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## Classical Realism

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### ➔ Reader's Guide

Classical realism represents an approach to international relations that harks back to fifth-century Greek historian Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian War. It recognizes the central role of power in politics of all kinds, but also the limitations of power and the ways in which attempts to use it can readily be made self-defeating. It stresses sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and their practical implications and the need to base influence, whenever possible, on shared interests and persuasion. In this chapter, I examine the core assumptions of classical realism through the texts of ancient and modern writers, contrast their ideas with neorealism and other variants of modern realism, and analyse the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq in terms of the tenets of classical realism.

### Introduction

There is widespread recognition that the realist tradition reached its nadir in neorealism (also referred to as structural realism; for a discussion of structural realism, see **Chapter 3**). In his unsuccessful effort to transform realism into a scientific theory, Kenneth Waltz, father of neorealism, denuded realism of its complexity and subtlety, appreciation of the importance of actors, understanding that power does not automatically confer influence, and that the latter is best achieved when used in support of generally accepted goals and practices. Neorealism is a parody of science. Its key terms like power and polarity are so loosely and haphazardly formulated that they are open to diametrically opposed readings. Not surprisingly, realists disagree among themselves as to whether the post-Cold War world is bi-, multi-, or unipolar. Neorealism relies on a process akin to natural selection to shape the behaviour of units in a world where successful strategies are not necessarily passed on to successive leaders and where the culling of less successful units rarely occurs. It is closer to religion than science, and proponents, like John Mearsheimer, could be interpreted as akin to preachers who warn their flocks about evil—in this instance the rise of an aggressive China and the nearly inevitable threat it poses to the West.

Like religions, neorealism is untestable, and its rise and subsequent fall had little to do with conceptual and empirical developments in the field. Its appeal lay in its apparent parsimony and superficial resemblance to science; something that says more about its adherents than it does about the theory. Its decline was due to the end of the Cold War, which appeared to many as a critical test case for a theory that sought above all to explain the stability of the bipolar world. The end of the Cold War and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union also focused scholarly and public attention on a new range of political problems to which neorealism was irrelevant.

The decline of neorealism encouraged many realists to return to their roots. They read with renewed interest the works of great nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century realists like Max Weber, E. H. Carr, and Hans Morgenthau in search of conceptions and insights relevant to contemporary international relations. Weber and Morgenthau, in turn, were deeply indebted to the Greeks—to the tragic playwrights and Thucydides—as is the broader tradition of classical realism.

Classical realism has displayed a fundamental unity of thought across a span of nearly 2,500 years. The writings of its principal advocates—Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Carl von Clausewitz, and Hans J. Morgenthau—are concerned with questions of order, justice, and change at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Classical realists have holistic understandings of politics that stress the similarities, not the differences, between domestic and international politics; and the role of ethics and community in promoting order in both domains. In keeping with their tragic orientation, they recognize that communal bonds are fragile and easily undermined by the unrestrained pursuit of unilateral advantage by individuals, factions, and states. When this happens, time-honoured mechanisms of conflict management like alliances and the balance of power may not only fail to preserve the peace, but may make domestic and international violence more likely. Like Greek tragedians, classical realists tend to regard history as cyclical, in the sense that efforts to build order and escape from fear-driven worlds, while they may succeed for a considerable period of time, ultimately succumb to the destabilizing effects of actors who believe they are too powerful to be constrained by law and custom.

This chapter explores the thought of two of the most important classical realist writers on international affairs: Thucydides (460–c.390 BCE), a fifth-century Athenian general and author of an account of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and their respective allies; and Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–79), a German-born lawyer who came to the USA as a refugee on the eve of the Second World War, taught for many years at the University of Chicago, and was arguably the most influential postwar theorist of international relations.<sup>1</sup> There are important similarities in their approach, at least some of which derive from the tragic view of life and politics they shared.

The importance of community for classical realists directs our attention to the ever-present tensions between the interests of the community and those of its members, whether individuals or states. The first section explores classical realist reflections on community. Thucydides and Morgenthau believe that a well-functioning community is essential to the intelligent formation and pursuit of individual interests. The principles of justice on which all viable communities are based also allow the efficient translation of power into influence. Membership in a community imposes limits on the ends and means of power. And failure to subordinate goals to the requirements of justice leads to self-defeating policies, especially

those of overexpansion. Classical realists understand that great powers are often their own worst enemies because success and the hubris it engenders encourage actors to see themselves outside of and above their community, and this, in turn, blinds them to the need for self-restraint.

The second section of the chapter explores change and transformation. Classical realists think of political systems in terms of their principles of order, and the ways in which they help to shape the identities of actors and the discourses they use to frame their interests. For Thucydides and Morgenthau, changes in identities and discourses are often the result of modernization, and hegemonic war is more often a consequence than a cause of such a transformation. This different understanding of cause and effect has important implications for the kinds of strategies classical realists envisage as efficacious in maintaining or restoring order. They put more weight on values and ideas than they do on power.

The third section of the chapter shows the similarities in their understanding of the nature and purpose of theory. Thucydides constructed no theories in the modern sense of the term but is widely regarded as the first theorist of international relations. Morgenthau is explicitly theoretical. They are united in their belief that theoretical knowledge is not an end in itself, but a starting point for actors to work their way through contemporary problems and, in the process, to factor in key, and generally determining, features of context. Theory can shape, but never fully determine, explanatory narratives or forecasts of future developments.

The fourth section of the chapter is a case study of the war in Iraq. It offers a classical realist analysis of Anglo-American intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein. I argue that intervention was characterized by three features—really pathologies—that are described by classical realism but to which many modern realists are oblivious. The first has to do with the inability to formulate interests intelligently and coherently outside of a language of justice. The second is hubris, and how it can readily lead to tragic outcomes that are the very opposite of those intended. The third has to do with the choice of means, and the generally negative consequences of choosing those at odds with the values of the community.

I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of tragedy. Thucydides should be considered the fourth great tragedian of fifth-century Athens. His account of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) is constructed in the form and style of a tragedy. Morgenthau wrote no tragedies, but his thinking, like many educated Germans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was deeply steeped in a tragic understanding of life and politics. It lay at the core of his theory, and the strategies he thought appropriate to reconstituting political order.

## Classical realism on order and stability

### Community, order, and stability

Most realists have a straightforward answer to the problem of order: effective central authority. Governments that defend borders, enforce laws, and protect citizens make domestic politics more peaceful and qualitatively different from international politics. The international arena remains a self-help system, a 'brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other' (Mearsheimer 1994: 5). Survival depends on a state's material capabilities and its alliances with other states (Waltz 1979: 103–4). Thucydides and Morgenthau are not insensitive to the consequences of anarchy, but do not distinguish international from

domestic politics. For classical realists, *all* politics is an expression of human drives and subject to the same pathologies. They see more variation in order and stability *within* domestic and international systems than they do between them, and explain it with reference to the cohesiveness of society, domestic or international, and the channels into which it funnels human drives and passions.

Thucydides devotes equal attention to internal developments in Athens and external developments in the several theatres of war. He describes parallel developments in Athens and Greece and encourages us to understand them as the outcomes of similar and reinforcing processes. His city states run the gamut from highly ordered and consensual to those who succumb to civil war. These differences have nothing to do with the presence or absence of rulers, but with the cohesiveness of the community (*homonoia*). When communal bonds are strong, as in Periclean Athens, and in Greece more generally before the Peloponnesian War, conventions (*nomoi*) restrain individuals and cities. When community breaks down, as in Corcyra in the 420s, so does order. Thucydides would have agreed with Aristotle's observation that law 'has no power to compel obedience beside the force of habit' (Aristotle 1984 *Politics*: 1269a20).

Morgenthau's understanding of the relationship between domestic and international politics mirrors that of Thucydides. At the outset of his famous text, *Politics Among Nations*, he makes a sharp distinction between international and domestic politics, which he then systematically undermines. All politics, he insists, is a struggle for power that is 'inseparable from social life itself' (1948a: 17–18). In many countries, laws, institutions, and norms direct the struggle for power into ritualized and socially acceptable channels. In the international arena, the struggle cannot so readily be tamed. The character of international relations nevertheless displays remarkable variation across historical epochs. In the eighteenth century, Europe was 'one great republic' with common standards of 'politeness and cultivation' and a common 'system of arts, and laws, and manners' (1948a: 159–66). Morgenthau often spoke of the parallel between international relations in the eighteenth century and pre-Peloponnesian War Greece. In both epochs, 'fear and shame' and 'some common sense of honor and justice' induced leaders to moderate their ambitions (1948a: 270–84). The sense of community was ruptured by the French Revolution, and only superficially restored in its aftermath. It broke down altogether in the twentieth century when the principal powers became divided by ideology, as well as by interests. In the 1930s, four major powers—Germany, the Soviet Union, Japan, and Italy—rejected the very premises of the international order. The Soviet Union continued to do this in the postwar era, leading to a conflict with the USA and reducing international politics to the primitive spectacle of two giants eyeing each other with watchful suspicion' (1948a: 285).

Morgenthau recognized the same variation in domestic politics. In strong societies like Britain and the USA, norms and institutions muted the struggle for power, but in weak societies like Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, they broke down. Politics in these latter countries was every bit as violent and unconstrained as in any epoch of international relations. For Morgenthau, as for Thucydides, communities and the identities and norms they help to create and sustain are the most critical determinants of order, at home and abroad.

### Balance of power

Contemporary realists consider military capability and alliances the foundation of security. The Greeks were not insensitive to the value of alliances. Aristotle observed that 'When people are friends, they have no need for justice, but when they are just they need friends as well'

### Featured book

Hans Morgenthau (1948). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf)

Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, first published in 1948, went through six editions in his lifetime. It was the principal International Relations (IR) text in North America from the early 1950s until the late 1970s. Two generations of American college students were taught the principles of realism, the importance of power, and the balance of power as guarantees of security. The principles of political realism Morgenthau set out in *Politics Among Nations* were: (i) that politics is governed by objective laws with their roots in unchanging human nature; (ii) that realism perceives the world through the concept of 'interest understood in terms of power'; (iii) that, while interest is to be universally defined as power, the meaning and content of interests may shift and change; (iv) that realism was a perspective aware of the moral significance of political action; (v) that moral aspirations of a single community or a state may not be universally valid or shared; and (vi) that realism as a tradition of thought was distinct in its focus on the autonomy of the political realm and decisions made within it.

To Morgenthau's regret, many who used his text in their courses paid less attention to the ethical dimensions of foreign policy, which he considered equally important. Initially written to wean Americans from law-based, idealistic foreign policies, Morgenthau was convinced by the mid-1960s that the lesson of realism had been overlearned. He complained that *Realpolitik*, divorced from any ethical considerations, was the mindset responsible for intervention in Indochina and the disastrous war that followed.

In the post-Cold War world, there has been renewed interest in Morgenthau by scholars motivated by related theoretical and political agendas (see, e.g., Williams 2007). Those interested in recapturing IR theory from the narrow positivism of Kenneth Waltz and his followers have turned to Morgenthau and other founding texts of classical realism for inspiration. They have drawn from them different conceptions of theory, the importance of actors versus so-called structures, and the lesson that the most successful foreign policies are those that serve the international community at large. These lessons provide starting points for the development theories intended to challenge the continuing pursuit of hegemony by American leaders and its national security establishment.

(Aristotle 1984 *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1155a: 24–6). Thucydides, and classical realists more generally, recognize that military power and alliances are double-edged swords; they are as likely to provoke as to prevent conflict.

Book One of Thucydides leaves no doubt that Athenian efforts to construct a favourable balance of power were an instrumental cause of war. Its alliance with Corcyra (present-day Corfu) led to a violent encounter with the Corinthian fleet and raised the prospect of a wider war with Sparta. Athens then took preemptive action against Megara and Potidaea, and made war difficult to prevent. Sparta's alliance with Corinth dragged it, in turn, into a war with Athens that many Spartiates would have preferred to avoid. Nowhere in his text does Thucydides offer an example of an alliance that deterred war, and by the logic of the balance of power some should have. His Mytilenean Debate and Melian Dialogue suggest several reasons for this unrelieved pattern of deterrence failure. Chief among them is the pursuit of unrealistic goals, motivated by the appetite and spirit, which encourage wishful thinking in the form of downplaying risks and exaggerating the likelihood of success. In Sparta, this led the war party to ignore the strategic advantages of Athenian sea power, which made it all but invulnerable to even a successful invasion (Thucydides 1954: 1.86–8).

Deterrence was also defeated by the breakdown of community and the conventions it sustained. Athenians increasingly succumbed to the impulses of self-aggrandizement (*pleonexia*). In the Sicilian debate, the sensible and cautious Nicias tries to educate Athenians

about the size and population of Sicily, the military readiness of its largest city, Syracuse, and warns of the dangers of sailing against an island so far away when there are undefeated enemies close to home. Alcibiades dismisses these risks out of hand and appeals to the greed of his audience. Recognizing that arguments against the expedition will not succeed, Nicias now tries to dissuade the assembly by insisting on a much larger force and more extensive provisions than were originally planned. To his surprise, the more he demands, the more eager the assembly becomes to support the expedition, convinced that a force of such magnitude will be invincible. Carried away by the prospect of gain, Athenians became immune to the voice of reason, and committed the second fateful misjudgement—the alliance with Corcyra being the first—that led to Athens' defeat (Thucydides 1954: 6.10–26).

For Morgenthau, the universality of the power drive means that the balance of power was 'a general social phenomenon to be found on all levels of social interaction' (1958: 49, 81). In individuals, groups, and states inevitably combine to protect themselves from predators. At the international level, the balance of power has contradictory implications for peace. It might deter war if status quo powers outgun imperialist challengers and successfully demonstrate their resolve to go to war in defence of the status quo. Balancing can also intensify tensions and make war more likely because of the impossibility of accurately assessing the motives, capability, and resolve of other states. Leaders understandably aim to achieve a margin of safety, and when multiple states or alliances act this way, they ratchet up international tensions. Even when the balance of power fails to prevent war, Morgenthau reasons, it might still limit its consequences and preserve the existence of states, small and large. He credits the balance with having done this for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1948a: 155–9, 162–6, 172; 1958: 80).

For Morgenthau, the success of the balance of power for the better part of two centuries was less a function of the distribution of capabilities than of the existence and strength of international society that bound together the most important actors in the system. When that society broke down, as it did from the first partition of Poland in 1772 through the Napoleonic Wars, the balance of power no longer functioned to preserve the peace or existence of the members of the system (1948a: 160–6). International society was even weaker in the twentieth century, and its decline was an underlying cause of both world wars. Morgenthau worried that the continuing absence of a robust international society in the immediate post-war period had removed all constraints on superpower competition. By the 1970s, he had become more optimistic about the prospects for peace. Détente, explicit recognition of the territorial status quo in Europe, a corresponding decline in ideological confrontation, the emergence of Japan, China, and West Germany as possible third forces, and the effects of Vietnam on American power had made both superpowers more cautious and tolerant of the status quo (Morgenthau 1972: preface). Perhaps most importantly, daily Soviet–American contacts, negotiations, and occasional agreements had gone some way towards normalizing relations and creating the basis for a renewed sense of community. Today, he would voice concern about the extent to which China and the US are increasingly relying on deterrence to restrain the other. He would worry that their arms buildups, and in the case of the US, forward deployments and bellicose rhetoric—especially of President Trump—risk provoking the kind of conflict deterrence is intended to avoid.

Thucydides and Morgenthau understand politics as a struggle for power and unilateral advantage. The differences between domestic politics and international relations are of degree,

not of kind. Military capability and alliances are necessary safeguards in the rough-and-tumble world of international relations but cannot be counted on to preserve the peace or the independence of actors. Order, domestic and international, ultimately rests on the strength of community. When states and their rulers are bound by a common culture, conventions, and personal ties, competition for power is restrained in its ends and means. In this context, a balance of power might prevent some wars and limit the severity of others. In the absence of community, military capability and alliances are no guarantee of security, and can provoke wars they were intended to prevent. States like Athens, and leaders like Napoleon and Hitler, cannot be deterred. Morgenthau understands the seeming paradox that the balance of power works best when needed least.

### Interest and justice

Contemporary realists define interest in terms of power. For the most part, they equate power with material capabilities. According to Kenneth Waltz (1979:153), 'the political clout of nations correlates closely with their economic power and their military might'. Many contemporary realists also believe in the primacy of self-interest over moral principle, and regard considerations of justice as inappropriate, even dangerous foundations on which to base foreign policies. At best, appeals to justice can serve to justify or mask policies motivated by more concrete material interests. Classical realists consider capabilities only one source of power and do not equate power with influence. Influence for them is a *psychological* relationship, and like all relationships, based on ties that transcend momentary interests. Justice enters the picture because it is the foundation for relationships and of the sense of community on which influence and security ultimately depend.

The first level of Thucydides' history depicts the tension between interest and justice and how it becomes more acute in response to the exigencies of war. It reveals how interest and justice are inseparable and mutually constitutive at a deeper level. In his funeral oration, Pericles describes Athens as a democracy, but Thucydides (1954: 2.37.1) considers the constitutional reforms of 462–1 to have created a mixed form of government (*xunkrasis*). Behind the facade of democracy, he tells us, lay the rule of one man—Pericles (Thucydides 1954: 2.37.1, 2.65.9–10). The democratic ideology, with which he publicly associated himself, moderated class tensions, and reconciled the *dēmos* to the economic and political advantages of the elite. When the gap between ideology and practice was exposed by the behaviour of post-Periclean demagogues, class conflict became more acute and politics more vicious, leading to the violent overthrow of democracy by the regime of the Thirty in 404 and its equally violent restoration a year later. Justice, or at least a belief in justice, was the foundation for community.

Athenian imperialism underwent a similar evolution. The empire was successful when power was exercised in accord with the social conventions governing Greek speech and behaviour. Post-Periclean Athens consistently chose power over principle, lost its *hegemonia*, alienated allies, and weakened its power base. In 425, during the Mytilenean debate, Cleon tells the assembly to recognize that their empire is a despotism (*turanis*) based on military power and the fear it inspires (Thucydides 1954: 3.37.2). In 416, the Athenian commissioners in the Melian Dialogue divide people into those who rule and those who are subjects (1954: 5.95). To intimidate allies and adversaries alike, they acknowledge their city's need to expand

runaway imperialism of this kind stretched their resources to their breaking point. Interest defined outside of the language of justice is irrational and self-defeating.

Thucydides' parallel accounts of Athenian domestic politics and foreign policy indicate his belief that coercion is a grossly inefficient and ultimately self-defeating basis of influence. The sophist Gorgias (c. 430) personified *logos* (words) as a great potentate, who with the tiniest and least visible body achieves the most divine works (Diels and Kranz 1956: fig. 82, B11). Employed in tandem with persuasion, it 'shapes the soul as it wishes'. Thucydides leads us to the same conclusion. Persuasion can maintain the position of the 'first citizen' (*stratēgos*) of Athens vis-à-vis the masses and that of the hegemon vis-à-vis its empire and effectively mask the exercise of power. To persuade, leaders and hegemons must live up to the expectations of their own ideology. For Athens, this meant providing benefits to citizens and allies, and upholding the principles of order on which the polis and its empire were based.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted line from *Politics Among Nations* is Morgenthau's assertion at the outset that 'the concept of interest defined in terms of power' sets politics apart 'as an autonomous sphere of action' and makes a theory of politics possible (1960: 5). Morgenthau then subverts this statement to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between interest and power. These contradictions can be reconciled if we recognize that Morgenthau distinguishes between theory and in practice. The former aspires to create an abstract, rational ideal based on the underlying and unchanging dynamics of international politics. It represents the crudest of templates. Policy is always concrete, rarely rational, and has to take into account many considerations outside of politics.

The contrast between theory and practice is equally apparent in Morgenthau's conceptualization of power. He thinks of power as an intangible quality with many diverse components, which he catalogues at some length. But in the real world, the strategies and tactics leaders use to transform the raw attributes of power into political influence are just as important as the attributes themselves. Because influence is a psychological relationship, leaders need to know not only what buttons are at their disposal, but also which ones to push in diverse circumstances. There are no absolute measures of power because it was always relative and situation-specific. Levers of influence that A could use against B might be totally ineffectual against C. The successful exercise of power required a sophisticated understanding of the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of allies, adversaries, and third parties. But, above all, it demanded psychological sensitivity to the others' needs for self-esteem.

People seek domination but most often end up subordinate to others (Morgenthau 1947: 145). They try to repress this unpleasant truth, and those who exercise power effectively employ justifications and ideologies to help them do this. Whenever possible, they attempt to convince those who must submit that they are acting in their interests or those of the wider community (Morgenthau 1958: 59). 'What is required for mastery of international politics', Morgenthau insisted, 'is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and moral strength of the statesman' (1948a: 172).

Like Thucydides, Morgenthau understands that adherence to ethical norms is just as much in the interest of those who wielded power as it is for those over whom it is exercised. He makes this point in his critique of American intervention in Indochina, where he argues that intervention will fail and erode America's influence in the world because the ends and means of American policy violate the morality of the age. There is a certain irony to Morgenthau's opposition. Two decades earlier, he had written *Politics Among Nations*, in large part to disabuse

an influential segment of the American elite of the naive belief that ethics was an appropriate guide for foreign policy and that international conflicts could be resolved through the application of law. Intervention in Indochina indicated to him that American policy-makers had 'over learned' the lesson; they had embraced *Realpolitik* and moved to the other end of the continuum. Morgenthau is adamant that morality, defined in terms of the conventions of the epoch, imposes limits on the ends that power seeks and the means employed to achieve them (1947: 151–68).

For classical realists—including Machiavelli—justice is important for two different but related reasons. It is the key to influence because it determines how others understand and respond to you. Policy that is constrained by accepted ethical principles and generally supportive of them provides a powerful aura of legitimacy that helps to reconcile less powerful actors to their subordinate status. Influence can also be bought through bribes or compelled by force, but influence obtained this way is expensive to maintain, tenuous in effect, and usually short-lived. By contrast, a demonstrable commitment to justice can create and maintain the kind of community that allows actors to translate power into influence in efficient ways.

Justice is important in a second instrumental way. It provides the conceptual scaffolding on which actors can intelligently construct interests. In this respect, a commitment to justice is a powerful source of self-restraint, and restraint is necessary in direct proportion to one's power. Weak states must generally behave cautiously because of external constraints. Powerful states are not similarly restricted, and the past successes that made them powerful breed hubris, encourage their leaders to make inflated estimates of their ability to control events and seduce them into investing their assets and reputation in risky ventures. As in Greek tragedies, these miscalculations often lead to catastrophe, as they did for Athens, Napoleon, and Hitler. Internal restraint and external influence are thus closely related. Self-restraint that prompts behaviour in accord with the acknowledged principles of justice both earns and sustains the *hegemonia* that makes efficient influence possible.

## Classical realism and change

### Change and modernization

Modern realists classify international systems on the basis of their polarity (uni-, bi-, and multipolar). System change occurs when the number of poles changes. This is thought to be the result of shifts in the balance of material capabilities. Rising powers may go to war to remake the system in their interests, and status quo powers to forestall such change. For some realists, this cycle is timeless and independent of technology and learning. Others believe that nuclear weapons have revolutionized international relations by making war too destructive to be rational. In their view, this accounts for the otherwise anomalous peaceful transformation from bi- to multipolarity at the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer 1990a; Waltz 1993; Wohlforth 1994–5).

For classical realists, transformation has a different meaning and is associated with processes we have come to describe as modernization. It brings about shifts in identities and discourses, and, with them, changing conceptions of security.

Thucydides' language (1954: 1.15) encourages readers to draw an analogy between individual pursuit of wealth and Athenian pursuit of power. The empire is based on the power of

money (*chrēmation dunamis*). It generates revenue (*chrēmation prosodōi*) to build and maintain the largest navy in Greece. Athens is so powerful relative to other city states that it can dominate them by force. For Greeks, tyrants were rulers without any constitutional basis who dispensed with reciprocity and took what they wanted. Gyges of Lydia was the first known tyrant, and not coincidentally, Lydia was thought to be the first city to have introduced money. Like a tyrant, Athens no longer needed to legitimize its rule or provide the kind of benefits that normally held alliances or city states together. Wealth encouraged the 'orientalization' of Athens, a perspective common to Herodotus and Thucydides. It led to a deep shift in Athenian values, superficially manifested in an increasing reliance on force. This pattern of behaviour was a reflection of changing goals; that of honour (*timē*) increasingly gave way to that of acquisition. And *hēgemonia*-rule based on the consent of others—was replaced by control (*archē*) exercised through threats and bribes.

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is rich in irony. Athens, the tyrant, jettisons the traditional bonds of friendship and reciprocity in expectation of greater rewards, only to become trapped by a new set of more onerous obligations. As Pericles recognizes in his funeral oration, Athens maintained its *hēgemonia* by demonstrating generosity to its allies. 'In generosity', he tells the assembly, 'we are equally singular, acquiring our friends by conferring not by receiving favors' (Thucydides 1954: 2.40.4). The post-Periclean empire must maintain its *archē* by constantly demonstrating its power and will to use it. It must keep expanding, a requirement beyond the capabilities of any state. Athenians discover this bitter truth with their crushing defeat in Sicily.

Morgenthau's understanding of modernization is similar. It led to a misplaced faith in reason which undermined the values and norms that had restrained individual and state behaviour. Morgenthau draws on Hegel and Freud. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) and *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel warned of the dangers of homogenization of society arising from equality and universal participation in society. It would sunder traditional communities and individual ties to them without providing an alternative source of identity. Hegel wrote on the eve of the industrial revolution and did not envisage the modern industrial state with its large bureaucracies and modern means of communication. These developments, Morgenthau argues, allow the power of the state to feed on itself through a process of psychological transference that makes it the most exalted object of loyalty. Libidinal impulses, repressed by the society, are mobilized by the state for its own ends. By transferring these impulses to the nation, citizens achieve vicarious satisfaction of their aspirations, including those that society would otherwise make them repress. Stalin's elimination of the Kulaks (wealthy peasants), forced collectivization, and purges, and Hitler's foreign conquests and efforts to exterminate Jews were all expressions of the transference of private impulses onto the state and the absence of any limits on the state's exercise of power. Writing in the aftermath of the great upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, Morgenthau came to understand communal identity as far from an unalloyed blessing: it allows people to fulfil their potential as human beings, but also risks turning them into 'social men' like Eichmann, who lose their humanity in the course of implementing the directives of the state.<sup>2</sup>

The intellectual transformation Morgenthau attributes to the Enlightenment bears striking similarities to the proto-Enlightenment of fifth-century Greece. In both epochs, the assertion of the individual, widespread belief in the power of reason, and the triumph of secular over religious values had far-reaching political implications. The biggest difference between

the two periods was in technology; the modern Enlightenment made possible the industrial revolution and machine-age warfare. Nuclear weapons are an outgrowth of this process, and for Morgenthau, 'the only real revolution which has occurred in the structure of international relations since the beginning of history'. War between nuclear powers would no longer be an extension of politics by other means but mutual suicide (1958: 76; 1960: 326).

### Restoring order

Thucydides and Morgenthau wrote in the aftermath of destructive wars that undermined the communities and conventions that had sustained order at home and abroad. Neither thought it feasible to restore the old way of life, aspects of which had become highly problematic even before the onset of war. They searched instead for some combination of the old and the new that could accommodate the benefits of modernity while limiting its destructive potential.

Thucydides wanted his readers to recognize the need for a synthetic order that would combine the best of the old and the new, and avoid, as far as possible, their respective pitfalls. The best of the new was its spirit of equality (*sonomia*), and the opportunity it offered to all citizens to serve their polis. The best of the old was its emphasis on excellence and virtue (*aretē*), which encouraged members of the elite to suppress their appetite for wealth and power, and even their instinct for survival, in pursuit of valour, good judgement, and public service. The Athenians displayed *aretē* at Marathon and Salamis, where they risked their lives for the freedom of Greece (Thucydides 1954: 2.20, 25, 41, 43, 4.81.2). By the end of the fifth century, *aretē* had progressed through three stages of meaning: from its original Homeric sense of fighting skill, to skill at anything, to moral goodness. Thucydides uses all three meanings, and has Pericles (Thucydides 1954: 2.34.5) introduce a fourth in his funeral oration where *aretē* now describes the reputation a state can develop by generous behaviour towards its allies. Thucydides offers an idealized view of Periclean Athens as an example of the kind of synthesis he envisages. It is the very model of a mixed government that allowed the capable to rule and the masses to participate in government in meaningful ways. It successfully muted tensions between the rich and the poor and the well-born and men of talent, and stood in sharp contrast to the acute class tensions and near stasis of Athens when ruled by demagogues.

Thucydides may have hoped that intercity relations could be reconstituted on similar foundations. The same kinds of inequalities prevailed between cities as within them. If the power of tyrants could give way to aristocracy and mixed democracy, and the drive for power and wealth be constrained by the restoration of community, the same might be done for inter-polis relations. Powerful cities might once again see it in their interest to wield influence on the basis of *hēgemonia*. Power imbalances could be 'equalized' through the principle of proportionality: the more powerful cities receiving honour in degree to the advantages they provided for less powerful cities. Thucydides wrote his history, I believe, to advance this project.

Thucydides is a stern sceptic and rationalist, but one who supports religion because he considered it to be a principal pillar of morality and conventions. In his view, the radical sophists had done a disservice to Athens by arguing that laws and conventions were arbitrary justifications for economic and political inequality. Thucydides wrote for a small, intellectually sophisticated elite, who, like himself, were unlikely to accept conventions as gods given. He appeals to them with a more sophisticated defence of convention that does not require

rooting it in man's nature. By demonstrating the destructive consequences of the breakdown of conventions, he makes the case for their necessity and the wisdom of those in authority to act as if they believed they derived from nature. For Thucydides, language and conventions are arbitrary but essential. His history, like a tragedy, provides an 'outside perspective' for elites to generate a commitment to work 'inside' to restore what is useful, if not essential, to justice and order.

For Morgenthau, the absence of external constraints on state power is the defining characteristic of international politics at mid-century. The old normative order was in ruins and too feeble to restrain great powers (1958: 60; 1947: 168). Against this background, the Soviet Union and the USA were locked into an escalating conflict, made more ominous by the unrivalled destructive potential of nuclear weapons. The principal threat to peace was nevertheless political: Moscow and Washington were 'imbued with the crusading spirit of the new moral force of nationalistic universalism', and confronted each other with 'inflexible opposition' (1948a: 430). The balance of power was a feeble instrument in these circumstances, and deterrence was more likely to exacerbate tensions than to alleviate them. Bipolarity could help to preserve the peace by reducing uncertainty—or push the superpowers towards war because of the putative advantage of launching a first strike. Restraint was needed more than anything else, and Morgenthau worried that neither superpower had leaders with the requisite moral courage to resist mounting pressures to engage in risky and confrontational foreign policies.

Realism in the context of the Cold War was a plea for statesmen and, above all, American and Soviet leaders to recognize the need to coexist in a world of opposing interests and conflict. Their security could never be guaranteed, only approximated through a fragile balance of power and mutual compromises that might resolve, or at least defuse, the arms race and the escalatory potential of the various regional conflicts in which they had become entangled. Morgenthau insists that restraint and partial accommodation are the most practical short-term strategies for preserving the peace (1948a: 169; 1958: 80). A more enduring solution to the problem of war would require a fundamental transformation of the international system that made it more like well-ordered domestic societies. By 1958, the man who twenty years earlier had heaped scorn on the aspirations of internationalists, insisted that the well-being of the human race now required 'a principle of political organization transcending the nation-state' (1958: 75–6).

Morgenthau's commitment to some form of supranational authority deepened in the 1970s. Beyond the threat of nuclear holocaust, humanity was threatened by the population explosion, world hunger, and environmental degradation. He had no faith in the ability of nation-states to ameliorate any of these problems. But if leaders and peoples were so zealous about safeguarding their sovereignty, what hope was there of moving them towards acceptance of a new order? Progress would only occur when enough national leaders became convinced that it was in their respective national interests. The series of steps Europeans had taken towards integration illustrated the apparent paradox that 'what is historically conditioned in the idea of the national interest can be overcome only through the promotion in concert of the national interest of a number of nations' (1958: 73).

Thucydides and Morgenthau grappled with successive phases of modernization and their social, political, and military consequences. They understood these consequences, and modernization itself, as an expression of evolving identities and discourses. Human beings

were never entrapped by their culture, institutions, or language, but constantly reproducing, changing, and reinventing them. The central problem for Thucydides and Morgenthau was that old procedures were being abandoned or not working, and being replaced by new and dangerous practices that had entered without much warning. They recognized that stable domestic orders, and the security that they might enable, could only be restored by some synthesis that blended the old with the new. This synthesis had to harness the power of reason, but make allowance for the disruptive passions that often motivated individuals, classes, and political units. It had to build community, but could not ignore powerful centrifugal forces, especially self-interest at the individual, group, and national levels, that modernization had encouraged and legitimated. The biggest challenge of all was to construct the new order through the willing agency of representatives of the old order in cooperation with the newly empowered agents of modernity.

Given the nature of the challenge, it is not surprising that classical realists are better at diagnosis than treatment, to use Thucydides' medical metaphor. Thucydides is the most sophisticated of classical realists. Perhaps by design, he offered no explicit synthesis, but contented himself with identifying an earlier synthesis—Periclean Athens—that might serve as a model, or at least a starting point, for thinking about the future. Morgenthau addresses the problem of order at two levels: he seeks stop-gap political measures to buy time for statesmen to grasp the need to transcend the state system. Their works remain possessions for all time, if only because of their insights into human nature, war, and political order. But also because of their recognition of the great difficulty of reconciling tradition and modernity by conscious, rational designs.

## Classical realism on the nature of theory

Aristotle (1984 *Nicomachean Ethics*: 141a–b) thought it unlikely that human investigations could ever produce *epistēmē*, which he defined as knowledge of essential natures reached through deduction from first principles. Thucydides does not directly engage questions of epistemology, but one can readily infer that he shared this understanding of the limits of social inquiry. One of his recurrent themes is the extent to which human behaviour is context dependent; similar external challenges provoke a range of responses from different political cultures. As those cultures evolve, so do their foreign policies, a progression I documented in the case of Athens. There is also variation within culture. Thucydides' accounts of the Spartan decision to go to war, the plague in Athens, the Mytilenian Debate, and civil war in Corcyra all reveal that individuals respond to the same or a similar situation in very different ways.

Morgenthau explicitly denies the possibility of general laws and of predictions based on more limited kinds of generalizations. Morgenthau conceives of the social world as 'a chaos of contingencies' but 'not devoid of a measure of rationality'. The social world could not be reduced to a limited set of social choices because of the irrationality of actors and the inherent complexity of the social world. The best a theory can do 'is to state the likely consequences of choosing one alternative as over against another and the conditions under which one alternative is more likely to occur or to be successful than the other' (Morgenthau 1966: 77).

*Theōriē*, *theōreîn*, and *theōrōs* are all post-Homeric words having to do with seeing and visiting. The noun (*theōrōs*) meant 'witness' or 'spectator'. A *theōrōs* was dispatched to Delphi by his polis to bring back a full account of the words of the oracle. He might also be sent to religious and athletic festivals, and it is here that the word picked up its connotation of spectator. Over time, the role of the *theōrōs* became more active; a *theōrōs* was expected not only to describe what he had seen but to explain its meaning.

Thucydides comes closest to the model of the *theōrōs*; he provides readers with a description of events that has interpretations of their meaning embedded in it. Morgenthau conducts independent theoretical inquiries in which brief historical accounts, more properly described as examples, are used for purposes of illustration. But in the best tradition of the Greeks, he aspires to develop a framework that actors can use to work their way through contemporary problems. Morgenthau insists that 'All lasting contributions to political science, from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine to the *Federalist*, Marx and Calhoun, have been responses to such challenges arising from political reality' (1966: 77). Great political thinkers, confronted with problems that could not be solved with the tools at hand, developed new ways of thinking, and often used past experience to illuminate the present. Beyond this, Thucydides and Morgenthau seek to stimulate the kind of reflection that leads to wisdom and with it, appreciation of the need for self-restraint. For all three classical realists, history is the vehicle for tragedy and the teacher of wisdom.

#### Case study: classical realist analysis of Iraq

In Greek tragedies, success and power are the principal causes of hubris. US intoxication with power and disregard, even contempt, for the USA's traditional allies and the wider international community led the Bush administration to hubris. This is most evident in its policy towards Iraq. There was evidence that sanctions against Saddam Hussein were working, albeit at considerable humanitarian cost, but the administration was not satisfied with mere containment. Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, Under Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice sought removal of Saddam, and made no attempt to hide their objective. Their conversations with other officials and the media indicate that they were deeply offended by the survival of the Saddam regime, and expected that his overthrow by force would allow Washington to remake the map of the Middle East and dramatically increase its influence worldwide. They assumed that Iraqis would welcome American 'liberators' with open arms and accept their émigré puppet Ahmed Chalabi as their new ruler; and at one fell swoop the USA would gain significant leverage over Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Palestine. They further expected that a successful high-tech military campaign that removed Saddam by 'shock and awe' with few American casualties would intimidate North Korea and encourage widespread bandwagoning, making other countries more intent on currying favour with Washington.

The available evidence indicates that this circle of self-styled 'Vulcans' rarely, if ever, consulted with acknowledged Middle East experts in the State Department or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); ignored reports and estimates that ran counter to their expectations; and put great pressure on the CIA and other organizations within the US intelligence community to confirm their views. This has been well documented with regard to 'evidence' that Saddam had, or was developing, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Trust in hope rather than reason also characterized military planning. Donald Rumsfeld insisted on invading on the cheap, and ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to jettison their war plan calling for 400,000 troops and to produce one requiring no more than 125,000. Contrary to the wishes of field commander General Tommy Franks, he also insisted the army begin withdrawing forces thirty days after the fall of Baghdad. The CIA contributed to the rosy picture the administration had formed. It advised that principal opposition would come not from Saddam's Red Guard, but from paramilitary forces with money and ample diverse weapons caches. The National Intelligence Councils (NICs) thirty-eight-page assessment of postwar Iraq mentioned internal opposition only once *en passant* in conclusion. It did warn, however, that there would be trouble if the Americans were perceived as occupiers. The CIA's regional officers worried about insurrection, but George Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence, who was keen to please the President, made sure their fears were not reported in the NIC estimate.

Giving in to pressure from Rumsfeld, the CIA exaggerated the effectiveness of Iraq's infrastructure. The air force and navy were accordingly instructed not to target the electrical grid, but the system collapsed anyway. Getting the lights back on and rebuilding hospitals, schools, and sewage facilities became a major struggle for which the occupying forces were initially unprepared. Rumsfeld and his planners thought the bureaucracy would remain intact and could merely be reformed, as was true in the occupations of Germany and Japan! The White House, Secretary of Defence, and military were working with inadequate intelligence because Iraq had long been treated as a 'Tier 2' threat, in contrast to Iran and North Korea. The USA had no more than a handful of agents on the ground, and relied on refugees, foreign intelligence, and excellent photographic intelligence. Intelligence supplied by Chalabi, and refugees associated with him, was given credence by Rumsfeld and Rice, despite repeated warnings from the CIA and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research that it was exaggerated or entirely fabricated (Phillips 2005: 68–73). State Department planning for the occupation, a task force that drew in seventy-five experts on all aspects of the Arab world, was terminated by Rumsfeld on the grounds that they were not fully committed to transforming Iraq (Woodward 2004: 282–4). The Pentagon's occupation plans, based on Rumsfeld's most optimistic scenario, were designed only to secure the oil ministry and oil fields, and secondarily to search for WMD. None of the latter was ever found.

Inadequate plans and occupation forces alienated many Iraqis and allowed those who were disgruntled to loot arsenals and seize weapons, ammunition, and explosives that they would later use against US occupation forces and US-trained police. In the resulting chaos, looting took the place of shopping. US proconsul Jake Garner, relying on advice provided by Chalabi and other refugees, was totally detached from the local scene. His replacement, Paul Bremer, disbanded the Iraqi army of 400,000 and unwisely let them keep their guns, and many promptly joined the insurgency (Diamond 2004: 9–22; Phillips 2005: 198–9). There was no effective dialogue with local forces until well after the insurrection was underway, and house-to-house searches, and other measures designed to nip the insurgency in the bud, only intensified it. US generals would repeatedly claim over the next two years that the insurgents were losing, and would even cite increases in the number of their attacks as evidence. Very quickly, the Bush administration was in a quagmire, not unlike Vietnam (Fallows 2006; Cockburn 2007; Galbraith 2007). Subsequent changes in strategy, including the 2007 so-called 'Surge', and elections in 2010 and 2013, did little to stabilize the country. Compelled by the US public and Congress, the Bush administration negotiated a status of forces' agreement with the new government of Iraq and subsequently its troops between 2009 and 2011. By 2014, Iraq was riven by Sunni-Shi'a conflict, on the verge of fragmenting as a state, and at risk of ISIS jihadi insurgents. The Bush administration's experience in Iraq drives home what is perhaps the most important insight of classical realism: that great powers are their own worst enemies.

(continued)



## Case study questions

1. To what extent can George W. Bush, Barack Obama, or Angela Merkel be considered tragic figures?
2. How would classical realists characterize the similarities and differences between American intervention in Vietnam and Iraq, and between both of those and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan?
3. To what extent does classical realism offer a useful framework for studying the rise of China and the response of the USA and other developed states?

## Conclusion: the tragic vision

The chorus in *Antigone* praises human beings as the most inventive of all creatures who reshape the goddess earth with their ploughs, yoke horses and bulls, snare birds and fish in the twisted mesh of their nets, and make paths through the turbulent seas with their ships. But they destroy what they create, kill what they love most, and seem incapable of living in harmony with themselves and their surroundings. The juxtaposition of man's achievements and transgressions is a central theme of Greek tragedy and classical realism. Like the chorus in *Antigone*, Thucydides and Morgenthau recognized the extraordinary ability of human beings to harness nature for their own ends, and their propensity to destroy through war and civil violence what took them generations to build. Their writings explore the requirements of stable orders, but they remained pessimistic about the ability of the powerful to exercise self-restraint. Like Aeschylus, they saw a close connection between progress and conflict. They understood that violent challenges to the domestic and international orders are most likely in periods of political, economic, social, and intellectual ferment.

Thucydides was a friend of Sophocles and Euripides, and wrote what might be called a tragedy. In the late eighteenth century, German intellectuals turned to tragedy as a model for reconstituting ethics and philosophy. Morgenthau was deeply influenced by this latter development. He was intimately familiar with the corpus of ancient and modern literature and philosophy. His intellectual circle included his colleague and fellow émigré Hannah Arendt, who had studied with philosopher Martin Heidegger, wrote about tragedy, and applied its lessons to contemporary politics, as did American-born theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Morgenthau came to understand tragedy, he wrote to his British colleague, Michael Oakeshott, as 'a quality of existence, not a creation of art' (1948b). His postwar writings, beginning with *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, repeatedly invoke tragedy and its understanding of human beings as the framework for understanding contemporary international relations. The principal theme at which he hammers away is the misplaced faith in the powers of reason that have been encouraged by the Enlightenment. But he is equally wary of emotion freed from the restraints of reason and community. 'The *hybris* of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, the want of moderation in Alexander, Napoleon, and Hitler are instances of such an extreme and exceptional situation' (1947: 135). Although he never used the Greek word *sophrosunē* (prudence and self-restraint), his German and English writings and correspondence make frequent use of its equivalents: *Urteilskraft* [sound judgement] and prudence. He offers them, as did the Greeks, as the antidotes to hubris. Tragedy, and its emphasis on the limits of human understanding, also shape his approach to theory. Political leaders and theorists alike would do well to dwell on this lesson of history.

## Questions

1. To what extent do Thucydides and Morgenthau attribute the decline and downfall of great powers to their own policy choices versus foreign threats?
2. What are the principal ways in which classical realists differ from neo- and other realists?
3. To what extent can ethical precepts guide foreign policy in a world where there are fundamental disagreements about what is ethical?
4. Describe the respective understandings Thucydides and Morgenthau have of theory. In what ways were they similar and different? How do they differ from the neopositivist understanding of theory that underlies most so-called 'mainstream' theory-building in the social sciences?
5. Analyse the respective understanding Thucydides and Morgenthau have of the ability of the balance of power and deterrence to preserve the peace.
6. Has our understanding of international politics progressed at all beyond Thucydides?



For additional material and resources, including web links, flashcard glossary, revision guide, and pointers on answering case study questions, please visit the Online Resources [www.oup.com/he/Dunne-Kurki-Smith5e](http://www.oup.com/he/Dunne-Kurki-Smith5e)

## Further reading

- Frost, M., Mayall, J., Rengger, N., and Lebow, R. N. (2003, 2005), 'Two Symposia on "Tragedy, Ethics and International Relations"', *International Relations*, 17/4: 480–503 and 19/4: 324–36. A useful debate on the relevance of tragedy to contemporary international relations.
- Herz, J. (1950), 'Idealist internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, 2/12: 157–80. A discussion of the prospects of international transformation by one of the great classical realists and originator of the concept of the security dilemma.
- Lebow, R. N. (2003), *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Develops the concept of classical realism and uses it to critique modern realism and its belief that foreign policies should not be based on ethical considerations.
- Lebow, R. N. (ed.) (2017), *Max Weber and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Explores the epistemological foundations of classical realism in the works of one of the founders of modern social science.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1947), *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (London: Latimer House). A classical realist critique of behaviouralism.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1960), *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf). A foundational work of modern classical realism.
- Reus-Smit, C. (1999), *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Explores the links between ethics, politics, and identity.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1954), trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books).

The original text of classical realism.

Williams, M. C. (2007), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Important collection of essays on Hans Morgenthau.

## Important website

Columbia International Affairs Online (CIAO): [www.ciaonet.org](http://www.ciaonet.org). The best up-to-date website for articles and documents on foreign affairs and international relations.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html> for the text of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

## Notes

1. See Lebow (2003: 68–70, 217–20) for brief biographies.
2. Morgenthau and Hannah Arendt were friends and colleagues, and their extensive correspondence suggests that they drew on each other's insights in their work. Morgenthau was favourably impressed by Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964).