

# FOR WHOM IS REALISM?

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS IN RELATION TO ROBERT COX'S CLAIM THAT 'THEORY IS ALWAYS FOR SOMEONE AND SOME PURPOSE'

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*In this paper I examine the question for whom realist theories are. Theories allow us to explain and understand the world and give the possibility to guide humans through actions. In the paper I elaborate this problem first. I then provide the reader with a short overview of realist theory in general and of Hans J. Morgenthau's approach especially. To understand a possible purpose of Morgenthau I examine the social and political context in which Morgenthau developed his ideas. The following chapter then elaborates the usage of Morgenthau's concept by some members of the scientific community. I contrast it with Robert Cox's and Gramsci's claim of hegemony.*

### ***Introduction***

According to Habermas research in science, of all kind, is always related to a specific interest. There are different interests possible. Habermas distinguished between a *technical-instrumental* interest on learning which enables humans to extend control over nature. Secondly a *moral-practical interest* through which humans learn how to achieve more consensual social relations. Thirdly an *emancipatory interest* that should lead to the identification and eradication of unnecessary confinements and constraints (See Ashley, 1981, p. 233-234). Out of these interests theories derive through the research of scholars.

This is a basis to which the question of the essay is related. To develop concepts like theories there is a reason that scholar has in mind. But not only the scholar who developed a concept has a rea-

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son, or a purpose, for his ideas. People, of all kind, who use those concepts also have a reason and this concepts are always related to solve a problem of whatever type it may be. A closer look to the concept of theories could elaborate *this* problem.

A famous metaphor that explains the concept of a theory is the one of Karl Popper. He said that theories are a net, which we throw out to catch the world. Theories allow us to rationalise and explain the complex world (Popper, 1976, p. 31). If there is truth in the metaphor, than it is also true that different nets catch different "worlds" and that theories explain them different. Theories explain something about conditions and about connections. They shine a light on the cause and effect relationship, make clear what changes and what is constant. They also give us criterions for what has validity and what not. And they give the possibility to make better decisions of what we could expect and what not. So with this theory we could fulfil a purpose, the purpose is to solve a problem. And this is what Cox had in mind as he stated that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox et.al.,1996 [1981], p. 87).

Theories do not only explain the world how it is; they give us the possibility to guide us through our actions. Theories do not have to explain the whole world; theories can be used as an instrument for solving small problems. This instrumentalist view of theories is reflected in a statement by Waltz: 'the question, as ever with theories, is not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is useful. And usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predicative powers of the theory that may be fashioned" and if it is solving a problem, would Cox and others add (Waltz, 1979, p. 8). Theories can help to solve problems, they explain and they content elements of understanding (Zürn, 1994 p.95)<sup>1</sup>

The question for whom realism is points out to the problem

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<sup>1</sup> They can not fully help to understand a social action or a situation. To understand one has to try to enable themselves to think like the person which action or situation one would understand. For a deeper discussion about understanding (See. Zangl, p.20, Hollis/Smith, pp.68-91, Winch, pp.83-94)

which and what interest is served with a realist theory of international relations. Cox claims that realism is a problem solving theory, where its aim is to run the international system smoothly (Cox, 1995, p. 88). This distinction in Cox's thinking is not clearly elaborated. Later he says that his approach 'Critical theory contains problem-solving theories within itself, but contains them in form of identifiable ideologies' (ibid., p. 90). Though as already said, theory always wants to solve a problem, whatever it may be. Cox seems to be more concerned about which hidden ideologies come with a specific theory. So that is more the point to focus on, which, if any, ideology is served by realism, and for what or for whom? Hidden purposes happen if a theory focuses on specific social situation. By focusing on this specific situation other situations may be underestimated and that may lead, in the end, to the problem that a power relationship in a society is not quite clear. Marxist scholars for example tend to focus on the way society organises the production of goods and services. This theoretical assumption then shines the light on the power relationship manifested in the ownership of material (Marx, 1970 [1859,1867]). It underestimates for example the power and knowledge relationship, whereas a practical reasoning leads to the production process that is analysed by Marxists. This practical reasoning could be more important to focus on, if someone wants to understand what the power relationship in society is (Horkheimer et.al., 1947; Foucault, 1969).

By analysing this problem we should not forget that theories sometimes also serve other purposes which scholar had in mind. This for example had disastrous consequences in the atomic theory of Otto Hahn. This theory derived from his observation of the atomic fission. Later this theory was the basis of the first atomic bombs of the USA that killed millions of people and destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That was not Hahn's purpose. His theory became used by other physicists, whose purpose became to develop the mega bomb. Having this in mind my analysis focuses strongly on the realist ideas which are developed of Hans J. Morgenthau.

I will explain below why I focus on his realist theory. To explain better why the realist ideas are dominant in international relations theory after the Second World War I will try to examine in

which environment these ideas derived. It could help us to better understand Morgenthau's purpose and, if there is any, the purpose of other scholars. Research with these realist ideas, and several other slightly different approaches, derived for the most part in the international relations scientific community of the United States. Thus I focus on these scientific community later. But before that the world political circumstances are also important to mention, because 'in the study of politics, theory typically follows practice, rather than vice versa' (Keohane, 1996, p. 463).

The analysis starts with some explanations of the realist ideas. Morgenthau's theory is stated more in detail, because only if we know on what his theory is aiming at, we can possibly understand and explain its purpose.

### ***Realism***

The essay question above is a little bit inexact. 'There is no single tradition of political realism, but rather a knot of historically constituted tensions, contradictions and evasions' (Walker, 1993, p.106). A simple distinction is by defining periods of realistic approaches. Until the twentieth century there was the classical realism, between 1939 and 1979 the modern realism and after 1979 neorealism with Kenneth Waltz as the most important scholar. Walker (1993, pp.108-122) distinguished between historical realism and structural realism. Whereas the historical realism is led by Machiavelli who defined several ideas with which a state leader could control their territory (1988, [1532]). Carr is also a leading figure in Walker's historical realism. He advocates that power and morality are in an interplay, to increase power in this approach is more important than moral principles (Carr, 1948). Walker defines two structural realistic worldviews. The first sees the human nature as the determining structure. Thucydides was a leading figure who promoted the endless struggle for power that is inherent in human nature. Hans J. Morgenthau is *the* leading figure after the Second World War. My focus later on will be on his ideas. There are many reasons for this, which will be stated below (Thucydides, 1954; Morgenthau, 1978). Walker's second structural realism assumes

that the anarchical structure leads to conflicts and therefore the survival decision to increase power. Rousseau and Waltz are leading figures of this approach (Rousseau, 1991 [1750]; Waltz, 1979).

My focus on Morgenthau's theory is reasoned on the grounds that he is the leading figure in international relations after the Second World War. His book defines the key assumptions that are used very much in the later developments of realist's ideas. Waltz for example is stated by Keohane as 'the most systematic spokesman for contemporary Structural Realism' which uses very much of Morgenthau's ideas to develop a slightly different, but not less important, realist international theory (Keohane, 1986, p.162). Carr's approaches can not be defined as a complete theory, his concern was to give a critique to the idealist ideas of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Morgenthau tries to explain international politics (Olson, 1972, p.19). According to Thomas Kuhn's scientific revolution theory (1970, p10, pp.23-25) Morgenthau's work could be seen as a major contribution to the discipline of international relations which defines what are the legitimate areas of inquiry. Then Morgenthau's work served as an exemplar, which was followed by many scholars in that field. Morgenthau defined a paradigm that is followed by practitioners (Kuhn, p. 23-24). If these practitioners uncover anomalies then a crisis could emerge which could lead to 'extraordinary science' in which a new paradigm arose to compete the old and may be the new displaces the old (Kuhn, p.52-53). The above explains my decision for Morgenthau's theory. My purpose here is to stay closer on the development of Morgenthau's ideas. It is difficult in an essay of such length to analyse all the problems of the different purposes of realistic ideas. But if we explain and understand the core ideas of the different realism it may us allow to think about what the different purposes in other realistic ideas are.

*Morgenthau's theory is based on six principles:*<sup>2</sup>

1. Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. [...] Realism, believing as it does in the objectivity of the laws of politics, must also believe in the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects, however imperfectly and one-sidedly, these objective laws.' (Morgenthau, 1978, p.4).

2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. [...] The concept of interest defined as power imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible' (ibid. p. 5).

3. Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. [...] Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man' (ibid. pp. 10).

4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance's of political action. [...] Realists maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the action of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. [...] Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defence of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival' (ibid. p. 12).

5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations

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<sup>2</sup> I will quote the six principles from Morgenthau's "Politics among Nations" in order to make no hermeneutic faults. As we will later see, a different interpretation may change not only the theory but also the purposes of that theory.

of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. [...] On the other hand, it is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from both that moral excess and that political folly. [...] Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgement' (ibid., p. 13).

6. Intellectually, the realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs. He thinks in terms of interest defined as power, as the economist thinks in terms of interest defined as wealth; the lawyer, of the conformity of action with legal rules; the moralist, of the conformity of action with moral principles. [...] And the political realist asks: "How does this policy affect the power of the nation?" [...] Political realism is based upon a pluralistic concept of human nature. [...] A man who was nothing but "political man" would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. [...] Thus it is inevitable that a theory which tries to understand international politics as it actually is and as it ought to be in view of its intrinsic nature, rather than people would like to see it, must overcome a psychological resistance that most other branches of learning need to face' (ibid. p. 13-17).

These are the six principles of Morgenthau's theory. Here already we can see a purpose stated for example in the second principle that political realism wants 'to find its way through the landscape of international politics' and in the sixth principle that realist theory 'tries to understand international politics' (ibid. p. 5 and 17). It seems that the purpose of Morgenthau is to explain and understand international politics. The crux of Morgenthau's theory is that he wants to explain the international politics by using a scientific way. Realism aims to 'detect and understand the forces that determine political relations among nations, and to comprehend the ways in which those forces act upon each other and upon international political relations and institutions' (ibid., p.18). This scientific way is important in its aim on the question how things operate but not why. This scientific approach does not ask why the things operate in that way. Thus as Cox claims realists take the world as it finds it. The theory is non-historical, it does not ask, like critical theory,

'how the order came about' (Cox, 1996, p. 88). This already reflects the first hidden purpose of the realist theory. By not asking how the order came about and taking the world as it is, the theory tend to advocate the status quo, rather than to promote the change of an order. The paradigms I wrote about above in the sense of Thomas Kuhn are in the realist's theory that, first 'nation states or their decision-makers are the most important actors for understanding relations. Secondly that there is a sharp distinction between domestic politics and international politics. Thirdly that international relations is the struggle for power and peace. Understanding how and why that struggle occurs and suggesting ways for regulating it is the purpose of the discipline' (Vasquez, 1983, p. 18, 1998, p.37).

The hidden purpose that I stated in the introduction can already be seen her. Morgenthau focus is on the state level; he is not much interest on the domestic political situation of a country. That could underestimate the power relationship within the country, and therefore could led to a status quo oriented view of the world, which takes these relationship for granted and by this it serves the interest of the ruling people in a country (See Booth, 1995 for an example). Also underestimates Morgenthau's theory other actors in the international arena, multinational companies, international organisation, human rights and environment networks for example. Also the human nature concept with the basis of the theory is man made and tends to reflect also the nature of man than that of woman (See Sylvester, 1994). The balance of power concept focussed strongly on the relationship of Russia and USA, it left out Latin American, African and many Asian countries. In every critique which could be made the hidden purpose then of the realism theory is to secure the power position of the powerful. In a sense those theories arose out of a technical interest to extend control over social situations if we use Habermas ideas to look at those issues. However these are so far suggestions. The analysis now continues with a view on the environment that surrounded Morgenthau. By looking at these we could try to understand Morgenthau's real purpose. What could be the reasons that he developed his theory in that way that he did? On what was he aiming at?

### *The social and political environment as Morgenthau researched it*

It does not matter where people work - according to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann most people will develop views and ideas which reflect closely the social and political circumstances that surround them. These 'sociology of knowledge' causes us to believe certain things and even convinces us that those things are objective truth (Berger/Luckmann, 1967, esp. pp.1-19).

In 1932 Morgenthau went to Geneva to teach public law, he stayed there until 1935, because of Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Then he went to Madrid for a year and after that he took up residence in the United States. He served at the faculties of Brooklyn (N.Y.) College from 1937 - 1939, the University of Kansas City, Mo. between 1939-43 and then at the University of Chicago from 1943 until 1971. In 1948 the first edition of 'Politics Among Nations' was published. Walker (1999) mentioned that Morgenthau was confronted with extremism even in the United States. In Brooklyn he was surrounded by an extreme isolationism characterised by the editor and owner of the Chicago Tribune, Colonel Robert McCormick, whose opinion was that 'the most pernicious enemy was anything beyond America's border.' And 'that all the "good" Europeans had already arrived in the United States' (Walker, 1999). The rest of them are of a lesser sort. The United States should keep out of the European struggles that happened that time. McCormick's Newspaper was by then very influential in the area in which Morgenthau lived. The political extreme in that time was by far the rise of the fascist regimes in Europe, Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany; later the outbreak of the second world war. During the war, when Morgenthau moved to Chicago, there was another extreme. S.O. Levinson's grassroots organisation the American Committee for the Outlawry of War, fought that all the states should agree to outlaw war. On the University of Chicago campus some professors in international politics forbade their students using the word "war" in the classrooms during that time. Quincy Wright made his major study of wars over the centuries there (1942) (Walker, 1999). After the world war the international politics changed. Brit-

ain was too weak to continue its 'Great Game' world leadership politics. The new elected Labour Government of Clement Attlee continued Churchill's realist foreign policy. Churchill developed the view that Stalin could try to dominate the continent. He thought Stalin added the imperialistic ideas of Lenin's International Relations theories to the traditional expansionism of the Russian Tsars. Attlee's Cabinet adapted those ideas and tried to convince the USA of the potency of the Soviet threat. The United States were strengthened from the war; they dominated Latin America, Japan and China. Stalin did not see many differences between the liberal America and Nazi Germany. Both were imperialist countries for him, they were led by the capitalist oppressors and were driven towards expansion. Soviet Union had by then already expanded over Eastern Europe. Stalin closed the USSR off from the rest of the world and concealed the real extent of poverty within the Soviet Union. United States headed for the American age. Roosevelt's decision to intervene in Europe was to protect the sovereignty of all nations. The war-aims signed by Churchill and Roosevelt should be to establish a general security system and a fair world economy. Equal access to the world's wealth should be guaranteed. State Department analysts adopted the view that free trade brings peace and high tariffs, trade barriers and unfair competition bring war. The atomic bomb, which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, sent a threatening signal to the world. America was in the position to dictate the politics for their own interest after the Second World War. The unexpected early rise of power for Harry S. Truman changed the foreign policies of the United States from an economic vision of world affairs to a power oriented and geo-strategic realist view (Knutsen, 1992, p. 214-218).

This is the social and political background that surrounded Morgenthau as he developed his ideas of an international relations theory. He was also influenced by his own education at the German Universities in Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich. The strongest influences came from Hermann Oncken in Munich he introduced Morgenthau in thinking about foreign policies and defence in Bismarck's Realpolitik terms. Through the Constitutional and Church Law Professor at the University of Munich, Rothenbacher, he

learned about the political and social philosophy of Max Weber. It was Weber's thinking about politics with objectivity and detachment and his concentration on political understanding, but also Weber's civic courage and his writings on political morality which impressed Hans J. Morgenthau (Thompson, 1999).

The two extremism's in the United States, isolationism and the ideas of outlawing the war, the war itself with its death of millions of people, Americas rise in power, the threat of the Soviet Union, the mega bomb and the influences of his teachers led to the development of the dual approach of Morgenthau's realist international theory. His ideas of maintaining peace are: 'One is the self-regulatory mechanism of the social forces which manifests itself ... in the balance of power. The other consists of normative limitations upon that struggle in the form of international law, international morality, and world public opinion' (Morgenthau 1st ed. 1948, quoted in Walker, 1999). Walker states that many interpretations only focused on the amoral pursuit of power instead of taking the morality and international society ideas into account. Keohane made it clear that realism was discussed 'in the language of power and interests rather than ideals and norms' (Keohane, 1986, p.9). Later on I will try to explain why most of the scholars ignored the morality of Morgenthau's ideas.

But we can see here another purpose of Morgenthau himself. He was seeking a balance of the extremes he was confronted with in the USA and on the world politics level. The utopian liberals, which wanted to outlaw law by international negotiations and the power politics which, happened in Europe through Stalin and America and its allies, here mainly Britain. He wrote that a 'discussion of international morality must guard against two extremes either of overrating the influence of ethics upon international politics or else of denying that statesmen and diplomats are moved by anything else by considerations of material power' (Morgenthau, 1978, p.174).

We see that Morgenthau himself was a moral man - he wrote in his later work that 'almost 25 years ago I launched, in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* a frontal attack against faith in the power of truth to move men and in particular statesmen' (Morgenthau, 1970, p.5). He was convinced that power positions do not necessarily lead

to intellectual arguments. But his purpose was stated more directly: 'the domestic changes [...] which have been witnessing since the book was written [1960] raised again in a novel and acute way the central issue of American existence: how can the purpose of America be achieved under novel conditions? That issue comprises [...] mortal dangers and unique opportunities. It puts into question the very existence of America' (Morgenthau, 1970, p.6). So while Morgenthau himself was concerned with trying to keep peace in the world, also the existence of America was important to him. But if someone took his whole work, especially of course his 'Politics Among Nations', than one could see that in his mind there is an option for a long-lasting peace within an international society with a possible world government. America was in his view important but peace must come first. In a dialogue with Hannah Arendt, who asked him to turn away from foreign policy issues towards Aristotle and political philosophy, he answered: 'Perhaps I would do so if we were in the eighteenth or nineteenth century but today's world is threatened with nuclear annihilation' (quoted in Thompson, 1999). Thus he focussed on the struggle for power and peace, as the subtitle of Politics Among Nations suggests. So far it seems that this was not the only purpose Cox had in mind as he spoke of a problem solving theory without emancipatory purpose. In a world that is dominated by war an emancipatory project is to search a theory that tries to promote everlasting peace. But Cox later worked deeper on a hegemony principle related to Antonio Gramsci who introduced a concept in which a group of people ruled over another by manufacturing consent, to secure their power (Cox, 1994 [1983]). If we take the example from Otto Hahn misused theory, is there a misuse of Morgenthau's theory? Does the theory serve a purpose that is beyond the interest of peace keeping? The next section tries to answer these questions.

### *Scientific Community*

It was already stated above that Morgenthau's morality ideas were often ignored. It is not answered yet, if this happens with a specific reason. Clinton (1999) points out that 'the book is long; the

semester is short - perhaps that is why the themes illustrating the first half of the subtitle of the book (The Struggle for Power) seem so decisively to overshadow those corroborating the second (and Peace).<sup>3</sup> So it is possible that students of International Relations haven't read the second part of the book which deals with more with morality questions. It seems to be too easy an answer, but if young students, or better young scholars, and old ones too, tend to bent on recognition and prominence, they can not gain little if they stand against a writer who is famous and maybe controversy. If many people misunderstood him the misunderstanding could accumulate. In political science and international relations the power of professors should not be underestimated.<sup>3</sup> Scholars decide what students ought to know. Scientific Association defines the competence of people; they could exclude and include people. In these community young scholars as already stated, tend to produce more articles and books to gain reputation. The American political science community believes that the society should benefit from the research, it is concerned to help in supporting a good citizenship, but also to teach the government in doing good policies. This leads to the dilemma: America is devoted to democratic liberalism, which is deep-rooted in there political culture (see Lipset, 1997). The liberal postulates are to believe in human rationality, democratic polity, the activity of political groups and a responsible government. In believing this the scientific community rely on that 'at any rate, the proponents of liberalism have long expected that continual additions to scientific knowledge will constitute positive contributions to general welfare' (Ricci, 1984, p. 74). The liberalism postulates guide to the political science and the international relations community in which they have to operate; there should be no partisan position collides with values. All humans should be treated equally for example. But the dilemma here is what should be justified and what not? McCarthyism for example had an important influence in the American scientific community, scholars were careful with the expression of ideas which could be related to communism and by doing so they violated the equality postulate (See Lazarsfeld et.al., 1958). The important

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<sup>3</sup> I follow in the next part David M. Ricci's „Tragedy of Political Science“

attitude in American political science was (and is by some contemporary political scientist) 'that scientific truth could be the basis of modern democracy' (Ricci, 1984, p.76). This was extended during the second world war when social scientist became more and more part of governmental administration to help to run the country. Harold Lasswell, an influential political scientist was working to contribute, with other social scientist, to the intelligence and psychological warfare (Oren, 2000, p.552). Oren also pointed out that Gabriel A. Almonds 'Civic Culture' study, among others, contributed to the Cold War cultural formation (Oren, 2000). This is what critical theorist as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and others are concerned about - the technical-theoretical approach with the purpose to run a political system smoothly. And this could be what Cox is aiming at if he is thinking about production of ideas (Sinclair, 1996, p. 9). The realist theory rooted in such a scientific community tends to serve the interest of the nation, but combined with the hegemony ideas of Gramsci, the foreign policy of the capitalist United States serves the ruling power elite.

### ***Conclusion***

According to Foucault power produces knowledge - scholars in societies then and now do hold a special power position then. Their goal is to produce knowledge. As I tried to show this production is related to any form of interest. Morgenthau and other realist theorist claim to have the interest in keeping peace. They also tend to promote a necessary and inevitable raise in power of a state by increasing military capabilities, information warfare systems and the like. Morgenthau's own purpose was to keep the peace. The hidden purpose which arose out of his, often misunderstood, ideas and through the theory itself which are used by the international relations scholars after the second world war, serve the legitimisation and the education of politicians for the foreign policy of the United States. It helped by this to run the international system smoothly and it underestimated the economical institution development and the economic purposes that were always in the interest of the power elite of the United States. The US ideas of spreading democracy and

free trade tend not to fit into the realist ideas of Morgenthau. His fifth principle states that 'Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a nation with moral laws that govern the universe' (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 13) - the American messianism violates this principle by forcing countries, with the help of international organisations as the WTO and the IMF, to change their systems to make them 'fit' for the international economy system. But that is just another example how the realist theory of Morgenthau could be interpreted. Just leave the fifth principle of the pluralistic moral law ideas out, like the morality ideas, right after the second world war, and the realist theorist of today could use much of the realist ideas to explain and advocate the contemporary foreign policy of the USA.

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