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*Journal of International Political Theory* (2016)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1755088216671735>

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**DOI link to article:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1755088216671735>

**Date deposited:**

02/03/2016



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*Interlocuting Classical Realism and Critical Theory: Negotiating ‘Divides’ in International Relations Theory*

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Will be published in  
*Journal of International  
Political Theory* JIPT, Fall  
2016

**The problematic**

On April 30, 1947, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to the US Congress in which he asked for the impressive amount of one billion dollars in order to organize a citizen education program on the dangers and risks of nuclear power. Einstein argued in this letter that it would be the inescapable responsibility of his generation of nuclear physicists and philosophers to educate their fellow citizens about the ‘simple facts and implications’ of atomic energy for humankind. This would be a question of life and death.<sup>1</sup> Atomic energy, he further argued, would have as revolutionary an impact on humanity as the invention of fire several million years ago; and if the consequences of atomic energy and nuclear weapons could not be reversed, then citizen education about their impacts and consequences would be the only means of safeguarding the survival of humanity.

Probably predictably, Einstein’s call fell on deaf ears. Yet it provides a challenge that continues to confront thinking about world politics, for it raises the relationship between critical thought and political reality or, in other words, the question of political realism.<sup>2</sup> Determining (or at the very least, asking instead of asserting) what it means to be politically ‘realistic’ remains as important for our time as it was for Einstein’s. Yet in the field where it is arguably most crucial – the study of global politics – political realism

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of Albert Einstein on behalf of the *Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists*, April 30, 1947; original in the Musée de lettres and Manuscrits, Paris, 222 Boulevard Saint-Germain, 75007 Paris, France, permanent exhibition. See in this regard also the Russell–Einstein Manifesto, London, 9 July 1955.

<sup>2</sup> R.N. Berki, *On Political Realism* (London: Dent, xxx).

has often become a remarkably narrow and, in many eyes, ‘unrealistic’ enterprise.<sup>3</sup> The goal of this Special Issue is to broaden the engagement between critical thought and political realism – and thereby to help invigorate both by reconnecting critical theories of International Relations to classical realism.

### **Negotiating ‘Divides’**

This may at first glance seem an unpromising enterprise. Few theoretical positions in IR seem more at odds with each other than realism and critical theory. Indeed, a strong case can be made that critical theory in IR emerged primarily and self-consciously as a *reaction* against realism. Whether in Robert Cox’s<sup>4</sup> classic articulation of ‘critical’ versus (realist) ‘problem-solving’ theory, or amongst those who identified critical theory with ‘emancipation’<sup>5</sup>, realism was often the adversary: the theoretical foil and political opponent. There was much to be said for this oppositional move. The cruder (or what Timothy Luke in this volume terms ‘vulgar’) forms of realism that had come to dominate parts of the field certainly demanded a frontal assault, and a starkly oppositional stance also had the merit of providing an apparently clear set of theoretical choices, intellectual alliances, and political allegiances around which that opposition could coalesce. However much one might deride competing ‘camps’<sup>6</sup> in IR theory, there is little denying (for better or worse) their social power and considerable strategic utility.

Yet the starkly opposed representation of the relationship between realism and critical theory was always problematic and often false, both historically and conceptually. Historically, even a cursory examination soon reveals a much closer intellectual

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<sup>3</sup> Ido Oren, ‘The Unrealism of Contemporary Realism: The Tension Between Realist Theory and Realists’ Practice’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 7,2 (2009): 283-301.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W Cox, ‘Social forces, states, and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* **June 1981** vol. 10 no. 2 **126-155**.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wyn Jones, ed. *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima, Joao Nunes, eds. *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> See Christine Sylvester, ‘Experiencing the end and afterlives of International Relations/theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 19: 609-626.

background and shared set of concerns between many of mid-century realism's key thinkers and prominent critical theorists. Viewed through the lens of conceptual history,<sup>7</sup> these linkages become even more obvious. The centrality of the 'concept of the political', for instance, has now been widely discussed as a crucial common reference point for both sets of theorists from the first decades of the twentieth century,<sup>8</sup> providing a way of tracing the connections and divergences between them, as well as illuminating sources of their disagreements over policies and political positions.

The goal of this Special Issue is to further and enlarge this process of engagement. The authors share the conviction that exploring the relationship between critical theory and realism is essential not only for historical accuracy and theoretical clarity, but as a means of sharpening political reflection and judgment, and engaging with the challenges of contemporary global affairs. IR is riven by theoretical divisions and conflicts between schools of thought: not only does critical theory tend to be seen as standing in implacable conflict with realism, but liberalism likewise continues to be represented as staunchly opposed to realism, while rationalism contends with its adversary, constructivism. The list is familiar and can easily be expanded. Yet many of these debates seem not only continually unresolved, but increasingly stale and self-referential. Indeed, recent years have seen increasing frustration with this state of affairs.<sup>9</sup> Calls to set aside the pernicious rule of the 'isms', or to embrace a more productive theoretical 'eclecticism' have found wide resonance.<sup>10</sup> At one level, this is all to the good, especially if it helps break down

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<sup>7</sup> See for conceptual history, Practice of conceptual history: timing history, spacing concepts / Reinhart Koselleck ; translated by Todd Samuel Presner and others ; foreword by Hayden White.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive overview and illustration, see Hartmut Behr and Felix Roesch, 'Introduction' to Hans J Morgenthau, *The Concept of the Political* (London: Palgrave 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Colin Wight, 'The End of IR Theory?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19: 405-425.

<sup>10</sup> For the first, David Lake 'Why Isms are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments To Understanding and Progress', *International Studies Quarterly* 55,2 (2011): 465-480; for the second, Rudra Sill and Peter Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

distortive dualisms and unhelpful oppositions that inhibit rather than foster creative and rigorous analysis. But it is also problematic. Rejecting ‘isms’ leaves open the question of what to put in their place: eclecticism (itself another ‘ism’) risks descending into *ad hocery*. What is more, calls for pluralism often mask continuing if less overt strictures about epistemology, methodology, and political responsibility that are far from straightforwardly pluralistic: when the surface is scratched, prevailing orthodoxies about the nature of legitimate, social scientific knowledge are not hard to see.

A different way of approaching this issue is not to reject the ‘schools’ or ‘isms’, however problematic they and their definition may be, but to problematize them (and the divides between them) by bringing them into historical, conceptual, and political *relation* with each other. Rather than abstracting essential tenets or propositions from different bodies of thought and comparing them, this Special Issue traces the genealogies of different theoretical stances, examining their connections, contradictions, and trajectories. This is in many ways a more demanding process than that of simply drawing up a matrix of core claims and setting them against one another. It involves instead detailed historical research into the historic development, conceptual lineages, and political contexts of different contemporary theoretical positions, the relations between them, and their implications of this process of reinterpretation for contemporary analysis. Yet as the essays in this collection show, it can prove a remarkably fruitful approach – nowhere more so than in rethinking the relationship between classical realism and critical theory.

In different ways, this form of engagement between critical theory and classical realism has been going on for some time. While we do not seek to provide a comprehensive review of these trajectories here,<sup>11</sup> it is possible to discern three waves of engagement, each of which has in diverse ways and with different aspirations sought to reopen classical realism, to rescue it from its reduction to an ahistorical (often rationalist)

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<sup>11</sup> Also, we shall not comment on individual contributions in the following discussion of these trajectories, but only relate them to the genealogy of re-reading classical realism.

framework, and to open IR to a wider critical theoretical agenda and set of political problematics.<sup>12</sup>

### **Three movements of re-reading classical realism through critical theory**

A first movement of engagement was part of the identifiably ‘critical’ movement in IR theory that dates from the 1980s through the mid-1990s, represented most notably by Richard Ashley’s article on Morgenthau and human interest (1981), RBJ Walker’s discussion of Machiavelli (1992), and Timothy Luke’s discussion of re-reading realism (1993). These works and others like them attempted to locate ‘classical’ thinkers or concepts in contexts beyond IR’s mainstream, providing re-interpretations that challenged their canonical location and usages, and stressing instead their potential for opening up IR theory, providing space for alternative thinking. Ashley, Walker, Luke, and others in their footsteps, were most interested in the effects of certain thinkers on the discourse of IR theory. While theoretically highly sophisticated, their interpretive agendas were driven not primarily by the desire to provide detailed contextual interpretations of the thinkers involved, but to use reinterpretations of them to challenge settled readings in IR and their use as legitimations of contemporary theorizing. In short, these engagements in re-interpretation were ultimately guided by disciplinary interests and focused on challenging the discipline as such, including its narratives on the state, sovereignty, power, and legitimacy.

This initial critical movement was thus tied to creative uses of classical realism from the beginning. It saw and appreciated the theoretical distinctiveness of classical realist authors from positivist movements in IR and their appropriation by the latter, and drew upon the intellectual value of historical thinkers and 20<sup>th</sup> century (classical) realists, even if it usually did not share their ontologies and/or epistemologies. It also drew, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees, on the relationship between post-structuralism

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<sup>12</sup> In contrast to misreadings by neo-liberal and neo-realist IR scholarship (as shown in Behr, 2010; see also Kahler’s notion of demand-driven IR scholarship with reference to neo-realism; 1997)

and Frankfurt School critical theory represented by Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Juergen Habermas.

A *second movement* of this trajectory comprises many more authors. These contributions date initially from the later 1990s through the mid-2000s, and, in contrast to the first wave, their work is characterized by explicit attempts to provide more detailed and in-depth understandings of IR's classical realists (including Thucydides, Hobbes, Rousseau, Clausewitz, Morgenthau) and to elaborate their contribution to the history of the discipline of IR.<sup>13</sup> This search for disciplinary understandings beyond neo-realist and neo-liberal mainstream and for alternative understandings for international politics was not as explicitly focused on frontally challenging the discipline as the first wave, but rather on arguing *within* the disciplinary parameters and themes as a form of historical redescription seeking to re-open and re-discover closed lineages or *lost* alternatives. In some cases, this almost takes the form of an imminent critique within the tradition of critical theory, but more generally their work undertakes explicit efforts to elaborate conceptual understandings and intellectual-historiographic accounts of realist thinking and how they can contribute to a more advanced and profound analysis of international politics.

This second movement of re-reading classical realist authors is characterized by two observations: first, classical realism is viewed in relation to other forms of historical traditions (especially a deeper engagement with liberalism), and as a body of thought that has important implications for contemporary theoretical positions – especially as a form of constructivist theory that both critically analyses and promotes certain ideas about politics.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, and equally importantly, this second wave was also directly concerned with fundamental differences in ontological and epistemological terms between classical and structural (or neo-) realism. They questioned explicitly structural

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the most prominent (i.e., most referenced) include Christoph Frei, *Morgenthau*; Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy*; Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* and Michael C Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations*.

<sup>14</sup> See most explicitly here Lebow, “Thucydides the Constructivist” *APSR*; Williams, “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations”, *International Organization*, 2004)

realism's harking back to classical authors as a strategy of legitimation, questioning both its methodological as well as its disciplinary-historical claims, and sometimes sketching also an alternative genealogy linking structural realism to 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism and nationalism, and differentiating it from forms of classical realism indebted to Greek political thought (Lebow, 2003) and the European "*Geistesgeschichte*" (Frei, 1993; Scheuerman, 2009; Lebow, 2011).

This leads to a further observation concerning this movement - the importance of the historiographic study of (international) politics. Historiography was understood by classical realists in either a Nietzschean fashion or in the tradition of the Cambridge School. In both cases, they shared a genealogical understanding of political developments and historical processes, and much like the first wave tried to set IR and classical realism in a wider context of modern social and political theory. An important part of reviving the richness of political realism in the second wave thus involved recovering the influence and importance of figures generally outside the canon of IR theory, such as Karl Mannheim, Max Weber, or Friedrich Nietzsche (see in this regard the contribution by Daniel and Ned Lebow in this Issue). This element became elaborated in a more detailed way in the third wave of re-reading classical realism.

A third movement of re-reading classical realism is generally characterized by a greater distance from the discipline of IR, searching for legacies in the discipline beyond IR's mainstream self-understanding. These endeavors widened even further the intellectual context and lineages of classical realism, generating detailed studies of not only the figures discussed above, but also a diversity of influences on and relationships with classical realism ranging from American pragmatists to Sigmund Freud, Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and further back to the impact of Epicurean philosophy, Aristotle, and Thomas Reid (amongst others Schuett, 2007; Scheuerman, 2007; Lang, 2007; Tjalve, 2008; Behr, 2013; Roesch, 2013; Molloy, 2009; Turner, Stephen and G. O. Mazur. 2009. Morgenthau as a Weberian Methodologist. The definitive version of this paper has been published in *European Journal of International Relations* 15(3) 477-504; Barkawi, 1998). At the same time, sophisticated intellectual histories of the discipline of IR and the place of classical realism within post-war social science emerged as vibrant

and increasingly influential areas of research (Cesa, 2009; Behr, 2009; Cozette, 2008; Guilhot, 2008; Neascu, 2010; an early attempt, see Koskenniemi, 2000).<sup>15</sup>

Like the first and second waves, these most recent initiatives also often took critical theory as a lens through which to view classical realism. Sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, they seek to challenge and undermine orthodox narratives of IR theory, its history, and its theoretical commitments by cataloguing different and additional legacies, relations, and influences between theoretical movements and classical realism. The most obvious implication of these interventions is that classical realism is a multi-disciplinary enterprise: it cannot be reduced to disciplinary territories or paradigms, but emerged out of a multitude of inspirations, kept these alive, and never attempted to form a coherent discipline or disciplinary paradigm in a narrowly scientific sense. In order to discover this and to read classical realist texts sincerely engaging with and learning from *their* commitments with political analysis required one epistemological device that, again, came from/through critical theory, namely the abandonment of and intellectual disassociation from a teleological reading of IR theories as a progressive story of theoretical advancement and paradigm creation towards a democratic, Western modernity as narrated and taught by all kind of ‘isms’ as well as by orthodox textbooks and curricula.<sup>16</sup>

### **New contexts**

What, then, can we conclude from these three waves and a little more than three decades of re-reading realism? Clearly, unanimity is as impossible as it is undesirable. Yet a number of themes emerge powerfully and reveal that the relationship between classical realism is far from one of simple opposition(s) - it is actually a ground marked by certain

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<sup>15</sup> An important step forward through first-hand research in the Hans Morgenthau Archives in the Library of Congress, Washington DC, where important personal notes, letters, and unpublished manuscripts, both in German and English, became available. The papers of Hans J. Morgenthau were given to the Library of Congress by Morgenthau’s daughter and son in 1981, then arranged and described in 1985. Additional material received 1991-1995 was incorporated into the collection in 1998; see <http://rs5.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxmss/eadpdfmss/2009/ms009291.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Each of these three waves evince different understandings of critical theory and legacies of critical IR, although we are unable to pursue this fully in this context..

affinities that provide a means of engaging with fundamental issues of agreement and sources of divergence and disagreement. Classical realism cannot be understood and never understood itself as an ontology of international politics, but was instead a problematization, a way of at looking at epistemology and ontology, at knowledge and practice rooted in and seeking to address key themes and dilemmas in modern politics (such as “national interest”, “power” “morality” “peace” and “history”). These problematizations did not come with an agenda and ‘shopping list’ for international actors (although they certainly did not preclude some forms of generalization or specific political and policy stances), but sought to frame the political conditions in which awareness of the issues as problematized could unfold, political conditions such as liberal democracy and a democratic public sphere that needed to be addressed anew under conditions of mass society, consumerism, the threat of nuclear weapons, and a host of other factors.

Second, like critical theory, classical realism is anti-positivist. It rejects teleology, and is often deeply suspicious of claims about progress. Though it is not necessarily wholly hostile to the possibility of progress in a more chastened sense, it is resolutely sceptical toward the grander claims of political modernity as the march of progress, stressing continually the dark sides and specific dangers that are part of the modern political project. Its method is hermeneutic, interpretive, and historiographic – a set of commitments that are linked to a vision of politics as contingent, and as thus filled with dangers and opportunities, risks and possibilities (see hereto the contributions by Stulerova and Roesch to this Issue).

Rather than being divided by philosophical and political commitments, Classical Realism *meets* Critical Theory, both biographically with regard to important representatives of both movements sharing the same intellectual and academic spaces<sup>17</sup> and in conceptual terms (namely with regard to anti-positivist, anti-teleological and

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<sup>17</sup> Particularly Frankfurt at the end of the 1920s; see Scheuerman 2009; Frei 2001; Behr/Roesch, Intro to HJM’s *Concept of the Political* 2012; also Lebow in IR as a European Discipline in *Constellations*; Roesch’s edited volume on scholar émigré with Palgrave 2014, Add Duncan Bell’s edited book and Vibeke Tjalve’s book

modernity-critical as well as hermeneutic/historiographical readings of politics).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is the meeting points – the relationship – between the two that is most revealing. This interlocution, however, shall and must not obscure that even though they often shared similar stances, the ways in which they developed these themes and the conclusions they drew from them frequently diverged, often radically. Recognizing this provides an opportunity to interrogate the positions of both critical theorists and classical realists, using each to challenge the other and to take this dynamic process as a basis for both historical understanding of international politics and, potentially, as a source for contemporary insights into present-day problems and challenges. Overcoming the traditional opposition between the two does not mean that they become the same; rather, the relationship and its negotiation becomes a new, dynamic field for international political theory.

The relevance of putting the relationship of critical theory and classical realism as a key point of engagement is by no means purely historical. Nor is it relevant only to those who might subscribe to some broadly ‘critical’ position. On the contrary, it has direct implications across contemporary International Relations theory, including for schools of thought that usually evince little or no interest in such questions, and for the competing ‘isms’ that misleadingly structure much of contemporary debate. If, for example, power remains the core of political realism (which clearly it does and must) then classical realism and critical theory provide sophisticated insights into the forms of social power at work in modernity, assessments of some of their most troubling trajectories, and pointed evaluations of their ethical and political implications. In

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<sup>18</sup> Our readings and use of critical theory are thus based upon its epistemological theorems and leave aside critical theory’s economic and psychoanalytical implications – dimensions which are too broad to be dealt with effectively here. These notions mark our core understanding of critical theory’s commonalities with classical realism and distinguish it from decades of (politically and academically very powerful) misreadings/misinterpretations which obscured and occluded basic commitments/teachings of classical realism, depicting it wrongly as a grand, often rationalist and positivist theory; see *inter alia* Forde, Steven,(1995), 'International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli and Neorealism,' *International Studies Quarterly* 39(2):141-160; Gilpin, R. (1981), *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gilpin, R. (1984), ‘The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism’, *International Organization* 38, 287–304.

somewhat narrower terms, the lineage of historical sociology shared by classical realism and critical theory challenges today's neo-classical realism to open up the state in terms much broader than focusing too narrowly on processes of decision-making, or domestic politics alone. Crucial as these issues are, they need to be located also in wider understandings of social (now global) processes of (late) political modernity – just as classical realists of the mid-twentieth century insisted. Similarly, liberal international theorists who want to take seriously the foundations and history of their position in international political theory can scarcely ignore the complex relationship of liberalism to classical realism, and the difficult issues it raises.<sup>19</sup> The canonical divide in much of IR theory between realism and liberalism is not wholly false, but it is the relationship between the two, not their categorical opposition, that is crucial in understanding both. Finally, as the three waves of research surveyed above demonstrate, the idea that constructivism stands as a stark alternative to realism (at least in its classical forms) simply will not stand historical or conceptual scrutiny – indeed the most significant interlocutor of social constructivism is classical realism.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, a fuller recognition of classical realism problematizes the conventional theoretical landscape of IR theory. What it may show most of all is the limiting nature of thinking within fixed categories and oppositions, demonstrating how historical, conceptual, and political problematics actually cut across them. The obfuscation of classical realism through strategic misreadings and appropriations by both mainstream IR scholars *and* critically-inclined theorists (*inter alia* George, 1994) means that its claims and significance need to be relearned – something that requires we first unlearn a series of assumptions and oppositions that stand in the way of this process. Reading classical realism in relation to critical theory allows us to see what classical realist authors held and to free them from the grip of (mis)readings that have continually distorted their positions and their legacies for contemporary thinking. This potential has been found across contemporary critical re-readings of realism.

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<sup>19</sup> On the latter, see Michael Williams, 'In the beginning: the 'IR enlightenment' and the ends of IR theory'. *European Journal of International Relations*, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Again, with important implications for more recent thinking, such as Samuel Barkin's, *Realist Constructivism*.

### **Three insights and a question**

As the discussion above indicates, the three decade long intellectual recovery of classical realism places IR today at the heart of wider discussions in social and political theory and at the center of many of the most complex and important challenges in contemporary political analysis. In the broadest terms, however, we suggest that this recovery yields three important insights and one big question.

The most obvious insight concerns the importance of intellectual history. Both the disciplinary history of IR and enquiries into the place of that discipline within wider contexts of intellectual history have provided key resources for reconnecting IR theory with wider traditions of social and political theory from which it has too long been severed, and in which it should occupy a central place. The revival of interest in classical realism has been an important aspect of this movement, and grasping the relationship between classical realism and critical theory provides an important further step in this process. However, the importance of these exercises in recovery are not simply historical. They provide links to two further insights: the importance of concepts in general, and the relationship between key concepts in both classical realism and critical theory

#### *On the importance of concepts in general*

Social and political reality has no meaning in itself; facts, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it in his poignant style, 'are stupid'. Political reality only accomplishes a certain meaning according to concepts that we apply in experiencing, understanding, and exploring it. And the more concepts we apply, the more meaning 'things' accomplish and 'reveal'. Saying this, concepts are not assumptions. Thus there is a fundamental difference between 'concepts' as understood by critical theory and/or classical realism and assumptions as understood by rationalism. Concepts are, in stark contrast to assumptions (that are, according to Kenneth Waltz, a-historical, un-empirical, and even false; at best, and that's their only criterion, they are useful<sup>21</sup>) based on socio-political experience and

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<sup>21</sup> "Realist Thought" and Realist Theory": "Theory is artifice. A theory is an intellectual construction (...) Theory cannot be fashioned from the answers to ... factual questions (...) An assumption or a set of assumptions is [therefore] necessary. In making assumptions

resonate with that experience in an historical sense. The more our concepts resonate with our experience of reality, the more powerful they are for organizing our experience and providing us with understandings of the reality of our experience.

This underlines the importance of the development of concepts that is the genuine task of political theory and IR theory. These concepts have ontological and epistemological character, i.e., first, they resonate with the world and our experience of the political world without *being* that world (a misunderstanding often applied to mainstream readings of Morgenthau that read, especially his ‘Six Principles of Political Realism’, as ontologies of the international relations) and, second, they are both formulated on a certain knowledge of the political world and produce a certain knowledge of this world; i.e., too, they are never neutral and each theory is, using the famous word of Robert Cox, ‘for someone’ or, with Morgenthau, ‘*standortgebunden*’: it is bound to historical and cultural context in which they have been formulated and in which they are supposed to operate; i.e., concepts and theory are never, in the rationalist sense, ‘objective’.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, critical theory and classical realism suggest several concepts for the study of modern society, some of them intersect, some are different, however, all are based on the readings of the same sources of European “*Geistesgeschichte*”, even if they result in different theoretical and practical consequences. Thus, what an interlocution of classical realism and critical theory can ultimately provide is the understanding of similar problem horizons of modern society and modern politics; what it cannot provide is a clear set of similar answers. Three concepts are especially relevant: those of modernity, crises, and humanity.

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about men’s (or states’) motivations, the world must be drastically simplified; subtleties must be rudely pushed aside, and reality must be grossly distorted. Descriptions strive for accuracy, assumptions are brazenly false. The assumptions on which theories are built are radical simplifications of the world and are useful only because they are such. Any radical simplification conveys a false picture of the world (...) International structures are defined, first, by the ordering principle of the system, in our case anarchy, and second, by the distribution of capabilities across units.” (Waltz, “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory”, 1990, pp. 22, 23, 27, 29).

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion on this and on the difference between a ‘rationalist’ and a “*geistesgeschichtliche*” term of ‘objectivity’, see the Intro in Behr/Roesch 2012.

*On the epistemological and practical interrelation of the concepts of modernity, crises/crisis, and humanity*

The interlocution between classical realism and critical theory converges conceptually in the interrelation of these three concepts of modernity, crisis/crises, and humanity. This interrelation functions as both a critical and normative device, and articulates the main concerns of both movements about the trajectory and nature of modern politics. However, it also insinuates some normative imagination addressing these concerns. This interrelation, as a shorthand, reads as follows: (Western) modernity evinces specific intellectual constellations that manifest in positivist, rationalist Enlightenment philosophies, such as beliefs in teleological historical progress and in man as master of his/her destiny, paired-up with the idea of a rational, autonomous individual as well as a loss of ethics of self-constraint – that give rise to social and political crisis/crises – such as functional, problem-solving approaches to politics, resulting in the depoliticization of the public sphere, the disguise of power politics in Reason and ‘rationality’, and the loss of humane politics and humanity that needs to be recaptured.<sup>23</sup>

There is one distinct analytical focus involved here, namely to analyse and explain economic and political crises in Western societies and politics not primarily as problems of policy implementation and the perfection of respective tools, or as a deficit of knowledge or instrumental reason; but rather as phenomena of Western modernity, its historical legacies, and related attempts of overregulation according to naïve beliefs in social engineering and Reason. For both critical theorists and classical realists, politics, society, and economics risk becoming victims of functionalist and thus depoliticised and dehumanised rationalities. An alternative way of addressing this crisis (or, more precisely, these related crises) is a return to humanity and humane politics that foremost consists of attempts to institutionalize deliberative and discursive public spheres and a

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<sup>23</sup> These analyses and imaginations are key, too, to two 20<sup>th</sup> century political scientist who are not discussed/mentioned in this Special Issue and its contributions and who are probably impossible to allocate to either movement of critical theory and/or classical realism: Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin.

political language that can recapture anti-ideological debate and negotiation of fundamental normative questions of political and social life.<sup>24</sup>

*The/a question*

Of course, the question arises here ‘What is humanity’ and ‘What is humane politics’? Next to the philosophically complex analyses of Reason, teleology, domination, and the like involved in the classical realist and critical theoretic analyses of the ‘crises’ of modernity<sup>25</sup> this normative moment seems underdeveloped, often almost inarticulate. This underdevelopment might have different reasons,<sup>26</sup> but imaginations about humanity appear in either metaphorical forms,<sup>27</sup> as (sometimes crude) Freudian ideas,<sup>28</sup> or gleam as

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance “Reviving the Rhetoric of Realism: Politics and Responsibility in Grand Strategy, Vibeke Schou Tjalve & Michael C. Williams, *Security Studies*,24:1, 37-60, 11 March 2015.

<sup>25</sup> There are many writings by representatives of both schools that provide respective analyses (that are different in their depth and approach, however, centre around these issues and demonstrate a similar problem awareness of modern society and politics; see for example: Adorno/Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*; Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*; Herbert Marcuse, *The One-Dimensional Man*; EH Carr, *What is History?*; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics*; Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*; Marcuse, *Negations*; Horkheimer, “*What is critical theory?*”

<sup>26</sup> E.g., normative statements appear as anathematic to a critical understanding of theory because they reify certain beliefs and tend to become thereby dogmatic; see for this problematic Honneth, A. (2008), *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; also Morgenthau, “The Ethics of Evil”

<sup>27</sup> Mostly leaning to mythical and fictional figures as Odysseus, Don Juan, Hamlet, etc.; see for instance in Adorno/Horkheimer, *Dialectic and Enlightenment*; Morgenthau, “The Ethics of Evil and the Evil of Politics”

<sup>28</sup> As in Morgenthau (1934), “Über den Sinn der Wissenschaft in dieser Zeit und über die Bestimmung des Menschen” (unpublished manuscript, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Box 151); crude as in Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man* as if the problems of modern society and politics could be ‘solved’ through a sexual revolution ... ; Chapter 3; hereto Castoriadis, Cornelius, *Imaginary institution of society*; translated by Kathleen Blamey. 1987, Part I and his critique of determinism in neo-Marxist theory.

what Hannah Arendt calls ‘plurality’ and ‘natality’ (and optionality).<sup>29</sup> However, we argue, there is normatively more to get from both movements, both with regard to imaginations about humanity as well as in terms of positive notions for political agency, and that especially from the interlocution between both (again, see below in the next section; as explicit attempts see in this Special Issue, see the contributions by Beardsworth and Behr).

This leads, finally to the big question, so often asked of both theory and intellectual history: so what? What has classical realism and/or critical theory to say to and suggest for dealing with the Iranian nuclear crises; for political agency and global leadership in the context of global warming; for political responsibility with regard to intergenerational consequences of policies such as in nuclear energy; for dealing with EU financial and refugee crises; etc. etc.? Although this Special Issue and its contributions are clearly exercises in political and social theory and IR theory respectively, the editors and authors are of the view that ultimately theory is not (only) for theory’s sake, but rather has to engage at some point normative questions of how we ought to act in certain political circumstances; thus theory has to address questions of political agency and policy-making. Searching for avenues to such engagement, two understandings are given to us through the interlocution of critical theory with classical realism: first, no agency and policy will ever escape the field of practical and theoretical contingencies (including heavy contestation): thus in the imaginaries of the critical theory escape Icarus’s problem/paradox (or in the words of Morgenthau the ‘evil of politics’; second, speaking to politics (and power [as “*pouvoir*”]) does not result in unambiguous advice or recipes, but often ‘just’ in outlining and expanding the ambivalences and complexities of certain situations and of actions upon it and their consequences.

Nevertheless, this normative move needs to be made. Re-reading classical realism has shown that it contains important normative imaginations and commitments (as does

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<sup>29</sup> Mainly from/in her *Human Condition*, 1958; see also Ernst Vollrath on Arendt and optionality: ‘Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking’, in *Social Research* 44, 1, 1977, S. 170 - 182; Roesch on the thinking partnership between Morgenthau and Arendt: Roesch, F. (2013) Realism as social criticism: The thinking partnership of Hannah Arendt and Hans Morgenthau. *International Politics*, volume 50 (6): 815-829.

critical theory). Taking this history seriously demands that contemporary thinking do the same – and that it does so in clear recognition of the insights and the limitations of both classical realism and critical theory in this regard. Such a normative move might contribute to attempts to help realism more credibly and effectively address contemporary political questions, while at the same time helping move critical theory out of its mainly deconstructing logics into more positively framed engagements of social and political organisation.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, also ethical questions about political and social research in the face of tremendous global crises emerge. Facing those crises (energy; refuge and migration; climate change and global warming; economic crises; poverty; demographic issues; sustainable cities; etc. etc.) a clear demand arises for the political scientist and IR scholar to move from theory to practice. This is obviously by no means a plea to abandon theory; rather, it is a call to use theory, next to the reflection upon epistemological questions, to move forwards to practical questions while this engagement needs to remain grounded in (ongoing) theoretical reflection.

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<sup>30</sup> On the limits of realism in politics today, see Oren 2012, and well as Schmitt and Williams; regarding critical theory, it is important not to neglect important work in this direction as for example in IR by Andrew Linklater (*Critical theory and world politics : citizenship, sovereignty and humanity*; 2007; *Men and citizens in the theory of international relations*, 1982), but to push and elaborate this direction further. Many political norms might emerge from interlocuting critical theory and classical realism, however, we are presenting in this Special Issue just two that engage questions of responsibility, leadership, and the political reversibility and that can be read in conjunction such that responsibility consists in politics of reversibility.