Introduction

This book brings together in a revised, augmented, and updated form six essays about political realism written in the course of the past ten years or so. Although they have been written as discrete pieces, it became clear over time that they told episodes of a single story. Their publication as a single volume gives me the opportunity to spell out the larger argument that runs through them, and to state why I believe that argument continues to matter. The reason why the history of political realism is relevant to us today becomes obvious when one reads what self-declared realists were saying about their own predicament. Here is one of them:

> We are still . . . capable of great uprisings *against* a recognized threat or danger. But we are so confused in our thoughts as to which *positive* goals should guide our action that a general fear of what will happen after the merely *negative* task of defense against danger has been performed paralyzes our planning and thinking in terms of political ideas and ideals.

These words could have been written today, and yet they were written in 1951 by John Herz, a refugee scholar from Germany, in the introduction to his book *Political Realism and Political Idealism*. More than sixty years separate us from these remarks, which nonetheless resonate uncannily with our present situation. Today, we too have become engulfed by our own concern with security and confused about the more general meaning and purpose of politics. Since 9/11, security has become the universal framework of political thinking and the primary deliverable of any policy, foreign or domestic, often overriding well-established constitutional rights and provisions. It often seems to foreclose all alternative values whose breadth, reach, and controversial implications once were central to

political life. Facing and confronting "a recognized threat or danger" has become the essence of government as well as a new source of legitimacy. References to a permanent state of exception now sound like academic platitudes glossing over the obvious.

The ideals that once seemed capable of mobilizing political energies behind transformative projects seem now thoroughly discredited, or watered down beyond recognition. Instead, security itself has become an ideal – maybe the only ideal left. Increasingly, former "positive goals" have been engulfed by the "negative tasks," giving an appealing shine to the latter, as the notion of security has expanded to become the all-encompassing horizon of human experience. Even the spread of democracy, humanitarian assistance, and human rights are now seen as the functional components of a global security mix rather than ends valuable in themselves. Human development, long discredited by the neoliberal policies of the "Washington consensus" of the 1990s, has come back as a fundamental security measure in the many counterinsurgencies in which the West is currently engaged. And if there is anything new in contemporary humanitarianism, it is indeed its discovery of political realism.[1]

It is not a coincidence that political realism and indeed Herz himself are coming back into fashion.[2] Herz thought that the search for security was

[1] See for instance Ruti G. Teitel, *Humanity's Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); David W Kennedy, *The Dark Side of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein, eds., *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2011).

[2] On Herz, see Casper Sylvest, "John H. Herz and the Resurrection of Classical Realism," *International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2008): 441–55; Peter M. R. Stirk, "John H. Herz and the International Law of the Third Reich," *International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2008): 427–40. The literature on political realism is ballooning, but for a few examples, see Robert M. A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Stefano Guzzini, "The Enduring Dilemmas of Realism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 4 (2004): 533–68; Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013); Oliver Jütersonke, *Morgenthau, Law and Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Philip Mirowski, "Realism and Neoliberalism: From Reactionary Modernism to Postwar Conservatism," in *The Invention of International Relations Theory: The Rockefeller Foundation, Realism, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*, ed. Nicolas Guilhot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Seán Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); William Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); Brian C. Schmidt, "Realism as Tragedy," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004); Michael C. Williams, ed. *Realism Reconsidered:*

a basic fact of human life. He also suggested that it was the reason why conflicts and wars would remain an ever-present possibility, notwithstanding the intentions of the parties to such conflicts: What defines security for some may be perceived as a threat by others, and thus can trigger an escalation that spirals into open conflict. He called this basic condition of human life the "security dilemma" and thought it was intractable. He named the fundamental type of political thinking that took the security dilemma as its foundational premise "political realism." Today, this is still the intellectual foundation of the discipline that teaches cohorts of students to think about international affairs.

Herz thought that taking these "'gladiatorial' facts" into account was the *sine qua non* for the pursuit of any ideal or value. He wanted to put realism at the service of moral and political progress, to strike a balance between the grim necessities of power and the striving for ideals, and to reconcile security with the realization of collective values. Far from endorsing a pessimistic and limiting vision of human possibilities, often tied to conservative or reactionary ideologies, Herz wanted to formulate what he called interchangeably a "liberal realism" or "realist liberalism."[3] And yet, Herz's attempt at reconciling realism with a progressive sense of history and politics failed. Like many other realists, he ended up developing the same critique of liberalism, socialism, or internationalism.

Although he had been a student of Hans Kelsen, the great Viennese representative of legal positivism, Herz had gradually drifted toward the intellectual positions of Kelsen's nemesis in Weimar, the arch-conservative jurist Carl Schmitt. By the end of his life, Herz had become a willing participant in the Schmitt-revival launched by the journal *Telos*. He conceded that his "realist liberalism" was nothing more than an attempt at preserving some of Schmitt's fundamental insights.[4] Herz

The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell, "Introduction: Under an Empty Sky – Realism and Political Theory," in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, ed. Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[3] See for instance John Herz, "Political Ideas and Political Reality," *The Western Political Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1950): 161–78; John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 157–80; John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

[4] He recounts the episode in his memoirs: John Herz, *Vom Überleben. Wie ein Weltbild entstand Autobiographie* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1984). On how Schmitt influenced his conception of realism, see John Herz, "Looking at Carl Schmitt from the Vantage Point of the 1990s," *Interpretation* 19, no. 3 (1992): 307–14. Herz's correspondence with *Telos* editors can be found in his papers, at the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections & Archives at SUNY.

found his own progressive hopes for his liberal realism blocked in the political dead-end he had so clearly identified.

Herz's example tells us something important about the nature of modern realism as a political ideology. It suggests that realism places limits upon the kind of political goals that one can pursue and indeed makes it difficult if not impossible to pursue positive or transformative goals. It informs a certain kind of political outlook, at the cost of excluding others. It also suggests that when we talk about realism, we are really talking about two different things that the rise of political realism in the mid-twentieth century has sought to conflate in the process of establishing its historical legitimacy.

The first is realism as an ethical attitude, a reflexive relationship to one's actions that relies on prudential conduct in the pursuit of whatever ends one has chosen. It is normatively neutral and does not preclude any political or moral end. It is the realism of Machiavelli, for instance, a realism that can perfectly accommodate a search for glory that any contemporary realist would consider folly. It is a realism that does not imply a pessimistic anthropology or a regressive social ontology. It is naturalistic, pragmatic, and concrete.

The second is "realism" in the modern sense that is more familiar to us. It goes beyond the practical wisdom known to philosophers as *phronesis*. Above all, it is an "-ism," an ideology. It involves a specific conception of human nature and of historical time. It places limits upon what one can hope to achieve. These limits are not dictated by a concrete situation; they are metaphysical limits, constitutive of human nature and built into a historical process that, in the last instance, is considered to be in the hands of God – or at least not in those of men. This realism stifles the capacity to elaborate any political project beyond the maintenance of order – it is, by definition, a conservative realism. It developed essentially as a reaction to conceptions of science, history, and politics that emerged in the late eighteenth century and informed the great movements of democratization of the nineteenth century. It developed against these specific foes and could not have existed before the advent of modernity. It is this realism with which we now must come to terms.

Today, realism seems to offer something that looks to many like the promise of better politics. A mixture of idealistic vision and realistic execution has always characterized if not the truth of American foreign policy, at least of the narcissistic self-image of the American foreign policy establishment.[5] But

[5] The point is perfectly captured in Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

the current intellectual revival of realism cuts deeper and points at an exhaustion of alternatives. International relations theorists and intellectual historians are going back to classical postwar realism and exhuming an intellectual tradition that according to them has not lost any of its relevance but remains a perennial source of wisdom for navigating the politics of our times. This is not just a reaction against the impoverishment of a discipline that since the 1960s has gradually severed its ties to history and political theory as it became increasingly caught up with purely formal methodologies.[6] In recovering the complexity and richness of mid-century realist thought, historians and political theorists have contributed to its contemporary resurgence and, more or less wittingly, to its re-enchantment. Once considered a quietist ideology, skeptical if not critical about the very possibility of reforming international politics, realism is today being reclaimed as a potentially progressive intellectual project.[7] It seems to many to be the only grand narrative we have left with which to make sense of international politics. Interventions gone awry in the Middle East and a dangerous stand-off with Russia are today not condemned on the basis of anti-imperialist arguments or because they constitute breaches of international law. They are criticized because they ignore the basic precepts and wisdom of political realism. The degeneration of the soft-power policies of "democracy promotion" of the 1980s into the militarized democracy promotion of the G. W. Bush administration have made global transformative agendas an easy target of realist critique. Increasingly, realism seems to be the only language left if one is to impugn imperial adventurism and its moral contradictions while being taken seriously within policy-making and opinion circles. Very tellingly, realism seems to have captured the imagination of some on the Left, for whom it

[6] The literature is growing at a fast pace. See for instance Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Williams, *Realism Reconsidered*; Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Michael Cox, "Hans J. Morgenthau, Realism, and the Rise and Fall of the Cold War," in *Realism Reconsidered*, ed. Michael C. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*; Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998); Guzzini, "The Enduring Dilemmas of Realism in International Relations"; Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics*; Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau*.

[7] See William Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Vibeke Schou Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace: Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and the Politics of Patriotic Dissent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

represents the only possible counterpoint to depoliticized visions of a neoliberal world order.[8]

The contemporary attraction to realism as perhaps the last genuinely "political" form of thinking with which to oppose neoliberal depoliticization fundamentally misunderstands realism and ignores how much it has in common with neoliberalism. There is no doubt that postwar realism was a reaction against the economic understanding of history inherited from nineteenth-century liberalism and its utopian pretense to eventually displace politics.[9] But this opposition between realism and economics remains superficial and obscures a deeper convergence, for neoliberalism too was a reaction against its nineteenth-century predecessor ideology. In *After Utopia*, her brilliant and still unsurpassed description of the liberal-conservative postwar moment, Judith Shklar touches upon this convergence. She bundles together economists such as Wilhelm Röpke, political theorists such as Bertrand de Jouvenel, and historians such as Jacob Talmon as exponents of a backlash against a form of liberalism that traced its roots to the Enlightenment. She may as well have added international relations intellectuals such as Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Kenneth Thompson, George Kennan, and Reinhold Niebuhr. A few years earlier, in one of the first articles ever published on neoliberalism, her mentor Carl Friedrich had characterized this intellectual movement as a form of political realism: The distinction, for him, was almost non-existent.[10] Neoliberalism too was a defensive movement. Like many realists, neoliberals thought that "European society has been deteriorating steadily since the French Revolution," resulting in twentieth-century totalitarianism.[11] The movement emerged as a reaction against administered rationality, planning, and its alleged authoritarianism. The neoliberals also embraced a neo-Burkean vision of social development that was pitted against any form of Enlightenment rationalism. For them, "'human nature' or the interdependence of human factors provide[d] insuperable barriers to the best intentioned reforms."[12] These were exactly the views of political realists. In individualized exchanges in the market as in

[8] Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform*; Danilo Zolo, *Cosmopolis: Prospects for World Government* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1997).
[9] Judith N. Shklar, *Legalism: Law, Morals, and Political Trials* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 123.
[10] Carl J. Friedrich, "The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism," *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2 (1955): 509–25.
[11] Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 36.
[12] Shklar, *After Utopia*, 237–38.

international relations, an infinity of interactions that took place in a space deprived of central authority and which could not be entirely comprehended by a single mind constantly generated new patterns of order. Yet, for order to emerge, these interactions could not be simply left to spontaneity. A carefully crafted framework had to be maintained through political means – whether a framework of full economic competition, or an artfully maintained balance of power.[13] Realism and neoliberalism were twin ideological movements born in the crisis of the 1930s that reacted to the crisis of liberalism and to the rise of totalitarianism. Both were attempts at saving liberalism from its own deficiencies and from its enemies. Both recognized the primacy of politics and of political power but also their potential for unleashing universal human catastrophe. Both assumed that the fundamental liberal provisions that organized social life in the West could survive only if they were supplemented by forms of politics that were not liberal. Both thought of politics and economics in terms of concretely managed order. Both shared intellectual references, from Walter Lippmann's essays to some strands of Catholic thought. Both sought to insulate from democracy core domains of decision-making, including foreign and economic policy, and to entrust them to a select elite of expert decision-makers. Both assumed that public opinion was essentially irrational – whether it was manipulated by intellectuals or incapable of grasping the issues of high politics. Both were moved by a deep distrust of "scientific man," whom they considered a dictator in the making. Both redefined what "rationality" meant and eventually came to rely on some version of "rational choice" to legitimize economic and political decisions. The current return to realism as an antidote to neoliberal depoliticization is bound to fail because it refuses to recognize the shared ideological framework of decision-making upon which this attempted recovery of politics rests.

REALISM'S TAKEOFF

In the early afternoon of May 7, 1954, a military jet taxied to the end of the runway at Maxwell Field, Alabama, home of the Air War College.

[13] The intellectual history of neoliberalism has hardly been written yet. But for a few serious attempts, see for instance Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); François Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française. Histoire d'une idéologie politique* (Paris: Demopolis, 2007); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013); Serge Audier, *Néo-libéralisme(s). Une archéologie intellectuelle* (Paris: Grasset, 2012).

After a few minutes, the aircraft, a decommissioned Lockheed F94 Starfire, reached the entrance of the runway and slowly pivoted until its nose pointed in the direction of the long asphalted strip. Once in position, the pilot brought the jet to a standstill, engaged the brakes, and pushed the throttle until the central turbofan geared up to its maximum thrust, compressing air into the engine, where the jetfuel sprayed in the combustion chamber was ignited. Spitting a hissing stream of burning gases, the plane dashed along the runway. After a short run, it lifted its twelve thousand pounds into the air with a deafening roar, retracted its landing gear, and started climbing steeply toward its cruising altitude until it became a mere dot in the distance. Soon, it was engulfed by the morning mist, leaving behind a faint trail of exhaust fumes as it headed toward Washington, DC.

Besides the pilot, the two-seat interceptor aircraft had a most unusual passenger: a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, Hans J. Morgenthau, who had started his US academic career in 1936 after escaping from Nazi Germany and is today considered the founding father of the academic discipline known as international relations theory. Morgenthau had just given an address on the "Problems of Integrating the Factors of National Strategy" to the military brass gathered at Maxwell's Air War College for the 1954 National Security Forum. Leaving on a military jet was not a common practice for guest speakers and the Air Force did not have the habit of offering such complimentary perks to its visitors. This was indeed an exceptional circumstance. The flight had been arranged by Dean Rusk, who had recently left Acheson's State Department to become president of the Rockefeller Foundation. Morgenthau's presence was urgently required in Washington, where he was to join a small gathering of academics, policymakers, and journalists invited by the Foundation to discuss over two days the need for building a "theory" of international politics that could be taught across the campuses of the country.[14] The meeting had already started on the morning of May 7, and few believed that any such theory could see the light of day without the Chicago professor, widely regarded as a wise man when it came to understanding what politics is all about. Although the pilot may have been unaware of it, the flight was also a combat mission: By transporting Morgenthau to Washington, he was actually delivering

[14] On the particulars of this meeting, see the contributions in Nicolas Guilhot, ed. *The Invention of International Relations: The Rockefeller Foundation, Realism, and the Making of IR Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

a weapon on a specific target. The target, in this case, was the cultural currency of science, the cult of technology, and the resulting erosion of politics.

The 1950s were the age of science: To be taken seriously, any intellectual enterprise had to be scientific, and to be legitimate, any political decision had to be based on scientific evidence. The times were forward-looking, confident in the power of science and technology to solve social, economic, and political issues at home and abroad. World War II had ended with the defeat of the forces of irrationality and political romanticism, reason had reclaimed its rights over human affairs, and progress had resumed its course unimpaired. The interwar zeal for social engineering and scientific management was boosted by the civilian conversion of wartime Research & Development capacities. Even the political conflicts of these new times were of a different nature: The Cold War enemy was rational and therefore tractable. The Soviets too had adopted Science as their politics and did politics in the name of their science.

Science had come out of World War II fortified and tightly enmeshed with the governance of industrial societies. Governmental bureaus, universities, and philanthropic bureaucracies were replete with economists, statisticians, sociologists, psychologists, physicists, mathematicians, and engineers. Philanthropic foundations, like the Rockefeller and the Ford foundations, invested their munificent resources in an effort to establish the social sciences on par with the natural sciences. The social sciences thought of themselves as "social physics" and approached society as a second Nature, yet to be charted by explorers of the modern times, its vast resources lying untapped under the familiar landscape of everyday life. Scientists made visible its deepest recesses and summoned into being new entities such as unemployment, voting behavior, consumption patterns, social stratification, and public opinion. Knowledge of their interrelationship gave the key to their manipulation, and their manipulation would improve society. Statistical sampling and polling techniques developed since the 1930s inaugurated new ways to aggregate individual situations into unified representations of the nation. As it churned out increasing amounts of social data that not only represented the country but fostered "social integration," science was now woven into the very fabric of American society.[15]

[15] Emmanuel Didier, *En quoi consiste l'Amérique? Les statistiques, le New Deal et la démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009); see also David Paul Haney,

The age of science, as if by design, also seemed to usher in the twilight of politics. Postwar science constituted itself partly by professing detachment from, and indifference to, social values – that is, by understanding itself as being the opposite of politics.[16] The international crisis of the 1930s and the ensuing world conflagration had shown the devastating effects and the irrationality of power politics. Political decisions were messy, irrational, and arbitrary: scientific calculations were precise, rational, and incontrovertible. A cool-headed rationality was to replace the disorderly passions of politics, enlightened technical experts would formulate better judgments than volatile and emotional publics, scientific precision would substitute give-and-take arrangements, and technological solutions would overcome social and political conflicts.

The most enthusiastic scientific modernists of all, the sociologists celebrated the dawn of a post-political age. By the mid-1950s, many announced with confidence the "end of ideology" in Western industrial nations, as rationally administered welfare states were fulfilling basic social needs while at the same time spreading the values of efficiency and rationality associated with the age of science. The scientific management of production and income distribution had confined the politics of class struggle to the dustbin of history. Fundamental issues were considered settled, and all that was left to be done was for social engineers to improve existing social processes and institutions. Politics, it seems, was no longer an existential affair. At least not for science, which, as sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld once noted, did not distinguish between the socialist vote and the choice of a particular brand of soap.[17]

The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

[16] Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 272.

[17] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology. On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1960). See also Chaim I. Waxman, ed. *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968). At about the same time, politics also disappeared from US history, as historians observed the existence of a deep-seated liberal consensus constitutive of the nation. For classical statements, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, 1st edn. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948). Socialism too was a scientific way to overcome politics – a point emphasized by authors as diverse as Aron and Foucault. For the former, socialism had no political theory, while for the latter it had no concept of government. Raymond Aron, "Science et théorie de la politique," *Revue Française de*