avail, it “is time to recognize that the notion of a single overall international power structure unrelated to any particular issue area is based on a concept of power that is virtually meaningless”.²¹

Given this central, albeit weak dimension of their theory, even sophisticated realist theoreticians have resorted to rhetoric instead of arguments for defending their position. Hedley Bull, for instance, after assessing the difficulties to arrive at an “over-all” concept of power, at some point candidly writes that the “relative position of states in over-all power nevertheless makes itself apparent in bargaining among states, and the conception of over-all power is one we cannot do without”.²² His first argument, deriving power *ex post* from its effects, comes close to the usual power tautologies. The second argument, well, it is no argument at all - on the level of observation. Yet, it is perfectly correct that on the level of action, the society of states has come up with approximations of power. In classical diplomacy, with its balancing and band-wagoning, its arbitrations and compensations, diplomats must find a common understanding of over-all power. In other words, diplomats must first agree on what counts before they can start counting. But that is an insight that would be called constructivist today. We have made a long way from anarchy, and not types of relations, as a determinant, or from materialism, and not rules, as the core assumption.

*Realist indeterminacy at the micro-level:
a materialist theory of interest (power)*

In a similar vein, the (national) interest is a hollow shell which has been filled with auxiliary hypothesis on preference formation, be they liberal, institutionalist, “epistemic”, as mentioned by Legro and Moravcsik, or sociological, if inspired by a constructivist meta-theory.²³ As a discussion of the crucially used

²¹ Baldwin 1989, 167.

²² Bull 1977, 114.

²³ The latter started with Wæver 1995 and Weldes 1996.

concept of power will show, this is not for choice, but “by necessity”, to paraphrase Morgenthau’s dictum on the balance of power.

A reference to “power” as a filler for interest has proven self-defeating. Power is a conceptual Pandora Box when used in materialist theories of action. To produce an analysis in which power would subsume interest and therefore predict action, one would need something close to a *homo oeconomicus* in IR, somebody who could be expected to rationally maximise power (or security). And indeed, Waltz assumes an analogy between the role of power in IR and the function of money in neo-classical economics.²⁴ The striving for utility maximisation which can be expressed and measured in terms of money, parallels the national interest (i.e. security) expressed in terms of (relative) power.²⁵

In an astonishingly overlooked argument, Raymond Aron opposed this very transfer of economic theory to IR theory already some 40 years ago. First, for Aron, it made little sense to liken the maximisation of security as expressed in power to the maximisation of utility as expressed in terms of money.²⁶ Aron argued that there are three classical foreign policy goals (*puissance*, security, glory/ideals – following here actually Hobbes!) that cannot be reduced one into the other.²⁷ Having no single aim, no optimal rational choice could happen. In the language of rational choice, foreign policy is indeterminate since alternative ends are incommensurable. If this were correct, then rational choice theorists²⁸ accept that their approach cannot be applied for explanatory purposes.²⁹

Aron’s claim is based on what the literature calls the different degree of fungibility of money and power resources. The commensurability of means and aims presupposes a high degree of fungibility of power which is more than questionable in international relations. The term fungibility refers to the idea

²⁴ For the following, see also Guzzini 1998, 136–7.

²⁵ The relationship between power and security is not clear in Waltz (see also Grieco 1997, 186–91). He explicitly stresses that states maximise security, not power. At the same time, neorealists assume states to be rank maximisers or relative gain seekers, hence my formulation. Important for my argument, and consistent with realism, is that such gain be measured on a common scale (the final rank), which is established with reference to power.

²⁶ see also Wolfers 1962.

²⁷ Aron 1962, 28–9.

²⁸ Elster 1989, 31–3.

²⁹ See also Guzzini 1994, 83–6.

of a moveable good that can be freely substituted by another of the same class. Fungible goods are those universally applicable or convertible in contrast to those who retain value only in a specific context. Whereas fungibility seems a plausible assumption in monetarised economies, in international relations, even apparently ultimate power resources like weapons of mass destruction might not necessarily be of great help for getting another state to change its monetary policies.³⁰

Aron did, of course, recognize that economic theory can be used to model behaviour on the basis of a variety of also conflicting preferences. But for him, with the advent of money as a general standard of value within which these competing preferences can be put on the same scale, compared, and traded-off, economists were able to reduce the variety of preferences to one utility function. In world politics, for reasons of its lacking real-world fungibility, power cannot play a corresponding role as standard of value. With no power-money analogy, there is also no analogy between the integrated value of utility and the “national interest” (security).³¹ Consequently, in a chapter section appropriately entitled “the indeterminacy of diplomatic-strategic behaviour”, Aron concludes that (realist) theoreticians in IR cannot use economic theory as a model.³²

In a later, indeed very late, response to Aron, Waltz said that the analogy between power and money is not vitiated by a qualitative difference.³³ Rather, the problem is simply one of measurement. Power, Waltz argued, does nonetheless function as a medium of exchange. Yet, as Baldwin reminds, for making the theoretical model work, power needs to be a (objectivised) standardized measure of value, as well.³⁴

When taken to issue by Keohane³⁵ on the fungibility assumption, Waltz remained unimpressed and answered:

Obviously, power is not as fungible as money. Not much is. But power is much more fungible than Keohane allows. As ever, the distinction between strong and weak states is important. The stronger the state, the greater the variety of its capabilities. Power may be only slightly fungible for weak

³⁰ See in particular Baldwin 1989, 25, 34, 209.

³¹ Guzzini 1993, 453.

³² Aron 1962, 102.

³³ Waltz 1990.

³⁴ Baldwin 1993, 21–2.

³⁵ Keohane 1986, 184.

states, but it is highly so for strong ones.³⁶

Waltz's defence, however, is inconsistent. If power resources were so highly fungible that they could be used in different domains, then one does not need to argue with their variety: economic capabilities can be used for producing political, social or cultural outcomes. If one assumes a great variety of capabilities, one implicitly assumes that a strong state is strong not because it has a lot of over-all power, but because it possesses a high level of capabilities in distinct domains. This is still no case for the fungibility of power as desperately as balance of power theories would need it.³⁷

The issue has recently been again taken up again in an exchange between Robert Art and David Baldwin.³⁸ Art responds to Baldwin's by now classical, if neglected, charge not on the level of the conceptual analysis on which Baldwin pitches it, but on the level of state actors perception and action.³⁹ By this move, Baldwin's critique is meant to imply that policy makers have no way to come up with overall power measures. And then Art has little problems to show that they do so all the time. But Art's argument is based on the initial move which is a category mistake and hence does not add up to a rebuttal to Baldwin.

Of course, Art is right that policy makers can and do come up with an idea of overall power and ranking. But what does that mean for realist *theory*? It means that the ranking could be a different one looking from the different positions and assumptions, different policy makers have about the composition of material capabilities and the fungibility of its elements. This is, hence, a contentious issue, one for daily deliberation and potentially subjective assessment. Gorbachov apparently thought all his military might was not all that important at the end of the day and changed course. Moreover, if power assessments were not in principle malleable, it would make little sense to see so many writers, including Art, to come up with discussions on measuring and understanding power with a view to making our understandings of power converge.⁴⁰ But that is not what is happening with money. With a 10 Euro bill,

³⁶ Waltz 1986, 333.

³⁷ Hence, by simply re-quoting Waltz, Zakaria (1998, 19, fn. 24) does not prove anything.

³⁸ Art 1996 and Art 1999, Baldwin 1999.

³⁹ Art 1999, 184-86.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Frei 1969 and Merrit 1989.

we can generally expect to get goods which have no more expensive price tags, independent of whether we have a subjective feeling we should. Hence, having no real life equivalent of money does not make a measure as such impossible, as Art shows, but it is no standardised one, as Baldwin argued before. And this standard is necessary for making realist theorising about "...-maximisation" anything else but useless for a rationalist theory.⁴¹

This discussion leads to a further important point, already mentioned above. Although Art and Waltz can easily show that diplomats might agree on some approximations for their dealings, this is not because they have an objectivised measure, but because they have come to agree on certain norms to assess each other. Far from being a materialist necessity, it is a social (and often politically bargained) construct. We have now reached constructivist terrain. In this specific sense, measures of wealth and measures of power are similar, since they are institutional facts which only exist because people believe in them.⁴² Yet, they differ for the amount of institutionalisation and hence objectivation they have in the real world. Economists might keep on arguing at length for the alleged "real value" of a certain good but with no further effect, with the exception of bazaars and barter, i.e. less monetarised economic systems. But contributions about the fungibility of power, like Art's or others', and like *all power discussions including this*, are part and parcel of the measure of power, since it is not standardised, i.e. they influence the way power is assessed and hence politics conducted.⁴³

The article has hitherto used power as it were a capability, a usually material resource. But to complicate things further, conceptual analysis has repeatedly driven home the point that control over certain, in particular material, resources needs not to imply effective control over outcomes. For power, traditionally understood, resides in the capacity to influence the other against its will. Consequently, its assessment presupposes the analysis of the norms, as well as the interaction of individual's value-systems in any power relation. Debates in political theory have shown that it is therefore better to conceive of power not as a property concept, but as a relational concept.⁴⁴ Such an analysis is incompatible with the deductive balance of power theory on which narrow

⁴¹ Hence, it is not enough to refer to this exchange as proving the fungibility case for realism, as in Deudney 2000, 10, fn. 22.

⁴² See the classical money example in Searle 1995.

⁴³ Stockmarkets are an exception which confirm the rule.

⁴⁴ E.g. Dahl 1968.

realism is based, but also on any attempt to have an *ex ante* theory of behaviour which could claim to be primarily materialist.

As a result, realists need to “add up” something to make their theory working. And inevitably, realists have again and again been relaxing their materialist assumptions, from Kissinger’s insistence upon diplomatic skills and types of foreign policy personalities⁴⁵, to Morgenthau’s insistence that power cannot be equated with military might and is basically unmeasurable outside qualitative judgement (typically left unspecified)⁴⁶, to recent attempts in realist IPE, such as in Susan Strange’s concept of structural power,⁴⁷ or to the many defensive and neo-classical realists to mention just a few. The concept of power simply cannot bear the weight assigned to it by the attempt to base interest on something objectifiable or materialist.

Aron’s dictum of indeterminacy still applies. When relaxing this assumption in the discussion of interest formation, other phenomena slip in, from perception and psychology, from social agreement to norms. The lesson is the same as above: either realists keep their distinct materialist meta-theory linked to a cyclical vision of history, and then anarchy, interests and power provide indeterminate explanations; or they improve their explanations but must do so by relaxing their assumptions, losing distinctiveness and engaging research on the ground of competing schools.

Realism as indistinguishable science, or: “has anybody ever been a realist?” Probably all classical realists did travel on institutionalist or constructivism-inspired terrain. Better explanation was paid with the blurring of realist distinctiveness, but the cost incurred used to be low, since it was no issue at the time. Realism still defined the borders of the discipline, indeed used to be conflated with it. Only when it had to accept challengers, when it became one theory among others, it was forced to define its own borders; an endeavour painful indeed for realism resented the loss of the unity between its own reach and the discipline at large.

The somewhat ironic implication of this argument is that if one defines realism as a coherent, distinct and determinate theory, there has never been such a thing as a realist theory: not “is anybody still a realist?”, but (before

⁴⁵ Kissinger 1969.

⁴⁶ Morgenthau 1970 [1967], 245.

⁴⁷ Strange 1988b.

neorealism) “has anybody ever been a realist?” As long as the worldview of the first debate defined the discipline of IR, classical scholars, who often perceived themselves as realist, have systematically integrated insights from “idealism” (whatever that exactly meant, since it was often a residual category of realist theorising). There was no need to demarcate realism on the explanatory level, since the normative side – its human and political pessimism – would make a sufficient distinction. In the wake of the Inter-Paradigm Debate, when realism became one school among others, scholars needed to define clear-cut boundaries. As a result, the neorealist turn with its reductionist emphasis on materialism and systemism, not only defined its terrain, but in doing so, put itself against classical realists. From then, much of the debate has been about re-inventing the wheel.

It is only natural, that, in self-defense, realists would refer to some classical thinkers to show that such a narrow definition puts realism into a too narrow straightjacket.⁴⁸ Although this argument contains some truth, realists draw the wrong implications. For a simple enlargement will only put realism back into the same dilemma. As the preceding sections have shown, the assumptions and basic concepts of realist theorising inevitably ask for borrowings from elsewhere. In this, the present realist amendments to Waltz simply pursue a necessity already encountered by earlier realists. And the present critique is but a rehearsal of Michael Banks’ in what he described as the “hoover-effect” of realism, that is, its tendency to swallow everything valuable stemming from other paradigms. He called this strategy “realism-plus-grafted-on-components”.⁴⁹ The repeated realist endeavour to widen, and the repeated resistance of others exemplify this basic dilemma of realism, once it is no longer the taken-for-granted language of IR and needs to be distinguished, once it needs to justify itself, i.e. once it has to accept its own borders within IR. This problem lies within realist theorising itself, not with the use by its detractors.

The “conservative dilemma”, or: the choice between tradition and justification

What unites the recent critiques of realism is that the real stakes are potentially

⁴⁸ Feaver 2000.

⁴⁹ Banks 1984, 18.

very high: what should be the normal science of IR? Vasquez asked for a more systematic help of alternative approaches, since realism (read: the classical tradition) has not proven all that successful in empirical tests. This would allow realism to co-exist alongside other approaches, very much in the idea of the Inter-Paradigm Debate.⁵⁰ Legro and Moravcsik go further. They ask for a multi-paradigmatic synthesis on the basis of a causal theory of action which takes into account a variety of factors that can be linked to the four schools of thought they mention.⁵¹ Indeed, they ask to start from such a multi-paradigmatic setting, and not from whatever version of realism, as we have become (ab)used to over the last decades. This wider theory of action which is able to incorporate causal factors of action from a variety of sources would become the new normal science. Realist explanations becomes one type among others, almost never sufficient alone, and often, depending on the scope conditions, not even applicable.

Since the specification of scope conditions was the basis of the realist defense against Vasquez's critique⁵², why would realists oppose this move now in the version presented by Legro and Moravcsik? The reason is that the latter are no scope conditions between different realist theories which make up the entirety of the theoretical horizon, but conditions of the applicability of realism as compared to other theories. And this seems to be defined on realism's turf. As seen above, scholars in the classical tradition, including realists, and almost all conscious critics of realists, have spent their time defining where the supposedly Hobbesian image and the pure theory of self-help might be applicable. All their theories were meant to be superimposed on realism, i.e. they incorporated realist thought as mere part of a wider approach.

It is very difficult for realists, albeit not impossible, to join on such a terrain, since that would imply that their theory is simply a special case (under

⁵⁰ Banks 1985.

⁵¹ Such a synthesis with its exclusive emphasis on behaviour must leave out theories which at least partly focus their explanations on the reproduction of structures. This applies to purely holistic theories, but also all theories with a dual ontology (agency and structure), such as post-Gramscian approaches interested in the reproduction of the structures of power, or constructivist explanations interested in the reproduction of intersubjective life-worlds of meaning, or "cultures", as in Wendt 1999. Indeed, Wendt is consciously trying to provide an even more encompassing theory in which the conditions for these individualist action theories are spelled out.

⁵² Schweller 1997.

some conditions).⁵³ Yet, if taken seriously, it implies that realism would become a sub-theory subsumed under a wider and therefore more encompassing theory. It is in this particular, but very important, sense, that the realist rejoinders had a point when they saw in Legro and Moravcsik's writings an "imperialist" attempt. Realism would be reduced to the place where it is already for all non-realists: a special case in need of justification. For instance, the simple argument that materialism matters⁵⁴ does, in turn, no longer matter, since all other theories have always been able to integrate that component. What made the "neo-neo debate"⁵⁵ so futile from the start is that Keohane et al. were not arguing that realists are always wrong; they simply tried, again, to define the conditions under which they were. All neorealist defenses therefore missed the point, at least to the non-realist.⁵⁶

But the endeavour itself is revealing: for some realists at least, realism must avoid the impression that it can be subsumed. For the subsuming would be under a theoretical roof which, by necessity, is not realist. It cannot be realist since realism has always appealed to an inherent superiority for its supposed closeness to reality. Reality *is*, it cannot only *sometimes be*, for then the Pandora box is open again about the limits of *realism* and "*its*" *reality*.

Consequently, realism has to find a different defence line. It is not allowed to cover the universe of IR either by expanding such as to include assumptions and causal variables from competitors, or by defining purely theory-internal scope conditions. It cannot scientifically defend realism as such according to the discipline's standards, although they might defend empirical claims which they will have to share with others. In this situation, a last logical defense appears in simply ditching the very need of justifying realism and go on while doing business-as-usual. And indeed, such an anti-positivistic defense of IR realism has been proposed by Kenneth Waltz whose reaction should, however, no longer be read as representing anything close to the mainstream of present IR realism.

I will claim that a diversion into a type of pragmatic/intuitionist realism would not escape the "conservative dilemma of realism", which the next section will develop. A return to a "common-sense realism" is, as already

⁵³ See Feaver in Feaver 2000. Also Wohlforth and Brooks 2000/01 go in this direction.

⁵⁴ Schweller 2000.

⁵⁵ Wæver 1996.

⁵⁶ See the debate in Baldwin 1993.

argued by Spegele⁵⁷, hardly possible today: it needs justifications which could command a wider audience than the insiders. Yet, arguing for a realism of intuition, by justifying it on a relativist/pragmatic understanding of science, just to save the tradition of realism, is yet another attempt to have the scientific cake and eat it in an anti-positivist way, too.

The conservative dilemma of the realist tradition in IR

This article sees realism in IR as a scholarly tradition characterised by the repeated, and for its basic indeterminacy repeatedly failed, attempt to translate the practical rules of European diplomacy into scientific laws of a US science. Realist IR scholars have always faced the same basic dilemma: either they update the practical knowledge of a shared diplomatic culture, but then they lose scientific credibility, or, reaching for determinacy, they cast their maxims in a scientific mould, but end up distorting the realist tradition. Ever since the conversion of Morgenthau, realism has become paradigmatic in the social science discipline IR because it basically decided for the latter.

In “Metternich and the conservative dilemma”, one of the most evocative chapters ever written by a realist on realism, Kissinger depicts several facets of the politics of conservatism in a revolutionary era, a politics necessarily tragic. For conservatives must openly defend what should be taken tacitly for granted; they must strive for socialised values in a time which has become self-conscious. Put in the limelight of contestation and conflict, the conservative has three answers.

By fighting as anonymously as possible, has been the classic conservative reply... To fight for conservatism in the name of historical forces, to reject the validity of the revolutionary question because of its denial of the temporal aspect of society and the social contract – this was the answer of Burke. To fight the revolutionary in the name of reason, to deny the validity of the question on epistemological grounds, as contrary to the structure of the universe – this was the answer of Metternich.⁵⁸

But Metternich’s answer was always confronting the same dilemma: “While Metternich desperately attempted to protect ‘reality’ against its enemies, the issue increasingly became a debate about its nature and the nature of ‘truth’. Had ‘reality’ still proved unambiguous, he would not have needed to affirm it.

⁵⁷ Spegele 1996.

⁵⁸ Kissinger 1957, 193.

By the increasing insistence of his affirmation, he testified to its disintegration.”⁵⁹

Morgenthau stays paradigmatic for this birth defect of realism in international relations in his attempt to save the rules of a conservative diplomacy of the 18th century into the 20th century where nationalism, and to some extent democracy, has destroyed the very basis for its ruling. As Metternich, he does not concede the rational ground to the adversaries but confronts them on the question of “the world as it really is”. As Metternich, he eventually has to confront an audience which, by the very insistence on his realism, starts to question whether it is all that self-evident and natural.

Morgenthau follows a realist ritual in opposing what he perceives as dangerous idealist pipedreams. Interestingly enough, his opponents initially were the “scientific men” of the enlightenment.⁶⁰ Here Morgenthau is still the very German conservative, the romantic critique of rationalism. From then on, the successive editions of his famous *Politics Among Nations* show the conversion to the rationalist conservative.

Morgenthau’s conversion to a “scientist” is best understood as an adaptation to his new environment. In crossing the Atlantic, the maxims of *Realpolitik* became exposed to a political culture which was much less accepting of the categorical distinction between the internal and the external aspects of politics, let alone the *Primat der Außenpolitik*. Indeed, the foreign policy of the US not seldom aimed as a matter of course to remain apart (and aloof) of the petty power struggles which seemed to plague Europe. The Wilsonian approach, which struck a chord with some European politicians in the inter-war period, was an outright attack on the traditional way of running international affairs. The tenets of Wilson’s diplomacy diametrically opposed those of nineteenth century European diplomacy: public diplomacy over secret treaties, multilateral institutions of collective security over bilateralism and competitive alliances, and – at the heart of the matter – a progressive view of human nature as rational with potentially common interests over the assumption of eternal wickedness and selfishness.

Morgenthau tried his best to convince his adopted country(wo)men that such a world-view was not only helpless in front of the disaster that had shattered the world in the midst of this century. Worse, such naivete was

⁵⁹ Kissinger 1957, 202.

⁶⁰ Morgenthau 1946.

responsible for the calamity. His approach combined the outlook of aristocratic European diplomacy with the new challenges that arose as societies became more tightly integrated and mobilized, and as legitimacy and domestic sovereignty became increasingly bound to broad popular consent. For him, the evolution towards mass societies raised the level of violence inherent in international politics because the unsatisfied power drive at home is projected in ever more organised manners abroad.⁶¹

IR would be the academic support for the diffusion of the practical knowledge shared by the former European Concert. Though the diplomatic culture could no longer be reproduced by a transnational and often aristocratic elite, science was there to help the new elites to come to grips with the nature of international politics as conceived by realists. It is at this point that the evolution of realism, of US foreign policy, and of the discipline of IR became inextricably linked. To enable the preeminent international power to fulfil its responsibilities, Morgenthau packaged the practical realist maxims of scepticism and policy prescriptions into a rational and “scientific” approach.

Morgenthau might have helped to “save the US from idealism”. But as realism became the paradigm of the new discipline, the academic criteria of “American social sciences” increasingly undermined many of the practical tenets of *Realpolitik*. So-called idealists might be appalled by what realism did to the discipline of International Relations, but some realists, too, became distressed at how International Relations disciplined realism. The anthropological foundations of realism, uncomfortable bedfellow of empirical sciences, was removed in turning to the security dilemma as basic starting point. In the new formulation, violence was not deduced from human nature, but from the context of human action in international affairs – from anarchy. Realist analysts no longer derived behaviour from innate human drive for power, but rather from the socializing pressure of the international sphere. Empirical correlations started to supplant human psyches as the building blocks of Realist theory.

But turning Realism into an empirical science stripped it off its particular view of politics, that is, of the indeterminacy of politics, and of politics as a practical art and not an abstract model. Hence, during the Second Debate, not only two different versions of the scientific enterprise, but also two different versions of realism clashed. For the followers of the “continental finesse” and

⁶¹ Morgenthau 1948, 74.

shrewdness of Niccolò Machiavelli, realism derived from practical knowledge and utilitarian reason. For others, more inspired by the allegedly mechanic world-view of Thomas Hobbes⁶², realism had to be understood in terms of a testable science.⁶³ The social engineer so despised by Morgenthau⁶⁴ came back with a vengeance. And through the effect of his own writings on the “nature” of world politics, and the (one) “rational” national interest, he had done much to make such a comeback possible.

Morgenthau faced the conservative dilemma. If realism is practical knowledge, then it can said to exist because it is shared by a diplomatic community; it is real and does not need explicit justification. Yet, if the same realist maxims are no longer or not necessarily shared, and need justification in our democratic times, this foundation cannot simply rely on tradition; instead it must argue with evidence which can be intersubjectively shared. To defend realism, Morgenthau was forced to take the second road, although he believed in the first. His own ambiguity is shown in his treatment of the balance of power: on the one hand, Morgenthau viewed the balance of power as a contingent institution – it only works, if its rules are shared and followed; on the other hand, this balance was also “inevitable”, whenever the rules are *not* followed.

For this reason, it is against the very tradition of realism (so far) to try to diminish its scientific status: a return to pure tradition would merely put it square back into the conservative dilemma. For it undermines the traditional realist appeal which consisted exactly in it being analytical and not normative as all these idealists. Realism brought positivity to IR. As Chris Brown very rightly pointed out, this pressure for more “science” is, to some extent, preordained by the realist world view itself. Realism claims to refer to an unproblematic reality, a claim that must invite for more objectivist methods.⁶⁵ Retreating from this claim might save a classical version of realism - which, however, is then hardly distinguishable from the wider classical tradition.

Moreover, denying the dilemma by simply restating the tradition is even less an option today. Since realism is no longer paradigmatic, its heuristic value can no longer be taken for granted. In the second debate, realists could simply brush aside any empirically controlled critique of realist analyses, be it quantitative or not, as

⁶² But see Vincent 1981 and Bartelson 1996.

⁶³ For this opposition, see Walker 1987.

⁶⁴ Morgenthau 1946.

⁶⁵ Brown 1992, 90.

Morgenthau and Bull famously did.⁶⁶ But today, it would rightly count as a diversion which would hardly suffice as a justification to the non-converted.

A pragmatist critique of science as a defense of realism

There are several ways of meeting the dilemma, but only one which has the courage to push the realist defense as initiated by Kenneth Waltz some 20 years ago, to its logical conclusion. Kenneth Waltz's attempt to deal with this dilemma of tradition and science/justification sticks out, since he challenges the terms in which it is posed. He argues that science is actually not really possible, justification hence not conclusive, and therefore his theory is as good as one can get.

As I will try to show, Waltz asks us to choose and accept a theory (1) whose premises might be unrealistic, (2) which cannot be assessed in comparison with other theories, and (3) which informs explanations which cannot be assessed empirically, but (4) which should influence our thinking about the real world and hence our actions in foreign affairs – as if our thinking and action are independent of that very real world – lest to be punished by the iron laws of the international structure, for whose existence we have however no proof. Waltz wants to have the scientific cake and eat it anti-positivistically, too.

Waltz's rejoinder to Vasquez's critique⁶⁷ seems to indicate the final destination of a journey he started with his *Theory of International Politics*. Increasingly, the underlying ambiguity of his concept of "theory" appears. Waltz wants a scientific status to his theory. He distinguished his approach from mere "thought".⁶⁸ Also, he appealed to some scientific respectability by using a neo-classical economic analogy. Yet already then, he was careful to point out that positivist standards cannot really apply. It is these caveats about science which have become more prominent.

This curious use of "theory" to evade the need for theoretical justification is probably based on a radicalised pragmatic understanding of science. This only probable interpretation is based on the fact that Waltz used already a Friedman-inspired pragmatic (yet positivist) position for his book. Waltz retained three main features. First, in good logical positivist and constructivist manner, "data does not speak for itself", but is constructed via pre-conceived theories. What counts as a fact is theory-dependent. Second, and contrary to constructivism, assumptions and central concepts have to be as parsimonious as possible, but not realistic as long as they show empirical fit. Finally, and contrary to the falsificationist ideal, this empirical fit is defined in a much weaker, "pragmatic" way. Theory is so defined that it has little to do with science or falsification; it certainly needs no justification, as long as it

⁶⁶ Morgenthau 1970 [1964]; 1970 [1967], Bull 1969.

⁶⁷ Waltz 1997.

⁶⁸ Waltz 1990.

“works”.

But Waltz can no longer be content with even this position, since it would impose a discipline too demanding on his theorising, as for instance, on prediction. Waltz claims that “success in explaining, not in predicting is the ultimate criterion of good theory” (never mind that, in the same short piece, he too says that his prediction on a return to multipolarity after the end of the Cold War, if vindicated by the facts, would support his theory).⁶⁹ Although generally a plausible claim in the social sciences, it sits very uncomfortably with Friedman’s positivist pragmatism. There, being lax at the start is possible because it is coupled to stringent tests at the end. This testing is done on explanation and prediction, since positivists do not see any qualitative difference between the two: the law of gravity explains past events in the same way as it predicts future events under similar conditions. Indeed, the stress on prediction is important for positivists since it allows the only really independent check of the empirical fit of a theory. Gary Becker, for instance, was always unhappy about economic explanations in terms of “revealed preferences”, since they could rearrange anything *ex post facto*.⁷⁰

With these moves, Waltz has systematically ruled out the theoretical checks via (realistic) assumptions, (possible) predictions, and empirical testing. Here, the radical pragmatic argument comes in: the real world strikes back on those states who do not pursue policies that fall within the range of structural imperatives.⁷¹ But *knowing* about this check then miraculously escapes the theory dependence of facts he used to undermine stringent tests of his theory. Indeed, this question actually never arises, for this check is altogether on another level. Waltz does not care much about the “artificial” world of researchers who devise tests for the explanation they put forward. He thinks about the more powerful vengeance of the material “real” world, when its “laws” are not observed. The check does not appear in the theoretical, nor the controlled empirical world, but in the world of practice. In a curious way, Waltz’s response divorces the world of knowledge entirely from the historical (and material) world, to be then linked up through foreign policy practice. Put differently, Waltz argues for a theory dependence of facts when it serves to show that theories cannot be falsified (world of knowledge). There is, however, also a structural dependence of *policies* (world of practice) which can be used to check his theory (the link between the two). He does not answer, however, how on Earth we would actually *know* what this link is. How does Waltz know *what* actually stroke back or that there was a strike to start with?

Hence, this pragmatic position produces a huge justification deficit not only for

⁶⁹ Waltz 1997, 916 and 915 respectively.

⁷⁰ Becker 1986 [1976].

⁷¹ Waltz 1997, 915.

defending its claims (which it admits), but for the choice of this theory as compared to any other. In his earlier book, Waltz himself admits that power is not conclusively measurable and that balances tend to form over time but might not reach a point of equilibrium.⁷² He himself has ruled out an empirical check for assessing theories. In his own words, he cannot know what reality is. And this also means, as Waltz says, that there is no way to assess whether or not a theory has excess empirical corroboration as compared to another, as Lakatos insists it must have.⁷³ In other words, he has no base for falsification by comparing theories, either. How can he then justify that his “laws” are the right ones (if there are any)? How can Waltz defend his theory choice in the first place? But, of course, he does not need this, since here realism can rely on all the authority and symbolic power of its formerly paradigmatic position.

Not having a justification for his theory choice is moreover important, since, as all realist theories in the past, also Waltz’s theory, is easily criticisable for its potentially self-fulfilling characteristics. Contrary to constructivism, and consonant with positivism, Waltz seems to hold that the social and natural world are similar, at least insofar as, in materialist fashion, they are independent of the way we think about them. Positivists hold that basically there is no difference between the natural and the social sciences *and* that the subject (observer)-object relationship is unproblematic for the basic independence of the world from our thoughts.⁷⁴ Constructivists hold that the *social* world is not independent of the way we think about it.⁷⁵ Now, how does Waltz know that actors inspired by his understanding – which cannot be empirically checked – are not reproducing the very things he sees in the world? Peace researcher since 40 years and now Wendt⁷⁶ have shown quite conclusively that if everybody behaved like in a jungle the world would look alike.

Consequently, this position is in a permanent justification deficit and does eventually not escape the conservative dilemma of realism. Not surprisingly, in a last move, Waltz’s defence relentlessly pushes the need for justification to the other side. And here the fact that realism has been paradigmatic, as Vasquez has argued, comes handy, for it gives a chronological justification advantage. The contenders must always behave as critiques of realism. As long as there is not all substance of realism

⁷² See the discussion in Guzzini 1998, chap. 9.

⁷³ This is the major difference between Lakatos and Kuhn, which allows the former to claim that science is not reduced to a version of “mob-psychology” (Lakatos 1970, 178).

⁷⁴ This refers to textbook positivism not to today’s philosophy of natural science. Inspired by the “Copenhagen revolution”, Heisenberg’s “Unschärfe”-Theorem and quantum mechanics, the positions there can be seen as either a profound re-definition of positivism, or a move altogether beyond it.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of constructivist tenets, see Guzzini 2000a.

⁷⁶ Wendt 1992.

realised (whatever that means), as long as there is no other theory that superseded it (never mind whether this is at all feasible in Waltz's own vision), Waltz can claim that his neorealist "theory" stays unscathed. Again and again, Waltz wants to have the cake and eat it, too.

When pragmatism leaves realism behind

It is curious to note that whenever realism is criticised from the more scientific branches of the discipline, it seems able to embrace post-positivist ideas, as if there had always been theirs. This kind of reaction has a longer pedigree. When Bruce Bueno de Mesquita attacked the lacking scientificity of IR⁷⁷, Stephen Krasner retorted by (correctly) showing that even Lakatos is "debating in an arena which has been defined by Kuhn, an arena in which the traditional view of science has been severely undermined."⁷⁸ In particular, he argued in very Kuhnian way that meaning and topic incommensurability, as well as competing normative prescriptions and "the complex but often intimate relations with external communities", make claims about progressive shifts *across* paradigms extremely difficult. Basically, the discipline can only debate *within* given paradigms. After Krasner, now also Waltz against Vasquez, and Hellmann in his response to Legro and Morvacsik⁷⁹: if the science of IR has troubles with realism, it is not because realism is wrong, but because IR should not be a "science".

Contrary to Waltz, Gunther Hellmann does not leave the debate at this unfinished stage. Starting from the same Friedmanian pragmatist grounding that a theory is good as long as it works or functions,⁸⁰ he wants a return to the common language of academia and practice by pushing academia back to the language of the practitioner, yet by keeping the advantage of the outside observer. More openly than Waltz, he plays down the need for scientific respectability, but by offering a more philosophically grounded argument.

The grounding is provided by the recourse to the philosophy of science, more particularly to modern versions of "pragmatism", represented in particular, but not only, by Richard Rorty. For Hellmann, pragmatism has done the job in undermining the credentials of positivism and all what comes with it. This move takes the ground away for the need of any of the classical justifications in IR theory. Any version of the correspondence theory of truth, any version of scientific realism, any version of falsification is wrong-headed, if understood in a logical theoretical way. Such devices are just this: scholarly habits devised through the tradition of a scientific community.

⁷⁷ Bueno de Mesquita 1985.

⁷⁸ Krasner 1985.

⁷⁹ Hellmann in Feaver 2000: 169-174.

⁸⁰ Hellmann 1994.

But pragmatism is also not succumbing to the sirens of poststructuralism whose theorising, according to him, is purely de-constructing and has lost any major connection with real problems.⁸¹

The pragmatist solution would be the ideal solution to the conservative dilemma. It enshrines a view of the world in which we do not go about constantly reflecting upon action: we simply do. This keeps the important because implicit link to tradition. At the same time, it offers an rational academic (if meta-theoretical) justification for it.⁸² Hence, IR should be allowed to pursue in the classical tradition according to the pragmatist attitude that “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.”

Yet, whether or not pragmatism is the right meta-theory for the social science, it does not save realism as a distinct theory, as Hellmann implicitly shows. For IR to be “what works” must be the moment where the life-world of the actor and the observer somewhat coincide. This is the language of the so-called First Debate and the early days of IR. In other words, since for Hellmann it is this *way* of doing IR which is important, he is less interested in the exact boundaries of realism: he wants to retain the common language of the entire classical tradition, be it realist or idealist.⁸³

For this to happen, however, I think one should take Hellmann’s line further, and perhaps further than he would have done himself. I want to argue that even granted that the sophisticated falsificationist version of Lakatos is not tenable for the social sciences, this still does not make a very strong case for defending a return to a language of practice, the established wisdom, including realism, through pragmatism. This defense simply begs the question. It just re-affirms the conservative dilemma; for the classical tradition, including realism, would have no reason to be believed more than any other idea.

This justification does not need to come in the form of formal modelling, as feared by many and expressed by Stephen Walt.⁸⁴ But, surely, to have some wider appeal, it must come in a defense of the logical coherence of the theory, which this article seeks to question, and in an empirically controlled assessment. Indeed, it would make the life of qualitative research in IR much easier, if some of its defendants would not try to salvage realism at the same time, an endeavour which this article sees as basically impossible if realism is

⁸¹ Hellmann 1997, 41-54.

⁸² In this regard, it is similar to Gaddis’ (1992/93) somewhat paradoxical suggestion to explore a “scientific” theory, namely chaos theory, to support his point that history or the social sciences cannot function as a “science”.

⁸³ Hellmann 2000.

⁸⁴ Walt 1999.

understood the usual way (see below).⁸⁵ For there is plenty of stringent qualitative research, including conceptual analysis, around. The check of logical consistency is not something reserved to formal approaches, not even to positivism: it is a general scholarly attitude also for post-positivists, otherwise the meta-theoretical and theoretical analyses of theirs would hardly make any sense.⁸⁶ Hence, not even by post-positivist standards, realism can retreat on a ground on which it needs no further justification as a pragmatic “it works” – in particular if, in the absence of criteria to judge this, this simply begs the question: Was it “it” which worked?

Moreover, such understood pragmatism is a comfortable position only for an established paradigm, since only such a school will be *allowed* to forgo the justification of itself as compared to others. For its general status, realism-informed writings will see publication and their argument might then be “pragmatically” assessed. The situation is, of course, slightly more complicated, if a justification is needed *before* getting published. Pragmatism will not help much their submissions. Finally, this position has the advantage of keeping contenders in their place, which is exactly this: contenders to realism. In this position, realism can always point to the fact that the others must show the value-added or the incompatibility with one or the other version of realism (which is not undermined since one of the multiple versions of realism will always work pragmatically). Since this turn back to the distinctiveness/determinacy dilemma, the debate has reached full circle.

Learning the lessons of the dilemmas: the trap of the perpetual First Debate

Until now, the purpose of this article might have appeared to be just another, perhaps more systematically grounded, critique of the difficulties realist theories of International Relations have been facing. By drawing on the lessons one can learn from these dilemmas, this conclusion wants to suggest a way forward. Once we know where realism gets stuck in its analytical justification, the study of its dilemmas should open a more reflexive way to re-apprehend

⁸⁵ Walt and Powell via Brooks

⁸⁶ See, for instance, the criticism of the logical consistency of neo-realism and of a certain brand of regime theory found in the work of Friedrich Kratochwil 1984, 1988 and together with John Ruggie 1986.

this rich tradition. What I want to argue at last, is that realism should try to get out of the vicious circle of critique and anti-critique into which it got itself trapped by perpetuating the often virtual “realism-idealism” debate, which the discipline calls the “first debate” as a shorthand.

Realism as a double negation and the trap of the realism-idealism debate

In what follows, I argue that the underlying reason why realists are not facing up the implications of the identity (distinctiveness/determinacy) and the conservative (science/tradition) dilemma consists in the terms of the first debate in which many realists feel compelled to justify realism. According to this self-understanding, realists are there to remind us about the fearful, the cruel side of world politics which lurks behind. This distinct face of international politics inevitably shows when the masquerade is over. In the Venetian carnival of international diplomacy, only the experienced will be prepared when the curtain falls and world history picks up its circular course. By trying to occupy a vantage point of (superior) historical experience, science came then as an offer, IR realism could not refuse.

IR Realism has repeatedly thought to have no other choice but to justify this pessimism with a need to distance itself from other positions, to be non-subsumable. It needed to show that whatever else might temporarily be true, there is an unflinching reality which cannot be avoided. Realism needed to point to a reality which cannot be eventually overcome by politics, to an attitude which would similarly rebuff the embrace by any other intellectual tradition. The “first debate” is usually presented as the place in which this “negative” attitude has been played out, indeed mythically enshrined. It is to this metaphorical foundation to which many self-identified realists return.

Yet, I think that the “first debate” is a place where the thoughts not only of so-called idealist scholars, but also of self-stylised realists look unduly impoverished exactly because it is couched in terms of an opposition. When scholars more carefully study the type of opposition, however, they quickly find out that many so-called realist scholars have been not only critical of utopian thought and social engineering, but also of *Realpolitik*. In other words, if one concentrates on scholars and their work, and not on labels, one sees realism not simply as an attitude of negation – which it is – but as an attitude of double negation: in the words of R.N. Berki, realism must oppose both the conservative idealism of nostalgia and the revolutionist idealism of imagina-

tion.⁸⁷

Norberto Bobbio has developed this double negation in his usually lucid style as both a conservative realism which opposes the “ideal”, and a critical realism which opposes the “apparent”,⁸⁸ a difference too few realists have been able to disentangle. For this double heritage of political realism is full of tensions. Realism as anti-idealism is status-quo oriented. It relies on the entire panoply of arguments so beautifully summarised by Alfred Hirschman.⁸⁹ According to the *futility* thesis, any attempt at change is condemned to be without any real effect. The *perversity* thesis would argue that far from changing for the better, such policies only add new problems to the already existing ones. And the central *jeopardy* thesis says that purposeful attempts at social change will only undermine the already achieved. The best is the enemy of the good, and so on. Anti-apparent realism, however, is an attitude more akin to the political theories of suspicion. It looks at what is hidden behind the smokescreen of current ideologies, putting the allegedly self-evident into the limelight of criticism. With the other form of realism, it shares a reluctance to treat beautiful ideas as what they claim to be. But it is much more sensible to their ideological use, revolutionary as well as conservative. Whereas anti-ideal realism defends the status quo, anti-apparent realism questions it. It wants to unmask existing power relations.

Such a vision does actually apply forcefully for many so-called realists, as can, for instance, be shown for E.H. Carr and Susan Strange.⁹⁰ Both have been strong critics of the status quo not because it was wrong-heading into a kind of utopianism, but because of the ideological clothing used by the great powers of their days (the UK and French, and the US respectively), brandishing the “harmony of interests” or “there is no alternative” which masked their power and responsibility.⁹¹ In Carr’s words,

Indeed, realism itself, if we attack it with its own weapons, often turns out in practice to be just as much conditioned as any other mode of thought. In

⁸⁷ Berki 1981, 268-269, Griffiths 1992, 159.

⁸⁸ For this distinction, see Bobbio 1996 [1969], XIV-XVII.

⁸⁹ Hirschman 1991.

⁹⁰ See respectively Guzzini 2000b; 2001a. For a recent reassessment of Carr, see Michael Cox 2000.

⁹¹ For Carr, see his critique of the harmony of interests in Carr 1946 and for the radical critique of the Cold War, see Carr 1961. For Strange, see Calleo and Strange 1984, Strange 1988a, 1989, and 1990.

politics, the belief that certain facts are unalterable or certain trends irresistible commonly reflects a lack of desire or lack of interest to change or resist them. The impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist is one of the most certain and most curious lessons of political science.⁹²

Strange, on her side, needed to redefine the very concept of power as “structural power” for her anti-apparent realist critique of anti-idealist realism. Both have been receiving Marxist literature, and both have opted for a strategy to attack the common wisdom of the day, once radical, once conservative. Realism in this double negation becomes an uneasy shift back and forth, a continuing opposition.

Hence, once one starts from this double negation, it is difficult to use “realism” in the classical IR sense. Realism as a double negation is a tradition which stretches well across IR paradigms. For instance, it would include Robert Cox, as he acknowledges in his reference to Carr.⁹³ Realism thus conceived is pitched at a theoretical level altogether distinct from the usual – and I would argue misleading – categories of IR.

Consequently, a privileged way for realists to learn from their endemic dilemmas would consist to acknowledge the “first debate” for the little it is. On a purely disciplinary level, Brian Schmidt has already convincingly shown the missing “idealists” in the interwar-period which experienced no debate reducible to two camps labelled idealists and realists.⁹⁴ Similarly, many recent scholars on the realist tradition have emphasised the hybrid character of many of its more prominent protagonists, making them indistinguishable from some “idealists”. Griffiths shows how Hedley Bull, often not included in the realist canon, comes much closer to a genuine realist position than Morgenthau and Waltz, both judged to be nostalgic or complacent idealists respectively.⁹⁵ Similarly, in the most recent textbook on realism Jack Donnelly comes to the conclusion that the (better) realist tradition, as exemplified by Herz and Carr, is the one which kept “‘realist’ insights in dialectical tension with wider human aspirations and possibilities” - a sense of balance “sorely lacking in leading figures such as Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer”.⁹⁶

Realists should not recoil from the logical implication, Donnelly’s argument entails.⁹⁷ For if it is true that scholars like Carr and Herz most express the “nature” of the realist tradition, then the scholars most faithful to the realist tradition are

⁹² Carr 1946, 89.

⁹³ Cox 1986 [1981].

⁹⁴ Schmidt 1997. See also Schmidt 2002 forthcom..

⁹⁵ Griffiths 1992.

⁹⁶ Donnelly 2000, 193, 195. Note that Donnelly needs to use realism in two different meanings, once more generally and once in the realist-idealist opposition.

⁹⁷ For a more thorough discussion, see Guzzini 2001a.

paradoxically the most “hedged”, i.e. the least faithful to its assumptions and defining characteristics in the realist-idealist debate. It is only in this context that a rather candid sentence of the Donnelly’s back-cover makes sense: “Donnelly argues that common realist propositions...are rejected by many leading realists as well.”⁹⁸ What this shows is that the idealism of the continuing first debate is first and foremost the continuously re-invented “other”, logically needed to make realist rhetoric and thought work in the first place⁹⁹, but rarely one which would be opposed in its entirety by leading realists, in particular the classical (and perhaps also the neo-classical) ones.

In other words, I think it is counter-productive for realism to defend IR realism’s integrity at all price. In my understanding, it would be more coherent to accept that realism is this ambiguous tradition; and that some of the best writings which refer to that tradition are good, because they are often incoherent with any realism narrowly and distinctively defined. For the discussion has shown that the early realists were more encompassing classical scholars who had necessarily a richer theoretical panoply than a pure or distinguishable realism permits. Realists, now trying to overcome the 20 years’ crisis of the Waltzian parenthesis, would perhaps best leave the search for a distinct label in IR - in the very interest of a political realism more widely conceived.

Limits and opportunities of accepting the dilemmas

Put differently, once cleaned of its affiliation with a so-called first debate, once taken out of this relentless, one-sided, and ultimately misleading opposition, there is space for a realism more worth its name. Indeed, it would re-connect realism in International Relations with political realism in political theory. But it is a choice which comes at a price.

Some self-identifying realists – as much as some of their opponents – might not be ready to give up these wonderful identity-providing oppositions. On the realist side, the days would be gone of the nearly obsessive attempts to find an idealist, a “reductionist”, then transnationalist and institutionalist, now (a completely banalised) constructivist counterpart. We would no longer reduce IR debates into a rehashed first debate in which realists, if the caricature be permitted, relentlessly nail down any resurrection of an allegedly idealist mummy creeping out of its coffin. For this turns theoretical discussions in IR towards taking the hammering for all what there is. It locks IR into a backwardness, which it has made much way to overcome. Asked to be discussant on an ISA

⁹⁸ Donnelly 2000, back cover text.

⁹⁹ Guzzini 1998, 16.

panel on realism in Los Angeles, 2000, Michael Mann opened his discussion by noticing that if IR is still debating the materialist-idealist dichotomy, it has fallen much behind other disciplines.

Moreover, the price for realists would be high, since the differences seem hardened for external reasons. As the two debates which I used as a foil, suggest, these divisions might have less to do with intellectual differences, and more with political ones, both with regard to US politics and to camp wars in US academia. It is no help that the first is carried out in a bipolar opposition (again) and the second shows signs that the offer of promising young PhDs exceeds the job-supply in the respective camps. For the non-US spectator, the animosity and sometimes insults are otherwise difficult to understand.

Also, the feedback from the language of practitioners, in which the opposition between idealism and realism still prevails as the foundational dichotomy, makes such attempts difficult indeed and seems to undermine one of the alleged strengths of realism classically conceived: the closeness of the academic with the practitioners' language.

Furthermore, this choice would be perceived costly since it implies that realists must agree with the fact that their basic inspiration is best served by giving up the brand-name of IR realism and explore the possibilities and limits of realism as the double negation in which political theory thinks of it. Now, there have already been several attempts to convince IR realists of taking their concepts and philosophical inspirations more seriously and, as a result, leave IR realism behind.¹⁰⁰ But of course no theoretical family feels immediately comfortable when having to embrace new bedfellows.

Worse, thinking realism as a double negation, while being a more coherent way to account for a realist tradition, is no theoretical nirvana, either. Rob Walker has from earlier on indicated that it is not clear why would have to start from these dichotomies in the first place.¹⁰¹ Few realists, such as Pierre Hassner, have even started this re-thinking.¹⁰² In this context, realists would need to return to Aron's dictum that the aims of states – power, glory, ideas is his trilogy – are not mutually reducible. Realists would need to pick up where they left thirty years ago. But it would entail not only that they leave Waltzian

¹⁰⁰ The work of Rob Walker can be read this way. See the early statement in Walker 1987. See also Guzzini 1993.

¹⁰¹ Walker 1987, 85-86.

¹⁰² Hassner 1995.

neorealism behind: all realist theories which assume a single motive, such as Randall Schweller's single aim of power or Zakaria's single aim of influence-maximization, would be similarly faulted.¹⁰³ There is no power-money analogy: there is no single aim for expressing state motivation. Hence, more consistent with Aron or Wolfers-inspired realism, but not with neorealism, is Grieco's acceptance that state motivations vary in principle and not only due to changing circumstances¹⁰⁴, something which would ask for a much wider theory of rational action, then utilitarianism.

But perhaps, realists can be convinced by the advantages the acceptance of the dilemmas and the consequent choice to leave IR realism entails. The present realist strategy of picking and choosing within the tradition to find grounds for defending a version most congenial to a particular scholar, is simply not rigorous enough to defend the tradition as such. Hence, only accepting the call from political theory to view realism as a double negation would truly de-legitimate opposite attempts to box realism in the simple-mindedly portrayed *Realpolitik* which might do justice to some realist scholars at some time, but not to the intellectual tradition at large.

The second advantage of giving up the brand-name is that realists would be free to concentrate on the actual contributions in the debate. Our IR debates often function as if arguments only count if they help to establish or debunk a certain "-ism": there are mere means to another end. But this overstretches the paradigmatic debate: isms are not all what we should be concerned of. Once legitimately released from showing that this or the other argument saves realism, however defined, realists would be free to join on a series of ongoing debates.

First, realists would be ready to freely join the rationalist debate in IR. Legro's and Moravcsik's conclusion that realism is simply an indistinct rationalist theory would then be no indictment whatsoever (not that the two had this necessarily in mind in the first place). Indeed, realists could more openly contribute to the recent re-assessment of the concept of rationality which is

¹⁰³ See respectively Schweller 1994 and 1998 and Zakaria 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Grieco 1988. This contradicts Walt's (1999, 26, fn. 56) statement to the opposite. In other words, realism as a coherent theory might go the way of assuming an irreducible variety of state motivations (but then needs to answer how we derive them), but not a series of competing schools which can be used to play off contradicting evidence. But then, it will no longer look distinctive from a wider rational action theory. The identity dilemma still applies.

largely waged within the Weberian tradition in the social sciences – arguably also a political realist heritage – such as in the Habermas-inspired rationalist critique of utilitarian rationalism.¹⁰⁵

A second avenue would be an opening to more philosophical debates in IR in which some of the tenets of political realism might have been taken more seriously by others than IR realists themselves. Many so-called post-structuralists (another of these slippery categories for enemy-image use) have shown no particular fear to reflect on the fathers of political realism – from Max Weber to Carl Schmitt – as well as on their Nietzschean lineage.¹⁰⁶ Arguably, Foucault is inspired by, although not reducible to, such a political realism. Indeed, the conceptual discussion of a concept like power, central to realism, has been pursued largely outside of IR realism.¹⁰⁷ It is not quite clear why realists should leave that field eternally to others.

Moreover, admitting that realism is best thought of as a double negation, would lift the realist self-understanding on a more reflexive level where it would be able to answer the charge that realism is simply a special case of a wider approach proposed by neo-institutionalists, some constructivists like Wendt, and also the very classical IR realist tradition itself. For Wolfers', Kissinger's and Aron's distinctions which were mentioned above in the discussion on anarchy, all make place for Realpolitik as a special case of world politics. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to claim that Keohane and Nye (via the Aron disciple Stanley Hoffmann) are the heir of *that* richer realist tradition, rather than Waltz or Mearsheimer.¹⁰⁸

In particular, this would allow realism to engage on the right footing with the present challenge by Alexander Wendt's version of constructivism.¹⁰⁹ For Wendt carefully addresses realists in building a more comprehensive synthesis in which both realism and institutionalism are now seen as a special case of a

¹⁰⁵ Müller 1994; 1995, Risse-Kappen 1995 and Risse 2000. But see also Walt's critique of rational choice.

¹⁰⁶ The literature here is rapidly growing. For the start, see the still excellent early piece by Ole Wæver 1989, and Campbell and Dillon 1993. For the recent engagement with Carl Schmitt in IR, see Andreas Behnke 2000, Alessandro Colombo 1999 and Jef Huysmans 1999. More generally, see Mouffe 1999 and Scheuerman 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Guzzini 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Note also that Keohane 1984, 8, fn 1, finds it difficult to fundamentally disentangle his account from a "non-representative" type of realism like Stanley Hoffmann's.

¹⁰⁹ Wendt 1999.

wider constructivist theory.¹¹⁰ Again, Wendt does not say that world politics will never look like realists think it does. But since the materialist and individualist meta-theory on which realism is usually built, does not hold (meta-theoretical foundation), one has to find another, a philosophical idealist grounding for this. As a result, there is no logic, but cultures of anarchy. Still, realpolitik cannot only be said to exist, but, if it does, it is particularly vicious since it is based on a self-fulfilling prophecy difficult to get rid of. All these would be claims the “hedged” realists of the sort of Aron and Wolfers would have little to quarrel with. Yet, whether or not one agrees with him, Wendt does provide a necessary meta-theoretical founding for such a view, something realists have not been able to offer so far. And he offers a wider and more systematically argued theoretical net than any “hedged” realist did in the past. In short, Wendt’s constructivism is not just another idealism of the continuing “first debate”: he defines both the meta-theoretical and theoretical scope conditions of realism’s existence – which is something realists should be reflecting upon.

This leaves us with the cost in terms of communicability, or shared experience, with regard to the world of practice. This is perhaps the deepest issue, the discipline of IR is facing today. The misleading idealism-realism divide is very prominent in daily politics, and not only in the US where it is simply more visible. Giving it up would be putting further strains on the already difficult communication between the world of the observers and the world of practitioners. Yet, I would claim that the issue is wrongly put and if re-defined, does no longer have these negative implications.

The negative implications of seeing realism on the level of observation differently defined than on the level of practice, double and not only simple negation, stem from the curious assumption that the language of observation has to imitate the language of practice for understanding it.¹¹¹ This does not follow, however. It is perfectly possible to be proficient in more than one language. This implies that future scholars should be well-versed in both the life-worlds of world politics, be it the language of the diplomat, the military, the international businessperson, and/or transnational civil right movements, as well as in the life-world of academia where truth claims have to be justified

¹¹⁰ For an analysis of Wendt’s aim of a disciplinary and theoretical synthesis, see Guzzini and Leander 2001.

¹¹¹ For one example, see Wallace 1996.

in a scholarly (and not necessarily politically) coherent manner.¹¹² This is a task of tall proportions for which our usual education is not well prepared. But it is a task, we cannot avoid facing, if on the one hand, we want to produce sensible explanations, and on the other hand, we want to retain a hermeneutic bridge to world politics.

Another negative implication stems from yet another tacit but unwarranted assumption about the relationship between the world of practice and the world of observation, namely that the two are divorced. But there is already some reflexivity which has crept into political discourse and understanding. It is simply not true that the world of politics has not included a position of (self-)observation. Indeed, *Ostpolitik* cannot be understood without the conscious attempt to alter the reference points within which classical diplomacy has been conducted.¹¹³ Reflexivity is hence not only a characteristic of the scholarly observer. Rather, the double negation and the concomitant acceptance of a self-observing component which problematises the idealism-realism divide, has been already part and parcel of world politics. Indeed, this reflexivity has arguably been at least an important factor in shaping the end of the Cold War in Europe.¹¹⁴ Refusing to admit this does reify a language about world politics which does not necessarily hold. If consciously done, it is not a historical statement, but a normative argument about how world politics should be thought of. It makes out of realism exactly what Carr said it would be, a theory lacking. There is no reason why realists should be compelled to take only this backward looking position, nor, as Hellmann shows, do all (former) realists feel this need anyway.

Conclusion: After the “Twenty Years’ Detour”

Using two recent debates around realism as a foil, this article tried to unravel

¹¹² Guzzini 2001b.

¹¹³ Wæver 1995.

¹¹⁴ This is a finding of the original book on the end of the Cold War debate which has not been undermined by later critiques. See Wendt 1992, Lebow and Risse-Kappen 1995 and the debate which followed and which includes most prominently William Wohlforth 1998, now also together with Brooks 2000/01. See also the exchange between Kramer and Wohlforth in the *Review of International Studies* (Kramer 1999, Wohlforth 2000, Kramer 2001).

two underlying and enduring dilemmas of the realist tradition. The identity or distinctiveness-determinacy dilemma re-surfaced in the debate spurred by Legro and Moravcsik in *International Security*. Either realism tries to keep its theoretical distinctiveness, but then becomes indeterminate in its explanation for the very indeterminacy of its central explanatory concepts, such as power. Or it strives for determinacy but must then necessarily rely on auxiliary hypothesis and causal factors which are not uniquely realist. Therefore, the double implication of Legro and Moravcsik's critique, so acutely sensed by the realist rejoinders, is correct. Realism is basically no more than a special case in need of justification, a theory which can be subsumed under a wider roof of theorising. Moreover, the embracing theories are intrinsically superior to genuinely realist theories in that they are used to problematise the scope conditions under which different sub-theories apply, i.e. they have integrated an element of theoretical reflexivity which has, in the past, been alien to much of realism.

The "conservative dilemma" is haunting realism when caught in-between science and tradition, as shown in the Vasquez-spurred debate. For realism cannot avoid a stance on science which goes beyond a simple evocation of "tradition" as satisfactory it might seem to some of the realist rejoinders. The moment realism is no longer the taken-for-granted background for "good" political practice; it is itself in need of a justification. This justification cannot be provided by an appeal to its intrinsic superiority of grasping reality "as it is"; its appeal needs to be backed by scholarly justification. But this appeal to justification undermines the very basis of its practical tradition. Realism has been the repeated, and repeatedly failed, attempt to turn practically shared rules of European diplomacy into verifiable laws of a US social science. A however meta-theoretically justified return to tradition and intuition simply gets realism where it came from, but where it cannot stay since it is no longer self-evident. Its legitimacy depends on some narrative or theory which can appeal also to the non-believer, which can be persuasive to those who do not share its world-view. It comes therefore as no surprise, that recently a new scientific ring has just been added to realism, basing it on socio-biology.¹¹⁵

My discussion of the debate has shown many reasons why IR, and realism, should say farewell to *neorealism*. Realist scholars somewhat unwittingly join in with recent and elder critiques who claimed that neorealism has been

¹¹⁵ Thayer 2000.

detrimental to realist theorising itself.¹¹⁶ Realism became a “science of Realpolitik without politics”.¹¹⁷ Therefore, so-called neoclassical or neotraditional realists today have been eying back to classical scholars, partly for finding some help in the conceptual ambivalence of earlier writers, as Legro and Moravcsik seem to imply, and partly because these classics implicitly acknowledged, but could not care less about, the basic dilemma between indeterminacy and distinctiveness. In other words, what the debate around realism shows is that the last twenty years have been a gigantic detour for realism in which younger scholars had to find their way back to the realist state of the art before the time when Waltzian neorealism and the rather narrow neo-neo debate temporarily diverted it.

But they cannot start anew as if nothing happened outside of realism and other approaches in IR. Being aware of the enduring dilemmas of IR realism, I would hope that IR realists would not want to defend realism’s integrity at all price. I hope that the defense of realism will not come in building yet another citadel. Given the demise of anarchy as a founding myth, such a strategy would now revert to socio-biology which is basically the only category that constructivists would be unfit to integrate. But I am not sure whether many IR realists would feel attracted by such a move, not would I personally believe that socio-biology gets out of the dilemmas. Thus, IR realism should perhaps re-invent itself. I argue that the debate around political realism in political theory is one possible starting point, which would accommodate some of the more ambivalent realist tradition in IR, like the Carr-inspired scholars in IPE, such as Susan Strange, or the recent relaunching of the English School.¹¹⁸ But seeing realism as a double negation comes at a price, not the least, that it is not a stable position itself.

Still, a re-invention it must be, since IR realism can no longer mean a renewal of “common-sense realism” or empiricist intuitionism, nor yet another rehearsal of the first debate. In this case, it must accept that this no longer mounts to a defense of realism as a clearly distinguishable school of thought.

¹¹⁶ Ashley 1981; 1983; 1986 [1984], Walker 1987.

¹¹⁷ Kratochwil 1993.

¹¹⁸ For a recent reassessment of Susan Strange, see Lawton 2000. For the debate around the English School, see Timothy Dunne 1998 and the ensuing debate in *Cooperation and Conflict* (Symposium on International Society 2000), as well as Barry Buzan’s re-convening of the English School and rejoinders in the *Review of International Studies* (Forum on the English School 2001).

If this is the best way to save some realist insights and to engage in arguments – and not school or camp-fights – in the different meta-theoretical and theoretical debates in IR, well so it be. I believe that many scholars who have realist leanings, perhaps more in Europe, will find this a price worth paying.

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