ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Rationality and history in political realism: The predominance of instrumentalism and the problem of theorizing substantive change

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One of the main criticisms of political realism in International Relations theory has been that it poorly explains historical change. While some representatives of realism have paid a great deal of attention to historical alterations, realism, in general, does not offer a satisfactory account of substantive change. Interestingly, the same problem is largely faced by postpositivists, who, while criticising realists, appear to be not very well-prepared to offer a qualitative alternative. The present article aims at identifying some problems in the conceptualizations of historical change in realism, which are connected to too narrow treatments of rationality by realists. The linkage between the treatments of history and of rationality in realism has not been sufficiently covered in the literature yet. The problem was considered with reference to a wide range of examples of realist approaches which seem relevant and, to some degree, representative. The analysis drew on both classical and the most recent works of realists and their interpreters and critics. Besides, some contemporary philosophical views of rationality were examined. The article demonstrated that predominantly instrumentalist approaches to rationality have largely been prevalent in various realist conceptions at different stages of the development of realism. They have led, *inter alia*, to an unhistorical structuralism and/or to an understanding of change as limited to the succession of power relations, and to an underestimation of substantive change that is linked to rational social learning. The author pointed out some ways to correct the respective approaches, which aim at improving the concepts of rationality in International Relations theory.

Keywords: International Relations theory, realism, rationality, history.

Scholars have advanced numerous well-known criticisms of the inability of the realist paradigm in International Relations (IR) to persuasively account for substantive historical change[1]. In this paper, I link the realist misconceptions of history and of *rationality*. This linkage seems essential, but, unfortunately, it has not been explicitly and fully explored yet. Exceptions are few and include the famous critique of neorealism by Richard Ashley where he speaks of instrumental rationality [1]; Nicolas Guilhot has more recently also paid attention to issues of rationality in connection with realist views of history [2]. Besides, in general, the uses of the concept of rationality tend to be too imprecise in IR, and they largely fall behind the contemporary philosophical exploration of rationality. Realists' views of history are often criticized by postpositivist scholars; but their criticisms themselves gravely deface the notion of rationality. I try to contribute to filling these gaps.

I do not wish to make realism into a straw man. I readily recognize both its richness and non-uniformity. All this complexity is impossible to exhaust in one article, and I will concentrate on some realist writings which are the most relevant and, to some extent, representative. Quite different, and sometimes seemingly opposed, ideas are often brought together under the same title of realism. Certainly, one finds in realist writings attempts to formulate putatively 'eternal laws'. But it would be incorrect to reduce the actual philosophical depth of realism to a crude historical determinism, materialist or other. Not all realists were structuralists. Rob B. J. Walker, for example, reminds us that a historicist line of thinking much more sensitive to change can be found in realism as well [3]. Over the last few years, there has been a growing interest in rediscovering the significant attention to history that was paid by many thinkers traditionally identified as realists (see, e. g. [4; 2; 5]).

And yet, for all that, realists' theories misconceive some aspects of history that seem fundamental. The hypothesis that I will explore in this article is that this is largely because of impoverished and obsolete philosophical views of rationality from which many realists have proceeded. Namely, realists have tended to restrict practical rationality to its *instrumental* side. Instrumentalism presupposes that rationality is only a property of *means*, and not of *substantive ends*. This does not allow to rationally explore the sources of actors' end goals and their transformation, and to compare them. Instrumentalism largely accounts for realism's famous weakness in explaining change, especially ideational and peaceful. Meanwhile, numerous contemporary philosophers seem to agree that rationality cannot be reduced to mere narrow instrumentality (see [6; 7, p. 169, 214; 8, p. 762; 9]). It should be admitted that, for most realists, the content of actors' ends is not absolutely empty, waiting to be filled arbitrarily — actors must have such very basic goals as survival, security and order. Nevertheless, while these goals are no doubt very important to bear in mind, they are not sufficiently informative as to the specific substance of different actors' 'national interests'. Beyond the fundamental physical sense, survival, security and order can be conceptualized differently. For example, does a specific actor relate its security to the preservation of a certain territory, an ideology, a set of institutions, or an identity? And, to be sure, actors have many goals besides those ones. The ideational contents of the 'interest' beyond physical survival, security and order are most often politically contested inside the

[1] Some theses contained in this article were presented at the 11th Pan-European Conference on International Relations (13–16 September 2017, Barcelona) in the author's paper 'Misconceiving Rationality, Misconceiving Substantive Historical Change: Theory and Politics of History in the Realist International Relations Paradigm'.

collective actors, e. g., by various groups within a state. They are historically changing. It is in assessing the rationality and historicity of these different ideational contents that IR as a social science is strongly interested. Yet, they are very difficult to study with merely instrumental conceptions of rationality.

Definitions of rationality, given its very nature, can only be tentative. We may provisionally accept that, '[f]or beliefs, desires, and actions, at least, rationality is well-groundedness, however different the grounds we stand on' [9, p. 185]. Rationality aims 'to arrive at and act upon all-things-considered judgments' [10, p. 23]. Note that rationality is not a static, but an inherently developing concept. It presupposes continuous learning. Rationality only implies *seeking* 'all-things-considered judgements', which does not mean that such idealized judgements are actually achieved. To be rational, one must consider relevant things; one need not have actually 'considered *all* things', which may be prohibitively complex or even nonsensical (and thus irrational). Being a notion that recognizes its own imperfection and aims at continuous improvement, rationality should be clearly differentiated from rationalism as an *ideology* and from rationalization as an *appearance* of rationality. Rationality should also not be severed from ethics. On the contrary, the development of rationality that is understood not merely instrumentally is closely related to ethical development, although their relation is complex. There is nothing incoherent in holding that, very often, if there has been historical learning in terms of substantive rationality in a certain case, there has also been ethical improvement linked to that. It is keeping in mind these tentative explications regarding rationality that I will analyze its connections to history.

A final preliminary remark on rationality is in order. Realists are often criticized for applying rationality as an individual-level feature to states, which are internally complex collective entities. Discussing this would be much beyond the scope of the paper and quite far from its concern. Suffice it to note, however, that we need not *a priori* rule out the possibility that rationality may be so conceptualized as to apply to collective actors, not only to individuals. For example, Carol Rovane provides an interesting (though of course debatable) analysis of the possibility that rationality should not be confined only within an individual organism or consciousness. In her view, nothing prevents a group of individuals *as a whole* from being committed to achieving 'all-things-considered judgements', i. e. from seeking a collective rationality. Their individual rational capacities would, according to Rovane, be so structured with regard to one another as to produce a single 'rational point of view' and, thus, a 'group person'. In Rovane's account, such a 'group person' need not infringe on the individual personhoods of those individuals who constitute it at that [10]. We do not have to dwell at length on Rovane's hypotheses, some of which are not persuasive. Still, we may explore the possibility that, in some sense and to some degree, groups are capable of rationality. To be sure, when discussing any accounts of rationality or personhood, we have to duly respect the individual rationalities and personhoods of human individuals. We can fully take this into account and simultaneously study ways in which a group of people can think and act jointly in a rational manner. So, the problem of realism is not so much that it has invoked rationality as such as a feature of collectives, but rather that it has clarified insufficiently how this rationality is understood and formed.

Returning to the main concern of the article, what are, then, the problems related to instrumentalism and history? Stated briefly, the evident problem with *structural* realist theories is that they suggest immutable, ahistorical structures. These may be human na-

ture or an anarchical international system. The actors in the system follow their subjective goals with the help of technical rationality, and there seems to be no way to assess the more substantive rationality of their goals, interactions, or the dynamics of change (see also [1]). Any variation to be found in the system comes down to shifts in power distribution, which sometimes leads to the establishment of a coercive hegemony (most often temporary). These alterations may of course be called changes of structures, but the underlying logic remains without much qualitative change, if any.

In its turn, the *historicist* current in realism has, on the face of it, some advantages for theorizing historical change. Historicists stress the constant flux of norms, practices and rationalizations. Yet, if historicist realists are more 'historical', it is in one particular sense — namely, in their concern with the uniqueness and incommensurability of different historical epochs. Historicists are, however, still blind to another important aspect of history. They are unable to offer a rational analysis of substantive historical change, of its direction, and of comparison between epochs. Historicists (interestingly, fairly like post-positivists) often verge on absolute contingency and relativism unable to specify reasons why concrete changes occur.

Ironically, the structuralist and historicist ideal types of realism may melt into each other, which does not resolve the problems, however. If the very international structure in structuralism is *anarchic* (and hegemony temporary), the anarchy can accommodate very much because its meaning is almost empty. It can accommodate not only the simple redistributions of power, but also the historicist constant succession of different eras, if those eras are understood as different power configurations. On the other hand, the historicists can admit that, however important the historical changes, the underlying structural logic of competition for power is preserved. Both approaches could easily agree that everything changes, and yet everything remains essentially the same… What would be difficult, in any case, is to theorize substantive change within such a perspective.

Early modern dilemmas of rationality and history: Machiavelli and Hobbes

R. B. J. Walker presented Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes as exemplars of historicist and structuralist approaches, respectively [3]. Indeed, these two towering figures of the early modernity provide very interesting historical and logical starting points for discussing the dilemmas of modern realism. To be sure, my intention is not to untangle the full complexity of their legacy, but to highlight certain relevant points.

Machiavelli's understanding of rationality was characteristic of the nascent modernity. The widespread ancient and medieval belief in objective rationality and unity of the world and of history gave way to subjective understandings of them (see also [6]). Machiavelli's worldview stressed 'discontinuities', not continuities [11, p. 204]. Thus, Sheldon Wolin[2] wrote that for Machiavelli, '[h]istory was conceived not as a smoothly flowing continuum, but as a process which irrupted in destructive frenzy' [11, p. 204]. Different spheres of life — politics among them — were also separated from each other and governed by their own autonomous principles. These differences across time and space seemed even more

[2] Wolin provided some interesting interpretations of Machiavelli and Hobbes on which I largely rely below, but we do not have to agree with him in all respects here or elsewhere, to be sure.

unbridgeable in the relations between polities and nations, each with its own interests and *reason* [11, p. 199, 204]. In this context, rationality was conceptualized by Machiavelli mostly in instrumental terms. In principle, his political science was designed so as to provide efficient means to any political actors, even to antagonistic states. It was intended not to serve any specific ideological purposes, but to solve a concrete 'problem' [11, p. 181–182]. Machiavelli, then, introduced a disjunction very important for modern political science — the one between end goals, which are often treated as given and unanalyzable from the point of view of rationality, and means, which are largely believed to be the only appropriate subject matter for rational analysis [11, p. 184–185].

The foregoing does not mean, of course, that Machiavelli did not have his own preferences and ideals, the best-known of which was Italian unity [12, p. 87–90]. He also did offer an ethic which he believed corresponded to the specificity of politics. This was a typical realist ethic requiring prudence, will, a sense of concrete circumstances and of consequences, and the choice of a lesser possible evil [11, p. 182, 186–187, 194–195]. Wolin thinks that this ethic made Machiavelli not a pure instrumentalist [11, p. 194].

Yet, the problem with such conceptions of rationality and ethics is that they border on relativism. It was important to free science from ideology parading as 'reason' and 'goodness'. But that could at the same time mean banishing any normative analysis from political inquiry. Meanwhile, can this ever be done? Is it always desirable? Most often, it seems, normative considerations preserve their importance anyway; and, worse, if the scholar is unwilling to analyze them or unaware of them, they become untheorized givens. The preferences of particular scholars (and of political actors) may be and are often ethically laudable, but the problem is that their analyses of rationality confined to efficiency run the risk of being instrumentalized for other, inadmissible, purposes (see also [11, p. 185]). The choice of end goals not assessed from a rational viewpoint always risks being arbitrary. Prudence, will, a sense of circumstances and of consequences, and the choice of a lesser evil are ethically relevant only if we can rationally clarify sufficiently which ends they serve. To reduce rationality to efficiency in pursuing pre-given ends shuts out the possibilities for critique and historical transformation. It was, of course, important to dissociate rationality from the imposition of absolutist ethical 'truths' upon political actors. Yet, there was no need to dissociate rationality from ethics altogether. The resulting picture of politics was that of a domain divorced from intrinsic ethical ideals, a domain which 'held only a necessary and not an ultimate value'; thus, '[t]he exteriorization of virtue was but the symbol of man's alienation from his political world' [11, p. 195, see also p. 211–213] (see also [13] on Machiavelli and ethic).

It is not surprising that Machiavelli stressed constant historical change (see, e. g., [11, p. 180, 190–193; 4; 3]). It should be admitted that, explicitly, he was not a thoroughgoing historical relativist at that. He tried to identify certain patterns in history. For such a thinker as Machiavelli, 'timeless reason and timeless faith' could certainly no longer serve as yardsticks; yet, he believed that such a positive 'timeless' yardstick was represented by the achievements of the ancient Roman Republic [11, p. 193]. And the Roman experience could, in his view, be used in later epochs because historical epochs were not wholly incommensurable (see [14; 11, p. 193]). Machiavelli also identified successive cycles of 'order' and 'disorder' in states; he seemed to associate order with 'good' and disorder with 'evil' (cited in [11, p. 192–193]).

Nevertheless, Machiavelli could hardly avoid problems of historical relativism. He did not have substantive rational criteria for comparing historical epochs and identifying processes of social learning. This is not surprising given that rationality and ethics were reduced to efficient pursuit of subjective interests or to the very basic goal of order. His preference for a particular historical period — ancient Rome — remained therefore arbitrary (besides, it verged on a simplistic story of a 'golden age' and subsequent decline). Later, most realists abandoned even the search for such preferred historical periods. All that remained to them was ceaseless ebb and flow of rise and decline of powers, of successive anarchy and hegemony, ebb and flow without much substantive meaning.

Machiavelli's picture of politics was that of 'a universe hushed in moral stillness: there were no prefigured meanings, no implicit teleology' [11, p. 201]. Such views were characteristic of the beginning modernity and of its later critical periods. A similar disenchantment with old universalist concepts of rationality and history was to be repeated by the classical political realists of the 20th century. Ironically, essentially the same line has been continued by contemporary postpositivists.

Thomas Hobbes represented in many respects a very different thinker compared to Machiavelli. According to Walker, for Hobbes's structuralism 'time and change constitute a problem to be overcome … by attempting to abandon time entirely' [3, p. 74]. It would be inaccurate to say that Hobbes neglected history entirely, but he doubtlessly attempted to show that reason was superior to it. History consisted, in his view, of separate facts and experiences, it could only promote prudence, all of which were subjective and uncertain. Unlike Machiavelli, Hobbes thought that they therefore could not serve as an appropriate foundation for politics. Reason, in turn, could provide such a solid foundation. Political rationality was, at that, very much like that on which mathematics built. While for physicists who studied nature rationality was rather conceived as correspondence with the external word, for both mathematicians and political philosophers rationality was a matter of internal coherence. This was largely because both mathematics and politics consisted not in discovery (always uncertain) of an objective world, but in developing exact idealizations that *people themselves* constructed and changed. Politics, according to Hobbes's perspective, should be a system of consistent agreed-upon meanings and rules forming a kind of logical language (see [11, p. 218–222, 225–228, 239]). In this sense, Hobbes could be called a constructivist, however nontraditional that may sound for IR theory.

But what was Hobbes's view of rationality that should order politics? He seemed ambiguous on this point. On the one hand, in some places Hobbes leaned towards objectivity. He wrote that 'reasoning aright' leads to 'general, eternal, and immutable truth', which is superior to 'the expectation of the most prudent' [15, p. 442]. The state of nature out of which Hobbes sought to find a way may be read in epistemological and ethical terms. In this reading, Hobbes condemned the state of nature precisely because it signified 'an anarchy of meanings' [11, p. 230], a conflict of subjective, instrumental reasons, each with its own definition of good or evil [11, p. 230–231]. Yet, on the other hand, there was a powerful subjective tendency, too. Hobbes was a genuinely modern thinker in that he could no longer speak of an absolutely objective, detached reason. His philosophical nominalism prevented him from doing that. And ironically, he himself largely approached ethical relativism and a purely instrumental conception of rationality, much like Machiavelli. Rationality then simply came down to efficiency in the endless pursuit of subjective interests [11, p. 228, 248–249].

Who could provide rationality for politics? Was a Leviathan, the state power, the only means for this? Again, Hobbes was not wholly clear. Amartya Sen has recently argued against the predominant interpretation according to which, for Hobbes, justice was meaningless outside the state. Sen believes that Hobbes admitted the possibility of some — or even all — people agreeing to live according to justice without a state. Sen remarks that, logically, the Hobbesian Leviathan could be created to enforce justice only if some idea of justice had *already* existed before its creation (see [16, p. 262–263, 266–267, 270, note 6]). Nevertheless, the tendency in Hobbes that has received more attention among scholars — including IR realists — is that state power is the only prerequisite for defining justice [15, p. 85–87]. According to this second Hobbesian line of thought, it was the state that transformed the epistemological and ethical anarchy of the state of nature into order. The Leviathan became 'a Great Definer, a sovereign dispenser of common meanings, a "publique reason"' par excellence [11, p. 232]. Political rationality, then, became exclusively linked 'not with truth, or intrinsic validity, but with certainty' [11, p. 233]. This certainty's only basis was the establishment of state's force. So, '[a]t bottom… a deep irrationalism pervaded Hobbesian society, for the sovereign could assign any content he wished to public meanings' [11, p. 233]. In a precisely instrumentalist vein, rationality is reduced to technical consistency, while the end goals can be filled in with almost any *content*. Of course, internal consistency seems a necessary condition for any rational system, epistemological, ethical or political. But it may not be a sufficient condition for clarifying the system's rationality: in principle, any number of internally consistent systems may be created, which does not mean that each of them will be rational. This instrumentalist Hobbesian solution, then, does not avoid subjectivism against which it was, in principle, intended. It simply elevates subjectivism to the level of the Leviathan. And the problem becomes especially acute for international relations, as the mutual relations between different Leviathans seem to remain in the state of epistemological, ethical and political anarchy. To be sure, all this is not to deny the *value* of political order and the importance of states in guaranteeing it. It is just to question the idea that *any* power guarantees political rationality and justice, and the idea that understanding between states (and other actors) is meaningless for guaranteeing them.

How could history be conceived according to this reading of Hobbesian rationality? As noted above, Hobbes did not neglect history altogether. It would be perhaps too simplistic to claim that Hobbes had 'nothing that we would today call an historical sense' [17, p. 164]. But, firstly, if he considered history as mere succession of various facts and experiences, he undeniably valued the exactness of political reason much more. Reason was unnecessarily opposed to history.

Moreover, secondly, it seems that Hobbes believed that if history could have whatever meaning and unity at all, it was reason alone that could ensure those meaning and unity. But if rationality itself was subjective, if it could only mean the one established by the Leviathan's power, very interesting consequences for history ensued. Consider history's relation with the state of nature. Perhaps, the state of nature was for Hobbes not only a theoretical abstraction, but a real historical possibility threatening every society. Yet, at the same time, the descent of a society into the state of nature meant also for this society a *cessation* of its meaningful history itself (see [11, p. 236–237]). That is, if the state of nature meant absolute anarchy in knowledge and ethics, it also meant the destruction of 'social existence, a suspended moment which threatened to initiate a reversal of time' [11,

p. 237]. Certainly, it is indeed probable that if there are no shared meanings and rationality, there is no history in any meaningful sense. Yet, if rationality was confined within the Leviathan, it meant that history could also be meaningful only *inside* it. But here, at least two questions arise. For one thing, how could Hobbes conceive of a qualitative historical change even *inside* the state if its rationality was depicted as a rather unchanging system of meanings whose sole purpose was to ensure order? What room was there for qualitative change? On the other hand, if history could have no meaning *outside* of the Leviathan, then did *international* history not become, strictly speaking, meaningless and impossible? Was there room for meaningful historical change in the international sphere at all?

Hobbes's thought, thus, represented a bold attempt to comprehend and control politics and history through rationality and science. Yet, the very construction of political rationality was largely based on power; indeed, different Leviathans could create their own narrow rationalities and histories. And to this extent Hobbesian rationality and history remained confined only within states and seemed meaningless in international relations. Many contemporary realists have repeated Hobbes's approach of combining a scientific orientation with a subjective understanding of rationality itself, which has led them to much the same problems.

So, at least in some of their ideas and each in its own way, Machiavelli and Hobbes came close to similar dilemmas of instrumentalism and historical relativism. These dilemmas would become characteristic of modern realist thought on international relations.

Rationality and history in academic IR realism

Since the emergence of IR as a distinct discipline, the most interesting discussions regarding rationality and history are perhaps to be found in the works of classical realists. In many respects, their philosophical depths and ambiguities can be related to the crisis of modernity in the first half of the 20th century. Hans Morgenthau is representative in this regard. To be sure, Morgenthau's legacy cannot be reduced to a simplified determinism, materialism or cynicism. A number of leading scholars have recently revised classical realism so as to emphasize its strong critiques of rationalism and of rationalist views of history (see, e. g., [18, p. 7–8; 2; 5]). These realist critiques were not dissimilar to those presented by modern-day postpositivists. Echoing Weber and even Nietzsche, Morgenthau tried to analyze 'the difficulties (and even the impossibility) of escaping the disenchanted condition of the modern world' [18, p. 8]. Morgenthau's reflections were largely 'a struggle with negativity, temporality and contingency in the wake of the crisis of foundationalism in late modernity' [5, p. 354]. But was that struggle successful?

The most philosophically rich book to consider here seems to be Morgenthau's 'Scientific Man *vs.* Power Politics' [19]. Much like Machiavelli and Hobbes, Morgenthau wrote at a moment when the old beliefs in a universal reason and a rational harmony of the world seemed untenable. The book powerfully challenged the obsolete rationalism and scientism of modern society, and many of the criticisms were appropriate. Yet, the kind of rationalism and scientism that Morgenthau criticized was indeed all too easy to criticize, especially by simplifying some of its aspects. Thus, Morgenthau was certainly right in deriding the conception of reason that placed it 'before and above all history', a reason that was the absolute guide for all of history [19, p. 39]. Such views of reason are obviously misplaced. But perhaps they were never held except by the most superficial rationalists.

Rationality can be and is nowadays understood in much more nuanced terms than an ahistorical, unchanging 'reason'. Indeed, rationality cannot be unchanging because it presupposes learning from the past and present. Morgenthau, then, was right in criticizing a simplistic rationalism, but such criticism was quite trivial. If it was directed against rationality, it missed the point because rationality is not the same as an obsolete rationalist ideology of a particular historical epoch. To equate a rationalist ideology and rationality is to make a parody of the latter. It would have been much more fruitful to criticize this old rationalism and *at the same time* to offer a corrected vision of rationality. But precisely this Morgenthau failed to do.

One of the ambiguities was that Morgenthau was caught in a false dilemma: he could not subscribe to an unproblematic universal reason anymore, but, on the other hand, he was not explicitly prepared to embrace a full-blown subjectivism. He seemed to neglect the possibility that rationality could be understood as a historically developing concept, but not purely subjectively at that. Instead, at different times Morgenthau exhibited one of the two extremes. The subjectivist trend manifested itself, for instance, when he stressed that almost any philosophical ideas could not be intrinsically true, but were products of particular historical epochs and social interests [19, p. 15, 24, 77]. Morgenthau even criticized the 'unhistoric abstractness' of liberals and Marxists [19, p. 52]. Yet, it is in the same book that Morgenthau wrote about 'the eternal laws' of society [19, p. 187].

Morgenthau was aware of the weaknesses and dangers of purely subjective understandings of rationality. He deplored the fact that modern scientism was powerful in explaining 'many isolated things', and yet unable to show 'their *purpose* and *value* for man' (italics mine. — *N. G.*) [19, p. 110]. He also deplored the reduction of ethics to facticity, utility and currently dominating powers [19, p. 20–21, 91, 146, 150, 178].

Nevertheless, Morgenthau himself failed to propose a view of rationality that could go considerably beyond instrumentalism. He wrote: 'Reason, far from following its own inherent impulses, is driven towards its goals by the irrational forces the ends of which it serves' [19, p. 134]. And such instrumentalism, again, could not avoid the risks that Morgenthau himself had identified. Could it substantiate the '*purpose*' or '*value*' of politics for man? Did it not run a risk of reducing ethics to subjective utility?

It was not surprising that instrumentalism hindered Morgenthau from seeing substantive rational developments in history. Partly, his works exhibited historicist, relativist views. Today, 'strong affinities between Morgenthau and critical historicist currents' are well recognized in the literature [5, p. 357] (see also [2]). And to this extent Morgenthau faced the weaknesses of historicism mentioned above. A seemingly opposed trend consisted in his trying to formulate 'the eternal laws' of history. But how could he have done that? Indeed, Morgenthau relied on 'concepts such as 'power' and 'interest' as ideal types that indicate the possibility of making human conduct intelligible, and to an extent predictable, in a world that is in constant flux' [5, p. 369]. Yet, in line with instrumentalism, he could hardly rationally clarify what the substantive content and purpose of those notions of power and interest were, and how they changed historically. And, therefore, there was no large difference between historical variation allowed by Morgenthau and his 'eternal' categories. Again, everything could change — only to remain subject to the same logic of power relations.

Thus, Morgenthau's attempts to formulate 'the eternal laws' (which could also be termed 'structures' if one wishes) could add little substantive. And it seems that later real-

ists have continued to be trapped within the same deadlocks. It should be noted that the turn of many of them to an explicit — and at times ostentatious — 'scientific' orientation has hardly been able to overcome the difficulties. Scientific analysis has been mostly used by realists for thrashing out the efficiency of means that serve actors' mere survival or subjective and unexamined ends or perspectives (for critiques see, e.g., [1; 20]). Similarly, moreover, science itself has been largely regarded as *subjective* building of models that need not reflect an external reality, but can rather construct their own realities (see [21]). Realists' turn to 'science' means at times a mere metaphorical invocation of scientific terms; in other cases, it is the construction of quite sophisticated models. But this does not alter a fundamental subjectivism about rationality. Many contemporary realists are heirs to that Hobbesian impulse that aims to comprehend and control politics through science and rationality, which, however, are construed as founded upon particular subjective powers and interests. To take a central example of neorealist theorizing, Kenneth Waltz understood rationality as whatever factor that helps an actor to survive in an anarchic structure, and hardly anything more substantive [22, p. 76–77]. There is no place for history in any rich sense here. The structure is unhistorical, and the whole variation within it is reduced to meaningless interactions and changes of powers, with 'rationality' awarded to the ones that have managed to survive longer than others (see also [1]).

It is interesting to observe basically the same problematique in a wide variety of the most recent realist works. Even a book-length proposal for a 'rational theory of international politics' fails to theorize rationality (its central notion!) in sufficient detail and beyond the pursuit of fixed ends [23, p. 2, 14, 19–20, 23]. One also notes that current theorizing, while facing the same difficulties, is significantly less sophisticated in philosophical terms than that of many early classical realists.

A few recent examples are worth considering. They are, to some extent, representative of more historicist or structuralist, 'traditionalist' or 'scientifically'-oriented works and include some of the major developments in contemporary realism.

At one end of the realist spectrum one finds, for instance, David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith who continue the historicist line and are rather traditionalists regarding methods. They advocate a 'state-interested, historically particularist and prudentially calculated' approach [24, p. 936]. As earlier in Morgenthau, we are presented with a false dichotomy: either a derided 'abstract rationalist rigour' or the traditional realist alternative of 'reasonableness' and 'Prudence — phronesis or practical reason' [24, p. 938, 944]. Accordingly, they advocate a case-by-case, 'practical ethics' [24, p. 939]. Certainly, it is important that any ethics be prudential and practical enough. But it is unjustified to *reduce* ethics to current practice. Ethics implies a *normative* attitude towards practice, including the possibility of its change. It also implies at least some principles that cannot be arbitrarily modified from case to case. And the 'prudence' and 'reasonableness' become ethically relevant once we can rationally clarify sufficiently which ends they serve, as was mentioned regarding Machiavelli. But precisely because Jones and Smith do not offer a non-instrumentalist view of rationality, they risk an arbitrary reduction of ethics to serving currently dominant interests. Ironically, they themselves seem to agree with the quotation from Justus Lipsius that 'Prudence … is in reality … changeable in every respect' (cited in [24, p. 948]). The question is, then, which ends prudence will be made to serve.

Unsurprisingly, Jones and Smith are unable to rationally theorize particular historical changes or continuities, which remain quite arbitrary within their perspective. It is

difficult to imagine 'a prudent appreciation of history' [24, p. 952] if the very prudence is subjective and relative to unexamined goals. The authors end up in a typical realist paradox: '*Contingency* represents the only true, lasting, *norm* in the international system' (italics mine. — *N. G.*) [24, p. 952]. To be sure, if one empties the notion of norm to reduce it to whatever contingencies, one feels free to explain an event or choose a policy as one pleases. However, one also runs the risks of unfalsifiability and relativism.

Neoclassical realism which has become fashionable over the past two decades has not offered a major solution either. For instance, Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell have just claimed to propose perhaps the most ambitious research programme to drive realism forward. They seem to discard the Waltzian blind evolutionary perspective and to promise to answer more substantively what it means for states to behave rationally, when they behave irrationally, and how domestic politics impacts their policies. They also promise to account for major international political change over almost all time spans. However, they have not succeeded much on both counts. Again, they have not filled the notion of rationality with much substantive content beyond the very basic goal of survival. The specific content of national interest remains underexplored; and its formulation appears to be left to foreign policy elites. Historical change does not impact anarchy and functional equivalence of states, let alone actors' ideas or identities. Change remains confined to the ebb and flow of actors' power, a kind of Brownian motion whose whole variation is defined by actors' greater or lesser efficiency (see [25]).

Consider also Randall Schweller's recent extravagant book intended as more 'scientifically' oriented (see [26, especially p. 10, 22–23, 106–108, 139–140]). He calls in ancient myths mixed with phraseology from thermodynamics only to justify the old realist pictures of rationality and of history. Rationality for him seems to come down to survival or the imposition of order. His depiction of history is inspired by ideas going back to Heraclitus (it is cyclical and dominated by conflict) and Plato (the inscrutable and blind decay and chaos can be curbed by order). Only two (question-begging) sources of international order are supposed: wars for hegemony and global cataclysms. History is confined to the familiar realist dead-end choice of either anarchy or hegemonic order. Order, as always, is depicted as precarious: to use Friedrich Kratochwil's critical comment on such realist ideas, '[t]he structure, once set up by the hegemon, shares the same fate as Platonic ideas in real life: history becomes the story of decay' [27, p. 76]. It is also hard not to recall here Karl Popper's well-known denunciation of such views of history [28, vol. 1, p. 1–212].

Finally, at the 'scientific' and rather structuralist end of the realist spectrum we find Dominic D. P. Johnson and Bradley A. Thayer. Their approach seems to be an almost grotesque example of the attempts to lend to a simplified realism the appearance of 'scientific objectivity'. Johnson's and Thayer's core claim is very simple: because humans biologically evolved in anarchical settings, 'human nature' exhibits strong features that are in line with offensive realism, that is, '[h]umans, particularly men, are strongly self-interested, often fear other groups, and seek more resources, more power, and more influence' [29, p. 5]. With this simple claim, they purport to provide a theory of everything, recognizing no scope conditions. We are simply told that 'anarchy' covers the whole history of life [29, p. 4–5] and that the 'evolutionary theory of offensive realism is unlimited in *time*' [29, p. 12, italics in the original]. Anarchy (whose specific meaning is never clarified!) and human nature conditioned by it are treated as unhistorical. But the 'theory is also unlimited in *domain*' [29, p. 12]. It pretends to explain events involving any actors, at any level, inside

or outside the states, and in any sphere — provided there are humans with their 'nature' whose drives will always include 'egoism, dominance, and ingroup/outgroup bias' [29, p. 11]. This 'nature' is only tamed by hierarchy, and anarchy simply lifts the barriers to its impulses, but the very impulses remain the same [29, p. 4, 12–13]. Johnson and Thayer believe that they have significantly extended John Mearsheimer's offensive realism: while the latter approach applies 'only' since 1648 and to the state interactions, theirs encompasses all of human history [29, p. 4, 12–13, 19]. Indeed, compared to Johnson's and Thayer's 'limitless' theory, even the traditional offensive realism becomes an 'exemplar' of modesty and sensitivity to historical change.

What could be the role of rationality in Johnson's and Thayer's theory? Offensive realism has reduced rationality to trying to increase power under anarchy [29, p. 4]. Johnson and Thayer have given the power maximization a biological interpretation, thus taking it out of the domain of rationality altogether. If power maximization is a matter of biology, it is not a matter of *reasons* people weigh and choose. If rationality does play a role within their perspective, it can only be a very impoverished one confined to imposing discipline upon conflicting actors.

We are basically offered an old Hobbesian alternative: either there is anarchy, or it can be limited through the only means — a coercive hierarchy. Hierarchy, however, can be solid within groups (e. g., states), but not between them. And although Johnson and Thayer allow for a wide range of actors' possible behaviours, it is hard to see any substantive variation here. Actors can either compete or cease to do so only if a *force* guarantees their cooperation or if cooperation satisfies their interests whose content remains, as always, underspecified (see [29, p. 9–10, 12–14, 18]).

Of course, such a theory faces all the problems related to the utmost impoverishment of rationality and history. First, not only have Johnson and Thayer returned to the once abandoned notion of a fixed human nature in politics. They have tried to defend it through the prestige of science. They congratulate themselves that '[a]t the dawn of the 21st century, an era that will be dominated by science at least as much as philosophy', they can at last rely not on speculations, but on 'scientific knowledge' of human nature [29, p. 5]. However, such naive attempts to sideline philosophy and embrace 'scientific' rigor have been made in social sciences many times before, without much success. They run a double risk: by sidelining philosophy, they sideline critical thinking, and they simplify the sciences, biology in this case. Johnson and Thayer fail to specify sufficiently the relative importance of biological and cultural factors, and the interplay between them. Second, as noted above, the notion of interest is underspecified. Its content is limited to acquiring material resources, above all those needed for the survival of an individual organism [29, p. 6–8]. But is this content the most interesting one for social scientific enquiry that deals with complex interests of large social collectives? Third, the authors make quite voluntarist leaps between all kinds of biological and cultural levels — those of genes, organisms, political leaders and states. They seem to recognize that this is question-begging. But either they do not dwell upon the problems or reaffirm the decisive role of 'human nature' [29, p. 2, 17]. Anarchy remains the same at every level. Fourth, Johnson and Thayer largely see the boundaries between groups as natural and not as historically constructed. While they speak about ingroup hierarchies and anarchy between groups, they are unable to specify how the boundaries *between* groups came to be in the first place. Finally, Johnson and Thayer even allow for 'positive political change' [29, p. 19]. But can that be a historical

change in any substantive sense? Within their own perspective, it is difficult to imagine anything more than, at best, a new configuration of powers that will somehow limit the eternal competition. Conversely, if the actors are capable of rational social learning and of genuinely overcoming previous conflicts, then their very theory of an eternal competition rooted in 'nature' is refuted. Indeed, qualitative historical changes refute the theory.

Conclusions: the blind spots of realism and possible correctives

I tried to show that because of a dominant instrumentalism regarding rationality, realism is ill-equipped to theorize substantive historical change. This concerns both its more historicist and more structuralist/'scientific' varieties. History is mostly limited to eternal anarchy curbed at times by a powerful hegemon. Quantitative variations in power relationships may be inscribed in unhistorical structures, which are simply postulated or 'scientifically proven'. Powers are in flux, the logic of competition for power is eternal. But, in any case, there is hardly any intelligible qualitative variation.

To be sure, these problems touch the question of what substantive historical change actually is, what a genuine novelty is. This is a difficult philosophical question. Interestingly, the same dilemmas as those of realism are faced by many contemporary postpositivists. How can we conceive of a genuine novelty if every event seems in some senses *related* to the previous events and in other senses *distinct* from them? How can we understand event, a term so beloved by postpositivists? Their answers basically oscillate between two extremes. Either *anything* is novel merely because it is an occurrence *distinct* from others, or a genuine novelty is only such an occurrence that is completely *unrelated* to the existing system. Either solution is, however, unsatisfactory. If novelty refers to any historical difference, it becomes trivial and bald. And if novelty is always a marvelous total break with the previous system, then history becomes an unintelligible series of incommensurable eras (see [30]). Postpositivists, much like realists, lack a means to show how one epoch can emerge out of the previous one because, even if partly, of a process of rational social learning.

What is, then, a possible way forward? What should approaches to rationality in IR take into account to correct the flaws identified? It should again be stressed that rationality today is most often understood to be much richer than instrumentalism allows. Rationality allows for theorizing history beyond a mere series of narrow 'rationalities' of various epochs and/or actors.

At the same time, I should immediately make another crucial point. Subjectivist, instrumentalist notions of rationality may be used beneficially — namely, when they guarantee actors' freedom of choice of their own acceptable ends and act as a precaution against all sorts of metaphysical pretences to the 'absolute', 'single' rationality, truth, or objectivity. In this regard, realism has helped to overcome such naive and sometimes dangerous absolutist doctrines as excessive rationalism or trust in unavoidable progress towards a specific *telos*. But there is actually no need to present instrumentalism for the sake of freedom as the only alternative to 'rationality'/'rationalism' depicted as unhistorical bogeymen. The choice between instrumentalism, let alone relativism, and an absolute 'rationality' is misplaced. It has been shown in much of contemporary philosophy (e. g., see [7, p. x]). Unfortunately, such a dichotomy continues to dominate many debates within IR. Thus, the 'opposition' between 'rationalists' and 'reflectivists' betrays a narrow and

obsolete view of rationality (which here may be confused with rationalism) and frames the debate as though rationality could *exclude* reflection, critique and emancipation. But rationality is a historically developing concept that *includes* reflection, critique and emancipation. It avoids *both* dogmatism and relativism. It should be stressed that rationality is not a notion that contradicts cultural or political diversity (e. g., see [9, p. 189, 193, 233]). As we have noted, realism does not lack an ethical dimension, and some of its ethical values, for example, security, order, balance, pluralism, prudence and modesty, remain important. Yet, rationality need not contradict them. Instead, it can give them substance better than previous realist approaches. In some respects, realism should not be rejected, but corrected and complemented.

Not only does rationality leave room for alteration across space and time, but it unavoidably implies such alteration for it presupposes the constant critical consideration and refinement of ideas. The search for rationality is characterized by self-correction [31, p. xii–xiii, 127–128, 132, 136, 199, note 56], though, of course, it never ends in a 'perfect' rationality. Across time, rationality does not necessarily mean breaking with tradition, although it means the readiness to view it critically [31, p. 128–131]. And, to be sure, substantive enough views of rationality are essential for innovation, which merely instrumental perspectives can barely grasp or promote. Rationality is not a deterministic, non-normative notion. It is normative in the sense that it relates to *reasons* people have to *orient* their behavior, to continue their practices or to change them. The realist emphasis on practices and the practical is certainly important. Yet, it is also important not to be confined within current practices, to see when and why people rise above these practices to change them. If rationality is reduced to dominant practices, there remains no equally good means to pass from an 'is' to an 'ought', to explain why people hold normative attitudes towards preserving or changing the current situation. As a matter of fact, people do not always behave for conscious reasons, let alone best reasons available. Indeed, rationality does not imply absolutely 'best' reasons, but only a horizon of possible betterment. But this does not mean that people never act on good reasons and never learn or that they should not do that. This is especially important to bear in mind to the extent that IR theories have a normative dimension, to the extent that they partake of the construction of the very social world. If people orient their actions in the light of those theories, then the theories should not reduce rationality to current practices alone. To use Kant's words, we should not, 'with the eyes of a mole, fixed upon experience', [32, p. 43] deny reason its guiding authority and transformative potential.

Heikki Patomäki has recently written that society exhibits at least some regular historical patterns, in part due to 'reflexive self-regulation' [33, p. 812]. In other words, there is room, albeit not a guarantee, for rational social learning. There is also room for rational, albeit imperfect, prediction, and for rational correction of our predictions [33, p. 812–813, 815–818]. Even if we challenge the notions of 'stable empirical regularities' or 'decisive tests between theories' [33, p. 818], this would not at all force us to abandon the notion of rationality. On the contrary, we would need more of 'reflexivity', '[r]atonality and openness to learning' [33, p. 818]. Again, the world is neither fixed in an eternal structure nor fully arbitrary. It is complex and fluid, but we need not leap to concluding that history and historical knowledge are absolutely arbitrary and relativist. Patomäki also argues that rational search for knowledge is important 'for ethical and emancipatory reasons' [33, p. 809]. And whereas we may never fully grasp 'truth' or 'reality' [33, p. 809], we are indeed ethically

required to develop our rationality how best we can, correcting it and learning from the past and from an open dialogue with others. Social science becomes especially important in this regard [33, p. 819]. We may say that future is certainly not predetermined, but possibly, as Roy Bhaskar would have it, 'there is a *rational tendential directionality of history* towards an increasing self-determining democratic control over the history of humankind' [33, p. 819]. This might sound too categorical. At every time, we cannot fully grasp or control the direction of change, and rationality remains forever imperfect and contested. But in any case rationality can help us better comprehend, influence and bear responsibility for that direction which is, ultimately, of our own collective making.

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