

What's the matter with realism?*

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Introduction

International relations, as an academic discipline, is not known for its strength in the area of theory. It has no immediate equivalent to the rich contrasts of perspective generated in sociology by the legacy of Max Weber, Marx and Durkheim—a lack so felt that Martin Wight once wrote a paper called ‘Why is there no International Theory?’¹ His own answer was, in part, that there *is* nothing further to theorize after the discovery of the repetitive mechanisms of the balance of power. This was a sad conclusion for such an acute and creative mind to reach. But it does illustrate a central feature of IR theory. For the balance of power, it can be argued, *is* the limit of any *Realist* theory of international relations. And Wight’s conclusion was perhaps more an index of the dominance of a Realist orthodoxy than a reflection of the inherent properties of ‘the international’.

What then does it mean to speak of a Realist school of IR theory? And how does a Realist perspective constrict our understanding of international politics: what’s the matter with Realism? This paper sets out to address these questions in the following manner. After offering a brief definition of Realism expressed in three related premises, it proceeds to explore the adequacy of these premises as a starting point for understanding international relations. This exploration is divided into three sections, in which works by E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz are discussed as examples of (respectively) descriptive, axiomatic and theoretical articulations of Realist premises. It is argued that, as description, Realism leaves too much out; as a set of prescriptive axioms it lets too much in; and as social theory—well, that it *is not* a social theory at all: rather it is an operator’s manual posing as one. This technical assessment is followed by an ideological characterization of Realism, and some suggestions as to how an abandonment of its core categories might alter the scope of IR theory.

Descriptive realism: E. H. Carr and the state’s-eye-view

In the postwar period the term Realism has come to indicate a series of propositions underlying a distinctive approach to the study of international relations. These are commonly abbreviated as follows:

1. International politics is to be understood predominantly as the realm of interaction between sovereign authorities—a realm which is separate from that of domestic politics.

* I am grateful to Simon Bromley and Fred Halliday for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ Martin Wight, ‘Why is there no International Theory?’, in Butterfield and Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London 1966).

2. The distinctive character of this realm is given by the condition of ‘anarchy’—meaning that a competitive pursuit of determinate ‘national interests’ takes place in the absence of regulation by a superordinate authority.
3. The result is a set of compulsions generic to relations between states which works, through the fulcrum institution of the ‘balance of power’, to determine how states behave internationally. To understand the balance of power is therefore also to explain international politics.

Strangely enough, in most of the classic texts of the school, we do not find these premises advanced as the core of Realism. For example, in the first half of *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, Carr describes ‘realism’ as an intellectual tool for unmasking the ideological determination of political thought and action. There is no visible commitment to a state-centric analysis. He even describes Marx, who of course would never have accepted the notion of a separate international realm, as a modern ‘realist’.² How then is Carr a Realist in our sense? Here the curiosity deepens, for by the second half of the book when he constructs his own understanding of international politics, the full panoply of Realist assumptions has already arrived unannounced.

Most immediately it is a question of perspective. Carr shared the urgent policy-orientation of the ‘Idealists’ he was criticizing: if their utopianism was an involuntary recoil from 1914, his own realist corrective was equally an injunction to learn the lessons of the 30s. This is not surprising since he was himself an ex-diplomat. But as a result, Carr’s is from the outset a discourse of *raison d’etat*: as prescription, it is committed to a view of the state as subject; consequently as explanation its energies are directed to the illumination of international history as the half-mastered practice and partly staggered outcomes of state policy. Thus, theoretically, the agency of the state remains an irreducible category—not in the complexity of the challenges which it faces (Carr does not claim to offer easy policy answers), but very much with respect to the interweaving of international and transnational processes within which it is constituted: in short, the ‘science of international politics’ poses questions *not of* the state but implicitly on its behalf. And this is of course a signature of Realism. Its deepest assumptions are grounded in the ideological needs of the social practice—namely diplomacy—whose norms it articulates.

Probably the first of these assumptions then, is that political agency in the international system is concentrated almost exclusively in the state. (Historical *agency* is almost always reducible in Realist writings to *policy*.) It therefore seems natural when he comes to define social power, that Carr discusses it quite narrowly as the instrument or constraint of state policy. And although he allows that state power comprises diverse ideological, economic and military components, he insists that it is measured and expressed in generic form as the nationally constituted capability of a state to influence international outcomes.

We do not have to jump very far ahead to see the theoretical implication of this conception of power. If military, economic and ideological factors are seen as tributaries of a generic power (wielded by the state) which casts the pattern of international relations, if they attain significant international reach only through being mobilized as instruments of state policy, then the structure of relations between nation-states is not merely a specific moment of the international order: it actually

² *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (2nd edn. 1946; rpt. London, 1984), p. 65. All subsequent references are to this edition.

defines the dynamics of that order. And the business of understanding world politics indeed resolves itself into the familiar Realist task of describing the balance of power.

Understanding economic, social, military and political power structures as parts of a global whole is, arguably, the distinctive task of IR theory. But can it really be done simply by collapsing them all into a model of politico-military competition between states? Can we give an adequate account of what international politics is about in these terms? This is what Carr attempts, and we should look at some examples of where this gets us.

Carr rightly says that economic and political power are so interdependent that we should drop the term 'economics' and speak instead of 'political economy' (116). The utility of this phrase for thinking about international relations is that it suggests two vital perspectives simultaneously: an economics of political competition (exploring the role of the state in ordering, directing and taxing economic activity within its borders as a means of extending its power beyond) *and* a politics of the world economy (suggesting a set of shifting global economic relationships which traverse political boundaries and shape, via the international processes of uneven development, the forms and scope of political action). Evidently, we need both of these. Similarly, when Carr adds that 'the science of economics presupposes a given political order . . .' (117) this does not only signal the existence in every empirical instance of a ruling political elite which mobilizes economic resources; it also raises the theoretical question of the *institutional* relation of the state and state system to the national and international economy.

Unfortunately, because he is considering 'economic weapons . . . for use in the interests of national policy' (115), Carr's account is in both cases skewed heavily towards the former sense, with mercantilism presented as something like an ideal-type of economic policy. This is a problem with a Realist description, which *can* perceive that the modern state seeks to mobilize the economy, but not that that economy is also part of a transnational whole which produces important *political* effects independently of the agency of the state. Two examples may clarify this point.

Carr argues that the nineteenth century doctrine of free trade posited a specious 'separation of economics from politics' which was not only belied by the reality of imperialism, but was later rudely shattered by unprecedented state control of the economy during World War I: 'We have now returned therefore, after the important, but abnormal *laissez-faire* interlude of the 19th century, to the position where economics can be frankly recognized as a part of politics' (116). Within a pure Realist perspective we do seem to have come full circle, nothing fundamental having altered since the closing years of European absolutism: states still compete for power in the international arena, mustering such economic and military resources as they can press into the service of policy.

But the implied image of the circle really does miss the wood for the trees. To picture the historical continuity of the nineteenth century we need at least to envision a spiral motion which incorporates the expansion of industrial capitalism as an international system as well as the related consolidation of the nation-state. If we ignore this transformation then 'the separation of economics from politics' will inevitably appear as simply the ideology of the status quo, and free trade as 'the mercantilism of the strongest'. Posed in a more familiar form, however, the separation of the political and the economic indicates precisely the central *institutional* linkage between the capitalist economy and the nation-state: that is, the legal

structure of property rights which removes market relationships from direct political control or contestation and allows the flow of investment capital across national boundaries. Carr is right to point to the state's use of economic resources for foreign policy purposes; but the economy is not, as military power is assumed to be, entirely a nationally constituted instrument ready at the disposal of the state.

The second example illustrates what is lost by regarding it in this way: Carr treats the export of capital solely as an instrument of state policy. Well, there must be plenty of politicians on both sides of the Atlantic (and the Pacific) today who fervently wish that international capital flows *could be* under the control of governments. However, private capital follows the highest returns; and when a currency appreciates due the international competitiveness of the domestic economy, capital flows out in pursuit of the resultant cheap investment opportunities. Governments may seek to help or hinder this process, but the underlying mechanism is a fact about capitalism, not about states. To thus construe the export of capital simply as an instrument of state policy is to place the international operation of the world economy and its complex interaction with the political order of nation-states outside the purview of Carr's analysis.

A similar constriction arises from considering ideological aspects of international politics in terms of what Carr calls 'power over opinion'. Here, the target of Carr's polemic is the liberal anticipation that international public opinion could become both judge and sanction in disputes between states. He is therefore concerned to show that universalist ideologies achieve effective power only when taken up by an interested national state, that public opinion is increasingly the *tool* of modern states, and that therefore 'international public opinion' may signal a temporary convergence of several national interests but cannot constitute itself as an autonomous agent in international affairs. All this is well-argued and well taken. But it hardly closes the issue: for even the free-trade credo which Carr dubs the ideology of the economically strong state hardly *emerged* as the contrived instrument of foreign policy. On the contrary, it evolved as the centrepiece of the domestic political and international economic aspirations of distinct manufacturing interests within 'civil society'. And its adoption by the state signalled both the victory of those interests and, yes, the ascendancy of British economic power: but who is the agent now?

Furthermore, if international relations are about states, and public opinion is something states manipulate to fortify their power, what are we to say about social revolutions and their prominence in international conflict? The point of this is not to construct an autonomy of 'public opinion' or deny the routine manipulation of nationalist currents by the state. It is simply to indicate how much remains unsaid about social ideology (even nationalism) as a dimension of international politics if it is conceived in purely instrumental terms.

So Realism has serious defects when offered as a description of the dynamics of the international system. But its primary mode, as already suggested, is axiomatic: that is it presents itself as a guide to policy-makers. How does it fare in this?

Axiomatic Realism: Morgenthau's laws of politics

There is a well-known article by Stanley Hoffmann which seeks to provide a sociological diagnosis of the intellectual symptoms of postwar US Realist thought.³

³ Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus* (Summer 1977).

Hoffmann considers (among other things) the sources of financial support for International Relations research, its close institutional connections with foreign policy-making during the global expansion of US power, and the prevailing positivist orthodoxy in the wider social sciences. And he argues that it was these which directed the American study of IR towards the search for general theories of world politics whose 'usefulness' would be measured by their ability to guide and predict policy. And this perhaps explains why Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, to a much greater extent than *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, is frankly a diplomats' manual of statecraft, which seeks in one extended argument to move from the assertion of laws of human nature to the elaboration of the Nine Rules of Diplomacy.

It is important to be clear how and why Morgenthau's attempt to derive axioms of political conduct from the premises of Realism is ensnared from the start in circular arguments. For the truth is, Realism can legitimate just about any course of action.

The well-known core of Morgenthau's theory is that states are by nature 'power maximizers'. They exist in a discrete world of 'the political', the latter being defined by its concern with power. In turn, power denotes 'anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man.'⁴ Because each state conceives its interests in terms of the indefinite enhancement of this control, each is potentially predator or prey to any other. Moreover, the fact that, in the nature of this competition, states must ultimately look to self-help for their survival means that the contrivance of a favourable military position is the foremost concern of every state. Any group of states which persists as a plurality of sovereignties does so by virtue of what he calls 'a general social principle to which all societies composed of a number of autonomous units owe the autonomy of their component parts' (187)—namely, the balance of power. By this shifting equilibrium of multiple alliances, the independence of the units is preserved against the excessive accumulation of power at any one pole of the system.

Given this, sound *policy* can proceed only from a recognition of the power struggle at the heart of international life, and consists in using it to balance interests and alliances in the achievement of given ends. Too much power will call forth opponents in equal proportion; too little will make it impossible to uphold national interests—and may even invite aggression. Moral fastidiousness and moral fervour are equally inappropriate and dangerous to the rational calculation of interests and balances. Similarly, the *study* of politics must be grounded in the same recognition, its leading categories suitable for the isolation and description of the dynamics of the power struggle. This is the claim made for the central assertion of *Politics Among Nations*: 'We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out' (5).

How far does this get us? We should turn again to the vexed issue of power. *Viewed as a means*, power takes myriad forms, depending on the type of political order, the nature of the ends to which it is directed and the particular social forces mobilized. Similarly, as a routinely exercised property of formalized relations of domination between individuals and collectivities, 'power' points our attention again to key social institutions *specific to particular historical societies*—obligations of fealty, the capitalist wage-labour contract, the sovereign authority of the state and so on. In each case the

⁴ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (6th edn, New York 1985), p. 11. All subsequent references are to this edition.

meaning of the term power, beyond broad generalizations about control, is given by the context and the ends involved. But the offer of historical explanation based on power *considered as an end in itself* is altogether more difficult to make sense of. If, on a weak reading, it is taken to mean that all political agents must seek power (as a short-term end) in order to achieve their goals, then it is of little explanatory value for it must cover anything and everything. Morgenthau, however, also intends a stronger reading. For he argues (and this is of course necessary to the positivist goal of prediction) that the behaviour of states and the outcome of relations between them can be understood *sui generis* in terms of the fixed dynamics of power grouped around the compulsions originating in the Balance.

Of course there *are* aspects of political and other forms of competition which are given by the number of competitors, the stakes, the means available and the degree of regulation involved. And states do perforce routinely pursue strategies in the international arena which must take into account the interests and behaviour of other states. It will therefore always be possible to point to interstate conflicts in history and describe this strategic dimension in terms of a 'balance of power'. But the autonomy of the political is, like all autonomy in the social world, a relative autonomy. And while it is both possible and important to distinguish analytically the irreducible aspects of state autonomy, this does not yield a model capable of prediction: for every empirical instance of its operation is heavily overdetermined by other factors.

In order, then, to pose the mechanism of the balance of power as the core of explanation of international politics at least two further assumptions must be made. First, it must be assumed that the international scene is defined exclusively as a plurality of states conceived as unitary agents, each adjusting its power drive to the opportunities and dangers of the *external* environment. A consequence of this is that domestic political issues and the domestic configuration of power do not (or should not) shape foreign policy. If we seek to peer 'inside' the state we find not the complex of a society presided over by a political institution which faces both ways; instead we are returned to the image of the statesman, his gaze turned steadily outwards, calculating the *external* advantage of the ship of state, chafing at the querulous interference of 'public opinion' which threatens to distract from rational judgement. Only by sealing off the internal from the external in this way can the 'primacy of the international' (which simplifies the task of prediction by reducing the number of variables) be secured.

Secondly, the balance of power is of course a military balance. Its prominence is given by the self-help character of international anarchy. To define international politics in terms of the balance of power therefore involves posing a hierarchy of issues facing states internationally, of which only those connected or potentially connected with the use of force qualify as (power) political. Hence the statement: 'a nation is not normally engaged in international politics when it concludes an extradition treaty with another nation, when it exchanges goods and services with other nations' (32).

By this stage however, the argument has become irretrievably circular: if power in a state system is ultimately military power, and the statesman is 'doing politics' only when attending to security-related issues, then the hypothesis that 'the statesman thinks and acts in terms of interest defined as power' becomes unfalsifiable.

Once the scope of political facts has been circumscribed in this way, the prediction that international politics is about 'interest defined as power' traces a great circle

through history from Thucydides through Machiavelli to Kissinger and back again, skimming the tops of successive strategic climaxes and recovering the moral. For example: Charles V, Napoleon, Wilhelm II and Hitler all sought to dominate Europe and met the same fate. Moral: imperial ambitions in a state system generate overwhelming opposing coalitions. Another example: from the early sixteenth century to the mid twentieth century, Britain repeatedly changed sides in the Franco-Germanic rivalry for control of the Continent. Moral: apparent fickleness in a nation's foreign policy may mask an underlying continuity given by its identity as 'holder of the balance'. Morgenthau gives a whole list of these examples; and they are held to illustrate the operation of the balance of power—but what has been explained about international politics?

The Realist perspective highlights the *similarities* between Charles V, Napoleon, Wilhelm II and Hitler by superimposing on widely contrasting historical periods the logic of military competition in a state system. But in doing so it prejudices the form taken by political power, reducing it to its military climax, and thereby suppresses the *differences*. This is perfectly acceptable as a very general proposition about unregulated competition. But announcing it as a political explanation makes it reductionist. Further, because these events are explained by unchanging 'objective laws that have their roots in human nature' (4), the essence of international politics is unhistorical: there is only the unending accumulation of empirical instances reproducing the same range of scenarios with different participants. Yet while the Realist is busy watching the statesmen playing the hands dealt them by the balance of power, those same international struggles are mediating a wholesale transformation of the form and conditions of social power in the world. Yes, there will always be a military dimension; but one has only to consider the last hundred years and the relationship between imperial rivalries, the globalizing of a transnational capitalist economy and the emergence of a world nation-state system: it is pretty obvious that something more has been afoot internationally than can be captured in the maxims of Thucydides.

This is not just an unfortunate omission. It is a fundamental failure to grasp what an adequate social explanation would consist in. And the cause of this deficiency is traceable fairly directly to the doctrinal Realist separation of domestic and international politics itself. For ignoring *domestic* non-state processes, (like private investment and social relations) renders their actual *transnational* extension invisible. This in turn makes it impossible (or irrelevant) to conceive of global structures other than the political—because the only visible agents are other states. And with so much of the substance of international politics cancelled at a stroke, it is little wonder that theories of indiscriminate power-maximizing and the endless security needs of anarchy step into the breach: what, otherwise, has all the fighting been about?

What, meanwhile, has become of the goal of prescription? The problem, of course, is that a definition of power which produces an unfalsifiable hypothesis about the past is capable of legitimating an unlimited range of practical suggestions as to present policy. For even when it is commonly accepted that vital interests *are* at stake, the injunction to 'pursue the national interest' has no substantive content. Which statesperson, after all, ever thought he or she was doing anything *but* upholding the national interest? Certainly not the 'appeasers' of the 1930s, those whipping-boys of later Realist writers. As Kennedy remarks of British foreign policy in the interwar years,

these were the actions of a country with nothing to gain, and much to lose, by being involved in war. Peace, in such circumstances, was the greatest of national interests.⁵

And indeed the first edition of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* described Chamberlain's policy of appeasement as 'a reaction of realism against utopianism'.⁶ This is an important point because it is part of the ideological self-definition of postwar Realism to contrast itself with a supposed prewar Idealist ascendancy in foreign policy-making which led inevitably to the shame of Munich and disaster beyond. This is of course pure myth. Every Realist consensus is, like the Roman Catholic distinction between the Church Spiritual and the Church Temporal, *post facto*. And while Realism likes to think that it *guides* foreign policy, actually, it has often ended by simply legitimating it: its 'usefulness' has been of a rather different kind to what it had hoped.⁷

Waltz's theoretical realism: accidents will happen

Morgenthau's edifice of political Realism was crumbling right from the start. Why *Politics Among Nations* remained the leading textbook for so long is indeed a sociological rather than an intellectual question. Yet the bulk of the criticism directed at Morgenthau was concerned not with *attacking* his Realist premises, but rather with *rescuing* them from the idiosyncrasies of his *weltanschauung*. Morgenthau, it will be recalled, had some rather unflattering and unsophisticated views on human nature, and an embarrassing habit of parading them as the philosophical basis of Realism. It must have been rather unsettling for diplomats to be told that the basis of postwar US foreign policy was not so much about the defence of democracy as the pursuit of an 'elemental bio-psychological drive . . . to dominate' (39), a drive which they might have in common with 'monkeys and chickens' (39n). And among the second generation of US Realists, Kenneth Waltz, in his book *Man, the State and War*, undertook to secure the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of the balance of power by deriving it *a priori* in the more palatable form of a rational-choice model.⁸ It should also be said that Waltz has an impressively clear grasp of what Realism logically entails, and he therefore provides its most concise theoretical formulation.

Waltz's argument falls into three parts. First, he derives the general principle that conflict is inscribed in any social system which lacks overarching authority. Next, he assesses how far states may be taken as discrete units involved in such a system.

⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy* (London 1981), p. 257.

⁶ (London, 1939), p. 14n.

⁷ I do not of course mean by this to suggest that Morgenthau was simply a eulogist of the power of the American state. On the contrary, he was an energetic, if idiosyncratic, critic of US foreign policy at several key points of its postwar development. (See M. J. Smith, *Realist Thought From Weber To Kissinger*, (Louisiana, 1986), pp. 147–58.) The problem was the impossibility of establishing that his own prescriptions were any more Realist than the policies he criticized.

⁸ This article does not give consideration to Waltz's later *Theory of International Politics*. This is partly due to constraints of space but not wholly so: insofar as Waltz in 1979 was still exercising the same problematic as in 1959 albeit at a slightly higher level of abstraction, the same fundamental criticisms apply. In this respect I would certainly maintain that *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass. 1979) is not a theoretical advance on *Man, the State & War* (New York, 1959). The latter however has achieved the status of a classic text within international relations and is widely used in the teaching of the discipline.

Finally, he establishes the connection between conflicts of interest and war, and reconstructs the balance of power as a function of an anarchical, international social structure.

For the first part, Waltz uses a parable by Rousseau concerning five men in the presocial state of nature who are driven by hunger to cooperate in a stag-hunt. As they are on the point of trapping their quarry—which would be sufficient to feed all of them—a hare (which could feed only one) runs within their reach. One of the hunters lunges at the hare, a movement which puts the stag to flight.

The moral of this is taken by Waltz to be that in a condition of anarchy, cooperation between individuals each seeking his or her own interest is only *contingently* rational. Each must base his or her calculations on the possible actions of others, but without a common authority to guarantee agreements none can calculate with certainty what those actions will be. Therefore, none can *afford* to be absolutely dependable. And the response of the hunter who disrupts the stag-hunt by seizing the hare cannot be called irrational since he had no means of knowing that he was not simply preempting his fellows. Rational self-interest would have dictated restraint only if the fidelity of his partners had been assured. And since it is precisely this which is ruled out by anarchy, the latter may be said to yield antinomies of political reason which establish the conflict between collective and individual interests as an inescapable feature of cooperation itself—so long as there is no authority to enforce contracts.

How far does the condition of states in the modern international system resemble the predicament of the hunters in Rousseau's parable? Clearly they interact without any common political authority. As to whether they constitute and behave as unitary agents, Waltz suggests that this condition is satisfied so long as *someone* is in charge. And since the state would not exist were this not the case, it necessarily holds for all states. It is irrelevant to this part of Waltz's argument that states are internally conflict-ridden, or that contingency and miscalculation are rife in politics. The question is simply whether those in power face conflicts of particular and general interest in their foreign policy-making which result from the effects of anarchy. To which the answer must of course be yes. To this extent, Waltz argues, the social structure itself plays a crucial causal role in producing collectively sub-optimal outcomes from an aggregate of individually rational choices.

The logic of the balance of power is then derived simply by interpolating into this anarchical structure an assumed desire by the state to maintain its own physical security. This means of achieving this goal are constrained by the condition of anarchy in that each state must provide for itself, and, as in a game of poker, 'Everybody's strategy depends on everybody else's'.⁹ Putting this maxim into practice necessarily involves at least a tacit reliance on a particular kind of behaviour from certain other agents—even if it does not issue formally in an alliance. Usually, however, where three or more units are involved, temporary coalitions inevitably result.

This much Waltz takes from the game theory of von Neumann and Morgenstern. However, he is quite clear that in order for laws derived from such models to be applicable to states, they must be twice qualified. First, the game produced by the competitive pursuit of security is not necessarily defined in purely zero-sum terms.

⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State & War* (New York, 1959), p. 201. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Secondly, states simultaneously play other games, both internally and externally which compete for the political priority and the material resources accorded to the security game. This is an enormous caveat, for it concedes that within certain limits (which in practice turn out to be very wide indeed) the impact of anarchy on the behaviour of states varies according to determinations quite outside the purview of a Realist theory. A state may choose or be forced to behave quite otherwise than predicted by the logic of the balance of power: it may be prepared to countenance large-scale retreat internationally in order to release resources for urgent domestic goals; it may undertake the military defence of a transnational socio-economic system which leads it routinely to exceed the requirements of the visible 'national interest'; in extreme cases, where it contends with serious internal challenges, it may even fail properly to resist an external aggressor. More routinely, certain security interests may simply be overridden because their pursuit is judged too costly in either domestic or international terms. But even if all the games which all the states play are governed by anarchical rules, we could still not predict the outcomes *a priori*, since the relative importance to each state of each game at any one time is contingent. And insofar as that is the case, both the predictive and the normative claims of Realism virtually disappear; for Realism does not pretend to possess the criteria for divining when pure balance of power considerations will be or should be overridden by other concerns: 'no sets of rules can specify how important the [security] game should be considered!' (206). Waltz is quite explicit about the consequences of this:

The reference to game theory does not imply that there is available a technique by which international politics can be approached mathematically. Balance-of-power politics, however, can profitably be described using the concepts of von Neumann and Morgenstern . . . (201n)

The implication is clearly that a theory of the balance of power is not a theory of international politics. And hence, no hard and fast rules may be drawn from it. In fact, we 'cannot say in the abstract that for peace a country must arm, or disarm, or compromise, or stand firm' (222).

What then is the explanatory scope of the theory? Paradoxically, Waltz's 'strong' realism is actually very weak in the scope of its claims. It purports to account for why war persists in the international system without any claim to explain why any particular war occurs. It isolates permissive, as opposed to efficient, causes of war. It is a contradiction of perpetual peace rather than a theory of international politics. And the purpose is simply to establish that there is a dimension of international politics, given by the absence of government, which conforms to Rousseau's parable: where knowledge of others' intentions is imperfect, and the use of force is not ruled out, (these being the two immediate consequences of anarchy), rational calculation by any individual cannot afford to assume (and therefore cannot actualize) an assured harmony of interests. *Ergo*, the balance.

It is difficult not to feel that the mountain has laboured, and brought forth a molehill. Having rightly dispensed with the reductionism of Morgenthau, Waltz's theoretical Realism is little more than a banality; *of course* states face recurrent Prisoners' Dilemmas in their attempts to manage their relations with other states—in all fields, particularly that of security. Truisms such as this, as the Realists themselves like to point out, have been available to statesmen for millenia.

But there is perhaps a more significant question: is this as far as Realism can go at the theoretical level—a barren choice between reductionism and banality? The

question can be explored further by considering again what is involved in the Realist assertion of the unitary agency of the state. For the latter is clearly connected with the belief that understanding the core of international politics is a matter of re-enacting the dilemmas faced by statesmen and tracing the recurrent techniques in the fitting of means to ends. This is especially clear in Waltz's use of the stag-hunter parable, where he allows the fiction of presocial individuals to persist even after he has supposedly debunked other fallacies of 'the state of nature'. Now, within such a perspective social structure is pictured as a set of external constraints which derive from the aggregate of individual, reciprocally calculated rational choices—that, after all, is supposedly how it is experienced by the politician. But such a model will take us no further than a charting of the mechanics of *Realpolitik*. How calculations within the system are reckoned (ideally) by practitioners, and how determinations are set out in the model are identical: this is nothing more than a systematizing of *raison d'etat*. (And of course, giving a logical proof of the Prisoner's Dilemma is also a normative legitimization of *raison d'etat*.)

It is precisely in this mechanical notion of structure that the inherent weaknesses of Realism are most transparent. In particular, it is perhaps easier to see at this level how two key concepts, change and power, become deeply problematical. What is it then that accounts for Realism's obliviousness to historical change?

The real reason, I would argue, is that in order to conceive the state as a unit responding purely to the balance of power it must implicitly define it as ontologically anterior to the international system: and if the system is simply a set of external restraints given by the number and relative strength of the individual units comprising it, what could change *mean* beyond variation in the numbers involved and the distribution of weight among them? But this of course is not what we mean by historical change. The shift from weak, territorially disaggregated fiefdoms in which the monarchical state shared authority and jurisdiction with Church and nobility to the modern, bordered, sovereign nation-state cannot be registered in these terms. Nor can the key role played in that shift by the convulsive interaction of domestic revolution and the international system. To conceive these it would be necessary to supply what cannot be derived from a rational-choice model: namely an account of those conditions of social power within a system which result not from balancing the numbers involved but from the reproduction of the core institutions which reflect its historical character, which position the individuals in terms of access to resources and which define the terrain of interaction. And it involves the same 'state of nature' fallacy already referred to to assume that there ever were social systems in which power could be understood without recognizing this dimension. (Waltz has not felt it necessary in his subsequent work to address these issues; nor, more surprisingly, and with the exception of Richard Ashley, have his critics.¹⁰)

Waltz would presumably answer that the system of states is the one exception: such core institutions as property rights, the liberty of the person and the suppression of routine violence rely for their domestic reproduction on the availability of coercive authority in the hands of the civil state; but internationally, who will coerce the coercers? Short of World Government, Waltz argues, no one. Since each state is therefore ultimately cast back solely on its own resources, a mechanical conception of structure is uniquely appropriate to the description of the society of states, however

¹⁰ Cf. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, 1986).

much it may need to be overlain by recognition of other, transnational processes in any historical study.

But here we are back with the fallacy of collapsing our understanding of power into a military definition of international relations, since that is the only realm in which it is claimed that this mechanical structure applies. And once again, the argument has become circular.

Realism as ideology

These recurrent circularities point to the need for an extra dimension, beyond a purely technical assessment, to any explanation of the part played by Realism in IR. Something else, remarked near the start of this paper, also points in the same direction: namely the startling difference between the self-definition of Realism and the properties which become visible only in the light of subsequent criticism. (As already suggested, the clarity of Waltz's exposition is exceptional.) And an intellectual position, the very propositional form of which is fiercely contested, cannot help but invite consideration as an ideology.

There is something awry with the foundation myth of Realism, the claim that the historical triumph over Idealism involved something like an 'epistemological break' which marked the inauguration of the discipline. There is indeed a sleight of hand being practised in the repetitive and apparently compulsive Realist self-definition in contrast to Idealism. Certainly, in rehearsing this Great Debate, opposing lists of assumptions are duly presented: there is the marshalling of *is* against *ought*, and *power* against *morality*; but what remain covert (because uncontested by either side) are those premises which are structured by the fact that fundamentally this is a *policy debate*. And as such it tacitly reproduces the premises of the unitary agency of the state, the international 'state of nature' and the insulated autonomy of the political taken over from the tradition of normative political theory. In important ways, Realism never did break with Idealism, which partly explains why its central premises remain unannounced. For this reason the question of how to theorize the state within a broader understanding of world politics, surely the central question facing IR theory, simply does not arise as an issue for Realism because it stands squarely in the common ground it shares with Idealism.

Realism, then, is not simply a focusing of attention on the state-political aspect of international relations. It is a determinate construction of political reality which entails a series of hidden propositions and symptomatic silences.

Realism is the conservative ideology of the exercise of state power: it provides a terminology of international relations which dramatizes the dilemmas, legitimizes the priorities and rehearses the means of *Realpolitik*. (Liberal, socialist and revolutionary governments also use Realist arguments to *justify* unpopular state policies; but they do not, if they can help it, embrace Realism as overall *explanation*. For it clashes with their alternative ideology, the 'society-centred', instrumentalist conception of the state.)

Fundamental to this role is the articulation of a discrete environment of 'the international' in which the behaviour of states can be explained *sui generis*—requiring the insulation of the international from the domestic. This is what enables 'the

autonomy of the political'—whether the latter is conceived as a self-sufficient explanation of outcomes (as in Morgenthau) or alternatively as the bare framework (and sole possible theory) of world politics (as in Waltz). The borders and landscape of this environment are set and policed by the twin concepts of sovereignty and anarchy. Quite restrictive definitions of these are needed to keep the environment sealed and its contents 'spare'. The Realist concept of sovereignty wavers between a military fact, a legal claim and a theoretical category; but in each case its 'indivisibility' defines societies as bounded entities whose interaction is channelled through the agency of the state. It does not, however, thereby become a window onto the society over which the state presides: on the contrary, by assuming the state to be co-extensive with the society for the purposes of foreign policy, this conception of sovereignty must factor out the operation of socio-economic forces which are not convertible into state power.

The fact that in the logic of Realism this sovereignty of the state precedes the theoretical formulation of its interaction with other states is of considerable importance. Under the plausible cover of conforming to the experience of the statesman, it achieves two things. It presents the state as a completed social order such that its foreign interests are constituted entirely internationally—thereby removing interpretation of the 'national interest' from domestic political contestation. And it clears the field for a purely interstate theory—since any other global structures or international agents which might complicate the picture could only be the result of the transnational extension of (domestic) sub-state socio-economic relations, which are not recognized. If sovereignty were not anterior in this way but were seen as a property consolidated in and through the evolution of the state-system, then the role of that system in upholding domestic social orders would come into view and the use of the term 'anarchy' to denote its overriding 'structural principle' would have to be dropped. As it is, for the purposes of international politics, states are seen to have only each other to deal with; and the theoretical atomism entailed by their analytical priority as completed orders dictates a mechanical conception of structure. And so on.

Why then does Realism have such 'staying power' as an ideology? Four major reasons may be suggested. First, although the discrete realm of 'the international' is a fiction, there is none the less a generic dimension to the behaviour of the state which relates to its unique legal, territorial and violent aspects. And this does indeed have to be considered in its own right. The historical concentration and enhancement of coercive power in the hands of the state organization has been in its dynamic and consequences a phenomenon irreducible to the particular socio-economic complexion of 'civil society'. Further, the fact of that coercive monopoly does make the state the site for the mobilization of generic forms of authoritative power whose use has repeatedly staggered the outcomes of transformative political projects which attempted to use it as an inert instrument. Realism may end by misconstruing the specificity of the state; but it does at least gesture at something of considerable importance.

Second, Realism *sounds plausible* because it articulates commonly held, common-sense assumptions about world politics. This is not surprising since it mimics the vocabulary of the state's rationalization of its own behaviour, and forms in that sense a ruling ideology *par excellence*. Its conception of the unitary, sovereign agency of the state sits easily with the popular nationalist identification with the 'home' state which

comprises most individuals' participation in the international system. This is a notion which is reinforced from all sides in public discussion of the international scene, through the media presentation of 'news' and the regular commentary of diplomats and politicians. And Realism's celebration of the professionalism of diplomacy chimes with the nationalist premise that there exists a permanent 'national interest', and that the conduct of international relations is therefore predominantly about the techniques and the means (not the political ends) of the operator.

Third, to the extent that IR remains, in terms of the sheer weight of numbers, resources and publications 'an American Social Science', the persistence of Realism seems assured. This is so mainly as a result of the interaction and mutual reinforcement of three factors which distinguish the American discipline: the demand for policy-relevant studies which provides the financial supports of the discipline and thereby installs the state's-eye-view as the natural perspective; the unique role played by the American state which requires special justification in the light of its extensive global interventions at all levels of the system; and the positivist methodologies, adopted in the effort to emulate the 'usefulness' of other sciences, which tend to accept uncritically the received categories of Realist common sense—provided by the state.

The fourth major strength of Realism is what Waltz might term a 'permissive cause': it consists in the absence of any recognized alternative conceptualization of the political structure of the global system to the one extrapolated from normative political theory, and the (related) behaviour of the critics of Realism. It has become a commonplace in recent years to remark the 'absence in liberal sociology and in Marx's writings . . . of a systematic interpretation of the rise of the territorially bounded nation-state and its association with military power'.¹¹ Whatever the reasons for this, the contrast with the plethora of theories of the domestic activity of the state is striking: there appears to be no parallel as yet within IR with the way in which the tradition of normative political theory was overtaken by political sociology. On the day that IR scholars too break with the Hobbesian problematic of 'why must we support the coercive activities of the state', and ask instead 'how are we to understand the state as a political organization, both in its generic aspects and in its interaction with other moments of international and domestic social orders'—on that day the stranglehold of Realism on IR as a social science will begin to loosen.

For the moment, however, the commanding position of Realism—reproduced also through the broader ideology of nationalism, the language of the media and the testimony of practitioners—continues to have a disorganizing effect on its critics. Indeed, one could almost say that Realism has been able to *organize* them into certain familiar areas of contestation which *reinforce* its own dominance. At any rate the persistence of forms of anti-Realist argument which are clearly self-defeating is an index of how far Realism is still able to set the terms of debate within the discipline. Among these forms, two stand out in particular. First, there is the outright denial of any specificity to either the political behaviour or the institutional form of the state. In the case of political behaviour, a clear instance is the ringing pronouncement of Jenkins and Minnerup:

Conflicts between states are in reality not conflicts between states at all, but conflicts between specific social and class interests using those states for their purposes . . . Stripped of its class

¹¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge 1985), p. 26.

content as defined by its ruling class, the nation-state is no more than a shell, a form, an organising principle of political sovereignty: a unit in the vertical division of humankind, devoid of any inherent dynamic which would set one against the other, and as compatible with federal association 'above' as with decentralising devolution 'below' it.¹²

Plenty of similar examples could be drawn from the longer history of liberal internationalism. As for the state's institutional form, calls for the democratization and even dissolution of centralized controls of the means of violence and the distinct foreign-policy making arm of government have an equally long history; they range across a broad political spectrum, from Cobden's slogan of 'No Foreign Policies!', through Lenin's (and Engels's) anticipation of 'a self-acting armed organization of the population' to the more recent advocacy in parts of the peace movement of 'detente from below' as a means of reducing international tensions. In each case the outright denial of 'the autonomy of the political' conflates what may be generic to the exercise of state power internationally with the interests of those in power. This entails a reductionism which both visibly demonstrates the need for an assertion of a distinct level of the political and, (by refusing to provide an alternative conceptualization), perpetuates the Realist claim to sole occupancy.

A second form of polemical suicide in the face of Realist orthodoxy involves endorsing the notion of a discrete political realm but challenging Realist prescriptions on ethical grounds. Moral attacks on the untroubled acceptance of power politics, on the rationale of arms racing, on the use of military force and war—all these, when unsupported by analytical criticisms, are so much bread and butter to Realism: for they legitimate the contrast of 'is' and 'ought' which is so central to its ideological self-definition. And the louder the moral protest, the more attention is diverted from the two most dubious claims of Realism: that its conception of power has any significant explanatory (as opposed to rhetorical) force; and that it rests on a value-free empiricism. Both this and the previous type of criticism unwittingly rehearse the 'Great Debate', and thereby automatically reproduce the terms of the Realist ascendancy. More generally, of course, *because* it is the intellectual orthodoxy, any criticism which does not provide a replacement confirms its centrality.

Conclusions: what's missing?

It was suggested above that the interlocking of the emphasis on anarchy with the restrictive definition of sovereignty forms a kind of stranglehold on the development of International Relations theory. It remains therefore to indicate briefly what new perspectives come into view when this grip is prised open.

Let us take the question of anarchy first. As we have seen, a rigorously interstate theory of the international pushes the issue of anarchy to the fore, and blocks consideration of how much interstate behaviour is determined by—and is concerned with managing—other, domestic political processes. It is not just that the international offers an arena for exploits to bolster domestic legitimacy. Rather, the description of the state, of its position within the global political order—and hence the overall character of that order, too—is simply distorted without the recognition

¹² Brian Jenkins and Gunther Minnerup, *Citizens and Comrades*, (London, 1984), pp. 146–7.

that the same agent is simultaneously central to the constitution and management of international and domestic politics. It would therefore be surprising if there were not powerful continuities as well as discontinuities between the two spheres. And while the discontinuities will indeed express 'the autonomy of the political', they are themselves visible only in the light of the continuities.

The clearest and most important illustration of this (confining ourselves to the political structure) is revolution. On a strict Realist view, there is no necessary reason why domestic revolution should impact significantly on the international system. If any instability is introduced into the balance of power it must be associated with the *weakening* of the state concerned; hence, revolutionary states should calculate a strong interest in peace with their neighbours. Obviously, this is not the case. The foreign policies of revolutionary states are generally hostile to foreign ruling establishments, which are perceived as representing the same oppressive social forces as have been overthrown domestically; they are unwilling (for the same reason) to recognize the legitimacy of conventional diplomatic channels; and they frequently seek to export the revolution via transnational links and assistance to insurgents in other countries. Generally too, the *social* conflict which they seek to export is taken up at the *interstate* level by counter-revolutionary alliances of other states, often prepared to intervene directly or indirectly to restore 'order'. But a counter-revolutionary foreign policy is rarely *just* a foreign policy. To a degree which varies with individual cases it is also directed inwards, a nationalist identification of certain programmes of domestic political change with a foreign threat. The Cold War, for example, always partook of this three-dimensionality.

All this might seem innocuous enough to the Realist until it is recalled just how much of the history of the state-system has been distracted by such internationalization of social conflict—for example, through how much of the history of 'international' conflict it is necessary to speak of the states involved as mediating the agency of social forces. Martin Wight found '256 years of international revolution to 212 unrevolutionary' since 1492—and that calculation was made in 1960. So, however much states are compelled to prepare against the possible behaviour of other states, 'the international' has also been very much about the management of change in domestic political orders. In the aftermath of great wars this aspect generally needs to be reasserted: Wight noted that '[s]ince Bismark's time, every war between great powers has ended with a revolution on the losing side'.¹³ And, of course, both World Wars were followed by a period of sustained, internationally concerted counter-revolution. (Nor has the state system acted uniformly as a brake on social change; in many instances it has done the opposite: witness the drastic impact of European imperialism, or the imposition from outside of liberal democracy in Germany and Japan.)

Yet the obverse is also true. When we approach the state from the perspective of transnational political (and other) movements and forces, the materiality of its power is of enormous significance. Revolutionaries in power moderate their support for comrades abroad in accordance with *raison d'état*. When they do attempt to carry the revolution beyond their borders by force of arms, they stir up currents of nationalist resistance which contradict their solidarist doctrine. And indeed the very process of 'liberation' is an extension of the power of the revolutionary state, which is generally

¹³ Martin Wight. *Power Politics* (2nd edn, Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 92n.

appropriated in nationalist terms. The attempt to use the agency of the state in the promotion of the transnational spread of revolution has proved endlessly problematic.

However, the important point here is that in both cases what is specific to the state, the manner in which its role overdetermines other political projects and conflicts, is not visible if the state is conceived as a 'national-territorial totality'¹⁴ responding purely to external determinations in the shape of other states. 'Domestic' and 'international' are continuously exploding and collapsing into each other. And while a plurality of sovereignties is indeed a fundamental aspect of the modern world system, it simply does not follow that anarchy forms its core identity. The truth is more complex, more exciting and far more politically controversial.

Turning then to the issue of sovereignty, Morgenthau explains that

sovereignty points to a political fact. That fact is the existence of a person or a group of persons who, within the limits of a given territory, are more powerful than any competing person or group of persons and whose power, institutionalised as it must be in order to last, manifests itself as the supreme authority to enact and enforce legal rules within that territory (335).

There have been states which were not sovereign—medieval monarchs had to share jurisdiction with Church and nobility. (Though in Waltz's atomistic version of Realism, even this does not mar the conception of the international.) To this extent, sovereignty is recognized as an historically contingent fact which in turn enables us to date the modern state-system. But it is regarded as an all-or-nothing fact, none the less: either it obtains or it does not; and if it does, the Realist conception of the international is held to be relevant. Hence the ease of recourse to Thucydides.

Of course, what is missing is any sense that the history of the state-system is more than the accumulation of successive power-struggles, that those competitions between great powers have mediated the continuing evolution, geographical expansion and global consolidation of a world political structure which in many ways is continuous with the changing *domestic* form, legitimacy and powers of the state: that the meaning of sovereignty itself is historically specific. This needs perhaps to be grasped in two dimensions: the interdependence of the emerging sphere of the 'international' with the widening scope of domestic sovereignty, and the (later) *global* consolidation of sovereignty as the universal form of political power.

First then, if we take sovereignty not just as the last-instance capability of a state organization to hold its own within a given territory, but additionally as an index of the scope of administrative power it exercises internally and externally, then states have become more fully sovereign than ever they were during the 'heyday' of the balance of power.¹⁵ Such a notion of sovereignty does not simply bring into view the simultaneous 'rise of the state' in both spheres. It suggests also ways in which the intensification of sovereign power *domestically* has underpinned the emergence and expansion of 'the international' as a realm of activity.

One clear instance of this developed by Anthony Giddens concerns the role played by the state in the provision and guaranteeing of forms of monetary units which has

¹⁴ A phrase coined by Fred Halliday, 'State and Society in International Relations: A Second Agenda', *Millennium* (Summer 1987).

¹⁵ The term 'administrative power' is taken from Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, 1985. It refers here to the control over the timing and spacing of human activities which the state is able to achieve by virtue of its activities of surveillance and regulation backed by its monopoly of the means of violence.

enabled the tremendous expansion of international trade in the modern era. Giddens recalls how the development of 'commodity money'¹⁶ in the era of Absolutism, which contributed so much to the early spread of capitalist enterprise, did not result solely from the influx of precious metals into Europe. The other vital ingredient was an enforceable state monopoly of the certification of money. Thus the growth of international trade facilitated by commodity money rested partly on the security of convertibility, but increasingly also on guarantees which could be provided only by territorially-ordered state organizations engaged in a routine monitoring of economic activities within established borders. With the emergence of the modern nation-state, these guarantees become all-important, fully displacing the 'safety-net' of convertible bullion-value. Modern money is 'fiduciary . . . that is, dependent upon confidence in the political and economic organizations in which it is produced and through which it is circulated'. The condition of this form is a major intensification of the internal administrative sovereignty on which commodity money depended; at the same time, although fiduciary currencies remain national in the sense of being legal tender only within the territories governed by the states which issue them, they are also fully international from the start:

Fiduciary money has not been the creation merely of individual states but has been tied to an extension of the reflexively monitored state system, and the 'confidence' that keeps it afloat has never been confined to the citizenry of the state which is its legal guarantor.

As Giddens notes earlier, 'it was war, and the preparations for war, that provided the most potent energizing stimulus for the concentration of administrative resources and fiscal reorganization that characterized the rise of Absolutism'.¹⁷ So the struggle between the European 'powers' comprised much more than the temporary ascendancy of one or more of them, more too than the specific political issues involved: it mediated an overall development of the system which enabled new international economic processes through a widening of the scope of *domestic* sovereign power. It is no less true today that the international movement of capital, so often seen as heralding the obsolescence of the nation-state, *depends* upon the territoriality of the state organization and the legal framework which its sovereignty, backed up by a coercive monopoly, upholds. Without this, private investment could not travel abroad unaccompanied by the military power of the originating state.

Which brings us to the second dimension of the historical evolution of the state-system which has been mediated by Great Power competition: namely its geographical expansion via European imperialism and the more recent global consolidation of sovereignty as the universal form of political power. It is of some significance in this process that the long decline of British (and European) ascendancy was associated with the military occupation of almost every stretch of territory not already claimed by one of the European states or settler-colonies; and that the subsequent rise of American world power coincided in turn with the creation of a hundred-odd new states. Now evidently, the Europeans did not carve up the planet in order to extend the state-system. But they *did* of course install the colonial state apparatuses for their own purposes of exploitation and control; these *did* shape and become the focus of nationalist resistance; and the mobilization for independence *was* supplemented from the outside by American pressure for unrestricted economic

¹⁶ Coinage linked to and exchangeable with a fixed amount of bullion.

¹⁷ The last three quotations are from Giddens *The Nation-State and Violence*, pp. 154, 155 and 112 respectively.

access, clothed in a rhetoric of freedom and self-determination. For their part, US planners recognized in the early 1940s that 'the British Empire . . . will never reappear and that the United States may have to take its place', that in the light of growing nationalism there was a need to 'avoid conventional forms of imperialism' and that new institutions of international management, such as a United Nations organization, should be developed to meet this need.¹⁸ The point is of course that US hegemony (like British hegemony before it) has reflected and consolidated the forms, possibilities and constraints of international power in a specific historical phase of the world economy, the global political structure and the international military order—and of their mutual interaction which comprises 'the international'. So, for example, playing the directive role in a global nation-state system is already hugely removed from policing a colonial periphery—and what either of them has in common with the Athens of Thucydides is something of a distraction.

In short, if we displace the Realist concern with anarchy, we see that the history of the state-system has a live political content; a moment's glance at this content, and it is apparent that to understand the realm of the political we need a conception of historical agency as a dispersed property of human societies which state organizations will always attempt to mobilize, but which is never reducible to state policy. If, secondly, we redefine sovereignty in the manner suggested, we start to make sense of power as a category because we specify it as a determinate historical configuration of social relations. This in turn throws into relief the changing institutional form of the state, and with it the essential novelty of 'international' power. And at a certain point in this overall process of reformulation, something else comes into view which Realism is incapable of showing us: the emergence and consolidation of a global nation-state system as the universal form of political power in the modern world. What has Realism to tell us about the *differentia specifica* of this unprecedented development? And yet where else is its significance to be registered if not in international relations theory?

¹⁸ Quotations are from members of the Council on Foreign Relations, cited in Holly Sklar (ed.), *Trilateralism* (Boston, 1989), pp. 146 and 149.