
Review

Realism: A distinctively 20th-century European tradition

Alexander Reichwein,
Felix Rösch, eds. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2021, 154 pp., ISBN:
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Hans Kelsen's Political Realism

Robert Schuett,
Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2021, 200 pp., ISBN:
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In 1985, Hans-Peter Schwarz in *Die gezähmten Deutschen (The Tamed Germans: Power Politics's Oblivion)* that West Germans had, for obvious historical reasons, lost their appetite for power politics, but had thereby also lost an essential aptitude in foreign affairs. Since the invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, Germans have fiercely debated whether and how to reorient their foreign and defense policy to confront revisionist powers like Russia. Realism's strengths and weaknesses in International Relations (IR) are also in the spotlight. Two new books on European traditions of realism in international political theory and foreign policy make valuable reading in this context. But the two books also illuminate the debate in contemporary political theory over the 'realist revolt' against the alleged hegemony of ideal theory. Does political theory need to descend from heaven to earth, and if so, what is the gravitational force—resources, institutions, human nature, or something else?

The volume edited by Reichwein and Rösch extends the revisionist current of scholarship on IR realism that in the last two decades has recast our understanding of major figures such as Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr. One of the volume's achievements is to highlight the liberal and progressive dimensions of canonical realist thinkers obscured by the caricature of realists as counselors of an amoral and conservative statesmanship. Schuett's study of Hans Kelsen complements Reichwein and Rösch's by approaching the realism–idealism binary from the other direction. Schuett challenges stereotypical accounts of Kelsen as an abstract,



formalistic and legalistic thinker out of touch with political realities, and the constraints of international politics in particular.

Another merit is that both volumes help readers trace the evolution of realist thought from Europe to the United States through the careers of émigré scholars like Kelsen, Morgenthau, John H. Herz, Hannah Arendt, and Nicolas Spykman. In his contribution, Felix Rösch offers a good explication of the claim in the introduction that early twentieth-century European history was ‘a constitutive moment of realism’ (p. 7), implicitly, its *most* formative moment. The émigrés filtered their experience of displacement from Nazi Germany and fascism through a normative and critical perspective honed by Central European humanistic discourses, though these are left underspecified. Once in America, they became defenders of the liberal and pluralist political system they found there but fearful of ‘another Weimar.’ All of the thinkers they categorize as realists were preoccupied with the dangers of ‘depoliticisation, dehumanization and ideologization’ as well as social planning (p. 6). But they remained committed to social progress.

By highlighting the ‘distinctively European’ origins of realism, Rösch and Reichwein explain that they aim to ‘challenge American or Anglo-Saxon hegemony when it comes to the definition of realism,’ to decenter American structural (or ‘neo-’) realism, and to encourage contemporary Europeans ‘to develop their own realist approaches’ in part by revisiting its European roots (p. vi). One result of the intellectual emigration from Europe in the 1930s is that realism became perceived more and more as American; as a result, it ‘did not receive the academic and political attention in Europe during and after the end of the Cold War it deserved’ (p. vi). While these motives for the recovery of a European tradition make sense, I had questions about the present volume’s execution of the project.

Firstly, the German émigré experience has been extensively treated elsewhere, including by the editors and their other distinguished contributors, and often highlights the role of cultural exchange—how the European émigrés encounter with the US changed the émigrés themselves, not just their host country (p. 5). But in arguing that the émigré realists simply ‘highlighted the illusions of American liberalism...[a tradition] which seem[ed] unable to recognize the inevitability of evil, interest and egoism that permeates political, economic and social life’ (p. 4), we obtain the impression of a static confrontation of European wisdom and American naiveté. Secondly, the dichotomous framing—Europeans contrasted with Anglo-Saxons—is belied by the number of Anglo-American figures who appear here—Carr, Niebuhr, Wight, Bull, and Butterfield. Thirdly, one wishes that the large cast of European realists, mostly from German-speaking Europe, could have been broadened by bringing in more French figures, or ones from Italy, Spain, Russia, or Eastern Europe.

Schuett’s precise recreation of Kelsen’s Viennese intellectual and political milieu, especially his dialogue (both intertextual and personal) with Sigmund Freud, is revealing and rewarding for its evocation of a distinctively European tradition. This volume builds on Schuett’s (2010) earlier work on Freud’s influence



on the realist tradition. But in contrast to interpretations which have emphasized Kelsen's difficulties in finding an appreciative audience in the US (p. 49), Schuett frames Kelsen's years in the US as successful as measured by consultancies to the US government, tenure at Berkeley, and influence on scholars like the *National Interest* journal founder, Robert W. Tucker (pp. 63–64).

The main thrust of Schuett's project is to recover Kelsen the 'political realist' from the condescension of his contemporaries—including those who should have known better, according to Schuett, like his student, the political scientist John H. Herz. By naming Kelsen's public international law theory, 'the most sophisticated natural law theory...developed in this century,' Herz intended to link Kelsen to 'the ideas of the League, Kellogg-Briand, and the United Nations' to underscore the dangerous naïvete of Kelsen's effort to juridify world politics (p. 98). Through a compelling and original reading of Kelsen, Schuett convinces us that beneath the 'layer[s] of what many critics scorn as Kelsen's abstract formalism' one can find Kelsen, the 'progressive political realist.' Schuett builds on earlier studies that have emphasized Kelsen's 'fundamentally antagonistic understanding of politics as a struggle for power' (p. 26, see also von Bernsdorff, 2010).

In what did Kelsen's progressive realism consist therefore? In the final chapter, 'Kelsen's Style of Political Thinking,' Schuett defines being a political realist this way: it 'means having a clinical view of government and international affairs—or a methodical view in Kelsenian jargon—of how state organs relate to one another politically: who gets what, when, how and above all, why.' Political realism requires attentiveness to the 'vantage point of each and every stakeholder relevant to the political problem at hand,' and the connection of these perspectives to 'resources, material interests and material power' (p. 128). For Schuett, an academic and experienced civil servant, foreign policy realism depends too on the 'distinct art' of navigating bureaucracy: it requires knowing 'when to speak up and when to work one's way silently while always pursuing' one's goals, including moral ones like the vocation of speaking truth to power (pp. 127–128), an important theme in Rösch and Reichwein's volume too.

But Schuett's most significant intervention is his account of how Kelsen's prescription of a world-state governed by coercive law (Kelsen, 1944, 1957) flowed from his realist diagnosis of international anarchy, not from any idealism about securing nations' compliance with global law. Instead, Schuett argues that Kelsen was so well-attuned to the realist conundrum of international anarchy and great power self-assertion that he realized the only realistic way to guarantee peace was to centralize military power in a world-state. Schuett admits that Kelsen neither provided nor today provides a road-map to get there from here. But his point, that Kelsen arrived at his conception of international security through law through sound realist logic, is well-made.

Schuett's Kelsen also provides an interesting test-case for the contemporary realist revolt in political theory pioneered by Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams and continued by Matt Sleat (2018) among others. Firstly, because



Schuett tries to distinguish Kelsen's 'liberal realism' or 'realist liberalism' from the 'pseudo-realism' of Schmitt and contemporary Schmittian populist-nationalists in Europe, he contributes to the ongoing debates that link Schmitt to Morgenthau and Carr, but also to contemporary left-populists like Chantal Mouffe. In describing a progressive realist Kelsen who 'justifies open society ideals not in any naïve opposition to a realistic account of man, society and politics but instead through it' (p. 47), Schuett provides a rejoinder to realist caricature of liberalism as constitutively incapable of thinking about conflict and power at the national or international scale. It also suggests a link to the public sphere theorizing of Karl Popper and Jürgen Habermas.

Similarly, the essays in the Reichwein and Rösch volume help recover a twentieth-century Euro-Atlantic realist liberalism that holds open a dialectic of *kratos* and *ethos* without insisting on the full autonomy of 'the political' sphere. Both books would have benefited from engagement with feminist theory, the relationship of gender to 'power politics,' and women as realist thinkers and intellectual interlocutors in the contexts outlined throughout the twentieth century. Political theorists interested in questions of international peace and security, as well as how liberal and realist ideas intersected and diverged in twentieth-century Europe and the US, will find the level of scholarship in both books exciting and worth reading. The Reichwein-Rösch volume also furnishes an excellent introduction to the revisionist scholarship on realism in international relations theory.

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