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Realism, the War in the Ukraine, and the Limits of Diplomacy

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Abstract: Since the outbreak of the war in the Ukraine, realism has made a comeback in public discourses but it is not clear what realism actually means as it seems to stand for everything: from supporting the Ukraine against Russian aggression to the war is the West's fault. This is the result of decades of not distinguishing between neorealism and classical realism and implicitly acknowledging neorealist storytelling of having systematized classical realist thought. The present paper is a further intervention to carefully distinguish between both theoretical perspectives to uncover what they can add to current world political problems. It finishes by asking if neorealist scholars like John Mearsheimer have a point that it is the West's fault and a diplomatic solution needs to be found. They often refer to Hans Morgenthau not least because he was one of the most outspoken critics of the Vietnam War.

Keywords: classical realism, diplomacy, John J. Mearsheimer, Hans J. Morgenthau, neo-realism, Ukraine

It does not feel right to reflect on the state of International Relations (IR) theory while people are suffering in the Ukraine, losing their livelihoods and their lives. Of course, there have been many violent conflicts around the globe in recent years; in Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, and Ethiopia to name a few, but since the end of the Yugoslav Wars, there had been no major war anymore in Europe. Given its geopolitical importance, being closely tied economically with European industries, a major global wheat producer, and a transit country for Russian oil and gas on which several European countries like Germany depended until recently, there is no shortage of pundits on social media and traditional media outlets that offer insights into the war, explain the weaponry that is being used on both sides, and offer a contextualization of the events that unfold barely a 1000 km from major Central European capitals like Berlin, Prague, and Vienna. Particularly realism seems to make a comeback in this context.

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However, media consumers are often left confused because realism seems to stand for everything. It is being referred to when the West is accused of having caused this war as much as it serves as the theoretical backdrop for arguing that NATO should engage directly in the war in the Ukraine and fight Russian aggression. That realism stands today for everything is a result of a discipline using this theoretical perspective in the last decades—and it does not matter if it was used by scholars who take a critical stance towards realism or endorse it—as a crude caricature to build on or set apart their otherwise often excellent research. Realism has been reduced to a couple of platitudes, usually state, anarchy, and war, that are being thrown in at the beginning of scholarly works to pay lip service to a discipline that considers this paradigm as 'mainstream'. No distinction is being made between neorealism and classical realism. Bizarrely, not many would identify as a realist these days and for some of those who do, Schütt (2022) recently used the term "pseudo-realists". He added in reference to Isiah Berlin that "a 'true' realism is indispensable. However, when it is merely a euphemism for 'doing mean things', then no one needs realism".[1] The war in the Ukraine is therefore an opportunity—as inappropriate as it may sound in such a situation—to reflect on what realism should and could stand for. In other words and to adapt Cox (1999, 643) words, "would the real realism please stand up?"

The present contribution aims to be such an intervention. However, it does not claim to identify the real realism—after all, there is not one realism (Behr and Kirke 2014)—but it hopes to help clean the Augean stables of what realism in IR has turned into. To do so, this paper, first, provides an overview of the use of realism to explain the war in the Ukraine. This is followed, by a more in-depth discussion of the differences that we find in realism and it asks if the more European classical realism is in any way connected to neo-realist scholarship that originated in North America. Finally, it engages with the work of arguably the most famous twentieth-century realist, Hans Morgenthau, and uses his understanding of diplomacy to investigate if a diplomatic solution to the war in the Ukraine seems feasible or not.

1 Realism and the War in the Ukraine

Since Russia's most recent attack on the Ukraine more than half a year ago, there is a never-ending stream of commentaries, opinion pieces, interviews etc. about it on social media platforms like Twitter, in newspapers and magazines, on radio and TV, and there are blogs and podcasts. Some of the scholars and

1 All translations from German into English are by the author.

public intellectuals that comment on the Ukraine had been well-known security, military and/or Eastern European experts before the war; some others only gained in prominence since then through sharing their expertise publicly. In Germany, for example, a neorealist scholar like Carlo Masala, before the war mainly known and respected in academic circles, even turned into a household name, with the German weekly *Die Zeit* calling him "Germany's world explainer" (*Deutschlands Welterklärer*) (Scholz 2022). As Masala's theoretical perspective indicates, many of these pundits engage with realist thought and/or take a realist perspective on world politics. After years, if not decades of critique from every other perspective on IR's theoretical spectrum, the war in the Ukraine seems to have brought back realism into the academic *and* public limelight. After all, "its proponents foresaw the potential for conflict over Ukraine long before it erupted" (Walt 2022a). At least, this is what Stephen Walt, himself one of the most well-known neorealist scholars, claims.

Realists, however, do not speak with one voice when it comes to the war in the Ukraine. Far from it. If we take the position of the mentioned Masala (2022a), then his ontological premise is that we live today in a disorderly world in which grand strategies no longer work. Politicians can at best govern uncertainties but they can no longer be avoided or contained as it might have been the case in the bipolar world during the Cold War. This uncertainty is partly due to the politics of the West since the 1990s. Aiming to establish a liberal world order through military interventions in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, Western powers merely caused a backlash against democracy globally, causing chaos and a '*Weltunordnung*' (global disorder). With this premise, Masala's epistemological position is not unlike the position of some of the realist critics. As we live in a world in which change is the only constant, empirically verifiable, absolute truth is maybe a maxim to aspire but impossible to achieve. Rather, scholarship has to engage with and account for the uncertainties, contingencies, and ephemeralities that life contains (Scholz 2022).

While he criticizes Western states for their failed liberal illusions to establish a peaceful, democratic world order, Masala (2022b) by no means seeks the cause for the war in the Ukraine in the West. He promotes noninterference, as an active engagement, such as enforcing a no-fly zone over the Ukraine (Scholz 2022), could lead to a war with Russia. However, he equally points out that the West should have supported the Ukraine more quickly with heavy weaponry. "The EU and NATO were too hesitant" (Masala 2022b). For him, the war in the Ukraine also shows that the European Union needs to develop a common defense policy that protects against the threats that Russia causes and frees from an over-reliance on the United States.

John Mearsheimer, by contrast, paints a different picture of the war in the Ukraine. He concurs with Masala in arguing that Western attempts to create a liberal world order after the end of the Cold War not only have failed but were also deluded in the first place. Other than Masala, however, Mearsheimer goes a step further by arguing already in 2014 that the crisis and subsequent war in the Ukraine has been caused by the West. In agreement with Walt (2022b), Mearsheimer argues that Western advancements in Eastern Europe through the enlargement of the European Union and NATO's ambitions to expand into this area have forced Russian reactions. "No Russian leader", Mearsheimer (2014a, 82) wrote, "would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine. Nor would any Russian leader stand idly by while the West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West." Although Russia had invaded the Crimea by the time Mearsheimer's paper was published in *Foreign Affairs*, for him, Putin's "response to events there has been defensive, not offensive" (Mearsheimer 2014a, 85).

While many in the discipline criticize Mearsheimer for claiming that the conflict in the Ukraine is the West's fault, others like Lieven (2022, 67–8) come to his support, claiming that "every intelligent U.S. realist (like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt), has understood that, for the Russian establishment, preventing Ukraine from joining a hostile military alliance is a vital interest for which it might be prepared to go to war." Certainly, "Mearsheimer is . . . correct in thinking that Putin was deeply offended by these Western actions, the democratization of Ukraine, and its overthrow of an utterly corrupt leader who was taking the country in direction opposed by most of its people", as Lebow (2022, 130) recently wrote. However, Mearsheimer "exaggerates the extent to which any of this posed a strategic threat to Russia. No Western combat forces were stationed in any of the new members of NATO." To be fair, Mearsheimer's critique of the West for having caused the conflict in the Ukraine is not to be read as being an apologist for Putin's Russia. As Blachford (2022) writes, he is more concerned that "the Western experience of the post-Cold War unipolar era . . . has left it blind to its own hubris". This hubris not only causes global chaos, as Masala points out, but it also has the potential for an imperial overstretch on the American side. For him, "perhaps the greatest cost of [such] a strategy . . . is the damage it does to the political fabric of American society. In particular, individual rights and the rule of law will not fare well in a country that maintains a large and powerful military and is addicted to fighting wars" (Mearsheimer 2014b, 25). Simply put, engaging in too many wars may cause domestic frictions that threaten the existence of the United States altogether.

Despite arriving at different conclusions as to what caused the war in the Ukraine and how to react to it, particularly the work of Mearsheimer and Walt

seems to confirm what critics have realism blamed for all along. Realists think in categories of states as containers and international politics is like a billiard game, during which states clash with each other and that leads to further reactions among other states. In this game, smaller states are just like the red balls at snooker. They are being played at to position oneself for the next hit against another color, that is, a more powerful state. After all, Mearsheimer (2014a, 83) wrote that "the Russians remained steadfastly opposed to enlargement, NATO especially into Georgia and Ukraine. And it is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them." That it might have been in the interest of smaller Eastern European states to seek admission into NATO and/or the European Union and invest in economic cooperation elsewhere does not occur to Mearsheimer. Already since the 1990s, for example, the Baltic countries and particularly Lithuania started to build LPG terminals to free itself from Russian gas supplies, after Russia had stopped deliveries and increased prices in the wake of their independence from the Soviet Union.

2 Realism and Realism are Not Identical

In the context of the war in the Ukraine, more criticism is being voiced against realism that goes beyond claims of a simplistic, yet potentially dangerous ontology. In a recent contribution for *The New Statesman*, Tooze (2022) equally critiques Mearsheimer for claiming that the United States overstretches their capacities and that Western endeavors for a liberal world order are central to the conflicts in Eastern Europe but he also questions "what he sees as realism's support for military force and aggression" (Blachford 2022). As Tooze (2022) writes,

> Other than wars of national liberation, one is hard pressed to name a single war of aggression since 1914 that has yielded clearly positive results for the first mover. A realism that fails to recognise that fact and the consequences that have been drawn from it by most policymakers does not deserve the name.

This belligerent outlook on the world is for Tooze not only the result of a normative-ontological poverty in realist thought, as it promotes amoralism, but he also questions the epistemologically ahistorical position of realism. Devising a grand theory of great powers that are prepared to fight for the protection of their areas of influence, one ends up believing that wars are inevitable. Mearsheimer highlighting the West's role in what happens at the moment in the Ukraine is therefore not based on having built an expertise in Eastern European politics but merely the application of his theory. In other words, "[w]hat he [Mearsheimer] is doing is elucidating the implications of his favourite IR theory . . . Russia is a great power.

Great powers . . . guard their security through their spheres of interest. The US does so too . . . " (Tooze 2022)

This critique of realism being amoral and ahistoric is nothing particularly new. It is part of the standard repertoire voiced against realism. Relatively new, however, is that Tooze sees the origin of realism's belligerence in its "dark roots in the imperialist era" (Tooze 2022). In making this claim, Tooze (2022; italics in the original) calls on Matthew Specter, writing that

> a line runs straight from the expansive naval theorists and geographers of the pre-1914 period, such as Friedrich Ratzel and Alfred Mahan, to the German geopoliticians of the interwar period—notably Karl Haushofer and Carl Schmitt—and from there to the classic texts of American realism, notably the writing of Hans Morgenthau. Like Mearsheimer, Carl Schmitt, the Nazi lawyer and theorist of *Grossraum*, envisioned a world order based on dividing the planet between large spatial blocs, each dominated by a major power.

Specter (2022, 71; italics in the original) added in a recent piece for *Dissent*, a magazine that once invited Morgenthau, Michael Walzer, and Noam Chomsky to reassess American involvement in Vietnam in light of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, that there is a "larger story of realism's imperial investments. Realism was not born in the 1930s but the 1880s and '90s, a period when both the terms 'geopolitics' and *Lebensraum* (living space) were first coined." A few years earlier, Guilhot (2014, 701) even saw "post-war realists . . . engaged in a historiographical cover-up exercise" in which attempts were made to conceal the origins of IR as a discipline to produce racial theories and provide insights into how to administer Western colonies.

Being sympathetic to Tooze's critique of Mearsheimer and not questioning Guilhot's assessment that IR has its origins in racist theories and imperial administration, as substantialized amongst others in the writings of Hobson (2012), Vitalis (2015), as well as Davies, Thakur, and Vale (2020), we have to ask if Mearsheimer really is a realist? And if he is, what was Morgenthau? This is because "[t]he difference between the Morgenthaus and the Mearsheimers is fundamental" (Schütt 2022). In other words, claiming that realism per se would be encapsulated in the scholarship of Mearsheimer is not only incorrect but it is also implicitly endorsing the points that are being brought forward by neorealists like Mearsheimer and the intellectual genealogies that he draws. Tooze (2022; italics in the original) in fact recognizes this, when he writes:

> If you ask Mearsheimer about the historical source for his lucid but dark view of the world, he will most likely tell you that it is an ancient wisdom that originates in the writings of

the Greek historian Thucydides. But that is an invented tradition assembled *ex-post* by the discipline of IR as it established itself at American universities in the Cold War era.

This invented tradition, however, does not only include ancient thinkers like Thucydides, Hobbes, or Machiavelli but also mid-twentieth century thinkers like Morgenthau. The neorealist claim that their scholarship systematizes the scattered thoughts of a classical realist like Morgenthau is at best a misreading on the side of neorealists (Bain 2000; Behr and Heath 2009). In fact, as I have done elsewhere (Rösch 2018), I would go so far as to claim that classical realism and neo-realism are fundamentally opposed in their normative-ontological outlook on the world and epistemological approaches to uncover what people perceive as reality.

This is because neorealism and classical realism stem from two different intellectual traditions and evolved in two geographically and culturally disparate contexts. Classical realist scholars, such as Morgenthau, Hannah Arendt, Hans Kelsen, John Herz, or Hans Speier, matured in Central Europe often during the interwar-period, were tested by genocide and forced migration, and were affected by the potential of atomic warfare. They adjusted their work in the United States and often concealed their Germanic origins, a wise move considering that soon after their arrival World War II broke out and anti-Semitism was also common on the American side of the Atlantic, but they did not fundamentally change their political, intellectual outlook on the world (Castellin and Rösch 2020, 48; generally, Rösch 2020b). As Devetak (2018, 29) puts it, "[l]ike other émigrés who fled 'suicidal Europe' during the years of fascism, Nazism, and war, Morgenthau was schooled in continental legal, political, and social thought governed by different intellectual methods and different political experiences." As many of them were trained in law, they had to engage with the work of Carl Schmitt, as he was one of the leading *Staatsrechtler* (constitutional lawyers) of the Weimar Republic before he later became Nazi Germany's "Crownjurist", as another émigré, Waldemar Gurian, once put it (Rösch 2015, 32).

Engaging with Schmitt, however, does not mean that they would have endorsed his work or outlook on the world, as Tooze and Specter imply. By contrast, they often critiqued Schmitt, both for his political views and for his scholarly work. Towards the end of his life, Morgenthau, for example, recalled his sole encounter with Schmitt. Having had a brief audience in Schmitt's home, Morgenthau (1984a, 16) said to himself after having left his apartment that he has "met the most evil man alive." On January 14, 1965, he also thanked Arendt for sending him a copy of Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan*, writing that "it is interesting, but unbelievably shoddy, both in thought and exposition" (Morgenthau 1965a). This is the only personal reference to Schmitt that I could find in the personal writings of Morgenthau in his archive at the Library of Congress. Particularly Schmitt's

concept of the political as friend and enemy attracted Morgenthau's criticism. In his own *Concept of the Political*, written shortly after finishing his doctoral thesis in 1929, Morgenthau (2012) developed a conceptualization that understands the political as a lifeline for democracy, as having the opportunity to engage in agonistic tensions people can shape the contours of the society they live in and avoid the outbreak of violent conflicts. This notion of the political bears resemblance to the one we find in the contemporary writings of Mouffe (2005) or Marchart (2007) and is in opposition to Schmitt's belligerent outlook on the world. Morgenthau (1932) repeated his critique in his inaugural lecture in Geneva and devoted an entire unpublished manuscript in the early 1930s on the shortcomings and dangers of Schmitt's conceptualization of the political (Morgenthau 1934).

This critical stance of émigré scholars (Rösch 2020a, 2020b) towards Schmitt that we find exemplified in Morgenthau should not surprise us. The clue is in their biographies. This was a group of scholars that had to experience the atrocities that were caused by racism, xenophobia, fascism, and nationalism in Europe during the 1920s–1940s. They were forced to leave their homes, lost their livelihoods, lost family members and friends, and indeed some paid with their own lives. Many of them were born into liberal Jewish families and/or supported with liberalism, socialism, and democracy. This made them the target of Nazism in Germany and Austria. Sympathizing with someone like Schmitt, therefore, did not resonate well with their outlook on the world. Again, Morgenthau is a case in point. Born into an assimilated Jewish middle-class family in today's Northern Bavaria, he spent a significant time of his studies in Frankfurt and finished his doctoral thesis there. During this time, he got into close personal contact with members of the Frankfurt School and other scholars, whose work features prominently in contemporary critical theories, like Karl Mannheim. While he did not consider himself a Marxist, he revealed on several occasions how much their thought and the work of a generation before them like Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche had affected his own work. In Chicago, he even contributed to the Walgreen Foundation Lectures by speaking about Marxism. Like Neumann and Ernst Fraenkel, he also worked as a clerk for Hugo Sinzheimer, the most prominent labor lawyer of the Weimar Republic and a social-democratic member of the Weimar National Assembly. Scheuerman (2008) therefore is right to highlight the connections between "realism and the left".

Having had this (intellectual) socialization, Morgenthau, while concealing his German origins in the United States, did not fundamentally change his thought after arriving there in 1937. He replaced as much as possible his German examples and references for American ones, but he continued to argue for spatio-temporal context-sensitivity and he was dubious about sciences claiming to be able to establish absolute truth. Politics was an art for him and his fellow émigrés because the

contingencies and ephemeralities of life required flexibility that only a situational approach to knowledge could provide. Grand theories as proposed by neorealism were rejected by Morgenthau. To Michael Carder he wrote on September 7, 1966, "I am inclined to think that the recently fashionable types of research such as systems theory, game theory, and behavioralism will decline because of their sterility which is now increasingly being recognized. Conversely, I would anticipate a revival of interest in the traditional types of historical research and intellectual analysis." (Morgenthau 1966) This dissatisfaction with such positivistic grand theories is because they would require uniting all political thoughts that exist throughout the world and having in-depth historical knowledge about their developments. A momentous task that no human can muster. Morgenthau was also concerned about the hubris and racism that was entailed in an American foreign policy that advocated liberalism and democracy globally and would be willing to use force to achieve this end. In the 1950s, for example, Morgenthau (1955, 32) expressed concern about the moral poverty in promoting democracy in Africa, while not granting equal rights to African Americans at home.

Of course, all of this is not new. Ever since Frei's (2001) Morgenthau biography was translated into English more than twenty years ago, a veritable "cottage industry" (Jütersonke 2010, 51) evolved that provided reconsiderations of classical realism's contribution to IR. In fact, the list is endless (e.g. Bell 2009; Lang and Williams 2005; Molloy 2006; Munster and Sylvest 2016; Reichwein 2021; Reichwein and Rösch 2020; Schuett 2021; Tjalve 2008; Williams 2007). Primarily based in Europe, these scholars offered revisionist accounts of realism that distinguished carefully between neorealism and classical realism and uncovered the context-sensitive epistemologies of classical realism that are in contrast to neorealist ambitions of providing a grand theory. They equally highlighted the political activism that many of these scholars engaged in their new home country to help protect American democracy from the same fate that had brought the downfall of the Weimar Republic about. Most of this work, however, seems not to have made it onto reading lists in North America. At least, responses to these revisionist accounts are scarce from scholars based in North America, and I am under no illusions that these lines will be read much on the other side of the Atlantic. There are some few noticeable exceptions (e.g. Douglas Klusmeyer, Eric Van Rythoven, William Scheuerman, Brian Schmidt, and Brent Steele), but, given that there seems to have been little engagement with these European works, the writings of North American based scholars in particular still paint a picture of a realism that is hard to maintain in light of these 20 years of research. What is more, they even uncritically accept and thereby sustain neorealist claims of having systematized classical realist thought. That this is the case would be an interesting sociology of knowledge study, as it tells much about the power relations in a discipline that

strives to be global but is yet far from it. However, this is not the purpose of this paper which is why the final section investigates if diplomatic solutions to the war in the Ukraine are a possibility.

3 Morgenthau, War, and Diplomacy

In claiming that the war in the Ukraine is the fault of Western, particularly American liberal hubris, Mearsheimer and Walt imply that a diplomatic solution to it is feasible. If the Russian attack on the Ukraine is more defensive than offensive, it should be possible to settle Russian security concerns through diplomatic channels. In making this point, reference is often made to Morgenthau, as exemplified in Hacke's (2014, 40) reflections after Russia invaded the Crimea in 2014. This is not surprising because there was a reason why Morgenthau was invited by *Dissent* to discuss with Chomsky and Walzer the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. They were the most outspoken and most prominent critics of the Vietnam War. In numerous articles in magazines like *Commentary* and *The New Republic* and newspapers like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, in countless public speaking engagements, some of them televised, Morgenthau criticized the American government for their involvement in Vietnam. This had an impact on his career. He no longer was called upon to serve as a government adviser, something that Morgenthau's ego did not take lightly, and his run for the American Political Science Association (APSA) presidency in the early 1970s was torpedoed. There was even an "Operation Morgenthau" (Rösch 2015, 126) by the government to collect compromising materials that could be used against him.

However, the reasons why Morgenthau opposed the Vietnam War were similar, yet different to the ones in the Ukraine. Given his anti-communist stance, it seems unlikely that he would have disagreed with Masala in arguing to support Ukrainian forces militarily. Being caught in the Truman Doctrine from 1947 that propagated militarily containment of communism globally, Morgenthau argued that the United States did not understand the conflict in Vietnam. As he made clear during an interview late in his life, "the Vietnamese peasants did not embark on revolution to improve an intolerable social situation. They embarked on it to get rid of the Western foreigner." (Morgenthau 1984b, 374) In other words, United States foreign policy makers did not understand back then that Vietnam was not another potential domino falling in favor of communism that had to be stopped from happening at all cost, but, like many other countries at that time, Vietnam was engaging in an anti-colonial struggle to liberate itself from French rule. What is more, Vietnam historically never had strong ties with Soviet Union (or its successor Russia) and relations with China were adversarial. At the moment, both

Russia and the United States are in danger of making the same mistakes again in the Ukraine, in which each side has to contain advancements of the other side to maintain their own power position regardless, as Smith and Dawson (2022, 189–190) warn in this issue of *Analyse & Kritik*. What is different this time, however, is that Russia is pursuing imperial ambitions with its attack on the Ukraine. With his critique of the Vietnam War, Morgenthau stressed that a country like Vietnam only tried to free itself from colonialism in South East Asia. In Europe, however, Morgenthau was concerned about Soviet imperial ambitions. Consequently, he argued to detain these ambitions and European countries would need to be protected from the Soviet Union (Zambernardi 2011, 1340).

Morgenthau's critique of the Vietnam War went even further. He not only criticized the United States for pursuing an ideologized foreign policy but he also questioned the epistemological grounds on which this foreign policy rested. Being critical for a long time about positivistic approaches that promised socially plan the world, he criticized the United States for applying "rational models typical of Western economic culture to populations who did not think and act in terms of cost-benefit principles" (Zambernardi 2011, 1347) and one needs to add neither did Morgenthau believe that the United States and the West at large would be able to act in a rational manner, as human nature is more complex and driven by interests, desires, and emotions that cannot be captured through scientific means alone. In fact, for Morgenthau, the Vietnam War reared science's ugly head most forcefully. Science in its positivistic reduction dehumanized people, as success during the Vietnam War was measured in 'body counts', that is, measuring enemy losses to produce a tangible, quantifiable gain (Rösch 2015, 152).

The critique that Morgenthau (1965b) brought forward against American delusions in Vietnam, as he once called it in the *New York Times*, however, did not ripe in his mind during the Vietnam War, but in essence he made the same points against German pacifism during the interwar years. In an unpublished manuscript titled *Suicide with a Good Conscience* (*Selbstmord mit gutem Gewissen*), Morgenthau (1930, 1–2) argued that pacifism suffers from a rational understanding of the world that does not account for the human factor. Pacifists believed, Morgenthau claimed, that people would only need to see it as reasonable to live peacefully together and understand that war is against their interests. While this is not to argue about, according to Morgenthau, interwar pacifism wanted to achieve this by educating people in the sense that they learn to understand the "absolute force of law" for their lives. However, this would have to fail as people are also driven by "irrational" factors like emotions.[2] Some conflicts can therefore not be resolved

2 For the importance of emotions for classical realists, see Ross (2013) and Rythoven (2021).

through law, but they are political conflicts and require political solutions, such as seeking compromises. This has two implications. First, "the fruit of pacifist victory is . . . war" (Morgenthau 1930, 9). If international law is the absolute guiding principle for relations between states that rule breakers have to be punished. As such, leading wars against aggressive states is permissible. But fighting a war to sanction others is for Morgenthau a paradox. Pacifism therefore rest on a "war philosophy" for Morgenthau (1930, 9).

There is however a second, more profound issue. Suppressing the seeking of political solutions can equally lead to violent conflicts. Believing in the power of a scientific rationality—an issue that he later on discussed in more detail in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* and *Science: Servant or Master?*—dehumanizes people. It represents "das Un-Menschliche" (the inhuman) (Morgenthau 1930, 40). This is not only an issue of pacifism but a symbol for Morgenthau of modernity at large. In modernity, the belief in the power of rationality meant that people are no longer embedded in a religious community and they no longer can find intellectual and physical fulfillment in their work. Capitalist division of labor created an economic system that "reduces the human to an object" (Morgenthau 1930, 47–8) by turning workers into wage slaves (*Lohnsklaven*). Hence, we already see in Morgenthau's pre-World War II writings a concern to which he came back after his emigration in the United States. There, he not only experienced an even more capitalist society, regularly criticizing the squandering of natural resources, but he also befriended Arendt, whose *The Human Condition* provided him in *homo faber* and *animal laborans* with more detailed concepts to express his thoughts.

Being thoroughly individualized and no longer embedded into a community, the potentially destructive human drives cannot find any purposeful satisfaction in the sense of contributing to a common good. Consequently, these drives seek different outlets, making people susceptible to ideologies that promise them fulfillment. Referring to Ernst Jünger, even an ideology like pacifism can therefore lead to war, as destruction is not only greeted with indifference by people but even wished for. "Destruction per se increases lust, as it provides a tangible outcome that makes the power of emotional outbursts and . . . vital forces experienceable" (Morgenthau 1930, 40). Following Lebow (2022, 130), it is this aspect that Mearsheimer cannot account for in the war in the Ukraine because his "brand of realism blinds him and his followers to the real causes of Putin's anger that have to do with the status of his country and, by extension, his standing as a leader."

In light of this, what would Morgenthau have made of the use of diplomacy to settle a conflict like the war in the Ukraine? For Morgenthau (1956, 410; 1957, 9; 1959, 16), in a world of nation-states, there are only three options how to engage with other states internationally: "diplomacy, war, and renunciation." The latter

is for most, if not all states only a limited option. It cannot go so far as to not react to an aggression from another state, as this would mean self-destruction. It equally cannot mean that a state withdraws completely from engaging with the outside world, as most countries would not be able to sustain themselves. A lack of natural resources would force states to interact with each other. War, however, is for Morgenthau no feasible solution either anymore. With the development of nuclear weapons, the situation has changed internationally. Potential dangers are too grave to engage in warfare. He writes that.

> The possibility of all-out nuclear war has destroyed these rational relationships. When universal destruction is the result of victory and defeat alike, war itself is no longer a matter of rational choice, but becomes an instrument of suicidal despair. The pursuit of a nation's interests short of all-out nuclear war, then, becomes a matter of self-preservation. (Morgenthau 1959, 17)

Following Benjamin Tallis (Althaus 2022), this fear of a nuclear war is part of the reason why the German government is so cautious in supplying heavy weaponry to the Ukraine at the moment. While Tallis makes it clear that this fear is unjustified, it is not only the use of nuclear weapons that causes countries to be cautious about getting involved in war but also nuclear power production in war zones has its dangers, as the shelling of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukraine and at the beginning of the war the attack on the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant show. In today's world, states are therefore only left with the diplomatic option to interact with each other. Diplomacy is "of vital importance to a nation which seeks to pursue its interests successfully and peaceably" (Morgenthau 1956, 410). Otherwise, it only has the option of a 'slow death', being left at the mercy of great powers—something that the United Kingdom is experiencing now after Brexit—or a 'quick death' through nuclear annihilation.

As Morgenthau was suspicious about the prospects of direct democracy, he equally favored a diplomacy that was in the hands of politicians. It would be legitimation enough if the people who are responsible for diplomatic endeavors were voted into power democratically. If diplomatic talks would be led in public or the public would have an opportunity to steer these talks, then for Morgenthau (1957, 2), it would nearly be impossible to settle conflicts by transforming antagonistic differences and continuously developing interests into a goal to which all involved parties could subscribe. It may not be a common goal, but one that enables parties to manage their different interests agonistically (Morgenthau 1946, 1079). If the public would be involved, demagogues and hard-liners could aggravate public opinion that would make finding a compromise even more unlikely. Even at the current war in the Ukraine, we can see such diplomatic endeavors. To enable Ukrainian wheat transportation via the Black Sea, Turkey had invited Ukrainian

and Russian delegations to Istanbul. Through the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits from 1936, Turkey has considerable geopolitical bargaining power, as it regulates shipping traffic through the Dardanelles and the Bosporus.

In a world of nation-states, the use of diplomacy, protected from populist masses, would be the most reasonable way to conduct international affairs. This concern of a populist takeover and his subsequent attempt from keeping politics (not the political) free from public interference is probably Morgenthau's weakest point. It can be explained through his own lived experiences but hoping that elections will help to find the wisest, most suitable politicians and that these politicians then will serve the common good thanks to prudence will not always happen in real life. Morgenthau, however, was not naïve. His elaboration of diplomacy is to be conceived of as an ideal-type. The world of nation-states is not rational, as his terminology like 'suicidal despair' indicates. Politics is driven by emotions. Even if foreign policy making could be hidden from the interference of the masses, politicians and diplomats are still driven by their emotions. They might have other interests that they pursue, rather than search for the common good. Lebow's (2022) critique of Mearsheimer's neorealism is pointing in this direction. It was not rational for Putin to attack the Ukraine, as the potential to conquer the Ukraine without massive losses in life, military capabilities, and reputation is not possible. But, as Putin's statements and those of some of his entourage like Dmitry Medvedev suggest, Russian politics is not guided by rationalism, as its leaders are caught in delusions of former Russian grandeur. In the mid-1970s, Morgenthau (1974, 54; italics in the original) already warned the United States from reducing its commitment in Europe. The Soviet Union would otherwise try to fill this power vacuum in Europe, as '[t]he nations of Western Europe . . . would then no longer be able to maintain a viable balance of power *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union and would have to accommodate themselves to the Soviet hegemony over the Eurasian land mass."

As there are states who pursue a belligerent foreign policy due to their leaders seeking personal gains and/or pursuing ideologized world views, Morgenthau in fact argued to overcome this world of nation-states. Particularly nationalism was for him an ideology that has the potential to steer emotions and is therefore bound to lead to conflict and even war. What he perceived as traditional diplomacy was the best one could hope for in this world to avoid war, but it was not the world he wanted to live in. One needed to seek opportunities for using diplomacy but one had to be prepared to resort to other means if the situation would not allow the use of diplomacy. If one's adversary is not interested in finding a compromise, as they seek to obliterate oneself or nationalistic voices overtone reasonable ones,

war for self-protection is the only option. This is the situation the Ukraine finds itself now.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to reflect on two issues in the wake of the war in the Ukraine. First, I have highlighted that the discipline should be cautious in seeing neorealism and classical realism as 'one'. They stem from disparate intellectual traditions and historical backgrounds, rest on opposing ontologies, produce very different normative outlooks on the world, and their epistemologies ask for different approaches to study international politics. Continuing to see them as 'one'—and this is a critique that also applies to critical theories in IR for referring to realism as amoral, ahistoric 'mainstream'—would implicitly strengthen the claims and positions of a neorealist scholarship, who sees itself in the tradition of classical realism and praises itself for having systematized classical realist thought.

At best, however, this claim is a 'misreading' of the work of the likes of Morgenthau and it shows a non-engagement with the work that classical realist scholars have produced in Europe during the interwar years. However, there would be more to gain in finally separating these two IR perspectives. On the one hand, the discipline could investigate what neorealism and classical realism can offer to the study of international politics. Classical realists for example highlighted the role of emotions in politics, warned of nationalism and the nation-state and promoted global communities, they criticized the squandering of natural resources and urged to protect the environment, and classical realists also dismissed modern economies for their greed and for dehumanizing humans by seeing them simply as another 'resource'. In other words, there is a lot in classical realism that can inspire current scholarship to think about some of the most pressing problems we have today. On the other hand, one can also carefully think how these perspectives maybe can cross-fertilize each other and other IR theories; *and* they have to be criticized for their many shortcomings.

Second, I engaged in a thought experiment to see if Mearsheimer has a point. Could we find stimulation in Morgenthau for a diplomatic solution to the war in the Ukraine? After all, he was a prominent critic of the Vietnam War. Morgenthau made it clear that for him, diplomacy is the rational, peaceful way to find compromises for the often conflicting interests that exist between states around the globe. In light of technological developments, the other two options are no longer viable, as both of them lead to destruction. However, he was not so naïve as to believe that there will be no wars anymore. Sometimes, they even are unavoidable. Indeed,

this is the case with the Ukraine, as the situation there is different to Vietnam. The latter was an anti-imperial war, the attack on the Ukraine by Russia however is imperialistic. Morgenthau already cautioned against Soviet imperialist endeavors if the United States would reduce its commitments in Europe in the 1970s. Hence, it seems likely that he would not have searched for the causes of the war in the Ukraine in the West like Mearsheimer does but in Putin's desire to restore former Russian grandeur. Morgenthau probably would have sought to keep diplomatic channels open—and we even see that currently in the war in the Ukraine—but he would also have urged to support Ukrainians militarily, as he would have seen the Russian attack on the Ukraine as just the beginning, rather than the end.

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