THE REALIST CASE FOR GLOBAL REFORM

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The argument of the advocates of the world state is unanswerable: There can be no permanent international peace without a state coextensive with the confines of the political world.

(Morgenthau, 1954: 477)

What follows is an unabashedly contrarian book by an author who— or so I have been told by those closest to me— exhibits a strong streak of intellectual stubbornness. The conventional wisdom is that Realist International Theory offers an institutionally complacent vision of global politics, wedded to the existing state system and congenitally opposed to far-reaching global reform. To be sure, some Realists have spoken out powerfully against irresponsible foreign policies like those which produced the Vietnam and Second Gulf Wars. Yet Realists supposedly remain a cautious and even pessimistic bunch, defenders of the thesis that in global affairs states are the only major actors, and no structure of power or authority stands above them to mediate their conflicts; nor would they peacefully consent to such a structure, even if it could be shown to be workable. States act according to their power interests, and these interests are bound at times to conflict violently. Therefore, even if progress toward community and justice is possible within states, the relations between them are doomed to a permanent competition that often leads to war. However deplorable, this permanent competition remains an unavoidable reality that no amount of moral exhortation or utopian scheming can undo. (Smith, 1986: 1)

Though initially attracted to this interpretation, I have decided that it is not only misleading, but also gets in the way of formulating an interna-
tional theory properly attuned to the moral and political imperatives of globalization. What ensues is an openly revisionist view of significant strands in mid-century Realism, in which I counter the standard portrayal of Realism as intellectually and institutionally conservative.

Admittedly, this must initially seem like an odd and indeed implausible endeavor, given the unabashedly anti-reformist instincts of prominent Realists like Henry Kissinger, Kenneth Waltz, or John Mearsheimer. Contemporary Realists have indeed closed ranks around a stodgy and rather self-satisfied defense of the international status quo. However, its most important mid-twentieth-century representatives – E. H. Carr (1892–1982), Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–80), Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), as well as some unfairly neglected secondary figures: John Herz (1908–2006), Frederick Schuman (1904–81), Georg Schwarzenberger (1908–91), and Arnold Wolfers (1892–1968) – developed a forward-looking reformist Realism very different from that now pervasive in both the academy and halls of government. Those whom I dub Progressive Realists typically were situated on the political left during some juncture in their long careers. Most were influenced by the experiences of the interwar European (and especially German) left. With many left-leaning refugees among its ranks, mid-century Realism indeed drew on a so-called “Germanic tradition” – of Weimar reformism, and not as commonly asserted, reactionary Bismarckian Realpolitik.

Starting from the assumption that the nation state was increasingly anachronistic, Progressive Realists engaged in a fierce debate with proponents of global transformation, including the “one-world” global federalist movement which briefly flourished in the aftermath of the Second World War. Unfortunately, the debate’s heated character masked important programmatic overlap; the comparatively conservative predilections of more recent Realists encouraged them to ignore it as well. Like global federalists, Progressive Realists sought extensive international reform. They argued, however, that many of its proponents neglected the centrality of supranational society, or what they occasionally called world community: any desirable as well as viable system of postnational governance would need to rest on a corresponding postnational society capable of exercising basic integrative functions akin to those regularly achieved by successful national political communities. From this standpoint, dramatic global reform and perhaps even world statehood constituted admirable goals, but they were only achievable if reformers figured out how the necessarily thick societal background for a prospective postnational political order might be constructed. Global liberal democracy remained for them a distant goal, albeit one having immediate consequences, whose social preconditions would have to be constructed in a gradualist and reformist spirit.1
The volume’s first half thus offers a critical-minded revisionist intellectual history of mid-twentieth-century Realism. Yet its aims are by no means chiefly antiquarian: intellectual history can help shed fresh light on conventional disciplinary divides and shake up ossified ways of thinking. As such it remains an indispensable component of any international theory aspiring to counter present-day fashions or the widespread “presentist” bias which dogmatically posits that contemporary modes of thinking are necessarily more advanced than those of our historical predecessors. Unfortunately, such presentism is ubiquitous among scholars of international politics; it needs to be challenged. Without a creative retelling of the history of twentieth-century Realism, we simply miss its most provocative and surprisingly relevant ideas.

I begin by briefly revisiting the complex intellectual and political universe in which mid-century Progressive Realists came of age, along the way explaining why existing attempts to define “Realism” mask core elements of the story. In particular, the conventional category of “classical Realism” gets in the way of serious discussion more than it helps ignite it. Chapter 1 shows how Progressive Realists, while defending refreshingly nuanced theses about international law and morality, interpreted some of the conceptual mainstays of their intellectual tradition—the national interest, balance of power, and security dilemma—so as to leave open extensive possibilities for international reform. Most important perhaps, their sophisticated and surprisingly demanding political ethics underscored the necessity of changes to the global status quo. Chapter 2 then reconsiders their appreciative but ultimately critical views about the nation state, while Chapter 3 turns directly to Progressive Realism’s lively internal debate on global reform, and especially its discussion of the pros and cons of David Mitrany’s competing functionalist theory of international change. There I also outline why attempts by contemporary Realists (including Kissinger, Waltz, and Danilo Zolo) to transcend the reformist impulses of their mid-century predecessors ultimately founder.

The second half of the volume then shows why and how contemporary defenders of global reform can gain from a serious engagement with Progressive Realism. Chapter 4 argues that the commonplace dichotomy between Realism and Cosmopolitanism is overstated: more common ground is shared by the two intellectual tendencies than is widely presupposed. To be sure, some Cosmopolitan ideas remain vulnerable to Progressive Realist criticisms. When properly interpreted, however, the Progressive Realist critique is by no means exclusively destructive in character. On the contrary, Realist insights can be welded effectively to the present-day Cosmopolitan argument for democracy “beyond the nation state.” In particular, Progressive Realist ideas about the centrality
of supranational society remain vital for present-day Cosmopolitans, as
does the Realist defense of robust statehood as ultimately essential to suc-
cessful global governance. Realism, in short, offers powerful untapped
intellectual resources for criticizing the presently fashionable idea of
“global governance without government.” Even a recent editor of the
journal Global Governance has begun to acknowledge the limits of this
concept: Progressive Realism can help us see why such skepticism remains
pertinent (Weiss, 2009: 215–33). Cosmopolitans can strengthen their
arguments by reintegrating some forgotten Realist ideas. They should
join Progressive Realism in seeking ways to deepen supranational society;
they would also do well to abandon their kneejerk hostility to world
statehood.

Chapter 5 examines other notable recent attempts to further global
reform — as advanced by Liberal Transgovernmentalism, the English
School, Republicanism, and Constructivism — from the standpoint of
Progressive Realism. Notwithstanding their many virtues, each of these
competing approaches is found wanting. At the very least, each can
learn something from the reform-minded Realism of Carr, Morgenthau,
Niebuhr, and others. Chapter 6 argues that Realists were right to argue that
even if world statehood represented a long-term aspiration manifestly
unachievable in the foreseeable future, a properly conceived model of it
remains a suitable goal. I defend this unfashionable and seemingly far-
fetched intuition by responding to the most commonly voiced criticisms
of world statehood, most of which turn out to rely on intellectual carica-
ture. Even hardheaded rational choice legal scholars now concede that
“problems of global collective action have multiplied and increased in
seriousness” and will probably continue to do so (Posner, 2009: 38).²
Progressive Realists were justified in viewing global government as ulti-
mately the best way to tackle them. Finally, I reflect briefly on US President
Barack Obama’s apparent sympathies for Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the
most important figure in mid-century Progressive Realism, considering the
possibility that Obama’s policies may be shaped to some degree by Pro-
gressive Realism.

Global reform today seems at a standstill, with the United Nations
unable to pursue minimal yet overdue changes, and the European Union
mired in internal divisions about how best to deal with the ongoing eco-
nomic and financial crisis. For reasons to be described below, this situation
should worry us. Yet the momentarily frozen character of some present-day
global institutions perhaps provides a useful opportunity to re-think many
of the increasingly tired clichés that dominate thinking about global-level
change. A reconsideration of the neglected reformist legacy of Progressive
Realism can help us do so.
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Meet the Progressive Realists

Ernest (alias “Ernie”) had studied hard for his final written examination in international relations theory. When the test instructions asked for a concise definition of *Realism*, he was happy to be able to display his new knowledge. During the course of the semester, Ernie had carefully read the assigned texts on Realism (few of which, however, were original sources), and his professor had also lectured twice on Realism’s core theoretical attributes; he had conscientiously taken good notes. Confident that this was a question he could easily “ace,” Ernie wrote:

Realism denies morality any meaningful role in international politics. It takes this hostility to “moralism” from the political theories of Machiavelli and Hobbes, who exerted a substantial influence on Realism. Machiavelli argued in favor of discarding traditional moral norms in order to ensure self-preservation in a dangerous political universe; Hobbes believed that shared ideas about justice presuppose a system of shared sovereignty. Realists point out that because there is no sovereignty or state at the global level, interstate affairs are characterized by a perilous “state of nature” in which no common moral framework operates. Realism affirms *Realpolitik*, meaning that individual states can legitimately pursue their vital power interests even when doing so conflicts with morality. Realism’s skepticism about international law stems from the same roots. As Machiavelli and Hobbes asserted, binding law requires sanctions backed up by a coercive state apparatus. Because interstate affairs remain characterized by anarchy, the regular enforcement of law there inevitably is plagued by massive deficits. More often than not, international law – like many appeals to a shared moral
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code – serves as little more than the political instruments of powerful global interests or Great Powers. When international morality or international law operates effectively, it does so only because big power interests at the global level happen to decide that it is in their interest for it to do so. But in a Hobbesian world, their support necessarily remains fragile. This is why Realists are hostile to what they call “moralism” and “legalism.”

Because the essay question also asked of Ernie that he outline one of the main flaws of Realism, he added that

Realism’s main flaw is its institutional conservatism. Because of international anarchy, Realists say, states can do little more than pursue their parochial national interests. International organizations always represent fragile creatures, dependent on the cooperation of power units whose interests may conflict. The basic dynamics of an international system in which rival states compete for power and security render utopian any attempt to establish ambitious varieties of global governance. This is why Realists even today remain committed to maintaining the primacy of the nation state, despite evidence that globalization is undermining it. They discount even modest attempts at international reform. Rather, they believe that peace is best preserved by the realities of the “balance of power,” on which they sometimes offer a backwards-looking and nostalgic gloss. Their dogmatic view of international anarchy makes them skeptical of attempts to reform international politics in the direction, for example, of “cosmopolitan democracy,” as advocated by some writers. Such skepticism also partly derives from the pessimistic (and highly dubious) view of human nature endorsed by some early or “classical” Realists. But even among Realists who do not base their views in ideas of human nature, skepticism about global reform is widespread. Such Realists often focus on the “security dilemma,” which basically says that because no state can feel perfectly secure in a world with competing autonomous political units, each state is driven to acquire as much power as possible. Even these Realists miss the need today, in the face of globalization, to develop new forms of political organization. Consequently, Realism cannot make sense of the rapid growth of international organizations, appearance of new political systems like the European Union, or the emergence of a global system of human rights, all of which have already transformed so-called anarchy. Realism’s main nemesis, Cosmopolitanism, probably does a better job understanding the emerging realities of globalization.

Ernie’s instructor, Professor Conventional (“Connie”) Wisdom, read his essay and quickly rewarded Ernie with a high grade. The answer, she determined, not only covered most of the main points relevant to Realism, but also successfully identified its most striking flaws. Of course, more could have been said about Realism’s different variants and the ways in
which recent Neorealism breaks with the “classical” Realism of writers like E. H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau, or the disagreements between contemporary “offensive” and “defensive” Realists (Layne, 2006: 15–25). Yet given the examination’s time constraints, Connie fair-mindedly acknowledged, no answer could conceivably cover every feature of Realist theory. As she was well aware, Ernie’s response meshed nicely with the account of Realism found in a great deal of the secondary literature. In particular, his interpretation of Realism overlapped at most junctures with that of Cosmopolitanism, which – as Ernie accurately noted – probably represents Realism’s most important rival in present-day international thought.1

Based on his hard work and strong academic record, Ernie successfully finished his studies and ultimately earned a doctorate in political science. Only a few years after having completed the international relations theory exam, he found himself administering a similar test to his own eager (and not-so-eager) students, from whom he expected a parallel assessment of Realism.

Realism: A Second Look

Now if this were the final word on Realism, you could put this book down and return to whatever activity you were contentedly doing just a few minutes ago. I would have gone back to that detective novel I was reading while comfortably ensconced on my back deck overlooking the woods. We could all go on happily repeating the conventional interpretation of Realism, enveloped in a smug sense of the certainty of our knowledge. And for those among us (like Ernie and perhaps Connie, as well as this author) sympathetic to Cosmopolitanism, we could also rest assured in the superiority of our theoretical and political preferences. Realism, we might again tell ourselves, is a conservative and outdated international theory, poorly suited to the social and political realities of our rapidly globalizing world. It may once have captured, albeit somewhat one-sidedly, some key elements of the traditional state system, when relatively discrete nation states faced off in a nasty struggle for power. Yet it becomes ever more outdated as the Westphalian system fades into the past.

For better or worse, I will have to ask you to stay with my somewhat polemical little book for just a while longer. Too much present-day international theory seems disturbingly reminiscent of shadow boxing, with participants directing their punches at imaginary antagonists outfitted with crudely stylized arguments, but rarely in fact landing a real punch on an actual opponent. Comfortably ensconced in the disciplinary subfield of