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# Introduction and Overview

THE PURPOSE OF this book is to elucidate an approach to the study of world politics—Classical Realism—and to demonstrate why that paradigm is a productive and valuable one, and one that is urgently needed for describing, explaining, and understanding events in world politics. Classical Realism is a minority perspective in contemporary International Relations (IR) theory. The realist community, to the extent that it exists, is overwhelmingly dominated by the influence of structuralism, that is, by an approach that models states as identical units distinguished only by their relative capabilities. Since the 1980s, this school of realist thought has become so predominant that both champions and critics of realism routinely conflate the two (realism and structural realism). Much of the larger field of IR is in the thrall of a similarly abstract bargaining model of politics, a paradigm rooted in the building blocks of individualism, materialism, and exceedingly narrow assumptions regarding the rationality of actors—a perspective so extreme (and ruinously unproductive) that it is best described as hyper-rationality. Structural realism and hyper-rationalism perform poorly when applied to the real world, due to basic errors that are hardwired into the core of their analytical apparatus. Each purports to (and boasts of) a more “scientific” approach to the study of world politics, superseding previous, allegedly less rigorous perspectives, such as classical realism.<sup>1</sup> But structural realism and hyper-rationalism, grasping for an illusion of scientific precision evident in style but empty in substance, have failed. This book seeks to reclaim realism, and rearticulate classical realism as a worthwhile and even vital point of departure for the study of world politics.

In clarifying what this book is, it is also important to make clear what this book is not. It is not, it should be stressed, a comprehensive overview

of theories of or approaches to IR, or even for that matter an exhaustive survey of the subgenres and specialized schools of thought within realism itself. Nor, beyond its essential, motivating confrontations with structural realism and hyper-rationalism, is this book participating in “paradigm wars,” or insistent that to be a good student of world politics, it is necessary to be a realist or a classical realist. The goal of reclaiming realism, and illustrating what it is, and why it is a productive and informative approach to understanding and explaining world politics, need not step on the toes of most other perspectives. Certainly realist approaches are commonly and understandably contrasted with liberal perspectives, which generally take as points of departure greater emphases on individual interests and material incentives, stress problem solving over irresolvable political clashes, and tend to place less emphasis on the urgency of the consequences of anarchy and the barriers to mutually beneficial cooperation. A realist tends to flip each of those cards over—nevertheless, a confrontation with liberalism is not on the agenda here.

This essential attribute is worth repeating. This book is not, remotely, an overview of IR theory. It is the articulation and application of one approach to understanding and explaining world politics, with an emphasis on how that approach contrasts with its two principal intellectual adversaries, varieties of structural realism and hyper-rationalism. Thus readers will not find in these pages a deep engagement with liberalism or with other contrasting (or presumably contrasting) perspectives. This is purposeful. The almost ritual rehearsal of clashes between realism and liberalism—the nadir of which was the academic “paradigm wars” of the 1990s—has been as ubiquitous in IR theory as it has been unproductive. *Paradigms* are inescapable. *Paradigm wars* are largely vacuous, as the differences between them are rooted in distinct philosophical dispositions and underlying, non-falsifiable grounding assumptions that cannot be definitively adjudicated and settled. Classical Realism has no real productive “argument” with liberalism to engage—they are different (but in many instances overlapping) ways of seeing the world, and theories derived from these contrasting traditions will commonly, but not necessarily, lead to contrasting explanations (and often, but again not necessarily, contrasting policy prescriptions).

Similarly, this book does not take a deep dive (or even much of a shallow one) into constructivism, or dwell on the all-too-common (and largely presumed) contrast between realism and constructivism. At the time of its emergence some realists recoiled, like Dracula from the sunlight, from the very notion of constructivism, because many of its early contributions

seemed to suggest that some international conflicts might be transcended by processes of learning and socialization. But there is nothing inherently pacific or hopeful or ameliorative in the abstract about the consequences of, say, distinctions rooted in identity affiliations, notions that only make sense from a constructivist perspective (as group identities are socially constructed) and which can be drivers of fierce and intractable violent conflict. Fascism, to take a related example, is readily understood from a constructivist perspective but is invisible to structural realism and essentially incomprehensible to hyper-rationalism. Constructivism is indeed incompatible with *structural* realism. And, with its emphasis on the social-historical-cultural context of what actors want, it also exposes the limitations and poverty of much hyper-rationalist work, which insouciantly assumes away fundamental political questions in favor of doing some math at the margins. Nevertheless, constructivism is not inherently incompatible with classical realism. In fact, classical realism draws on one of constructivism's fundamental points of departure: that what individuals, groups, and states want (beyond some minimal achievement of food, shelter, and physical security) is not uniform across actors but shaped the perceived lessons of history and the social-cultural environment in which behavior takes place.<sup>2</sup>

### *Distinguishing Classical Realism*

Not surprisingly, classical realism and structural realism share some basic underlying assumptions. They both, after all, self-identify as realist. In fact, the thinkers who, in the middle of the twentieth century, developed the approach now called classical realism simply thought of themselves as realists, full stop (just as Mozart and his contemporaries never thought of themselves as writing “classical” music). In IR the moniker only became common decades later, as structural realists sought to distinguish what they were doing from their intellectual predecessors (which is also why the term “neo-realism,” implying a new, updated version of realism, is a synonym for structural realism). Adding the modifier “classical” to the seminal contributions of the past also helped suggest a sheen of modernity to the neo-realist project, which, as a rhetorical device, further gestured at the notion of scientific progress.

Nevertheless, the common roots of both incarnations are clear. Any realist perspective takes as its point of departure the consequences of anarchy—that is, in world politics there is no ultimate authority to adjudicate disputes, and in particular, there is no guarantee that the behavior

of others will be restrained. Autonomous political units (typically but not necessarily states) must look out for their own survival—because no one else will. And the stakes could not be higher, as human history is littered, from the ancient past to the present day, with countless episodes of horrifying barbarism. This in turn means that states must be alert to the power and military capabilities of others, since the distribution of power will inform the nature of the threats and challenges that all states face. Note that realism is not distinguished by these assumptions—most approaches to IR theory embrace the anarchy fable—it is distinguished by the emphasis that it places on anarchy and its consequences.

Structural realism stops there: with states, dwelling in anarchy, as “like units” differentiated only by their relative capabilities. The analysis is thus limited to the effects of systemic forces generated by the interaction of states, that is, from the distribution of power and changes to relative capabilities. Classical realism includes much more than that. It considers both power and purpose—and insists that world politics can only be understood by attending to both. From this follow a number of basic divergences from structural realism. The first is that history matters. From a classical perspective, you cannot understand how states will behave without knowing what received lessons loom large in their historical memories. In contrast, “like units” dwelling in anarchy (and hyper-rationalists at the bargaining table) act as if they have no past—they see only what is placed in front of them (like that guy in the movie *Memento*)<sup>3</sup> and make their calculations accordingly. Another basic classical realist divergence from both neo-realism and hyper-rationalism is its assumption that states dwell not simply in an environment of anarchy but also of uncertainty—they do not know what will happen next. This is not because the intentions of others are opaque (though they often are), or because the world is probabilistic, but because actors do not know exactly how the world works—in many instances they do not even know for certain what their own reactions will be to events three steps down the road, and only find out when they get there.<sup>4</sup> A world of uncertainty is also a world of contingency—one thing leads to another, in ways that cannot be predicted. Relatedly, classical realism also diverges sharply from structural realism with the view that politics matters. That is, states, and especially great powers, are not simply subject to the forces generated by the structure of the international system; their behavior—that is, the choices they make—in turn shapes the incentive structures of the international system. Structural realism focuses on the imperatives imposed by the need for security; classical realism emphasizes the fact that states, and especially great powers, can choose

from a menu of distinct policy postures and dispositions (each of which would plausibly ensure security), and that those choices will in turn shape the choices made by others.

Finally, and crucially, classical realism parts company with purportedly scientific approaches to world politics with the observation that even if such efforts were successful, they typically yield abstractions of little practical value. Because in international relations, the important accomplishment is not to be able to make an informed estimate about the likely behavior of an average state in a typical moment—it is almost invariably about understanding the potential reaction of a particular state at a critical and novel juncture. Given that states can safely and plausibly respond to external stimuli in a number of different ways, otherwise similarly situated states will respond to them differently, because they will have different preferences, and also make varied guesses of their own about what will happen next, and why. The paths chosen will not be obvious in the abstract. The craft of classical realism requires dirty hands.

Critics of classical realism dismiss this approach as “unscientific.” This is, at best, empty rhetoric and at worst an invitation (and often a command) to bark up the wrong analytical trees. Structural realism is perhaps analytically pristine; hyper-rationalism rigorous in appearance. But what do they tell us? As *An Unwritten Future* will make abundantly clear, about world politics structural realism tells us very little—and nothing we did not already understand; the bargaining model is fatally undermined by its misguided core assumptions.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the day, with British philosopher Carveth Read, classical realism holds that “it is a mistake to aim at an unattainable precision. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, chasing the implicit holy grail of exactly right, for the social sciences, will prove to be a snipe hunt. Social relations are slippery, and causes and effects of social phenomena invariably change over time, complexities that are compounded by the fact that events will lend themselves to a multiplicity of interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

This is not nihilism—to the contrary, it is analytical modesty, and an attentiveness to the discipline required to distinguish what, as students of world politics, we can and cannot hope to achieve. Understanding international relations is harder than many would have us believe. But the challenge is a vital one—lives are literally at stake in getting these questions right. In that spirit, the aspiration of this book is to articulate classical realism, to clarify the basic tenets of the perspective, to demonstrate its practical utility, and to present and illustrate in practice the analytical tools that it draws on. Beyond its mission to reclaim realism, however,

and to illuminate the strengths (and weaknesses) of the approach, this book is not evangelical—everybody need not be a realist—in fact, that would surely be a bad thing. But all students of world politics will be better equipped with an understanding of the classical realist disposition, and the ways in which it describes, explains, understands, and anticipates events in world politics.

### *The Richness, Utility, and Relevance of Classical Realism*

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for what follows by distilling the foundations and core principles of classical realism from the contributions of some of its most accomplished thinkers. It begins with a close engagement with Thucydides, and his book *The Peloponnesian War*, a history of the epochal conflict between the Greek city-states Athens and Sparta late in the fifth century BCE. This immediately raises an important question—why? What could possibly be relevant for analysts of contemporary world politics from an account of an ancient conflict provided by an exiled participant—and one who would not have recognized the very concepts of international relations theory in general or realism in particular? In a word, everything. Put another way (and this is a mental game worth playing), if I was only allowed to assign one book to students of international relations, it would be *The Peloponnesian War*, which is resplendent with compelling and timeless insights into political behavior, and from which can be derived a host of lessons that are foundational for classical realism. The discussion that follows elucidates ten of those lessons, the most important and enduring of which are an alertness to the fragility of civilized order and the danger of great power hubris. (Both of these are invisible to structural realism; the latter of course is incompatible with hyper-rationalism.)

A serious engagement with Thucydides is also rewarding and requisite because his work has been enormously influential across the long history of realist thought, contributing insights that will be central for many of the episodes and analyses engaged throughout the course of this book. In addition, an attentive engagement with *The Peloponnesian War* is obligatory for all students of world politics, because shallow readings of this grand work are all too common, with Thucydides invoked simplistically, superficially, and erroneously to lend gravitas to otherwise featherweight arguments. But pulling a few selected passages from Thucydides is akin to that old joke about a day tour of Paris, in which, without breaking stride,

the guide makes a sweeping gesture of the hand to announce, “And that is the Louvre Museum.”

This first chapter also reviews the insights of a number of realist thinkers, ancient and modern, with an emphasis on the contributions of a handful of figures who, in the middle of the twentieth century, saw themselves as purposefully and explicitly establishing a realist approach to the analysis of world politics. Prominent among this cohort are Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron (Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* [1946] is perhaps the representative work of this perspective), and the foundations of contemporary classical realism can be derived from the writings of these and other scholars from that era.

Chapter 2 makes the case for reclaiming realism at the theoretical level, by challenging the internal logic of the approaches that avow to have superseded it. Each of them draws, formatively, on appeals to and transplantations of economic theory. Structural realism derives its basic inspiration from a market scarcity analogy in general and oligopoly theory in particular; hyper-rationalism embraces in whole cloth the core assumption of Rational Expectations Theory, regarding the ways in which actors receive and process information.<sup>8</sup> A closer look at each of these theories, however, illustrates that these approaches do not offer a scientific step forward but an unproductive step back. In particular, an attentive examination reveals that structural realism is based on a fundamental misreading of oligopoly theory, which not only fails to support the few basic conclusions that structural realism would draw from it but in fact is suggestive of outcomes to the contrary of those conclusions. As for Rational Expectations, it turns out that the theory is deeply flawed and empirically dubious, and, although perhaps plausibly productive for addressing a modest subset of particular economic questions, it is nevertheless inherently and irretrievably inappropriate for addressing questions of war and peace.

Establishing these points is important—but doing so involves getting under the hood and taking a close look at these engines of inquiry. Although not mathematical, such examinations can get quite specialized, detailed, and technical, and general readers with less interest in academic debates (or those who need little convincing of the points on offer) can safely skip to the last part of the discussion in this theoretical inquest, “The Craft of Classical Realism,” without losing the thread of the central arguments of the book. This last section situates the practical application of classical realism in the general landscape of IR theory, as fundamentally informed by a proper understanding of the implications of the economic analogies reached for by others. In sum, and stated most plainly, one big



reason for a renaissance of classical realism is that its would-be successors don't make sense. Not only do they misguidedly aspire to a certain type of scientific practice, they also get the science wrong.

Having made the case for the merits of classical realism in theory, *An Unwritten Future* then turns to illustrating its utility in practice, by applying the approach to two of the great puzzles in twentieth-century international politics: Why did Britain appease Nazi Germany, placing itself within a hair's breadth of brutal subjugation, and why did the United States ruinously and unnecessarily sink so much of its blood, treasure, and reputation into what was an obviously misguided adventure in Vietnam? In the first puzzle, two explanations are closely associated with a structural realist perspective. Both suggest that the enigmatic behavior is well explained exclusively by logics of power politics: buck-passing and buying time. The former attributes the sluggish pace of British rearmament to a strategy designed to force their ally France to bear more of the burden of countering Germany and spend more on defense (little matter that the French nevertheless did not do so). The latter holds that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the principal and dedicated architect of British appeasement, was no fool; rather, he was cleverly buying time to confront Hitler when the country would be in a better position to do so. But the evidence does not support the contention that Britain, although certainly eager for France to do more, was motivated primarily, or even much at all, by buck-passing. And Chamberlain was perhaps no fool, but he was a supercilious prig who willfully and fundamentally misread Hitler. He wasn't buying time—the evidence shows plainly that he was bending over backward, indeed executing a series of Olympics-worthy reverse hand-springs, in a tireless and fruitless effort to make the German Fuhrer happy enough that he might lose his taste for war. Ultimately it is not possible to understand the behavior of Britain (and European powers more generally) without appealing to two variables forbidden by structural approaches: history and ideology. The relevant history is World War I—no understanding of the behavior of Britain and France, among others, in the interwar years is possible without accounting for the influence of that trauma on those societies. And no explanation of appeasement can fail to acknowledge the important role of ideology in shaping that strategy—in particular, the fact that most of the elites directing British foreign policy in the 1930s were comfortable with the notion of a fascist Germany dominating the continent.

The Vietnam War is another seminal experience that illustrates how classical realism outperforms its structural cousins. The standard

structuralist-rationalist explanations for such episodes generally fall under the rubric of “power cycle theory,” which locates the source of distress for dominant states in naturally occurring shifts to the balance of power, which make the status quo more difficult for them to maintain and create vexing challenges at the eroding frontiers of their influence. Classical realism reaches for different variables in explaining these costly catastrophes. In parsing these contrasting perspectives, and illustrating again distinctions between structural and classical realism (and the necessity for the latter), it is illuminating to take a close look at the finest articulation of power cycle theory, Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics*. One of the landmarks of twentieth-century realist analysis, *War and Change* is nevertheless distinguished by a tension between its structural and classical elements—a tension that Gilpin acknowledges but fails to resolve. As a dynamic structural theory, the book attributes the relative decline of dominant states to a number of factors, central among which is a (plausibly postulated) tendency for the costs of maintaining the status quo to rise. But Vietnam did not demonstrate the atrophy of American power at the frontiers of its reach—it showed the pathologies that come with *too much* power. Thucydides would have had little trouble identifying the root cause of America’s follies in South East Asia (and decades later, in its ill-advised war of conquest against Iraq). It did not come from the dispassionate calculation of costs and benefits at the margin—it was the arrogance of hubris.

Having made the case, in theory and practice, for the utility of classical realism, *An Unwritten Future* then pivots to a studied consideration of the problems with, and the limitations of, realist approaches in general and classical realism in particular. Typically, this sort of stock-taking is an afterthought, taken defensively or as a late inoculation against anticipated criticism. But we pause here to interrogate realism, because, having made big claims in the first part of the book, it is necessary to cast a critical and jaundiced eye at the reflection in the mirror. This was, notably, the approach taken by E. H. Carr in his seminal *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, which, having first castigated intellectual opponents and then established “the realist critique,” immediately turned to a bracing consideration of “the limitations of realism” not quite midway through the volume. For classical realism, doubt is not an afterthought—it is an essential part of the enterprise. Exploring the limits of realism at this juncture also fits well because many of the questions raised there speak to issues that reemerge in the investigations that follow. Tugging at the frayed edges of the concept of the National Interest, which is central to any realist analysis, introduces

questions that are reprised in the subsequent discussion of how economic factors can shape the nature and trajectory of that interest—something often assumed to be fixed and inviolable. Wrestling with the often vexing relationship between “is” and “ought”—that is, between detached analysis and policy advocacy—is a challenge for most scholars in the social sciences whose work touches on issues with real-world relevance. This conundrum resurfaces as one of the many problems with John Mearsheimer’s theory of “offensive realism,” which frankly conflates the two—an unpardonable analytical sin. And probing the limits of that ubiquitous realist watchword, prudence, implicates challenges associated with power vacuums and the fate of the American Order that are considered in this book’s final pages.

Chapter 5 considers political economy. It is the discussion that already-on-board realists will be most likely to skip over—and the one that they can perhaps least afford to. Although there have been notable exceptions, realist analysis throughout history has had a tendency to be tone-deaf to questions of political economy, a failing that was especially common during the Cold War, the peculiar circumstances of which were permissive of such selective attention. But the Cold War is long gone. Economic relations between the Soviet Union and the United States didn’t much matter—the same cannot be said of the United States and China in the twenty-first century. And the point is a general one: it is simply not possible to understand world politics without an alertness to and facility with economic issues. Any attempt to understand the origins of World War II, for example, must include a consideration of the consequences of the Great Depression; in the twenty-first century, it would be naive to overlook the extent to which China’s role in the world economy has transformative political implications. The discussion in these passages offers a general guide to realist political economy, tracing its distinct dispositions, assumptions, and expectations. And once again structural realism comes up short in addressing these questions, as it leans on apparently abstract generalizations that were in fact derived from the idiosyncratic Cold War experience.<sup>9</sup> Classical realist political economy also highlights an often crucial variable again invisible to structuralism (and generally overlooked by rationalist approaches that stress individualism and materialism): how the social economy—that is, the assessments of groups within societies of the fairness, opportunity, and prospects on offer—can influence the ability of a state to adroitly pursue its international interests.

Chapter 6 is similar in purpose and design to chapter 3. It looks at an important question in international politics—the consequences of the rise of China as a great power in the twenty-first century—and contrasts

problematic structural arguments with more nuanced classical insights. Two influential approaches to this question, Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism and Graham Allison's notion of a "Thucydides Trap," are fundamentally flawed, with basic problems that again expose the limits of structuralism. Mearsheimer's argument is plainly deterministic.<sup>10</sup> For this alone the theory of offensive realism ought to be ushered quickly to the door, but its problems run even deeper than that—as will be elaborated, the argument is logically incoherent, even on its own terms. As for the "Thucydides Trap," it is based not simply on a regrettably shallow reading of *The Peloponnesian War* but on one that is routinely wrong about basic aspects of the book—and thus, not surprisingly, misguided in the conclusions it would draw from that work. This chapter also includes a consideration of the experience of interwar Japan, which offers a virtual laboratory for illustrating the distinct strengths of a classical perspective. An episode of enormous significance and consequence, the discussion will illustrate why analyses that withhold the deployment of classical tools—the role of historical legacies, uncertainty, contingency, contestation, and exogenous shocks (that is, most notably, structural realist approaches)—will fail to comprehend what happened, and in turn fail to grasp the lessons to be learned. It is simply not possible, for example, to understand the behavior of interwar Japan on the world stage without attentiveness to the profound pressures and challenges that defined its social economy in those decades. And the twists, turns, and pitched debates about its grand strategy from the 1920s into the 1930s plainly reveal that multiple trajectories for its international behavior were possible, and that those prospects were shaped by politics, international and domestic. All of these factors (and the case of interwar Japan generally) are of great relevance for understanding world politics a century later, in particular with regard to the rise of China—about which a classical realist approach must be pessimistic. Classical realism expects emerging powers to be ambitious, and arrogant (a disposition that is typically not in short supply among the satisfied guardians of the status quo as well), suggesting a clash not just of interests but also of temperaments that will make disputes, which will inevitably arise, more difficult to smoothly resolve.

*An Unwritten Future* concludes with a return to first principles: to anarchy and its consequences, and to the necessity of attending to both power and purpose, in the context of uncertainty and contingency, in order to understand world politics. Anarchy here is considered in its broader, more Thucydidean conception, which includes a sensitivity to the fragility of civilization and its implications. This underscores again the influence of

a country's social cohesion, which in turn weighs heavily on its prospects and conduct. Illustrating this is a final historical excursus, to France in the 1930s, a society characterized by radical polarization and an embrace of unreason—and described by Raymond Aron, an eyewitness, as a country defined by little more than its vehement internal divisions.<sup>11</sup> This discussion is not a detour but a destination, one that illuminates how societies—even apparent great powers—can rot from within, and that this, even more than the external threat environment, can determine the prospects for their survival. A fearsome-looking, muscle-bound fighter might prove to have a glass jaw, and fetishizing the physique (apparent power) risks overlooking less visible but ultimately decisive vulnerabilities (social cohesion). Thus better understanding interwar France matters as an important case in its own right, but it is also illustrative. It showcases enduring classical conceptions through which both the establishment of and, especially, the unraveling of the American-led post-World War II international order can be seen more clearly. As with European powers after World War I, it is simply not possible to understand the United States as an actor in world politics in the 2020s without reference to formative trauma that inform its purpose in that moment: hollowing trends in its social economy (greatly exacerbated by the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath) and the bitter experience of losing two long overseas wars. Efforts to describe, explain, understand, and anticipate American behavior without reference to those two phenomena may be precise and parsimonious. But they will come up empty.

Classical realism suggests a different path forward. It is, perhaps, a bit gloomy in its expectations. But fortunately, the future is unwritten.

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