Understanding Realism in Contemporary International Relations

Beyond the Structural Realist Perspective
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Introduction

This book refers to realism as a theoretical paradigm in the study of international relations. Its aim is to offer a consistent picture of the evolution of realism, the challenges it has faced together with the fall of the bipolar order and the “way ahead” for realism in international reality after the end of the Cold War. The book outlines the direction of realism’s evolution and the main areas of dispute inside the realist camp. Besides this, it reveals realism’s response to the principal debates in international relations in recent decades – including the tensions between universal and particular aspects of international affairs as well as those between general theoretical models and domestic nuances of foreign policymaking. The latter issue becomes, in my view, crucial for post-Cold War realism and will decide its future development.

Thus, the book formulates some fundamental research questions. It asks whether the evolution of realism during the Cold War period proceeded in a coherent way and followed an obvious direction. It notes a domination of structural realism in the late 1980s yet asks whether the structural realist approach was actually the “last word” in the realist understanding of international affairs. Further, an obvious question emerges as to whether structural realism may offer an adequate picture of the complex international reality after the end of the Cold War and whether it is possible to enclose contemporary international relations within the frames of structural analysis alone. If not, the question arises about the role of unit-level variables and the dilemma emerges of how deep contemporary realist theories should reach into the domestic nuances of foreign policymaking.

To answer these questions, I have compared realist theories and their basic theoretical assumptions. I have identified the main axis of intra-realist debates but also some common realist “first assumptions”. Further, I have studied different responses made by realist theories to the principal problems discussed in international relations, including the end of the Cold War itself. In my study of realism, I have followed a pragmatic research attitude interested in the hard material aspects of international processes but also their historical and social contexts.

As a result, the book makes some general conclusions on both the evolution of the realist paradigm, its contemporary condition and the “way forward” for realism after the end of the Cold War. I conclude that the evolu-
tion of realism during the Cold War period was neither smooth nor straightforward. It revealed two distinct attitudes – the more nuanced but less verifiable classical realist and the narrow but more “scientific” structural realist. The logic of the Kenneth N. Waltz’s structural theory dominated the realist paradigm in the late 1980s. Yet structural realism was neither a “standard bearer” nor the “last word” of realism (Wohlforth 2011a: 499–503). On the contrary, it was too static and rigid to follow the international processes at the end of the decade, and its problems together with the fall of the bipolar order affected the image of the entire realist paradigm.

Consequently, the book contends that contemporary realism must depart from the purely structural realist perspective. In the international reality after the end of the Cold War it is impossible to enclose realism in some general considerations about the distribution of power in the international system. In the same vein, realism faces a clear pressure to absorb domestic determinants of a state’s foreign policy. Yet contemporary realists differ in their attitudes to unit-level variables. Elaborated Structural Realism (but also the offensive realist considerations of John J. Mearsheimer) aspires to offer a systemic picture of contemporary international relations and is reluctant to absorb unit-level factors excessively. The latter may be useful, yet they must retain their systemic and capability-based context. Neoclassical realism is open to a broader catalogue of domestic determinants of a state’s foreign policy. It accepts the impact of perceptions and misperceptions of power and reveals the game of domestic interests behind the leaders’ decisions. It declares a creative synthesis of systemic and domestic aspects of contemporary international relations. Yet it tends to reach for some psychological or cognitive variables that may reduce neoclassical realism’s ability to formulate any general conclusions and risk it falling into reflexivism.

Thus, in my view, the neoclassical realist perspective is more promising in the international reality after the end of the Cold War. It is a “way forward” for realism. Yet my preference for neoclassical realism is cautious and conditional. It depends on the theory’s ability to set a clear borderline beyond which domestic nuances of foreign policymaking become unnecessary for the realist theorizing about international relations.

Finally, some terminological questions require further clarification. I distinguish between a long and rich, but hardly consistent, tradition of realist thinking about politics and a (realist) theory of international relations. The latter means a consistent and logical catalogue of assumptions that identify the main actors, processes and mechanisms in international affairs (Buzan

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1996: 48). In this sense, Hans J. Morgenthau is the first realist theorist, and I begin the evolution of realism with Morgenthau’s theoretical considerations. The concept of paradigm is broader than a single theory (Vasquez 2004: 19–25). Paradigms in international relations formulate some fundamental views of the world of international affairs – its nature, principal phenomena and causes of international processes. They may group several theories that share the paradigm’s picture. This is in fact the case for different paradigms in international relations that are unlikely to follow Kuhn’s idea of the single scientific paradigm and the scientific revolution (Kuhn 2012).

Besides this, I try to avoid the general term “neorealism”. “Neo” means in this regard the new realist theories developed in the late 1970s and in the 1980s – as opposed to classical realism of the 1940s and 1950s. In this sense, both structural realism and theories of hegemonic rivalry are neorealist yet they differ considerably, and I prefer to discuss them as separate and specific theoretical attitudes. Further, I consequently use the terms “offensive” and “defensive” realism to describe the (structural) realist theories that evolved from Waltz’s initial considerations and focused on different responses to security dilemma. Yet I note some other concepts and some other terms in this regard (Brooks 1997: 446, 457). Lastly, the terms “systemic” and “structural”, used in chapter III while discussing the external constraints for a state’s foreign policy, intertwine but are not identical. The term “structural” reflects Waltz’s concept of the structure of an international system. It revolves around the distribution of power in the system and the state’s place in this hierarchy of power. The term “systemic” may be broader. It may reflect some processes and interactions in the system that do not radically change the distribution of power existing there (James 1993: 133, 136). Thus, some contemporary realist theories may be systemic but not purely structural.

The book consists of three chapters followed by extended concluding remarks. Its structure offers a clear chronological attitude. I start with the classical realist considerations of Morgenthau and study further realist theories developed during the Cold War period – structural realism and hegemonic rivalry theories. I discuss the problem of realism’s consistency and identify its “first assumptions”. Then the book focuses on the end of the Cold War and the realist interpretations of the events in the late 1980s. I outline the realist (ex post facto) explanation of the Cold War’s ending – its strengths and deficiencies. I define a catalogue of dilemmas that realism has faced together with the end of the bipolar confrontation. Finally, I turn to the post-Cold War realist studies – both the responses to the new inter-
national reality given by the previous structural stream of realism and the new theories: Elaborated Structural Realism and neoclassical realism. I discuss the main challenges for realism in contemporary international relations and indicate the “way ahead” for realism.

Chapter I outlines the evolution of the realist paradigm during the Cold War period. It begins with a comprehensive analysis of theoretical considerations of Morgenthau – the most prominent classical realist. For Morgenthau, the lust for power, rooted in human nature, was the source of the struggle for power – the fundamental mechanism of politics. In the same vein, politics was conflictual and the potential for conflict accompanied any political activity. It translated into states’ preference for their own national interests. Yet Morgenthau did not reduce the struggle for power to aggressive power politics. The main message of his theory was a need for moderation and restraint in international politics.

The theory of Morgenthau, like the entire classical stream of realism, followed a specific humanist attitude to the study of international relations interested in the historical and social context of politics or the moral dilemmas of leaders. It looked inside the domestic nuances of foreign policymaking. Further, it considered politics as never fully predictable since scholars could at best “(...) trace the different tendencies which, as potentialities, are inherent in a certain international situation” (Morgenthau 1948: 6). The broad understanding of power was an asset for Morgenthau, yet his considerations revealed some clear tensions between the contingency of political action and some universally valid “laws of politics”. The comprehensive nature of Morgenthau’s theory was, in my view, more important than his tendency toward universality. Yet the tensions between universal and particular aspects of international relations provoke disputes inside the realist camp up to the present day.

Morgenthau shaped the realist understanding of international affairs form the late 1940s until the end of the 1960s. Yet classical realism was too abstract for the new generation of theorists, which, in line with the “behavioural revolution” in social sciences, aspired to a more scientific and verifiable study of international relations. It was far from a new, more coherent, systemic attitude to international processes as well. Hence, the new structural theory of realism developed at the end of the 1970s by Waltz departed from the “philosophical” considerations of Morgenthau. Waltz was uninterested in any domestic nuances of foreign policymaking. He intended to develop a parsimonious theory at the systemic level that could identify some general patterns of states’ behaviour in the anarchic international order. The most fundamental issue for Waltz was the structure of the inter-
national system, which reflected the existing hierarchy of power. The international anarchy contributed to the similarity of states’ functions and mainly the self-help policy. Yet their different places in the system translated into different types of foreign policy, which they could pursue. Thus, the structural determinants constrained a state’s foreign action and made it more rational and predictable than in the theory of Morgenthau. They discouraged the policy that exceeded the state’s capabilities.

The problem of Waltz’s structural attitude, however, was its static and parsimonious nature and its difficulties in identifying sources of change in the international system. Waltz was unable to trace more dynamic changes in international relations, especially those rooted in a state’s domestic affairs. Besides that, he focused on bipolarity. He appreciated the “simplicity” of the bipolar order and considered it to be most enduring among different international systems. Yet its focus on bipolar stability made Waltz’s structural realism blind to dynamic political processes at the end of the decade and the final fall of the Soviet state. The collapse of the bipolar order undermined its theoretical plausibility and confronted Waltz’s structural theory with fierce criticism.

Nevertheless, Waltz’s perspective was not the only structural realist attitude developed in the late 1980s. Different responses to the security dilemma that states faced in the anarchic environment provoked a debate between offensive and defensive (structural) realists. The former claimed that the maximization of power was the best way to protect a state’s security. Yet, for defensive realists, power maximization could not be the optimal strategy, and some restraint, moderation or defensive military posture would serve a state’s interests better. Besides this, defensive realists suggested a more comprehensive and context-oriented departure from Waltz’s theory. They retained the structural logic of analysis yet they looked for more systemic variables than the distribution of power alone. In some cases, they reached for some unit-level factors and mainly different motives behind a state’s international action (Glaser 1997: 189–193).

Finally, structural realism was not the sole neorealist position in the 1980s. Hegemonic rivalry theories, including Robert Gilpin’s theory of hegemonic war, were “as realist as any ever written” (Wohlfforth 2011: 447). They shared the systemic logic yet they offered a more dynamic picture of international relations than Waltz. The hegemonic rivalry perspective rejected the balance of power imperative and considered international relations recurring cycles of the rise and fall in hegemonic power. It focused on the mechanisms of hegemonic change when the power of the challenger (number two in the system) rose and reached the level of the sys-
tem’s leader. Yet the hegemonic stream of realism looked for different sources of this change and different causes of the rise in power. It considered military, economic and technological processes but also some possible determinants at the domestic and individual levels (motivations, perceptions, ideas). It clearly differed from Waltz’s structural attitude since for the hegemonic rivalry theories it was both “(...) the structure of the international system and the domestic conditions of societies (...)” that were able to determine a state’s foreign policy (Gilpin 1981: 87).

Thus, the general conclusion of the chapter is that the evolution of realism during the Cold War period was neither smooth nor straightforward. The logic of Waltz’s structural theory dominated the realist paradigm in the late 1980s, yet structural realism was certainly not the “last word” of realism (Wohlforth 2011a: 499–503). Further, the evolution of realism during the Cold War provokes an obvious question about its consistency and a debate about the core of realist assumptions. The chapter identifies some “first assumptions” of realism that (I believe) a vast majority of realists would accept: the primacy of national interests in states’ foreign policy and the competitive nature of international relations themselves; the realist emphasis on states as the most important competing groups as well as the special care for their security and survival in the anarchic international environment. It is the emphasis on a state’s power that remains key to identifying its international position and a prerequisite to pursuing its interests. Yet the problem of realism is that together with its more detailed analysis of international relations the diversity of realism’s “second assumptions” grows and makes the paradigm hardly consistent. It makes realism’s fundamental assumptions less distinctive and less determinate as well.

Chapter II presents the (ex post facto) realist explanation of the Cold War’s ending. It discusses the consequences of the fall of the bipolar order for the realist theorizing about international relations. The end of the Cold War marked serious explanatory problems for structural realism and provoked fierce criticism of Waltz’s structural theory. Yet it affected the prestige of the entire realist paradigm. Waltz tried to respond to this criticism in some of his post-Cold War publications. He claimed that the end of the Cold War did not change the anarchic nature of the international system and the principle of the self-help policy. Hence, the change of polarity (together with the fall of the bipolar order) was important but it was still a “within-system” change. It did not reverse the plausibility of the fundamental structural realist assumptions, including the balance of power mechanism. Yet this response was unconvincing and even Waltz admitted clear problems in structural realism in distinguishing between systemic and domestic sources.

Thus, a more comprehensive explanation of the Cold War’s ending from the realist perspective was in fact an intellectual effort of some former defensive realists and the scholars from the new neoclassical stream of realism. It was outlined after the end of the Cold War and therefore has had a clear *ex post facto* character. The latter provoked a new wave of criticism of realists for their inability “(...) to predict much of anything before the fact, but all too easy for them to explain anything once it has occurred” (Lebow 1994: 263). Yet, in my opinion, the *ex post facto* nature of the realist explanation did not automatically undermine the value of its insights. In practice, the realist perspective of the Cold War’s ending retained some obvious structural determinants of the events in the late 1980s. Yet it was more flexible and nuanced than Waltz’s structural theory and derived some inspiration from the hegemonic rivalry theories and previous classical realist considerations.

The main cause of the Cold War’s ending was, in this view, the decline of Soviet material capabilities. It was the main reason behind Gorbachev’s perestroika and the ultimate fall of the Soviet state. Yet, the realist explanation considers the decline of Soviet power as a comprehensive process – much deeper than the military capabilities alone. It refers to considerable problems in the Soviet economy in the late 1980s, the pathologies of Soviet society and a general crisis in the Soviet communist model. It suggests that even if the Soviet–US military (nuclear) parity remained intact, the broader understanding of Soviet power revealed its deep and multifaceted decline. The gradual fall of the Soviet economic system was a good illustration of this thesis.

The decline of Soviet power translated in the late 1980s into the Gorbachev’s cost-reduction policy and the strategy of retrenchment. This retrenchment was not a surprise to realism or especially to the hegemonic rivalry theories that considered it a strategy to “bring costs and resources into balance” (Gilpin 1981: 192). Yet the necessary element to explain the dynamics and evolution of perestroika was the perception of Soviet power among the new Soviet leadership, and especially Gorbachev himself. It was a unit-level variable that translated the (structural) impulses from the state’s material decline into the practice of Soviet foreign and domestic policy. In the case of Gorbachev, this perception had worsened, especially after his initial unsuccessful reforms, and resulted in renewed attempts to restructure the Soviet economy. They were accompanied by some Soviet political concessions to the West. Finally, the overwhelming crisis in the Sovi-
et system and the ineffectiveness of Gorbachev’s reforms contributed to the economic and political fall of the Soviet state.

Yet the retrenchment was not, in the realist perspective, a reflection of any of Gorbachev’s plans “(...) to retreat from the world stage, give up socialism, make endless concessions to the West, or become liberal democrats” (Wohlfforth 1994/95: 115). Gorbachev believed that successful retrenchment would help the Soviet Union to come back to a more interest-oriented political strategy. The accommodation of interests with the West served to reduce tensions and the costs of Soviet foreign policy and give Gorbachev more time for domestic reforms. Thus, the Soviet reforms in the late 1980s were not a result of the independent role of ideas or Gorbachev’s agency. They reflected the deepening decline of Soviet power and the worsening perception of this decline by Gorbachev – and even by the hardline faction of the Soviet leadership. The latter opposed Gorbachev’s concessions, yet the resistance of the military defence sector was not as fierce as it could have been if the perception of Soviet decline between the reformers and the hardliners had differed considerably. It was therefore more of a “(...) haphazard, ineffectual, belated, and intellectually weak nature(...)” (Brooks and Wohlfforth 2000/01: 45).

As a result, the realist explanation of the Cold War’s ending accepts some clear structural constraints and their impact on Soviet foreign policy. Yet, in line with the hegemonic rivalry theories, it is more sensitive to dynamic changes in international relations in the late 1980s and the sources of Soviet decline. It notes some unit-level determinants, and mainly the perception of power among the Soviet leadership, that become necessary for an appropriate analysis of Soviet foreign policy at the end of the decade. The domestic factors are secondary in the realist perspective and subordinate to the primacy of Soviet material decline, yet they are crucial for the full picture of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Besides this, and in line with hegemonic rivalry considerations again, the realist explanation of the Cold War’s ending indicates that the bipolar order could fall peacefully because of the Soviet Union’s position as a declining challenger in this system and the stable power of the United States – the system’s leader. It departs from Waltz’s balance of power imperative and outlines a clear US power preponderance at the end of the 1980s.

The chapter presents the criticism of the realist explanation of the Cold War’s ending from constructivist and liberal positions. For constructivists and liberals, material pressure and Soviet decline were not decisive. They favour the agency of Gorbachev, the independent role of his ideas as well as the benign and democratic–liberal nature of the Western powers. As
Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry claim, “Economic decline provided an incentive to retrench, but a benign international environment made it possible” (Deudney and Ikenberry 1991/92: 99–100). Yet the debate over the end of the Cold War has been much broader, and some other positions indicate Gorbachev’s limited control over Soviet domestic political processes in the late 1980s or the rigid, overregulated and practically ir-reformable nature of the Soviet system itself.

Finally, the chapter identifies some clear theoretical challenges that realism faced together with the peaceful ending of the Cold War. The most obvious, in my view, was the departure from the static and rigid structural perspective of Waltz. It did not mean the rejection of any structural considerations, yet Waltz’s theory could no longer be a leading realist theoretical perspective and it was unlikely to comprehend the nuances of post-Cold War international affairs. In the same vein, the systemic frames of analysis preferred by realists during the Cold War needed some reconsideration and openness to domestic level variables. Yet the acceptance of the unit-level determinants provoked the next question of how deep such openness should be and what role the domestic factors could play. The realist explanation of the Cold War’s ending was a bit ambiguous in this regard. It claimed that the leadership’s perception of power was secondary to Soviet material decline. Yet, at the same time, this perception “filtered” the external impulses and translated them into the practice of Soviet foreign policy. Thus, it was unclear how much it actually mattered. Further, the departure from the structural perspective contributed to some questions about the predictability and rationality of states’ actions. The introduction of domestic variables confronted realism with some irrationality, misperception and inconsistency in leaders’ decisions.

Chapter III discusses the response of different realist theories to the complexity of international relations after the end of the Cold War. The peaceful fall of the bipolar order and the emergence of the United States as a single global power (a unipole) deepened the previous theoretical problems of structural realism. Waltz reluctantly accepted that “for some years to come the United States will be the leading country economically as well as militarily” (Waltz 1993: 71). Yet he claimed that the US’ unipolarity was only a “unipolar moment,” which would be replaced by the new multipolar order. Further, he considered unipolarity the least stable among international systems because of the obvious balancing but also the unipole’s tendency toward overextension. Yet the domination of US power in the 1990s and some restraint in the foreign policy of potential challengers

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(Japan, China or Germany/the EU) made Waltz’s predictions unconvincing again.

In the same vein, Waltz defended the parsimony of his previous structural realist considerations and claimed that “To criticize a theory for its omissions is odd because theories are mostly omission” (Waltz 2004: 2). Thus, adding new variables was counterproductive and risked breaking the internal coherence of structural assumptions. Waltz’s post-Cold War publications slightly softened his rigid structural attitude. He noted that the concentration of power in the United States’ hands opened more space for the domestic aspects of US foreign policy and “In the absence of counterweights, a country’s internal impulses prevail, whether fueled by liberal or by other urges” (Waltz 2000: 24). Nevertheless, Waltz’s post-Cold War considerations did not solve any of the previous structural realist dilemmas. Besides this, the strong claims about the inevitable balancing and return to multipolarity made at the beginning of the 1990s suggested some dogmatism present in his position.

Yet Waltz’s response did not exhaust the structural, theoretical realist reflections after the end of the Cold War. Mearsheimer’s offensive realist theory, summarized at the beginning of the 2000s, followed some clear structural realist inspirations but departed from the purely structural perspective and offered a more flexible systemic picture of international relations. Mearsheimer agreed that a state’s place in the international system may determine its foreign policy. Yet he introduced a clear geographical context to the initial structural realist considerations and focused on the regional (sub-systemic) struggle for power. The introduction of geographical variables (the unit-level factors) helped Mearsheimer to explain different regional configurations of power and different states’ responses to the competition for regional hegemony. The latter could be the balancing, yet the balance of power was neither automatic nor obvious in Mearsheimer’s theory, and states could finally choose “buck-passing” rather than balancing the emerging regional leader.

In the same vein, Mearsheimer shared Waltz’s conclusion that the US dominated international order would ultimately be replaced by a new multipolar system. Yet he was more cautious in outlining the possible shape of the new multipolarity. He claimed that “The exact form of a multipolar system can vary markedly, depending on the number of major and minor powers in the system, and their geographical arrangement” (Mearsheimer 1990: 14). Thus, the presence of geographical variables made Mearsheimer’s perspective more flexible than that of Waltz and sensitive to changing power relations in different areas of the international system. Yet
it was still disputable whether the introduction of geography alone would be enough to reveal the nuances of international relations after the end of the Cold War. For some realist scholars, Waltz’s structural theory needed more profound “elaboration”.

As a result, the idea of further elaboration of the initial structural realist assumptions contributed to the emergence of Elaborated Structural Realism (ESR). ESR indicates that focusing on the distribution of power alone does not exhaust the potential of systemic analysis. It looks for some new systemic variables that could enrich Waltz’s initial perspective and make it more appropriate to contemporary international relations. In line with Mearsheimer, it accepts the geographical location and the distribution of power at the regional (sub-systemic) level. Yet the catalogue of systemic variables is broader in Elaborated Structural Realism’s considerations. It comprises concentration and dispersion of power in the system, the number and tightness of alliances, regional or dyadic power balances as well as other determinants that may cause power shifts in the system but do not change the general hierarchy of the power existing there.

Further, ESR identifies itself as a systemic attitude and declares it does not cross the frames of the systemic analysis. Yet it ultimately reaches for some relational and intentional aspects at the unit-level that may accompany the power relations in the system. It is states’ motives and intentions (risks, fears, restraints or ambitions) that constitute some micro-assumptions for systemic analysis. But it is also a case of different “products of states interactions” in the system – including alliances but potentially some institutional regulations as well (James 1993: 135–138). The motives and intentions are the unit-level variables that Elaborated Structural Realism accepts as necessary to complement the systemic perspective. Yet ESR declares clear limits and cautiousness in the reach for domestic factors. It is reluctant to adopt excessive openness to domestic variables and declares that any unit-level determinant it absorbs should retain its capability-based logic and systemic consequences.

Thus, Elaborated Structural Realism intends to offer a single and consistent systemic perspective, which is not as parsimonious as Waltz’s theory but retains theoretical unity and integrity. It is going to “(...) expand the problem-solving capabilities of realist theory while nevertheless retaining the parsimony and elegance associated with structural models” (Freyberg-Inan, Harrison and James 2009: 4–5). The ESR attempt to propose a concise systemic approach has been ambitious, yet the integrity of its systemic analysis has been problematic together with its reference to states’ motives and intentions. ESR declarations to limit the unit-level factors to those that...
retain the systemic effects have been equally problematic. Besides this, the idea of the systemic attitude itself has not convinced some (neoclassical) realist scholars that consider a broader reach for domestic variables to be necessary to understand the dynamics and nuances of contemporary international affairs.

Indeed, the neoclassical stream of realism declares much deeper openness for the unit-level variables than Elaborated Structural Realism. It postulates a much bolder departure from a structural (and systemic) analysis. Thus, neoclassical realists emphasize the role of the perceptions and misperceptions of power in leadership decisions. They refer to different social, political or economic domestic interest groups, which may affect a state’s foreign policy. Besides this, it is the type of a state’s political regime that matters since democratic states would accept more social participation in foreign policymaking. Further, neoclassical realism studies a leadership’s ability to mobilize social support for a government’s foreign policy aims or to “extract” real power from all power resources in the state’s hands. Finally, some neoclassical realists turn to more constructivist-oriented areas of leaders’ identities or psychological and cognitive aspects of their political decisions.

The reference to the unit-level variables, however, is not an aim in itself, and neoclassical realism aspires to a synthesis of structural (systemic) and domestic aspects of a state’s foreign policy. It agrees that a state’s place in the structure of the international system may frame its foreign activity. Yet the impact of the structure “(...) is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level” (Rose 1998: 146). As a result, neoclassical realism introduces a concept of the “domestic transmission belt” between the constraints and imperatives of the international system and the final design of a state’s foreign policy. The structural (systemic) impulses are “filtered” in this perspective by a variety of “domestic intervening variables”—which goes much further than Elaborated Structural Realism would accept.

Thus, ontological pluralism becomes an asset of neoclassical realism, which helps it to follow the nuances of contemporary international processes. Yet, in my view, neoclassical realism faces some clear theoretical ambiguities. The high number of different variables at the unit-level may reduce its ability to formulate any general theoretical conclusions, and further references to psychology or social identities may affect the coherence of neoclassical realist considerations. The synthesis of structural and domestic aspects of a state’s foreign policy needs further clarification as well since the actual interaction between both types of variables remains am-
biguous. Neoclassical realism claims that in the long term a state’s foreign policy follows the structural constraints, yet in the short and medium perspective it “(…) may not necessarily track objective material power trends closely or continuously” (Rose 1998: 146–147).

Finally, the US’ unipolarity after the end of the Cold War was not a typically hegemonic system, yet some hegemonic rivalry conclusions about the nature of the hegemonic order become useful for an analysis of the United States’ foreign policy. Nevertheless, the realist positions inspired by the hegemonic stream differ in their assessment of the US’ power and the character of the US’ unipolarity. For those claiming the unprecedented preponderance of the United States’ power, US domination guarantees the stability and the peaceful nature of the post-Cold War international order. Yet the declinists indicate some clear challenges to the US’ power: not only the balancing by other great powers but also a clear US tendency toward “imperial overstretch”—together with the growing costs of policing the system (including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the rise of Chinese power. Thus, the United States faces the dilemma of the weakening hegemon and “(…) an inevitable tension between the pursuit of total security and the risk of overextension in the international system” (Harrison 2009: 96).

Besides this, the end of the Cold War confronts the previous hegemonic (rise and fall) schemes with some nuances of contemporary international reality. It is, for example, the specific (democratic) nature of the US’ domestic order or the specific character of relations among the countries of the West that reduces the incentive to balance out the United States’ power. Hegemonic rivalry theories have always been open to a variety of sources of hegemonic power. Thus, they would probably accept both the nature of the state’s domestic regime or the values that the state’s society shares. They could take a “middle ground” position between Elaborated Structural Realism and neoclassical realism. Yet they first need to agree themselves on the actual nature of the US’ unipolarity.

I conclude with some general remarks about the future of realism and the conditions of theorising in International Relations after the end of the Cold War. Looking for a “way forward” for realism, I prefer neoclassical realism, yet this preference is conditional and my priority is for a moderated neoclassical realist attitude able to set a clear borderline in the absorption of unit-level variables. The latter are necessary for realism to understand the nuances of contemporary international relations, and realism should in fact reach for domestic variables more than Elaborated Structural Realism suggests. Yet it must find a way to integrate the unit-level variables into a single and relatively coherent theoretical perspective. This has been a clear
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challenge for neoclassical realism and the entire realist paradigm since the end of the Cold War.

Finally, the number of academic sources that could support such a study of realism and different realist theories is abundant. Yet the aim of this book is less the detailed analysis of subsequent realist theories and more the concise picture of the evolution of realism and its response to contemporary international relations. Thus, I have had to select sources to support the main aim of my study. I am fully aware of this selection and, therefore, I prefer to consider the list of the sources at the end of the book as references rather than a full bibliography. Yet I hope that the sources referred to and cited in the book serve its principal aim well.
Chapter I  The Evolution of the Realist Paradigm During the Cold War – Hans J. Morgenthau and Beyond

I.1. Hans J. Morgenthau and the Nuances of his Theoretical Considerations

Contemporary realism refers to a long and rich tradition of realist thinking about politics and international processes. It goes back to Thucydides, Hobbes or Machiavelli and points to a specific and timeless “wisdom”. The latter revolves around domination of power and interest in a state’s foreign policy and the primacy of power politics over naïve and idealistic moral or legal considerations (Bell 2008: 3–4; Griffiths, O’Callaghan and Roach 2008: 268; Williams 2005: 2–3). Nevertheless, many scholars (including those in the realist camp) agree that the realist tradition of thinking about politics has hardly been consistent. As Moisés Silva Fernandes indicates, “A wide variety of authors with sometimes very distinct viewpoints have all been labelled realists (...)” (Fernandes 1991: 42). Further, the realist tradition seems more complex and more nuanced than the simplistic picture of brutal Realpolitik (Steans, Pettiford, et al. 2010: 53; Bell 2008: 2; Buzan 1996: 47–48). Finally, it does reveal some timeless conclusions about the nature of politics, but the works of particular authors reflect the social and historical context of their times as well. Thus, the debate between the particular and universal aspects of politics has accompanied realist considerations since their very beginning.

Yet, in my view, despite some common emphasis on power, realist thinking about politics and international relations reveals more nuanced conclusions. It does not limit the realist tradition to the crude and amoral forms of power politics (Bell 2008: 2). David Clinton notes in this regard the presence of contradiction: tragic and prudential motives in realist thinking throughout history. The former warn about deep social forces that profoundly determine and constrain human action, but the latter emphasize the leaders’ virtue and ability to overcome those constraints (Clinton 2007: 234–235; 237–238). In the same vein, Michael C. Williams identifies the presence of “wilful realism” motives in the works of the key figures in the realist tradition. “Wilful realism” does not reduce politics to pure power and emphasizes the variable and relative nature of power itself. It recognizes both the destructive and productive dimensions of politics but calls for limiting and mastering the potential of destruction in any political ac-
tivity (Williams 2005: 4–9). Finally, even the emphasis on power and interest does not automatically mean war and violence. The system of the nineteenth century European powers, despite its logic of power and interests, contributed to moderation and restraint in international relations and, as Marc Trachtenberg notes, more problems appeared when they forgot about their interests and allowed “emotion and ideology” to dictate their policy (Trachtenberg 2012: 6–9, 15–16, 28–30).

Furthermore, the reference to some broad historical traditions may serve different purposes in contemporary international relations, including using the “old wisdom” as a simplistic form of legitimization of contemporary texts (Lebow 2007: 246–250). Besides this, different approaches to theoretical traditions may translate into different ontological and methodological assumptions by contemporary scholars. The “contextualist” reading, as Duncan Bell indicates, is cautious about any universal (timeless) thoughts and prefers the specific social, historical and personal contexts of works belonging to a certain tradition. On the other hand, the “expansive” approach favours identifying and aligning certain “core themes”, and linking them “across historical time and space” (Bell 2008: 6). It refers to some selected (and usually time transcending) truths fundamental to the tradition – despite their different historical backgrounds (Bell 2008: 6; Booth 2011: 4). This chapter tries to balance both attitudes, although the example of Hans J. Morgenthau and the impact of personal experience on his theoretical considerations illustrate the value of some “contextual sensitivity”. Besides this, as Morgenthau reiterated himself, the tradition is a “living and evolving concept”, and “each epoch of history” should be able to “test yesterday’s dogmas against the facts of today” (Neacsu 2009: 158).

Yet Morgenthau was not an additional ordinary author on the list of thinkers contributing to the realist tradition. He aspired to create a first comprehensive theory of international relations, if we understand it as a consistent attitude able to identify the main actors, the fundamental processes and the general rules of international affairs (Buzan 1996: 48). Contrary to the previous loose considerations about politics, Morgenthau aimed at developing a concise theoretical attitude based on fundamental “laws” of politics. Understanding them meant comprehending international reality and pursuing national interests effectively. Further (and in line with Edward H. Carr’s criticism of inter-war liberal idealism), the knowledge of the general rules of politics could protect states from idealistic projects and the false promises of harmony of interests (Gaddis 1992/93: 7–8; Keohane 1986: 9–10; Griffiths, O’Callaghan and Roach 2008: 268–269). Thus, as Gaddis concludes, “Hans J. Morgenthau put forward the first
comprehensive modern theory of international relations – and the one from which most subsequent theories in that field have evolved (...)” (Gaddis 1992/93: 7). Nevertheless, from the beginning, Morgenthau’s ambitions to formulate certain “laws of politics” contrasted with his acceptance of the nuanced nature of politics, its limited predictability and rationality. On the one hand, the “laws” were to be universal, yet on the other personal attributes of leaders and nuances of domestic politics could, in Morgenthau’s theory, considerably affect a state’s foreign policy.

Indeed, an analysis of Morgenthau’s realism needs a comprehensive approach, and contemporary research reveals a complex and nuanced picture of his theoretical considerations. It underlines the Weimar period of Morgenthau’s intellectual evolution, before the Nazi’s rise to power in Germany, and especially his legal studies on the nature of international law. These considerations, including the conclusions on the effectiveness of sanctions in international law, left a clear mark on Morgenthau’s later theory of realism (Lebow 2003: 217–218; Jütersonke 2010: 37–38; Scheuerman 2009: 5–6). Specifically, Morgenthau indicates that international law tends to ignore the dynamics of social relations, including the inequality of power among states on the international scene (Scheuerman 2009: 11–12, 43–44). Ignoring the social context makes international law blind to the game of national interests, contributes to its static character and limits its ability to react to changes in international affairs. Hence, international law remains susceptible to international conflicts and tends to forget about a variety of (contradictory) interests that may accompany the implementation of its norms (Scheuerman 2009: 14–19, 25–26; Lebow 2003: 252).

In the same way, the effectiveness of the system of sanctions in international law is limited (Steans, Pettiford, et al. 2010: 57). It is specific as states remain both the subject and the object of these regulations. Besides this, it is decentralized and lacks the central sovereign authority at the international level able to impose its rules – which is a clear Morgenthau reference to the concept of international anarchy (Jütersonke 2010: 83, 92–96; Lebow 2003: 254). Hence, the effectiveness of sanctions in international law depends on the convergence of states’ interests or a balance of these interests, which introduces Morgenthau’s later “balance of power” considerations (Morgenthau 1948: 255, 264–265; Jütersonke 2010: 96–97). Further, this picture is far from harmony of interests as the most powerful states on the international scene strive to shape the international legal norms according to their particular aims. Besides this, the anarchy in international relations contributes to tensions and conflicts between the states that favour status quo and those interested in revising the current legal order.
Thus, the convergence or balance of interests, which stabilize international law, remain tentative and reflect the game of political goals of different international actors (Jüteronke 2010: 64, 95–96; Scheuerman 2008: 46–48, 51; Morgenthau 1948: 258).

Finally, Morgenthau identified a category of political conflicts, as opposed to that considered to be purely legal. In contrast to the legal disputes that international law is still able to solve, the political conflicts reflect the fundamental difference of interests among states and in practice are not a subject of any legal settlement. They reflect the states’ principal aims, the confrontation of which may potentially destabilize the whole legal order (Morgenthau 1948: 343). Thus, all Morgenthau’s legal considerations during the Weimar period contributed to his general conclusion about the limited effectiveness of international law, especially if faced with the difference of interests among the most powerful states. Morgenthau had initially called for a reform of international law, yet, as Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch indicate, his scepticism towards the effectiveness of the international legal system contributed to his gradual departure from legal studies and his growing interest in politics (Behr and Rösch 2012: 4). The experience of the Second World War had further strengthened these doubts and exacerbated Morgenthau’s general pessimism about human nature (Lebow 2003: 217–218). Hence, the context of his personal experience (including his Jewish origin, his escape from the Nazi regime in Germany and his final immigration to the United States) was another factor that left a clear mark on Morgenthau’s post-war theoretical considerations (Behr and Rösch 2012: 5, 10; Kaufman 2006: 29–30).

Consequently, in line with the concept of political disputes, Morgenthau looked for a more general source of conflict in politics. He found it in human nature and, first of all, in the lust for power (animus dominandi) rooted there (Scheuerman 2009: 37–38; Molloy 2006: 90–91). The idea of the lust for power rooted in human nature reflected Freud and his theory of instincts, yet in Morgenthau’s considerations it became a universal feature of any political activity. It appeared in domestic and foreign politics but also in different social groups, including the level of family, or in the behaviour of individuals (Schuett 2007: 54–55, 58–60; Lebow 2003: 224). Morgenthau claimed that at the level of the individual the lust for power could take on three forms: the lust to increase one’s power, to keep it or to demonstrate it. He translated these findings to the level of international relations and concluded that states on the international scene strive to increase their power, to keep it or to demonstrate it. Besides this, each of
these manifestations had its specific form in a state’s foreign policy: the policy of imperialism, the policy of status quo and the policy of prestige (Morgenthau 1948: 21–22).

Furthermore, the lust for power was closely related in Morgenthau’s considerations with his second fundamental concept – the struggle for power. The latter was a logical consequence of the lust for power and became another principal characteristic of politics, including the relations among states on the international scene. Besides this, both concepts revealed Morgenthau’s sensitivity to the antagonistic nature of politics, the inspirations for which he found in Carl Schmitt’s political thinking, hence Morgenthau’s claims that any political activity is potentially associated with violence and conflict and his general conclusion that conflict constitutes the permanent feature of politics (Morgenthau 1948: 13–15, 21, 343–346; Schmitt 2007: 25–27, 29; Jütersonke 2010: 62–63). Yet Morgenthau’s acceptance of the antagonistic nature of politics did not mean he accepted the extreme forms of power politics. Morgenthau was far from celebrating untamed power and its consequences (Jütersonke 2010: 62–63; Scheuerman 2009: 32). Contrary to Schmitt, he clearly distanced himself from any attempts to reduce power to violence and the struggle for power to the brutal Realpolitik. He was aware of the potential of conflict that accompanied politics yet he was deeply convinced of the need for moderation and prudence in any political activity, including a state’s foreign policy (Morgenthau 1947: 174–190; Morgenthau 1948: 125, 169–173; Scheuerman 2009: 32–35).

Nevertheless, his acceptance of the antagonistic nature of politics strengthened Morgenthau’s scepticism towards idealistic liberalism and liberal concepts of transformation in international relations (Scheuerman 2009: 32–35). Morgenthau developed his critique of liberalism in his first book published in the United States after the end of the Second World War – *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Morgenthau 1947). He indicates there (with some inspirations from Schmitt again) that liberalism ignores the presence of conflict in politics and tries to eradicate it using naive models of harmony of interest or faith in the peaceful impact of the free market. In practice, however, the reference to the harmony of interests masks that politics in liberalism is reduced to the calculation of individual interests. The liberal–democratic structures promote narrow, sectoral interests and cover the rules imposed by the most powerful interest groups (Morgenthau 1947: 54, 65; Schmitt 2007: 60–61, 69–73). Furthermore, liberalism tends to fall into dogmatism and liberal slogans became the absolute truths that cannot be criticised (Morgenthau 1947: 53–54).