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Realism and utopianism revisited

MICHAEL NICHOLSON

Realists and utopians*

For Carr, the contrast between utopians and realists was between 'those who regard politics as a function of ethics and those who regard ethics as a function of politics'.¹ In other words, can we direct society in benevolent directions, perhaps to a utopia, or do we take what we are given and try to rationalize this into some form of moral acceptability? In the context of International Relations, the utopian aspires to a world without war and where power is not the primary determinant of relationships. The realist is more sceptical. Broadly, the realist stresses the constraints in life; the utopian stresses the opportunities. At this level, they are not social theories but temperamental attitudes.

Writing originally in 1939, Carr regarded the realists as those who understood the significance of power in the international scene and whose voices had been neglected in the interwar years. The utopians espoused a set of disparate views prevalent at that time linked by their neglect of power. Carr held these utopian positions to be impractical and dangerous. My aim in this article is to look at some versions of realism and some of utopianism, to see how they have developed today into modern variants. I ask how relevant are these traditions, if traditions they be, to the present world.

'Realism' in International Relations is used in a broad sense and a narrow sense. In the broad sense it is the view that human beings are fundamentally selfish. In political contexts, as with Bertrand Russell, this might centre on power but power conceived of rather widely. This can lead to pessimism about human improvement, notoriously in International Relations with Martin Wight. It need not lead to pessimism. A realist can argue that change can come and be directed but only by working with the grain of self-interest and not against it. Utopians believe there is greater scope for persuading people to be virtuous.²

Realism in the narrow sense used in International Relations is a special case of broad realism as applied to the world of states. States are held to be the dominant

* I am grateful to Ken Booth, Stephanie Hoopes, Georg Sørensen and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. They are not responsible for the uses and abuses I have made of them.

¹ E.H.Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* 1946 (2nd edn.) (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan (Papermac editions, 1981)), p. 42.

² Relations between political realism in general and that in International Relations are discussed by Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism and International Politics: A Reinterpretation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

and, perhaps, the exclusive actors in an anarchic system, while power is seen as the central feature of interstate relationships. Realists in this narrow sense, by adopting the name, have cleverly implied that they are the true representatives of the broad realist view in International Relations. Inasmuch as realism and realistic is contrasted with 'unrealistic' meaning impractical, which may be personally endearing but not very useful, particularly in International Relations, they have won a public relations battle. Of course, this implied claim is not true. It is perfectly possible to be a realist in the sense of looking at the world, warts and all, without subscribing to the tenets of one particular approach to International Relations which many hold to be an empirically flawed account.³

There is a clear realist tradition, or set of traditions, in International Relations linking the realism of Carr and others such as Morgenthau to Waltz and to many writing today. It is common to add the familiar list of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Clausewitz, and others. Ideas have developed and the world has changed, but within the context of an identifiable intellectual programme.

Utopianism is not a true parallel or opposite to realism. It does not form a coherent theoretical tradition except in the very general sense that some people are more optimistic about the improvability of the international scene than others. There is no utopian theory in the sense in which we can talk, loosely at least, of a realist theory. Idealism, often used in International Relations literature as a synonym for utopianism, was one of the parties to the 'first great debate' in International Relations (if a debate of which only a few thousand people were aware can properly be referred to as 'great': our profession does not suffer from modesty). However, the parties were false opposites except within the rather particular context of the interwar years. Then utopianism spanned from a belief that the League of Nations would provide the umbrella for collective security to a belief that World Government would come about soon and be the answer to the problem of war. The most utopian of all were the pacifists. Now those we might call utopians consider very different things.

If we do not have a utopian theory to parallel the realist theory we must take some rather more general attribute of utopianism in order to identify the descendants of those in the 1930s of whom Carr disapproved. I shall regard utopianism as any view that radical change can be brought about in the international system by sets of political choices, and we are not simply under the control of forces which we can only influence only tangentially by manipulating power balances and the like. On this definition, there are clearly many versions of utopianism today. Some, stressing the interrelationships between economics and politics, look to a radically restructured form of the international political economy. Environmentalists require some degree of global governance to control the environment. Feminists want a social restructuring to empower gender relations, normally as part of a general emancipatory move. All these movements embody ranges of radicalism from moderate moves to fundamental change. However, World Government, once thought highly of by some, is now deeply out of fashion. Perhaps one day it will return.

³ A vigorous critique of realism as an appropriate framework for the analysis of International Relations on the grounds that it is empirically inadequate is by John A. Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique* (London: Frances Pinter, 1983). A set of empirical studies which are more sympathetic to realism is edited by Frank W. Wayman and Paul F. Diehl, *Reconstructing Realpolitik* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1994).

However, none of these movements has an obvious intellectual origin in the interwar period amongst the utopians. It is interesting that, with the exception of feminism, these were issues which people hardly recognized in the interwar years. One area with family links (sometimes literal ones) from the pre- to the post-war era is the peace movement. At least during the Cold War, organizations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament clearly descended from earlier peace movements. Peace research is an intellectual movement which in part links in with this. Peace researchers can be seen as modern utopians, but ones who have fully digested the objections raised by the realists.

Many modern utopians would argue that they were now realists in that they were looking at achievable utopias which allowed for the actual and not idealized characteristics of human beings. They might well adopt Ken Booth's happy phrase of 'utopian realists'⁴ and avoid the slightly pejorative, or at least condescending, sense in which utopianism has been, and sometimes still is, used in International Relations.

Realism in International Relations

Realism as a conceptual framework

There are many versions of realism in International Relations, but they all share a few basic principles.⁵ First, the main actors in International Relations are states who seek to maintain their existence and general security. Secondly, the system of states is anarchic: no government or quasi-government exists to control states. Thirdly, and following from these, the 'power-security' principle is the dominant mode of interaction. Fourthly, while for some states purely defensive security is all that matters, if a state's power position warrants it, it will become a predator and force concessions from a weaker power. Finally, but rather more cautiously, internal politics and external politics are largely separate. Thus, the behaviour of one state *vis-à-vis* other states can be explained largely in terms of the behaviour of these other states. The primary exogenous influence of the internal political system on the external is power. Anything else is secondary. Security is a dominant goal of a state. Thus, if there is the possibility that at least one other state will be a predator, then it follows that all internal matters will be subordinated to external matters. This is a

⁴ Ken Booth 'Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice', *International Affairs*, 67 (1991), pp. 527-45.

⁵ The various modifiers of realism are numerous and not used consistently. Waltz prefers 'structural realism' for his version of realism. Buzan, Little and Jones refer to this as 'neorealism', leaving 'structural realism' for later developments. Spegele uses 'concessional realism' for Waltz's version of realism on the grounds that it makes concessions to the 'positivist-empiricist' position and in so doing marks some decline from the faith of the true believer. His version of realism he calls 'evaluative political realism', a relative of 'commonsense realism'. However, as Michael Donelan puts in a surprise appearance in Spegele's work as a 'positivist-empiricist', the whole system is rather confusing. I shall use 'realism' as a generic term, 'classical realism' for anything before Waltz, and, with apologies to Waltz for not following his terminology, 'neorealism' for Waltz and after. See Barry Buzan, Richard Little, and Charles Jones, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1993). Roger D. Spegele, *Political Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

stark statement of the principles, which many would want to modify in detail. In broad outline, however, they define realism.

In very general terms and for some historical periods, this realist picture of the international system provided a set of concepts which explained some of its aspects, particularly those connected with war and peace. Even here we have to be careful. As Rosenberg points out, what are called 'states' are very different things at different times.⁶ As an explanatory mode for the contemporary international system, realism is developing problems though it still has many enthusiastic followers. Certainly there are those who toil industriously to interpret the world in terms of what Barry Buzan perhaps rashly called 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?'.⁷ Similarly, Alan James' attempt to show that realism is still not only a viable but the best way of interpreting the international system is either penetrating or forlorn according to one's approach to realism.

There are nevertheless serious philosophical fissures amongst realists. The mainly United States realists saw themselves as social scientists, Waltz being prominent.⁸ The classical realists such as Morgenthau⁹ and particularly the so-called English School did not. For the most part, the classical realists were unmoved by the serious problems in the philosophy of social sciences and never tackled those particular philosophical issues which scholars like Waltz took very seriously.¹⁰ Charles Reynolds was the exception who attacked the social scientific school from a philosophically sophisticated position.¹¹ Interestingly, Tim Dunne does not mention him as a member of the English School in his fascinating book on the English School.¹² In his introduction to *Theories of International Politics*, Waltz thanks effusively the London School of Economics for the help he received there—but from the Department of Philosophy. The English School's disdain for the philosophy of science is no longer the case. Its members are now as involved in philosophical issues, including those in the philosophy of the social sciences, as anyone.¹³

In its classical form, and as presented by people like Morgenthau, realism is a tautological system. This has often gone unnoticed but, like any other theory, there is the constant temptation to bolster it up to face the inconveniences of comparison with the real world. One of Karl Popper's insights was to recognize that the danger

⁶ Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

⁷ Barry Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 47–65.

⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

⁹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edn, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (London and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985).

¹⁰ Hedley Bull's famous attack on the social scientists interestingly made no reference to the debates in the philosophy of the social sciences. Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach', in K. Knorr and J.N. Rosenau (eds.), *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). See also David Singer's response to Bull in the same volume 'The Incomplete Theorist: Insight Without Evidence'.

¹¹ For example, Charles Reynolds, *The Politics of War: A Study of the Rationality of Violence in Inter-State Relations* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989) and *The World of States*.

¹² Tim Dunne, *The English School* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹³ See Barry Buzan, Richard Little, and Charles Jones, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1993). See also Roger D. Spegele, *Political Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Spegele, as an American resident in Australia demonstrates the geographical weakness of the term 'English School'.

of explaining everything in the terms of a theory is that one ends up by explaining nothing.¹⁴ Enmeshed in a tautological system, all things are true, because all things are defined as true, though possibly in rather convoluted ways so that the definitional aspect to the problem is not readily visible. Just as, for the Marxists, the concept of 'false consciousness' can be used to 'explain' any failures of the working class, or anyone else for that matter, to believe what they are supposed to believe, so 'power' is sufficiently versatile to outwit most objections to a realist scheme. If all else fails, any deviation from the realist portrait can be explained as a temporary lapse due to the system not reacting quickly enough to the change in circumstances. Mearsheimer uses this stratagem in explaining away the European Union, which he sees as explicable in the context of the Cold War, but slow in fading away.¹⁵ In all these things we are dealing with long historical periods. We can be safely dead before the facts posthumously inconvenience us. Popper's ire was directed particularly against Marxism and psychoanalysis. They are irrefutable, at least in the ways in which they were proposed by their founders and their immediate successors. Realism in International Relations is in the same class. We can always provide some device so that it appears to explain the world whereas in fact it provides only a tautological covering of concepts.

It is odd that realism was not mentioned by Popper as another example of tautological theories which were subject to the same objections as Marxism and psychoanalysis. Popper worked in the London School of Economics in the post-war period when this also housed one of the leading schools of International Relations in the world. He seems not to have noticed. The International Relations scholars, who must have noticed Popper, seemed oblivious to the pressingly relevant problems in the philosophy of science being discussed on their doorstep. Further, Popper did not trawl the social sciences to look for other examples of tautological systems. He was content to attack these two doctrines which were of course very conspicuous and which he disliked for other than academic reasons. International Relations was something of a specialist area. Probably few people had heard of (or hear of today) realism as understood in International Relations compared with the many who had heard of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Also, the conservative implications of realism would be more likely to appeal to Popper than the more disturbing radical implications of both Marxism and psychoanalysis with their emphasis on change. This might have made him less enthusiastic about 'outing' it as tautological.

More charitably we can see realism as a 'Scientific Research Programme' in the sense of Lakatos.¹⁶ Though Lakatos was a dedicated Popperian, he elaborated the Popperian principles, in a way he argued was implicit in Popper, to make it less sensitive to 'naive falsificationalism'. Lakatos argued that a scientific research programme consisted of a 'hard core' of central hypotheses which were regarded as given. These defined the family of theories which constitute the programme. These are surrounded by a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses which, if they are found

¹⁴ Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper and Collins, 1959) and *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19, 3 (winter 1994/95), pp. 5-59.

¹⁶ Imre Lakatos, 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

to conflict with the evidence, are rejected and replaced with other hypotheses which continue to protect the hard core. In any field there are likely to be several competing research programmes all pursuing partially inconsistent courses. The problem comes in how to choose between them. Lakatos argues that, as auxiliary hypotheses are developed and change, the theory itself changes either in a degenerative or in a progressive way. If they are progressive, the auxiliary hypotheses will expand the range of explanatory theory. Further implications and predictions of the theory will be found which were not apparent with the initial formulation of the hard core hypotheses. However, in degenerative research programmes, the auxiliary hypotheses do what they were designed to do—protect the hard core—but nothing else. The programme becomes weighed down by a cumbersome set of hypotheses necessary to protect the hard core from inconvenient confrontations with facts. A progressive programme will explain more and more events parsimoniously. Lakatos does not provide a criterion for deciding when a degenerative research programme is finally defeated. Apparently it just fades away. People do not reject theories at the first whiff of counter-evidence. On the contrary, they preserve and try to incorporate or outflank the apparently discordant facts.

On this view, the hard core consists of the principles mentioned at the beginning of this section, notably the centrality of the state and the centrality of power. It now becomes a virtue for the realists to work to accommodate the programme to make it fit the facts of the real world.¹⁷ Stubbornness in the face of awkwardness now becomes a virtue, not a vice.

Lakatos' methodology was developed in the context of the natural sciences and in particular physics. Lakatos himself paid little attention to the social sciences. There is a major difference between research programmes as conceived in the natural sciences and the social sciences. The natural sciences involve stable relationships. Thus, while the planet earth may be evolving and changing, it is doing so according to the stable laws of physics, chemistry and so on. In the physical world, a scientific research programme alters not because the world alters but because our knowledge of the world alters. This is only partly true of the social sciences. A research programme in the social sciences alters for two reasons. First because our knowledge alters but secondly because the world itself alters. This is not an issue for the natural sciences. There may be some very basic laws of human behaviour which are invariant with circumstance. If so, we do not know what they are. If they exist it is not relevant to the present task as it is improbable (Barry Buzan notwithstanding) that these apply to International Relations.

I am sure that many realists, particularly of the English School, would be outraged to think of themselves as participants in a 'scientific' research programme as they are eager to dissociate themselves from such an American fad. However, in a broader sense of the phrase 'research programme' inspired by, rather than strictly following Lakatosian principles, they might grudgingly consent.

However, work such as Bueno de Mesquita's analysis of war initiation fits rather naturally into Lakatos' methodology of scientific research programmes.¹⁸ His analysis is clearly within the realist programme or tradition in that he assumes that the state is the primary actor and for all practical purposes is a unitary actor.

¹⁷ Michael Nicholson, *Causes and Consequences in International Relations: A Conceptual Study* (London: Frances Pinter, 1996).

¹⁸ Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

However, he brings in uncertainty. Probability and the value of winning a war are traded off against each other; this is the essence of the expected utility hypothesis. Though Bueno de Mesquita contrasts his view with realism, this is only if realism is viewed as a static set of hypotheses. It is definitely different from realism as Morgenthau understood it (and even more so in its methodology). Nevertheless it is within the broad realist framework and can be quite reasonably be regarded as part of the same scientific research programme.

Waltz's version of realism can be seen as a modification, albeit a major one, around the central realist core. The core is undoubtedly still there but reinterpreted in the rather different conceptual framework where the system, rather than the individual actors, is the dominant feature. In Waltz's version the behaviour of the actors can be interpreted only in terms of the system rather than seeing them as autonomous, if constrained, elements themselves. This can be seen as introducing a set of auxiliary hypotheses but to do so is rather clumsy. It is more natural to see the development as one of devising another set of concepts which can quite reasonably be regarded as 'auxiliary concepts' and also is better seen in a broadened sense of the Lakatosian system.

Some weaknesses of realism

There are two classes of problem with the realist programme as a tool of analysis for today's world. First, its hard core requires more and more convoluted arguments to defend it even for what it is supposed to be good at, namely the analysis of interstate behaviour. Parsimony, which all theorists long for, stands sadly by. Secondly, while realism does not deny them, nor does it confront some major problems which are properly those of International Relations. Thus, interstate war is the realist's forte but nonstate wars, genocides and so on are now the major forms of political violence and death. Similarly, globalization goes unexplained within its rubric.

Consider three problems which involve realism's hard core. In realism, the state is the dominant actor. Other actors are hierarchically inferior to them. Thus, the international state system determines the economic actors but not vice versa. States may give economic actors a lot of latitude, but, in the end, states write the rules. However, looking at the world today, it seems hard to see actors such as multinational corporations acting purely by the consent of states. It is a much more plausible interpretation of the world that we have a political/economic system in which they are endogenous variables and not subordinate to the security variables. That is, they are all part of a common system.

Secondly, states may still be ardent in their defence against military invasion but they are nevertheless relaxed about giving up sovereignty in more peaceful contexts. In many cases, sovereignty is not the primary motive, as the development of the EU demonstrates. This major development of the post second world war period has no parsimonious explanation in the realist framework.¹⁹

¹⁹ The ingenious attempts of Grieco to defend neorealism on this difficult ground do not properly address the question of sovereignty. 'State Interests and Institutional Rule Trajectories: A Neorealist Interpretation of the Maastricht Treaty and European Economic and Monetary Union' in Benjamin Frankel, *Realism*, pp. 261–306.

Thirdly, states are clearly willing to take great risks with security when certain sorts of economic issues are at stake. The growth of military exports means that internal and external politics, at least internal economic matters, are important determinants of foreign policy and the behaviour of states. A great deal of international behaviour is parsimoniously explained by the assumption that a state wishes to do well by its economy in both employment and profits and only awkwardly by security considerations. Britain's arms exports and its enthusiasm for some very distasteful regimes cannot plausibly be seen in terms of security but quite readily in terms of short-period economic advantage. The distastefulness of a regime is, of course, not a relevant issue for the hard-line realist, but the possibility that a regime such as that of Iraq might become an enemy should be a feature. The readiness to put short-term economic interests before long-term interests of world security is not consistent with the classic realist position viewed as the pursuit of enlightened self-interest by states.

Now let us turn to some aspects of the international scene which are not explained in the realist context though they are not inconsistent with it. Realism deals with interstate wars. However, though wars and political violence are still a major feature of our age, wars are less often between states, though they are often with the aim of setting up a state. The massacres in Rwanda and of the Pol Pot regime are horrific but relate very little to realism. Similarly the Vietnam war was not a realist war conducted by settled states with settled armies as happened the nineteenth century. Interstate violence continues to exist. The wars in the Gulf are perhaps cases of wars which are sufficiently close to the old realist ways to make it worth while analysing in such a context. However, internal factors are still very much an issue in these cases. In the Falklands/Malvinas war, the internal insecurities of Argentinians and to some extent Britain were major factors. The perennial India/Pakistan conflict is fuelled as much by internal factors as external. The recent nuclearization of that dispute (never far from the surface since 1974) was largely caused by internal factors. On most definitions, the two countries are less secure now than they were. Further, this reduction in security was clearly a very likely consequence of India's action in detonating a nuclear bomb and must have been recognized as such by the Indian government.

Finally, globalization is a factor which is not explained within the realist context. There is legitimate controversy about the significance of globalisation and how far it is continuing, but the realist research programme has little to say about it either in its causes or in its consequences. What seems to be happening now is rather surprising and was not foreseen. The state system is not so much working differently as being bypassed. The relative significance of states has decreased. Economic actors have always been more significant than has been allowed in realist theory but now they are much more important. States, or more properly governments, are often willing to give in to economic actors rather than the other way round. The current dogma is that markets should be globalized and not nationally based. This inevitably means the weakening of the state, a factor not always realized by nationalist free marketeers of the 1980s new right.

Realism may be declining in effectiveness as a description of the international system, not because we have found a better theory to explain the same events, but because the structure of the international system is altering to make it less relevant. It is called upon to explain events which do not correspond to the basic postulates of the theory.

One can try to evade this by adopting the stratagem of Alan James, which is to restrict the definition of International Relations to that which can be explained by the realist programme.²⁰ That is, even though the range of the programme is narrower than it was, that there are still some aspects of the world which are explained according to the hard core of the realist programme. The question comes down to how interested we are in these features of it. As a tool for analysing many interesting things of the present era it seems to be sadly wanting. The classical notion of sovereignty seems to be dwindling in Europe where age-old enemies are adopting a common currency. If we define International Relations as that which can be explained in a realist manner, we are going to miss out a great deal which is important. The power–security approach to state behaviour explains some things, but on its own it is insufficient.

If we use realism to explain some of the behaviour of small subsets of states, we have moved a long way from Waltzian versions of realism based on the centrality of the system rather than of the actors. This is not a systemic view, at least in Waltz's sense. Even contemporary issues of violence are far removed from the classical portrait of realism where the warring and potentially warring parties were states. This was not regarded as problematic, though perhaps it ought to have been. However, now the problem is to find who the parties are who might go to violence. Why the Hutus and the Tutsis for instance? Who are the parties in Algeria and why have they formed in the ways they do? Why do people identify with the groups they do? These are the problems which concern the contemporary analyst of violence. Civil wars have always existed but they now seem to dominate, but in a context where state boundaries are of no great importance.

Though realism is meant to be realistic, it leaves a number of issues inadequately addressed even at the conceptual level. Thus, self-interest and the concept of the group (in the case of International Relations, the state) as an actor are both seriously problematic issues.

Gilpin argues that human beings act together in groups and that groups must be seen as actors.²¹ He acknowledges some problems, but I wish to extend the list. I shall consider three. First, while rationality in the context of an individual choice can be defined straightforwardly, its extension to groups is less clear. We can assume that a government acts more or less like a collective individual, but this is an assumption. Such characteristics as stable preferences which underlie a lot of choice theory cannot be assumed about a group which consists of changing individuals. This is a problem which attends all group decision-making theories and is not particular to realism. Secondly, the motivation of the individual human beings in a supposedly selfish state system becomes very problematic. The use of military power requires that the individuals involved must be willing to behave in very unselfish ways for the system to work at all. Specifically, people have to be willing to get killed and maimed in order to contribute towards the greater good of the community. This is not obviously consistent with the hypothesis of self-interest much less of selfishness. It is certainly a problem which needs addressing. Thirdly, why people are willing to make states (or perhaps nations) the basis of their primary identity?

²⁰ Alan James, 'The Realism of "Realism": the State and the Study of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 215–29.

²¹ Robert G. Gilpin, 'No One Loves a Political Realist', in Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Realism: Restatements and Renewal* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 3–26.

Joseph Grieco's interpretation of the European Union in neorealist terms depends on the states of France, Germany, and so on remaining constant and unproblematic actors.²² Will the French and the Germans and their governments see themselves as promoting the interests of their own citizens for which the EU has just been a manoeuvre, or will they see Europe as the basic collective, or even at some stage, something non-territorially based? A crucial question, however, is whether the actors themselves remain stable or break up, amalgamate, or re-form. There are a thousand ways in which a mass of people can divide.

This argument merely strengthens my earlier argument about the tautological dangers of realism. The concepts used purportedly to explain the world are so flexible that they can be interpreted in almost any way.

Realism and its relatives

The classical realists, and particularly the English School, see history as a parent discipline for International Relations. Most neorealists explicitly view International Relations as a social science and relate it to other social scientific approaches to social behaviour. Following this latter tradition, I shall discuss realism in its relationship to two aspects of social science, theories of the market system in economics, used as analogy and stressed by Waltz, and the rational choice approach to social behaviour.

In both the market system and the Waltzian picture of the international system, we have actors operating in anarchy. The system consists of the totality of actors. The system constrains the actors, but the constraints are endogenous to the system and are not provided exogenously by an authority. Providing some firms maximize profits, and providing some firms are predators, then a firm has no option but to maximize profits if it is not to become bankrupt or be taken over. Choice boils down to a question of survival. It is similar in the realist version of the international system. If a state does not pay attention to security, a predator will strike.

It is objected that the market system is not anarchical. It might be subordinate to the state. In many cases it obviously is, though the degree of this in the case of the global economy is becoming increasingly in doubt. This causes Charles Jones to worry that the analogy of market and international system may be a flawed one.²³ However, the question is posed improperly. It is not a dichotomy between anarchic and hierarchic systems. It is a question of how much anarchy and how much hierarchy or authority. Almost all relationships between groups or individuals within a social system have some degree of flexibility and choice and some degree of constraint which is imposed from the outside constraining the set of choices available. Only rarely is the set of choices totally imposed. Perhaps in some very strict nunneries and monasteries this is so, but these are rarities. Even in prisons, except in solitary confinement, there is a wide range of choices in social interactions, making issues of cooperation, strategy and altruism relevant considerations. Free market economic systems have some externally imposed constraints, but actors have

²² Joseph Grieco, 'State Interests and Institutional Rule Trajectories', in Benjamin Frankel, *Realism*, pp. 261-306.

²³ Charles Jones, in Buzan, Little, and Jones, *The Logic of Anarchy*.

a wide degree of choice. The international system is a different case, but only because it is a limiting case, not a totally different sort of entity. Manifestly there are major differences between the market system and the international system. There is no analogue in the international system. However, the same model²⁴ can still describe important features of both of them.

Many realists overtly write in a rational choice tradition which also originates in economics. Indeed, some interesting developments in rational choice theory and its sibling game theory have come in the context of International Relations.²⁵ Even those who avoid rational choice are accused of being closet or, more plausibly, unwitting rational choice theorists. This leads to the incorrect supposition that rational choice theorists are necessarily realists.

Broadly, rational choice theory, which originated in micro-economics, relates the choices of actors to the goals they pursue.²⁶ Sometimes this leads to a plausible description of what the actor will choose and do: often it demonstrates the ambiguities of the situation and the difficulties of choice as is the case in the prisoners' dilemma. Despite its name, rational choice theory purportedly is about actual behaviour (a positive theory) and is not a normative theory of what ought to be the case. The preferences of the actors are assumed given. They pursue them in an 'instrumentally rational' manner. All rationality means here is that the preferences are consistent, and in particular are transitive and that, in situations of risk, the rules of probability are followed. We have to remember that this is used as a model rather than a theory. For many practical applications, the actors are regarded as unitary actors. Similarly the goals are regarded as unproblematic whether they are those of an organization or of an individual. Just as the state is a unitary actor in many versions of neorealism, so the firm is in neo-classical economics. This is useful only for answering a limited range of questions and it normally leaves open many others. It is dangerous only if we believe that it embodies some final truth. Waltz, understandably, is rather pained at this misunderstanding.²⁷ Handled with appropriate caution, it can yield useful results within its domain. Like realism,

²⁴ I use 'model' to mean a set of concepts, a calculus, or whatever, which is used to describe a simplified world. I use 'theory' to be the same, but with the intention of describing the actual world. Thus, it can therefore be tested (or refuted). The same model in formal terms can be applied to very different processes. For example, similar differential equation models can describe the movement of cannon balls, the growth of plants, and arms races. See R.B. Braithwaite, *Scientific Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) and Michael Nicholson, *The Scientific Analysis of Social Behaviour: A Defence of Empiricism in Social Science* (London: Pinter, 1983)

²⁵ There are many examples, but the relative gains/absolute gains controversy is a good example. See Robert Powell, 'Absolute Gains and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory', *American Political Science Review*, 85(4) (1991), pp. 1303–20; Duncan Snidal, 'Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation', *American Political Science Review*, 85(3) (1991), pp. 701–26; Duncan Snidal, 'International Cooperation and Relative Gains Maximisers', *International Studies Quarterly*, 35(4) (1991), pp. 387–402. The problem is discussed in a more general rational choice context by Michael Taylor, *The Possibility of Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and in a non-realist International Relations context by Michael Nicholson, 'Interdependent Utility Functions', in Pierre Allan and Christian Schmidt, *Game Theory and International Relations: Preferences, Information and Empirical Evidence* (Aldershot and Brookfield Vermont: Edward Elgar, 1994). Other important developments relating to International Relations have been made by Steven Brams, for example *The Theory of Moves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁶ See Michael Nicholson, *Rationality and the Analysis of International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁷ Kenneth Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*, A Response to my Critics', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 322–45.

rational choice theory can be seen as a Lakatosian scientific research programme. Many of its adherents seek to develop it while remaining critical of its more simplistic manifestations. Amartya Sen, a prominent scholar in this tradition, analysed some of its limitations in a paper called 'The Theory of Rational Fools' which indicates a healthy scepticism.²⁸

It is obvious why rational choice analysis should appeal to the realists, particularly the neorealists, who are interested in models of actors in systems. However, it is relevant for any analysis where choice is central no matter who the relevant actors may be. A pluralist who includes other actors besides states as endogenous actors in the system can do so from a rational choice perspective. Any social theory involving actors pursuing goals can come under its rubric.

The rational choice programme has given some interesting insights, perhaps particularly about cooperation and conflict. The analysis of the repeated prisoners' dilemma has suggested that cooperation in an anarchic system is more likely to come about than intuition suggests. Axelrod (1984) is the best known work, but Taylor (1987) and, much earlier, Howard (1971) have shown this in the context of models in different but consistent ways.²⁹ These analyses suggest that self-interested actors are not as red in tooth and claw as some of the more pessimistic of the realists seem to think. They are, of course, models. The gap between them and 'real life' can be a big one. This does not stop them being very suggestive, though, even if their policy application is necessarily weak.

Utopian realism

Peace research: the utopian realists

Both Morgenthau and Carr characterize utopians as people who believe in a fundamental harmony of interests amongst human beings. This may be true of some, but not of all. There are many who are clearly of utopian temperament who have taken to heart the view that one must work with human beings as they are and not how one would wish them to be. This led to the view of many that, while conflicts are inevitable, violence as a way of solving them is not. It was not conflicts as such which were damaging such as the appalling way in which they were carried out such as by war. Thus 'peace research' in one way or another has characterized at least one form of practical or realistic utopianism since the second world war.

Peace research comes in even more variants than realism or utopianism in its more traditional sense. However, I shall concentrate on empiricist peace research. This I identify as the intellectual movement originating with the work of people like L.F. Richardson and Quincy Wright and taken up by scholars in the 1950s such as

²⁸ Amartya Sen, 'The Theory of Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1977), pp. 317–44.

²⁹ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Book, 1984); Michael Taylor, *The Possibility of Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Nigel Howard, *The Paradoxes of Rationality* (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

Boulding, Rapoport, Singer and Deutsch.³⁰ Like the earlier generation of utopians, they were shocked at the idea of war which was now made all the more horrific by the threat of nuclear war. Also, like their predecessors, they were reluctant to accept that this was the only possible way of running the world; they thought it possible to create something better in which war became a redundant institution. The traditional realists, who were prominent at the end of the second world war, seemed marooned in pessimism and more intent on describing a future of uninterrupted international gloom than in exploring the possibilities of change. Unlike their predecessors and unlike many realists of the time (and now) the peace researchers were unsure how to do it. Further, they argued that the international system and all the systems of political violence are systems about which we know very little. It is not just what sort of change is necessary, it is how even to set about it. The goal, then, became to find out how the present international system works as a basis for working out how to alter things. The medical analogy was often appealed to. If we want to cure a disease, we need to know how the human body works both when it is healthy and when it is not. This did not mean that, in a state of ignorance, one postpones action until the completion of the necessary research, but it does mean that one acknowledges one's ignorance. They pointed out that confident assertions about the balance of power by the realists, or the efficacy of international organizations by the utopians, were based on examples (or sometimes hopes) but rarely on systematic observation. David Singer famously remarked at the lack of 'reproducible results'.³¹

At first there seemed to be a great deal of hope for the new utopians. The empiricist tradition in the philosophy of the social sciences was dominant and in some of the social sciences such as economics was hegemonic. We can have hypotheses, testable by observation, which will be the basis for a happier and more stable society. If we can do so in economics, why not in international affairs? Further, the complexity of social systems had at one time made people pessimistic about the possibility of analysing them. This seemed to have been overcome by the computer which, even in the 1960s, had an enormous capacity for dealing with masses of information and for simulating the behaviour of complex systems. Complexity itself became a phenomenon to be analysed and less of a fearful barrier to the acquisition of knowledge.³² Everything seemed set for a development of a social science of war and peace.

Hopes were perhaps higher than achievement here as in all the social sciences. The optimism of the earlier peace researchers perhaps made this inevitable. However, the frequent claims, usually from people who never liked it much in the first place, that positivism, empiricism, and so on has produced nothing in

³⁰ L.F. Richardson, *Arms and Insecurity* and *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (both Pittsburgh: The Boxwood Press, 1960); Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (2 vols.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); Kenneth Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: University Press of America, 1988) (1st edn, 1962); Anatol Rapoport, *Fights, Games and Debates* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1974); Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963).

³¹ J. David Singer, *A Peace Research Odyssey* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

³² Herbert A. Simon, 'The Architecture of Complexity', *Proceeding of the American Philosophical Society* 1960. A recent work in International Relations stressing complexity is by Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics: How States and Nations Develop and Dissolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), significantly published in the series *Princeton Studies in Complexity*.

International Relations and is in any case philosophically dead, seems to be based on an unusual capacity to ignore what has gone on.³³

Arguments for utopia

The true utopian has a vision of some perfect world which will come about at some point in the future. It quickly becomes clear that not only are these utopias far away but that what is utopia for one is dystopia for another. Utopianism now is what is a contradiction for the true utopian. The modern utopian or, again to use Ken Booth's terminology a 'process utopian', aims at improvement rather than perfection. Commonly the aim is to eliminate violence as a political tool and in particular the use of war, though poverty is often added to the list.

While the pessimists have plenty to reflect on in justification of their pessimism, the utopians also have some reflections of a more consoling nature. These are three. First human behaviour varies radically in different circumstances. This is very clear at the individual level. On the negative side, we know that normal human beings can behave in very wicked ways. Concentration camp guards were ordinary people. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, evil is banal.³⁴ A host of psychological experiments testify to the capacity of human beings to be crudely authoritarian, cruel and heartless (and, of course, submissive and weak) when put in the appropriate roles.³⁵ If this is coupled with an ideological justification, then normal human beings can do horrific things.

However, if circumstances can produce malevolent behaviour, then they can also produce benevolent behaviour. Furthermore, we should be able to construct such circumstances. There are two problems. First, what are these circumstances and secondly, if we know them, how do we persuade people to adopt them? As far as the international system is concerned, there is still a great deal of ignorance about what these conditions are. This was the point of peace research. The interwar utopians thought they knew what to do (as, indeed, do many present-day utopians and radicals of right and left). Modern utopians are much more modest. We are often ignorant of the conditions for peace, which is why we think it appropriate to research these conditions and find out what may work. The 'democratic peace' thesis³⁶ is one which gives us a certain amount of hope in this respect.

The second factor giving some solace to the utopian is that there are some features of the world which suggest some sort of improvement. Clearly the vast increase in technology and resultant wealth has not improved the moral capacities of human beings. However, the alteration of some social structures may have achieved what morality failed to provide. Thus, slavery has declined as a human institution. While there may still be more than we would wish in various disguised forms, nevertheless it is almost universally condemned. The cynic might argue that this is

³³ I consider the philosophical issues in Michael Nicholson, *Causes and Consequences in International Relations: A Conceptual Study* (London and New York: Cassell 1996).

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Trial of Eichman: An Essay on the Banality of Evil*.

³⁵ A classic is the Milgram experiment. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental Approach* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

³⁶ There is a vast and rapidly growing literature. A clear statement is by Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

not because of an increase in moral awareness but because the economic structures have altered such that slavery is no longer a profitable institution. This may be why it was possible to get rid of slavery in the United States after the Civil War. It would have become obsolete anyway.³⁷ However, at least for some utopians this is not a matter of concern. If the structures alter such as to cause superior forms of social organization, this is all to the good. Mueller³⁸ makes this argument suggesting from the case of slavery that progress, even moral progress, is possible.

Change and flexible utopias

All social systems are changing very rapidly at the moment and not least the international system. We can confidently expect it to carry on changing, though in ways in which it is hard to predict.

In general, it is easier to influence the direction of a changing social system than it is to induce change in a static social system. The problem is often to induce change in the first place. Many social systems resist change because those who benefit from the system, either in economic or in power terms, want to keep it that way. Thus there are often powerful coalitions of interests wishing to retain the status quo or something like it.³⁹ If change is coming already, this obstacle is diminished. Nevertheless, the problem is still not wholly solved. Change can come about because it is in the interests of powerful people in the original system. They expect to gain even more power in the new system. However, a fluid and dynamic system is much less controllable by the powers that be than a static system. Take the present communications system. While it would be foolish to deny that powerful actors in the scene can strongly influence the direction of change, it is also foolish to suppose that this is totally under their control. Thus, the Internet is made to the measure of a few powerful actors but its use is not easily controllable. The whole nature of the printed word is becoming less and less under the control of publishers in the traditional sense. As a group they are unable to control things even though, by building vast conglomerates, they are doing their best. Having large resources is a great help in directing change but it is not the only issue concerned. Those with few resources, like the original environmental movement, can have a significant impact. (I am assuming that normally utopians have few resources.)

One problem about change is the high degree of unpredictability about the future of the international system. If we go back to the 1930s, even some of the major developments in the physical sciences which directly affect International Relations could not have been predicted. In 1930 we might have predicted that aeroplanes would develop rapidly, but it would have required remarkable prescience to foresee the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. It would have been totally impossible to

³⁷ There is a large literature, but see Peter Temin, *Causal Factors in American Economic Growth in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975).

³⁸ John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

³⁹ Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation and Social Rigidities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

predict nuclear weapons⁴⁰ or computers.⁴¹ Both have had enormous impact on International Relations. In the case of computers, they have influenced practically every aspect of life. It is quite possible that the next eighty years may provide us with equally big developments which at the moment are quite impossible to foresee. Social affairs would have been equally hard to predict. The holocaust must have seemed incredible. That at the end of the century primitive forms of religious fundamentalism would be major factors in domestic and international politics would seem to be beyond belief. Even if the social sciences develop dramatically, forecasts about, say, the year 2100 are unlikely to be much better.

Hence, our utopias must be flexible utopias. They must concentrate on desirable inclusions such as happy personal relationships and on desirable exclusions such as war. Thus, utopians, of whatever breed, cannot say what will be the ideal international system but they can hope to influence the world in benevolent directions. This hope is possible because of the permanent flux the world is in.

The social world must have some stable characteristics for it to be possible to influence it. If the world is random, we can say nothing about the future. To influence it is impossible. Likewise, at the other extreme, if the world is deterministic in which everything is preordained, there is nothing we can do either. The world in which we can do something is what I shall call 'structured'. For much of the time, social systems follow reasonably deterministic courses but the directions can be influenced, possible given frequent but gentle nudges. There are also points where major change is possible such as the end of war, 'revolutionary moments', the collapse of a regime such as with the USSR, or other 'switch points', when social systems can be set on different paths. In principle, we can know when intervention is possible as well as what its effects will be. The utopian must believe social systems are like this as the utopian must believe in the possibility of influencing change.

Some Conclusions

Referring to *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in 1980, Carr said that by 1945 it was already a period piece.⁴² It was a harsh judgement on a book which has been so influential since then. Nevertheless, he was partly right. Realists and utopians have altered a great deal since the interwar period. They still worry about war, but other factors such as the international political economy and the continuation of acute poverty are seen by all as major and interdependent factors. Above all, the utopians, or some of them at least, took to heart the criticism that, to bring about benevolent change, we must understand how the existing systems work. Also we must work with the grain of human behaviour.⁴³ Human beings are not infinitely malleable.

⁴⁰ Famously, Lord Rutherford, having split the atom, denied as late as 1933 that there was any possibility of a practical use for nuclear energy. C.P. Snow, *Variety of Men* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

⁴¹ The mathematics behind the development of 'computable numbers' was not developed until the late 1930s. See Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: the Enigma* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), 1st edn. 1983.

⁴² Preface to the 1981 printing. Russell Hardin uses exactly the same phrase about Bertrand Russell's book in 'Russell's Power', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26, 3 (September 1996), pp. 322–47.

⁴³ A recent vigorous statement of this point of view is by Peter Singer, 'Darwin for the Left', *Prospect*, 31 (June 1998), pp. 26–30.

The issues facing utopians and realists, whether separate or in tandem, are now much broader than they were. Non-state political violence has increased in proportion to interstate violence. While it is a mistake to forget the interstate aspects of it and forget the interstate quarrels which are potentially violent, a great deal of political violence is not interstate violence. Further poverty, famines and other negative aspects of the economic system are aspects of the same problem. Realism here would seem to be the recognition that the political system is not isolated from the economic system but is part of a single system. States may not have withered away but they have been shaken in their primacy.

A weakness of the realist analysis of the international system even in its heyday was its neglect of irrational factors in human behaviour. Nazi Germany was not just an exercise in power politics but an exercise also in human irrationality. Iraq, a potentially wealthy country, is poor and insecure because of its government's fascination with violence. Current events seem to show that the human capacity for cruelty, particularly in its racist forms, is unabated. All the major religions seem to be indulging in spasms of irrational fundamentalism. A realist, a utopian, or a utopian realist have to recognize these, as well as simple power, as being the reality of the present world. Human beings have very complex motivations, and the societies they construct are correspondingly complex.

Moving on from the narrow definitions of realism and utopianism, I suggest that we can identify a realist temperament and a utopian temperament. These differ along three dimensions, which need not be closely related. First, they differ in their optimism about guiding change. The realist stresses our limitations and sees only modest intervention as possible (or even none at all); the utopian believes in the possibility of greater control. The debate over globalization is instructive in this respect. Many people ('realists') appear to regard it as inevitable. Others ('utopians') regard its more malevolent aspects as alterable. However, any attempts to alter it must be based on a thorough understanding of its processes. We must understand the power structures within both the political system and the economic system and work in the recognition of these. Secondly, they differ on their views of human nature. Realists stress selfishness, which they argue will appear under most situations. Utopians stress that human beings are both good and bad and that the circumstances influence heavily (though not necessarily dictate) which predominates. These are general aspects of realism and utopianism and are not particular to the field of International Relations. The third aspect relates to realism in International Relations and the realist theories (in the plural) about its subject matter. Seduced by Carr's categories, we are apt to think that the opposite of the realist theories must be utopian theories, but on reflection that seems a very odd use of the word 'utopian'. The opposites are simply all those theories which do not accept the realist hard core discussed above. There may be a correlation amongst scholars of those who fall into the realist or the utopian camp on all three criteria, but there is certainly no logical requirement that they should do so. We are faced with a false dichotomy. Ultimately the welfare of the realist theories and their research programmes depend on them demonstrating that they can account for the condition of the international system better than any alternatives. To a sceptic like myself, the programme looks frayed at the edges, but as a good Lakatosian, I think it is still worth pursuing. In the end, I shall be persuaded or not by rational argument (or so I like to think). The other conditions are matters of degree. Whether human beings are the creatures of

circumstance or not is a matter of degree. Realism and utopianism represent the ends of a spectrum on which we can take up many intermediate positions. Our views on the degree of control we can exercise over social systems likewise fall on a spectrum. This is so whether we are dealing with the international system or any other. Facts are clearly relevant to both those. They are not purely acts of faith. However, while facts may shift us one way or another along these spectra, it is possibly our temperament which dictates the starting point and how far we move.