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Weimar in America: Central European Émigrés, Classical Realism, or How to Prevent History from Repeating Herself

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Introduction

Many of the scholars that are commonly badged as “classical realists” in International Relations (IR) today came from a diverse range of intellectual backgrounds, were often originally from Central Europe, and only turned their academic interests to the field of IR once they had crossed the Atlantic (Greenberg 2014; Rösch 2014a; 2019). This includes scholars, who had left already before fascists were elected into governments across Europe like Nicholas Spykman, Robert Strausz-Hupé, and Carl J. Friedrich (Petzschmann 2014; Rösch 2019; Zajec 2020), but most were forced into emigration after the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 because of their religious beliefs and/or political standpoints. The latter group includes some of the most well-known Western IR scholars and political scientists of the twentieth century, such as Hannah Arendt, John Herz, Hans Morgenthau, Leo Strauss, and Arnold Wolfers.

This chapter reflects particularly on two aspects that influenced realist thought. First, we discuss the specific role their intellectual socialisation in Central European humanities played in the development of their thought. Second, we consider how this thought was put into creative tension with their American interlocutors like Kenneth Thompson, George Kennan, and Reinhold Niebuhr (Rice 2008; Tjalve 2008; Castellin 2014a; 2015a). With this focus, we do not claim that having had to experience the Holocaust in which many of them lost family members and friends and the rise of totalitarian regimes did not play a major part in their intellectual development. It did. Some of the most important contributions to studying Nazi Germany, fascism, and totalitarianism in the twentieth century were penned by émigré scholars. However, it was their intellectual socialisation into discourses of Central European humanities that provided them the initial toolbox to reflect on these experiences. Their status and critical perspective of what Arendt (1978: 65-66) once called a ‘conscious pariah’ and the debates they had in North America further

helped them to refine their thought. Despite intellectual and personal differences, these common experiences helped these scholars to emerge as ‘critical persona[e]’, to use Richard Devetak’s (2018: 3) term, who turned their ruptures and displacements in life into a creative force to warn against ideological absolutisations of life and attempts of social planning.

To cover these desiderata and to highlight these unifying characteristics, while not renouncing their intellectual and personal differences and ambivalences that existed between them and in conversation with American scholars, this chapter is sectioned by a play on words of “unity” and “diversity”. In doing so, we focus on life and work of two scholars who were of particular importance for IR: Morgenthau, arguably one of the most well-known realist scholars in the twentieth century, as a representative of the Central European émigrés who made their careers in the United States, and Niebuhr, a theologian and highly influential public intellectual in mid-twentieth century United States, as a representative of American scholarship that helped to popularise realist thought among wider intellectual circles on the other side of the Atlantic.

Unity in Diversity

While they shared the fate of an often forced migration, Central European scholars that arrived in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s were a diverse group in terms of their intellectual socialisation, their academic backgrounds, their intellectual perception, and their age.

Most of them were trained in law, particularly in the German tradition of *Staatsrecht*, but others had studied philosophy, history, national economics, theology, sociology, and some even had been influenced by new insights gained in psychoanalysis (Rösch 2014a: 4). Having been educated in such a diverse range of disciplines affected their work and influenced the reception they received in the United States. Most remained sceptical about the epistemological opportunities that the behavioural turn in American social sciences promised to offer (Morgenthau 1947), which is why they choose IR as their new intellectual home due to the interdisciplinarity this discipline still offered back then (Rosenfeld 2017). They hoped that this move would provide them the space to nurture their alternative understandings of scholarship. In the late 1960s, Morgenthau (1969), for example, wrote to a former student, who since then had taken up residency in the United Kingdom, that ‘I am sorry to hear that the behaviorist

fashion, which seems to be declining here, is still in full swing in England. But I am sure that it will die there too at its own bareness.'

However, some émigrés also endorsed behavioralism. This was the case for sociologists Marie Jahoda and Paul Lazarsfeld, who had already advanced empirical social research during their time in Vienna by studying the effects of mass unemployment on local communities. Admittedly, both scholars are not commonly considered to have been realists and they were not excelling in IR. However, also émigré IR scholars like Wolfers were receptive to the prospects of the behavioural turn in which intellectuals almost naively portrayed 'themselves as possessors of tools and programs designed for precision social engineering' (Isaac 2009: 398). The situation was different for the so-called second generation of émigré scholars (Daum, Lehmann, and Sheehan 2016), i.e. scholars who had left Europe at an early age and received most if not all of their secondary and tertiary education in the United States. As evidenced in the careers of Henry Kissinger and Heinz Eulau, among this second generation, scholars were often more inclined to immerse themselves more deeply and profoundly in behavioralism after the Second World War than the émigrés who had received their education at universities in cities like Frankfurt, Cologne, Vienna, or Geneva. There were of course exceptions, Judith Shklar (Stullerova 2014) being one of them.

It also has to be noted that not all of them had such a 'brilliant career' (Frei 2001: 74) like Morgenthau or Arendt. And even they had to struggle for their first years in the United States. Morgenthau (1984: 371) noted with relief that the first book that he published in the United States, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, was publicly available only a few weeks after he received tenure at the University of Chicago and Arendt's career only took off after *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published in 1951. Before that, Arendt was working amongst others for the Jewish magazine *Aufbau* and for Schocken Books as an editor. Their struggles were partly due to the fact that also in the United States anti-Semitism was not uncommon, forcing some like Herz and Ossip Flechtheim to start their careers at universities restricted to black American students, and because of the financial constraints on university budgets since the Great Depression in the early 1930s (Greenberg 2014). Some popular at the time like Karl Deutsch, Hajo Holborn, and Waldemar Gurian (Ruzicka 2014; Thümmeler 2014) have since fallen almost into oblivion. Others like historian Christian Mackauer and economist Gerhard Meyer shared the same fate, as they

were brilliant teachers, but did not publish widely (Holborn Gray 2018: 174). Finally, some émigrés like Hans Kelsen never managed to recover their previous positions. While his legal positivism would have offered intellectual links to behavioural social sciences, Kelsen's work was not well received in the United States. William Scheuerman (2014) suggests that Kelsen had been victim of a disciplinary delimitation after the Second World War that many émigré scholars had tried to avoid. This narrowed the intellectual horizons within the disciplines, putting Kelsen on the margins in IR, political science, and law. Furthermore, his former students that made their career in IR and political science like Herz and Eric Voegelin as well as scholars who had personal connections like Morgenthau had reservations about Kelsen's pure theory of law and consequently did not promote it in their disciplines (Rösch 2019).

Diversity in Unity

Even though émigrés formed a very diverse group in terms of their intellectual, social, and also political backgrounds, John Gunnell (1993: 185; similar Hughes 1975: 15) is right to argue that 'there was striking uniformity across a broad spectrum of the émigré experience ... that was in sharp conflict with the values of American social science.'

This uniformity is largely because of experiencing (forced) migration, having had to adapt into different intellectual and academic cultures and to a different lifestyle, as well as their experiences of the downfalls of the Weimar Republic, the Italian monarchy, and the Spanish Republic with the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the Holocaust. As Duncan Bell (2009: 7) writes, theirs 'was a discourse of disillusionment, motivated by the attempt to understand the horrors of the twentieth century.' This turned them into 'wanderer between two worlds', as many émigrés across the spectrum repeatedly put it (Radio Bremen 1962; Herz 1984; Puglierin 2008; Sigwart 2016; Laqueur 2016; Holborn Gray 2016). Many of them frequently returned to Europe to take some time out and reconnect with their intellectual and cultural past (*'Man streicht sich die Seele glatt'*; Arendt 1975). Some even returned for good like Voegelin, Ernst Fraenkel, and Arnold Bergstraesser. More importantly, however, their work continued to be informed by Europe and their experiences. As Douglas Klusmeyer (2005; 2009) convincingly demonstrated, this informed their work to different degrees, but it influenced all of them. For Arendt and

Friedrich, totalitarianism was central to their political thought, Morgenthau (2012; also Rösch 2016) focused more on the question of the political, as he had been much influenced by the Weimar debate on the political led by Carl Schmitt. Herz, by contrast, was most concerned about the thermonuclear revolution and the possibility of destroying life on earth altogether (Munster and Sylvest 2018; Sylvest 2020).

At the same time, however, this unity among émigrés and their difference to American colleagues did not mean that they would have renounced American society, their socio-political values, or their academic world. On the contrary, being eyewitnesses to the decline of democracies throughout Europe, they endorsed American liberal democracy and strived to help prevent the same from happening in the United States what happened in Germany, Spain, and Italy. This did not mean that Morgenthau and other émigrés scholars did not express dissent against their adopted country, when they feared that the United States was on the brink of turning from a liberal state into one that pursued what they called idealistic policies (Rösch 2015; Molloy 2019). As such, Morgenthau was an outspoken critique of US involvement in the Vietnam War, as for him it was a war for independence from French colonial rule. Consequently, he called for what was termed elsewhere an 'ethics of anti-hubris' (Behr and Rösch 2013) to always be self-critical towards one's own positions as the beginning of developing empathy towards others, that is, trying to understand the position of others and the contexts it emerged from without necessarily agreeing with it.

In fact, many of them were public intellectuals or at least sought opportunities to engage with the public, as the émigrés understood their differences to scholarship in the United States, as something that put them into a position where they could compare and gain more nuanced insights about their adopted country. At the same time, it allowed them to seek for communalities in these differences and identify what unites people in all their diversity. As the educationalist and fellow émigré scholar Robert Ulich put it as part of an interview series of a German radio station, because of living on the margins, the émigré 'will realise that we are all humans; with our human weaknesses, but also with immense physical and intellectual possibilities. And he [sic] will work towards realising this duty to humanitarianism' (Radio Bremen 1962: 52).

Unity through Diversity

The proper study of humans, moreover, was not only the essential core of the thought of most of émigré scholars but also the common ground on which the strongest and most durable relationships with some American intellectuals were built. Among these encounters one in particular certainly maintains an extreme importance in the history of classical realism, that is the friendship between Morgenthau and Niebuhr. Although coming from very different social milieus and academic backgrounds, they developed 'a profound intellectual kinship' (Rice 2008, 256), as clearly emerged in their correspondence (Niebuhr 1965a, 1970a; Morgenthau 1965, 1970b). Furthermore, they always stated even a mutual admiration that, over time, has turned into sincere and genuine affection (Morgenthau 1970, 1970a, 1971; Niebuhr 1970). Morgenthau (1962: 109) characterized Niebuhr as perhaps 'the greatest living political philosopher in America', while Niebuhr (1965b: 71) once termed Morgenthau 'the most brilliant and authoritative political realist'.

The great amount of evidence of their constant dialogue has led various authors to divergent interpretations, so much so the proper question is 'who influenced whom the most' (Halliwell 2005: 210). On the one hand, Michael J. Smith (1986: 143) maintained Morgenthau sought to incorporate and secularize Niebuhr's insight in his international theory. On the other, Christoph Frei (2001: 111) dismissed this argument, asserting that Morgenthau made instrumental use of Niebuhr in order to introduce his German intellectual heritage in America. Paradoxically, both these ideas are valid. Once arrived in America, although his own thought had already formed, Morgenthau tried to translate certain Central European ideas in this new context, proving, in this attempt, that Niebuhr had not only been a mere instrument, but his most precious and essential interlocutor. According to Roger Shinn (2003: 185-6), their relationship 'enriched the insights of both men and showed the possibility of communication between worlds of discourse that are too often kept separate', rather than having 'derived their thought' from one another. Politics and religion became two key weapons in order to denounce the sentimental illusions of western liberal culture, to counter the cynical ideologies of totalitarianisms, and to develop a more suitable approach to the world crisis.

Despite their very different worldviews, Niebuhr and Morgenthau elaborated with their political realism a strategy of 'patriotic dissent' (Tjalve 2008) that became particularly evident in their opposition to the Vietnam War. Niebuhr, through what we could define as a 'scepticism of faith', tried to de-mythicize the false sacralisations of modern politics, while Morgenthau, with his 'faith in scepticism', attempted to avoid the most widespread interpretative patterns in order to achieve a more adequate understanding of international politics (Castellin 2015a: 34; also 2014b; 2015b). In this perspective, the different shades of their realism seem to complement each other perfectly.

Niebuhr and Morgenthau agreed on a very broad range of opinions. Nevertheless, their unity is usually detected in the *pars destruens* rather than in the *pars construens* of their discourse. In fact, their commonalities are evident in their harsh criticism against both positivist scientism and sentimental idealism (Castellin 2014a, Rösch 2015). The common ground they shared was considerable as well as undeniable in the ongoing strife against rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism that pursue a limited use of reason and made humans the measure of all things (Morgenthau 1934; 1947: 174; Niebuhr 1932: xxv; 1953: 102). They highlighted the illusions of American liberalism, which seems unable to recognize the inevitability of evil, interest and egoism that permeates political, economic and social life. Furthermore, they not only denounced the erroneous analogy between natural and social world (Morgenthau 1947: 111; Niebuhr 1949: 12; 1953: 80), but targeted also political science and its poverty due to behaviourism (Morgenthau 1955; 1966; Niebuhr 1952: 60). To the claim of the modern scientific method to free-values both opposed and acknowledged that reason was always corrupted by political power, economic interests, and social context (Niebuhr 1956: 15; Morgenthau 1947: 140). Niebuhr (1932: xiv-xv), for instance, stated that 'rational objectivity in a social situation is impossible' because 'reason is always, to some degree, servant of interest'. In this way, Morgenthau (1955: 446) remarked 'the perspective of the observer determines what can be known and how it is to be understood', in consequence 'the truth of political science is of necessity a partial truth'. Thus, overcoming liberal culture illusions can only be achieved by political realism. Only 'more-than-scientific man', observed Morgenthau (1947: 187), proves himself to be 'the true realist' who 'does justice to the true nature of things'. The very object of

the social sciences must to be human nature. In other words, a person is 'not ... a product of nature but as both the creature and the creator of history in and through which his [sic] individuality and freedom of choice manifest themselves' (Morgenthau 1955: 441; also Niebuhr 1941: 150-77; 1949).

Diversity beyond unity?

What divides them, on the contrary, could be identified in a different conceptualisation of power and national interest (Rice 2008: 272-80). The major differences between the authors arose exactly in their understanding of human nature. Even if both shared the assumption of the need of a crucial ethical dimension in all political actions, they diverged on the topic of the roots of morality. Niebuhr developed a view of human nature characterised by sin as well as love. The 'Christian faith', he argued, 'holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter' (Niebuhr 1965a: 39). His political thought was theology-rooted and based on a Christian anthropology. Humans are an *imagines dei*, but also sinners. Niebuhr located evil in the will of human being, in a self-destructive use of freedom, that lead humans to violate *agape*, the law of love (Niebuhr 1941-1943). Morgenthau, instead, whose thought is deeply rooted in the tradition of Continental European philosophy, elaborated a political theory built on psychogenic and praxeological bases. His idea of humanity was therefore strongly influenced by scholars like Max Weber (Pichler 1998; Williams 2005; Turner 2009; Turner and Mazur 2009), Sigmund Freud (Schuett 2007; 2010), and Friedrich Nietzsche (Petersen 1999; Frei 2001; Neacsu 2010). According to him, every human being pursues not solely the lust of power but is also moved by two fundamental drives: the drive of self-preservation and the drive to prove oneself (Morgenthau 1930).

Although their differences are as well-known as their similarities, many elements of unity that do not go beyond diversity could be found. So, even the different shades of political realism move towards a perspective convergence. More thorough investigations have demonstrated that Niebuhr and Morgenthau are not as distant as we have known them until now.

First, we can recover such a similarity in their conceptualizations of power. Felix Rösch (2014b) sheds light on the dualistic concept of power that Morgenthau meticulously elaborated in his

earliest European manuscripts from 1930s. In those works, Morgenthau 'distinguished between *Macht* and *Kraft* and *pouvoir* and *puissance*' (Rösch 2014b: 351). *Pouvoir* was understood as 'the ability to dominate others (as seen in the *animus dominandi*)', while *puissance* signified 'the intention to wilfully act together to create a life-world in consideration of a common good' (Rösch 2014b: 351). On one hand, the German émigré worked with a concept of power understood as domination, on the other, he promoted a concept of power that focused on the will to act together. This distinction between an empirical concept of power and a normative one seems very adherent to Niebuhr's argument about men's relationship with his communities. Although society is less moral than any individual and potentially dominated by collective egoism (Niebuhr 1932), the Protestant theologian believes that human beings can overcome the latter in order to achieve tolerable forms of justice derived from the human capacity of self-giving and motivated by the ultimate law of love (Niebuhr 1944).

Second, a body of recent scholarship has tried to find an analogy in their visions of global order, as an attempt to reform – and to overcome – interstate anarchy. Revisiting in a systematic way the writing of Niebuhr and Morgenthau, Campbell Craig (2003) supported the idea that both might envisaged the possibility of an international institutional change in order to guarantee human survival in front of the thermonuclear revolution. Scheuerman (2011), introducing the concept of mid-century 'Progressive Realism', was able to refresh traditional accounts of classical realism. According to him, Niebuhr and Morgenthau, like other realist scholars, aspired to a global political reform that is able to establish a lasting peace and sustain security for all of humanity. Although knowing that this would be very difficult to achieve, neither considered it altogether unattainable.

Most probably, this positive perspective about the future rested on their understanding of human nature – rooted in theological or more secular grounds. The vision of human as a creature. Facing the unsolved dilemmas of politics, they stressed the value of prudence and wisdom, along with the necessity of moderation and compromise, in the conduct of all statesmen/-women. But they have also highlighted the crucial role of an aware public opinion against the abuses of power, both in democratic and totalitarian regimes, as well as the blindness of liberal culture.

The encounter between Niebuhr and Morgenthau has certainly played a crucial role in the process of integration of the émigré scholar among the American intellectuals. By developing a solid anti-utopianist and anti-hubris approach to international relations, they have shown the *contingency* of politics, the *drama* of history (in its tragic or ironic patterns), and the *ambiguity* of human nature.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed the centrality of the refugee experience for classical realism. Many of the scholars that became known as classical realists in IR had been forced to leave their home to save their lives and had experienced the downfall of democracies in Europe, the rise of fascism, and the Holocaust. Having lost their intellectual and personal homes, unsurprisingly this affected their political thoughts, albeit to different degrees and with at times different conclusions.

Engaging with their thought through an émigré lens allows the discipline to reflect on transcultural knowledge exchange and knowledge production and it helps to avoid treating such – for a lack of a better word – “schools of thought” as self-contained. Rather, it shows that they were the product of interlocutions across intellectual and cultural boundaries. As such, these interlocutions were not free of conflicts, which is why William Galston (2010: 391) aptly termed them ‘arena of contestation’. Furthermore, they more often than not caused misunderstandings among their American colleagues, most famously maybe Kenneth Waltz’s reading of Morgenthau (Behr and Heath 2009). However, some of them were ‘productive’, as Paul Tillich (1937: 303) remarked during a workshop as part of the fourth anniversary celebrations of New School’s Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, offering ‘a common chance’ to imagine previously unconceivable political realities. Émigrés took these chances, albeit rather unsuccessfully, for example at the 1954 Rockefeller Foundation Conference on International Theory and the Council on Foreign Relations Study Group on International Political Theory at the same year (Guilhot 2011; Rösch 2019; McCourt 2020). Knowledge exchange and knowledge production are therefore not to be seen only as a one-sided process in which one group domineers over others, but as a messy process that blurs boundaries, producing knowledge that can be ‘attractive’ (Conrad 2018, 842) in many different contexts.

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