



ANALYTICAL ESSAYS: EVALUATION, SYNTHESIS, REFLECTIONS

Elder Abuse: How the Moderns Mistreat Classical Realism¹

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Neorealists narrate their origins by explaining that classical realists committed a multitude of sins and were therefore displaced. The classics unscientifically explained world politics primarily through individual-level characteristics, typically a will to power that drove state behavior and international outcomes. In short, classical realism was inadequately structural and theoretical; thus, neorealists revised them by prioritizing structural factors and putting the paradigm on sound scientific footing. We argue that this narrative is generally incorrect. Classical realists were supremely structural and competently theoretical. Consequently, the realist tradition has much more continuity and richness than presently believed.

Neorealists often preach some version of the following story:

Human nature realism, which is sometimes called “classical realism,” dominated the study of international relations from the late 1940s, when Morgenthau’s writings began attracting a large audience, until the early 1970s.... Human nature realists recognize that international anarchy—the absence of a governing authority over the great powers—causes states to worry about the balance of power. But that structural constraint is treated as a second-order cause of state behavior. The principal driving force in international politics is the will to power inherent in every state in the system...²

By the late 1970s, neorealism swept the field, bringing structure and theory to the fore of realism.³ So goes the neorealist narrative—but is it correct? If it is,

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²Mearsheimer (2001:19). For similar recapitulations of the neorealist narrative, see Waltz (1979:47, 61–65; 1990:21–38); Elman (1996:20–21); Mearsheimer (2001:407–409); Walt (2002:202–203, 207); Barkin (2003:328); Freyberg-Inan, Harrison, and James (2009:4); Levy and Thompson (2010:31–32, 128); cf. Haslam (2002:9–12, 250).

³On neorealism see, for example, Waltz (1979); (Walt 1987); Posen (1984); Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993:9). On classical realism, see, for example, Carr (1995); Morgenthau (1967); Spykman and Rollins (1939:391–410); Meinecke (1998); Fox (1959); Thompson (1955).

how can there be a realist tradition worthy of the name when there has been a monumental shift in explanatory emphasis from internal desire to external compulsion? How is it that a paradigm stressing historical continuity features profound discontinuity?

We argue that classical realist theory may not be highly systematic, but it is systemic and scientific. While there is some truth to the neorealist narrative, it is overall an unrealistic presentation of realism. A comparison of classical and neorealist thought on the same level of analysis shows that the two are more fraternal complements than generational substitutes. The vast majority of classical realists are not human nature realists, and the realist tradition is much more structural, theoretical, and consistent across time than neorealists contend.

Previous work has not dedicated sustained attention to why the neorealist narrative is incorrect on its own grounds. Other scholarship has restored stress on moral elements in realism (Rosenthal 1991; Williams 2005; Recchia 2007; Bell 2008; Scheuerman 2009), furnished interesting interdisciplinary perspectives (Craig 2003:164–165; Goddard and Nexon 2005:9–61), or provided views from other paradigms (Donnelly 2000:193–200; Barkin 2003:325–342; Lebow 2004:346–348). Our argument adds value by sharpening the intra-realist debate and clarifying the contributions of classical realism.

This work unfolds in six sections. The first section lays the groundwork of the study. Then, in the second section, we elaborate our arguments about the continuity of realist thought and in the third expand on the classical realist contributions in theory and method. The fourth section offers explanations of why classical and human nature realism were conflated, and the fifth investigates implications of our analysis on current scholarship. Lastly, we sum our arguments and appeal for continued attention to classical realists.

Groundwork

Let us start by elaborating the prevailing wisdom on the evolution of realism. In the beginning, there were classical realists, sometimes called human nature realists, and they tended to see states, and the individuals who ran them, lusting after power and seeking power as an end in itself, not primarily as a means for security. Despite adopting the neorealist label to highlight a link with the past, Kenneth Waltz indicates deep rifts between classical and neorealism:

Like most students of international politics, realists infer outcomes from the salient attributes of the actors producing them.... Neorealism contends that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to traditional realism's unit-level explanations.... Realists cannot handle causation at a level above states because they fail to conceive of structure as a force that shapes and shoves the units.⁴

This, in the parlance of neorealism, made classical realists “reductionist,” which means they explain outcomes based on domestic or unit-level traits. It is not that the classics did not value structure—most agree that classical realists see structure creating incentives for states—it is that structural factors have inferior explanatory power to unit-level factors. Alternate ways of phrasing the charge of reductionism are asserting that classical realists favor agency over structure, dispositional variables over situational variables, or inside-out accounts over outside-in accounts (*Primat der Innenpolitik* over *Aussenpolitik*).⁵

⁴See Waltz (1990:34); also 37. For realism's assumptions, see Keohane (1986b:163–165); Mearsheimer (2001:30–31); Grieco (1990:3–4).

⁵On reductionist theories, see Waltz (1979):chap. 2. On dispositional versus situational explanations, see Mercer (1995:6, 45–49, 68–69); Larson (1985:37).

Waltz also takes classical realists to task for their shortcomings in transforming analytical accounts into theory. For him, classical realists do not just lack structure as a concept; they inadequately structure their ideas into proper theory. They do not bound the system under investigation, and without a closed system or “autonomous realm,” classical realist thought cannot graduate to true theory. Absent such rigor, classical realists could not draw the appropriate causal relationships and so could not explain a big anomaly—alternations between war and peace.⁶

Neorealism superseded classical realism around 1979, when Waltz published his seminal *Theory of International Politics*. Also known as structural realism or systemic realism, the theory’s main causal variable is the distribution of power. In an anarchic structure, the distribution of power homogenizes outcomes and corals the parameters of the probable, in spite of the efforts and aims of the actors. With spare and compelling logic, neorealism argues that states are the essential units of international politics, they interact in anarchy, and they compete for security. Security competition leads to balancing coalitions forming and reforming, and sameness of the competitors.

So if the realist tradition is a dialogue with classical realists, who are the classical realists? To support the neorealist view quoted at the top of this work, John Mearsheimer cites Hans Morgenthau heavily. Mearsheimer also mentions Reinhold Niebuhr twice and Friedrich Meinecke once, which implicates Meinecke’s countrymen Otto Hintze and Leopold von Ranke, who said much the same things. But if realist historians count, there is no reason they have to be nineteenth and twentieth century Germans. Xenophon, Livy, and A.J.P. Taylor are equally qualified to be classical realists. Relatedly, Mearsheimer dismisses classical realists like E.H. Carr and George Kennan because they have “no theory”; that is, they do not have “a story to tell about the *causes* of security competition...”⁷

Waltz relies heavily on Morgenthau and Niebuhr, but also names Saint Augustine, Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Martin Luther, John Milton, Thomas Malthus, Bertrand Russell, Jonathan Swift, some comments by Spinoza, Bismarck, and Hobbes, and several lesser known figures. Waltz insists that Thucydides, Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexander Hamilton, and Ranke are not human nature realists. Yet the matter is murkier. All of Waltz’s non-human nature realists laced their writings with passages equivalent to those that land their peers in the category of human nature realism. For example, Hobbes joins Morgenthau in Waltz’s discussion of human nature as the root of conflict.⁸ Since Hobbes borrows his points on human nature and conflict almost verbatim from Thucydides, it seems the latter counts as a human nature realist after all.

If Mearsheimer means to indict the best classical realists, he has botched the job. He ducks quite a few great realists of this period, e.g. Raymond Aron and Arnold Wolfers, and goes mysteriously silent on realists before 1940. For instance, later in Mearsheimer’s book, Machiavelli appears twice in passing, once explicitly because he is a structural theorist.⁹ Waltz is inconsistent in similar style. He selects a bevy of writers who are not known or read for their international politics work and is equivocal about marquee realists like Thucydides and Hobbes.

⁶For Waltz’s criticism of classical realism on theoretical grounds, see Waltz (1990:24–32).

⁷See Mearsheimer (2001:18). For a similar listing of classical realists that adds Walter Lippmann, see Gaddis (1998:384). On modern human nature realism, see Thayer (2000); Bell and MacDonald (2001); cp. Rosen (2004); Kagan (1995).

⁸For Waltz’s view of who constitutes human nature realism, see Waltz (1954:chaps. 2–3; 1959:chaps. 2–3, esp. 3, 24, 34–39; 1979:65). On Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Ranke, see Waltz (1959:7, 157, 212–216). On Waltz’s view of Hobbes and Morgenthau, see Waltz (1959:34–35; 1990:35); cf. Smith (1986:136).

⁹On Machiavelli’s influence on Carr, Meinecke, and Morgenthau, see Gilbert (1988:70); Meinecke (1998); Haslam (2002:186–90).

It would take a massive book to trace realism from Thucydides to Waltz and is not a feat that can be attempted here. Fortunately, it is not necessary. Because the continuity between classical realists is high, and few scholars posit a significant break in classical realist thought along the dimensions considered here, we may safely restrict the scope. Our focus will be on twentieth century classical realists—what holds true for realists after 1900 holds true for realists before that date.¹⁰ But we aim to improve on Mearsheimer and Waltz's treatment by assessing what we believe to be a representative sample. Our cohort includes: Aron, Carr, John Herz, Hintze, Kennan, Kissinger, Walter Lippmann, Meinecke, Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Nicholas Spykman, Taylor, and Wolfers.¹¹

One of the chief stumbling blocks to sensible comparisons of realists has to do with the levels of analysis. All realists, at some time or another, explain outcomes on different levels of analysis, and it would be unproductive to contrast arguments on dissimilar levels. What are those levels?¹² It may be helpful to think of the levels of analysis as covering a continuum.

At one extreme are theories of international politics. Theories of international politics attempt to deduce broad, long-term patterns produced by the interaction of units within a system, such as the extent to which a group of states will tend to coexist in peace or fight wars.¹³ At the other extreme are theories of decision making. They offer, if not point predictions, then point explanations. Often through complex models, they detail how specific choices were made and the processes that produced them.¹⁴ Between theories of international politics and theories of decision making are theories of foreign policy, which focus on the grand strategic behavior of individual states.¹⁵ To keep the field level, unless otherwise noted, we seek to compare theories of international politics because these engage basic issues in realism, and it is at this level that neorealism claims to be most distinct.

Summing up, the neorealist narrative makes two accusations. One is that the classical realists are human nature realists who find human nature the primary cause of international politics and structure at best a secondary cause. The other is that the classics are theoretically jejune. To inquire into the validity of these charges, we bound the scope of analysis to representative twentieth century classical realists. And we also laid down that, unless otherwise noted, we will be comparing realist theories of international politics.

¹⁰Naturally, there are many ways to divide classical realists, but these are generally outside the purview of this paper. See, for example, Boucher (1998); Brown, Nardin, and Rengger (2002). Readers need not take on faith our claim that classics we do not consider are fundamentally structural. See, for example, Machiavelli (1998:chaps. 3, 25); Parent (2005:627n.7); Hobbes (1991:35, 89–90, 99, 100, 115, 118, 223; 1998:83); Tuck (2001:130); Thucydides (1998:V.105); Montem (2006:15, 23); Ober (1998:53, 57–58, 68); cf. Lebow (2004:342); Betts (2007). If we leave the Western realist tradition, we may include structural thinkers like Kautilya (1992:624).

¹¹Space constraints prohibit a fuller treatment of other founding scholars, such as Bernard Brodie, Abbie Rolins Caverly, G. Lowes Dickinson, Frederick S. Dunn, E.M. Earle, William T.R. Fox, Charles Merriam, Frederick L. Schuman, Kenneth W. Thompson, Martin Wight, and Quincy Wright. At base, we claim our list is adequately representative to establish classical realist trends, and those we omit are also generally support our arguments. For example, although he had a more cultural view of structure than Waltz, Schuman asserts (1970, 404): "If war be viewed in the light here suggested, international conflict cannot helpfully be regarded as an act of God, nor as a result of the machinations of wicked statesmen, nor yet as a consequence of the vices and imperfections of human nature."

¹²The level of analysis often refers to the level of the independent variable, whereas here we are discussing the level of the dependent variable. There is dispute on the levels of analysis, and we claim only to be presenting our personal views.

¹³For theories of international politics, see Copeland (1996:47n63); Taliaferro (2000/2001:149); Wolfers (1962:13); Brooks (1997:445–477).

¹⁴Examples of this category include more historically minded thinkers, e.g., Robert Jervis (1976); Trachtenberg (1991).

¹⁵On the differences between theories of international relations and theories of foreign policy, see Elman (1996); Rose (1998:145); Powell (1994:313–344); Jervis (1999:42–63); cp. Waltz (1967).

The Continuity of Core Realist Arguments

We argue that classical realists are neither human nature realists nor theoretical simpletons. The sound bites—such as the *animus dominandi*¹⁶—are well known, but less well known is that the classics are tightly allied with structural analysis and extremely consistent with neorealism. It is unjust to reduce classical realism's thrust to human nature; classical realists believed states were the main actors in international relations, that they competed for security in anarchy, that power was the central variable explaining their behavior, that states pursued it more as a means than an end, and that balancing and sameness were repetitive consequences of the quest for autonomy. Most neorealist arguments can be found in classical realism—though the reverse is not true.¹⁷ Neorealist parsimony has its advantages, but so does the breadth and detail of classical realism. To make our case, we lay out the fundamental beliefs of classical realists, organizing their thoughts around the topics of anarchy, the consequences of anarchy, and state motivations.

Anarchy

Our first and most important point is that the classical realists believed there was no more fundamental cause than the anarchic structure of international politics. Internal traits may be significant, but they rarely trump systemic imperatives. Classical realists did not, in Waltz's words, "fail to conceive of structure as a force that shapes and shoves the units." In fact, structure reigns in classical realism.¹⁸ To them, the structure of anarchy made power primarily a means to security, and it caused balancing, the security dilemma, and sameness in the competitors.

For Morgenthau, the *animus dominandi* represents only a secondary explanation for why states seek to maximize power. Just as Waltz argues that sources of particular conflicts must be found in the first and second images even though it is the third image that makes such conflicts possible, Morgenthau asserts that it is the absence of central authority that translates the desire to dominate into reality. In his words:

And since no nation can foresee how large its miscalculations will turn out to be, all nations must ultimately seek the maximum of power obtainable under the circumstances. Only thus can they hope to attain the maximum margin of safety commensurate with the maximum of errors they might commit. The limitless aspiration for power, potentially always present ... in the power drives of nations, finds in the balance of power a mighty incentive to transform itself into an actuality.¹⁹

¹⁶Morgenthau made the term famous, but he was not the only one to use it. See Morgenthau (1946:192); Meinecke (1998:5); Thucydides (1998:130, 166, 229).

¹⁷See Recchia (2007). Classical realism harbors enormous diversity of views. At the extremes, many classical realists flirted with or converted to positions associated with liberal thinkers like David Mitrany and Ernst Haas. To various degrees, Carr, Kennan, Lippmann, Morgenthau, and Spykman were skeptical of the nation-state's future and predicted greater political integration. See Spykman (1942:471); Carr (1945:47, 51–59); Herz (1957:473); Kennan (1954:106–107; 1993: 190, 234, 245); Kennan (1996:121, 217); Lippmann (1963:77); Morgenthau (1966). After 1945, Meinecke grew estranged from power politics; his biographer notes, "Meinecke, in the Weimar period, was on his way to the political never-never land of cosmopolitan Romanticism, a destination he attained after the second German catastrophe had taken place.... As some varieties of fish die, they display, as if in pathetic defiance, all the colors of the rainbow." Pois (1972:48); cf. Stern (1987:176–178); Carr (1961:131–132).

¹⁸Although we may develop the argument, we are not the only ones to claim that classical realists are first and foremost structural. See Smith (1986:3, 9, 224); Grieco (1990:3n3); Reus-Smit (1996:168); Rose (1998:145–146); Williams (2005:14).

¹⁹Morgenthau (1967:201–202). Oddly, Mearsheimer makes exactly Morgenthau's point when describing how he is different from Morgenthau. The key difference between Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Morgenthau's human nature realism, the former asserts, "is that offensive realists reject Morgenthau's claim that states are naturally endowed with Type A personalities. On the contrary, they believe that the international system forces great powers to maximize their relative power because that is the optimal way to maximize security. In other words, survival mandates aggressive behavior." See Mearsheimer (2001:21).

He underscores his causal priority, stating that “drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men. Their relative strength is dependent upon social conditions that may favor one drive and tend to repress another...” (1993:37). Motives matter for Morgenthau, but they seldom outstrip structure.

And Morgenthau is hardly alone in this ordering of causes. Herz asserts (1962:7):

I believe that in international politics it is relationships among basic units of international affairs, rather than behavior patterns of agents, that lend themselves most properly to theoretical investigation. I suggest, therefore, that the primary method of studying international politics should be one that deals with the “structures” and “systems” of international relations as the basic data.

For Herz, anarchy homogenizes state preferences to a remarkable degree. In the final analysis (1962:243), “nothing short of global rule can ultimately satisfy the security interests of any one power, and particularly any superpower.”

So too with Niebuhr. States, like people, are power-hungry; what differentiated moral man from immoral society were the circumstances of each (Niebuhr 1959:135, 287–289; 1986). Aron and Spykman strike similar chords. In a chapter entitled “The Anarchical Order of Power,” Aron remarks (1985:255–256; cf. Hassner 2007:500), “the conditions, constant throughout history, of the political organization of mankind suffice to explain the precariousness of peace and the frequency of wars. Peace could be safeguarded only, and always temporarily, by the balance of rival powers or the victory of the strongest and the establishment of empire.” Spykman espouses vintage structural realism:

The international community is without government, without a central authority to preserve law and order, and it does not guarantee the member states either their territorial integrity, their political independence, or their rights under international law. States exist, therefore, primarily in terms of their own strength or that of their protector states and, if they wish to maintain their independence, they must make the preservation or improvement of their power position the principal objective of foreign policy. (1942:446; cf. Aron 1966:6–10, 64–65, 306)

This not *obiter dicta*; Spykman is concluding his signature work by placing primary and principal stress on the distribution of power.

The more historically inclined agree. Carr illustrates how structure disciplined Russia after the revolution, curtailing its excesses, shaping its ideology, and driving its diplomacy. Meinecke praises Ranke’s primacy of structure: “Hence arose Ranke’s heuristic principle (which was so very fruitful in general) of investigating, always and everywhere, those motives in the statesman’s conduct, which sprang from the pressure of the universal state of affairs, and of setting aside the trivial (and yet so very ineradicable and very human) habit of dwelling on personal errors and weaknesses.” Taylor makes a structural argument in perhaps the hardest of cases, the Second World War in Europe: “Powers will be Powers. My book has really little to do with Hitler.”²⁰ For the classics—as well as for the moderns—structure is not omnipotent, but it still rules.

The Consequences of Anarchy

The structure of anarchy leads to the same consequences for the same reasons in classical and neorealism. Consider the security dilemma, a solidly classical

²⁰Carr (1979:9, 85; 1985:42); Meinecke (1998:388); cf. 403; Taylor (1996:xiii, also xxv). In addition, Taylor explicitly assumes (1977:xxi) the state as the main political actor in his *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*.

concept. Herz, an original formulator of it, maintains (1950:157; cf. 1962:21, 157, 231, 234n5) that “this dilemma, and not such (possibly additional) factors as ‘aggressiveness,’ or desire to acquire the wealth of others, or general depravity of human nature, constitutes the basic cause of what is commonly referred to as the ‘urge for power’ and resulting ‘power politics.’” Carr relates (1985:345) the dynamics between the young USSR and Britain in explicitly security dilemma language: “both sides, undeterred by the agreement, continued to regard the activities of their own agents as legitimate retaliation or legitimate self-defense and those of the other party as unprovoked aggression.”

Kennan likewise saw in the U.S.-Soviet crises of 1948 the defensive motivations and escalating spiral of the security dilemma. Elsewhere he chronicles (1967:401; 1979:248, 12, 16, 20) several security spirals, but describes them as “In accordance with that law of reciprocal momentum that seems to govern, at all times and in all places, such things as competitive military preparations and professed military fears...” Taylor conveys (1977:361, 112) the essence of the security dilemma when he says, “the plans of both sides, which appeared aggressive to the other, were alike based on fear and had a purely defensive motive. This did not make them any less alarming to others.”

Another consequence of anarchy is a classical realist hallmark: balancing behavior. Spykman understood well that states do not really want to achieve a balance; they want to attain a margin of safety, to be somewhat imbalanced, more powerful than their rivals, and retain greater freedom of action. The consequence of all states acting this way is that power tends to be balanced by countervailing coalitions. Again, Carr demonstrates that even revolutionary states catch on to the necessity of balancing. Kennan and Kissinger gained fame as proponents of balance of power politics. Meinecke sees balancing as a blessed stabilizer of states, and in Taylor’s dignified phrasing, the balance of power is a “perpetual quadrille” in which, because of anarchic security competition, great powers may never cool their heels.²¹

Classical realists commonly noted that in an anarchic environment, states tend to imitate each other. Since states compete they have to keep up with their rivals if they want to be secure, and this predisposes them to copy innovations. This is now called the sameness effect, but before the present term came into vogue the concept was covered extensively. For example, Hintze and Meinecke demonstrate how Prussia was driven to copy its brawniest competitor, France, to stay safe (Hintze 1975:153; Meinecke 1977:38–39, 95–96). Kennan showcases (1979:224) the same phenomenon with Russia elites after the Crimean War; the losers swiftly copied the methods of the winners.

In addition, because the distribution of power drives states and relative power changes slowly, internal transformations are unlikely to shake up continuity in world politics. Kissinger marvels (1995:802) that, during the Cold War, “the overall direction of American policy was remarkably farsighted and remained remarkably consistent throughout changes in administration and an astonishingly varied array of personalities.” Carr 1985 comments (1985:292) how even a revolutionary state like the USSR quickly reverted to traditional tsarist diplomacy. Morgenthau observes (1946:65–66): “The fundamental foreign policies of the Great Powers have survived all changes in the form of government and in domestic policies.... Continuity in foreign affairs is not a matter of choice but necessity...” Like neorealists, classical realists saw the security dilemma, balancing, imitation, and policy continuity as consequences of the anarchic structure of world politics.

²¹See Spykman (1942:21–24); Carr (1985:381, 434); Kennan and Kissinger in Gaddis (2005:31, 278); Meinecke (1998:431); Taylor (1977:xix). On states’ reluctance to balance, see Kissinger (1995:21, 834); Sheehan (1996:11); Gulick (1967).

State Motivations

The neorealist narrative has it that classical realists made their obsession with the will to power paramount. Again, the neorealist narrative leads us astray. The *animus dominandi* is certainly present but does not dominate classical explanations; the pursuit of power represents less an end in itself than a means to security. The vast majority of realists cohere around the notion that survival—defined in terms of maintenance of independence—is the highest objective of states.²²

While Morgenthau does discuss the “urge toward expansion which knows no rational limits,” he also portrays the “moral principle of national survival.” Tellingly, none of his inducements to imperialism (read revising the status quo) relate to the internal traits of states (Morgenthau 1967:53, 10, 51–52). Wolfers makes a similar argument about state aims being potentially limitless, but propelled by relative power. At the height of the Cold War, he wisely predicted (quoted in Haslam 2002:209):

Once the balance of power is broken, once a particular nation secures a predominant position in the state system, it will be tempted to continue to expand its power vis-à-vis the other states. If the United States broke through the present bi-polar balance, its objectives (for example, of eliminating tyranny) would probably become unlimited too.

Spykman privileges security in terms almost identical to neorealism. Because “independence is of the essence of the state, self-preservation also means fighting for independent status. This explains why the basic objective of the foreign policy of all states is the preservation of territorial integrity and political independence.” And he goes on: “Power means survival, the ability to impose one’s will on others” (Spykman 1942:17–18, 7). In his historical survey of realism, Jonathan Haslam comes to the conclusion (2002:9) that most “traditional realists ... like today’s neorealists ... believed that security was the most vital concern.”

The classics disagreed about whether maximizing or optimizing relative power was the best road to security, but this tension is present in neorealism and is no rupture in realist tradition. Classical realists realized that power was addictive and sometimes became an end in itself, but they did not base their explanations on pathological power-mongers any more than economists based theirs on misers. Power, like money, was a means to other ends.²³

The classics were mindful of unintended effects and constantly cautioned against putting too much stock in state motivation and traits. In a note to his discussion of status quo states, Morgenthau mentions that, “we are exclusively concerned with the actual character of the policies pursued and not with the motives of those who pursue them.” He also contends that, “The concept of interest defined as power ... creates that astounding continuity in foreign policy ... regardless of the different motives, preferences, and intellectual qualities of successive statesmen. A realist theory of international politics, then, will guard against two popular fallacies, the concern with motives and the concern for ideological preferences.” Where Morgenthau saved space for motivations, Carr goes further: “Freud has driven the last nail into the coffin of the ancient illusion that the motives from which men allege or believe themselves to have acted are in fact adequate to explain their action...”²⁴

²²See, for example, Mearsheimer (1990:44); Grieco (1993:127; 1997:166, 169–70); Jervis (1978:174); Gilpin (1996:7–8); Waltz (2000:38); Donnelly (2000:54).

²³For the classical and neorealist debates on maximizing versus optimizing relative power, see Morgenthau (1967:201–202); Kennan (1954:passim); cp. Mearsheimer (2001:33); Waltz (1979:126). On assumptions of wealth and power maximization, see Coase (1995:30–31); Wolfers (1962:89); Simmel (1971:185).

²⁴For the quotes in this paragraph, see Morgenthau (1967:37n3, 5); Carr (1961:185). See also Rose (1998:146); Morgenthau (1993:6); Kissinger (1995:295, 301, 813).

Wolfers avers (1962:18–19) that labeling a state as revisionist or status quo implies little about its underlying motivation: “empirical study would validate ... that almost any nation which has suffered a loss of territory or has been subjected to discrimination, will, when its power permits, take some action to redress its grievances—and thus fall into the ‘revisionist’ category, regardless of the personal characteristics of its leaders or the peculiarities of its national culture.” Hintze underscores (1975:215, cf. 159–62, 183): “matters will remain as they have been throughout history: the form and spirit of a state’s organization will not be determined solely by economic and social relations and clashes of interests, but primarily by the necessities of defense and offense, that is, by the organization of the army and of warfare.”

Classical realists placed supreme stress on “necessity,” what could also be called environmental compulsion, incentive structure, or relative power. State behavior, like individual behavior, is predominantly a product of circumstance. This is what the classics share with the moderns; this is what makes a realist a realist. A central realist tenet and perhaps the core insight of international relations is that cupidity correlates with capacity. Classical realists recognized that structure ruled, that behavior was proportionate to power, and that interacting states had various appetites, but appetite was more a function of capability than taste. In Machiavellian language, states conform to the times or are punished.²⁵

With the possible exception of Niebuhr, who was absorbed by sin and pride, the classical realists may have had a disconcerting view of humanity, but it derived from their structural view of the world. Morgenthau said that “Reinie and I come out about the same on politics, but I do not need all his metaphysics to get where we both get.”²⁶ One should not overemphasize the familial resemblance of classical realists—they are a large number of individuals writing over a long period of time. But they share a broad consensus that causation should not be found primarily within states. Despite their diverse styles, the classics are first and foremost structural in substance.

None of this should be taken to mean that classical realists did not value the role of domestic politics or individuals. On the contrary, classical realists were intent on countering idealistic tendencies in foreign policy thinking, particularly in the United States, stopping maniac leaders like Hitler, and averting counter-productive mindsets, especially with respect to nuclear weapons.²⁷ But this makes them no different from neorealists. To take two examples, Mearsheimer is an outspoken critic of the Israel lobby’s impact on American foreign policy, and Waltz has advocated the spread of nuclear weapons in the face of the unit-level fear of nuclear arms (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007; Waltz 1981; cf. Kuklick 2006:6; Guzzini 1998; Schroeder 1994). Because great power politics is an exacting taskmaster, realists worry that domestic factors might painfully push states afloat of structural incentives.

Realist Theory and Scientific Method

“Laws identify invariant or probable associations. Theories show why those associations obtain.” (Waltz 1979:5; cf. Weber 1964:88, 107, 111–112) By this definition, classical realism is replete with theory. Granted political science methods have improved over time, but the classics and moderns come very near to connecting the same concepts in the same ways for the same reasons. Whatever their

²⁵On cupidity correlating with capacity, see Spykman (1942:25); Wolfers(1962:90, 96, 125); Morgenthau (1967:32); Meinecke (1998:1–2); Coby (1999:102–103); Jervis (2005:93–94); cf. Aron (1985:117).

²⁶Quoted in Smith (1986:134); cf. Lippmann (1997:111–113). For similar trajectories in other fields, see Smith (1984:181–185); Knight, 1982:359–360; Burckhardt (1999:163); Barzun (2000:xx).

²⁷See Sterling-Folker (1997); also Lippmann (1999); Kennan (1979:417–418, 424; 1984:157–167); Gaddis (2005:299–302, 332); Sumner (1992:276–277); Reus-Smit (1996:169).

views on social science—and some were downright hostile—classical realists have aggregated an enviable store of useful theory.

It would be a grave loss to demean classical realists as markedly inferior because they did not have the foresight to practice political science in the present fashion. Thucydides' historical work resembles a play, Machiavelli deliberately fictionalized his evidence, Meinecke left us no game theoretical models—readers seeking current standards of organization and method in classical realists are destined to go away disappointed. Conventions always change; today's scholarship is guaranteed not to conform to tomorrow's customs. Yet, if history is a fair guide, radical breaks in realist theory are improbable.

Standards for the use of evidence have elevated, and causal models have grown more formal and tidy (sometimes too formal and tidy) in parallel with other sciences. Nevertheless, in international relations, the tools of consequence have changed little: our eyes are about as discerning, our brains about as keen, our pens about as mighty. Many very smart realists over many centuries have puzzled over war and peace, conflict and cooperation, trade and blockade with substantially the same equipment. We ought to be wary of overdrawing the differences between the ancients and the moderns in a fit of temporal parochialism, estranging ourselves from kindred spirits and inspirational insights.

Classical realists saw people and states as extremely complex, and as self-styled realists they did not blush to document nuances and complexity. At the same time, however, they did not abstain from abstracting and theorizing. Morgenthau, for example, opens his most famous work with the statement: "This book purports to present a theory of international politics." He had a sophisticated understanding of human behavior, but—in explicit contradiction to Waltz's claim—that did not prevent him from fencing off his subject: "Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere.... Recognizing that these different facets of human nature exist, political realism also recognizes that in order to understand one of them one has to deal with it on its own terms."²⁸

In spite of his allergy to formal theory, Aron did not question the imperative for generalizable arguments: "Reasonable decision, nonetheless, requires one apply all of the abstract knowledge at one's disposal to the unique situation as it exists at the moment, not in order to eliminate but to delineate and isolate the element of unpredictable uniqueness." Meinecke saw in general causes the "deep and hidden relations of life." And Spykman immersed himself in methodology and theory in his 1925 *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*.²⁹

No one would have been more surprised than Carr to hear that he had "no theory," as Mearsheimer words it. Carr saw his task as "finding what is general in the unique," and he believed "The study of history is the study of causes," and "Every historical argument revolves around the question of priority of causes."³⁰ He is right: good history is theory; path dependence is theoretical; weaving compelling explanations of broad patterns, foreign policy, and particular actions requires sound theory at more than one level of analysis. Although historical theory is not always as transparent as many would like, it is theory regardless.

Carr's perspective may be justly extended to many classical realists who also happened to be historians: e.g. Thucydides, Machiavelli, Meinecke, and Taylor. If they focused on great power politics, if they used the same concepts we use

²⁸Morgenthau (1993:3, 13, 16); cf. Machiavelli (1998):Dedicatory Letter; Buzan et al. (1993:10); Jervis (1994); Tellis (1996); Turner and Mazur (2009).

²⁹Aron (1985:336); cf. 373; Meinecke (1967:4); Spykman (1925:xiii, 5, 124–125, 257). Besides foreshadowing *Theory of International Politics*, Spykman also foreshadows Waltz's *Man, the State and War* in *ibid.*, 45–46, 72.

³⁰Carr (1961:80, 113, 117); cf. Jones (1998: 6–10, 133, 153). Mearsheimer (2009) also believes that Waltz is insufficiently theoretical.

today, if they caught important correlations, and if they described why those correlations hold in the international system, then why make a fetish of form? Does this mean it is acceptable to demean the arguments of modern historians like John Lewis Gaddis, Paul Schroeder, and Marc Trachtenberg because they have “no theory”? If not, what separates them from Kennan and Carr?³¹

Finally, it is not our intention to charge our predecessors with maltreating their predecessors and in the process commit the same sin. Neorealism is a theoretical advance, it is widely read for good reason, and our scholarship owes a debt to it (full disclosure: both of us have worked under Waltz and one of us under Mearsheimer.) Neorealism affords a number of advantages. It updated the theoretical foundations of realism; it sharpened how concepts like agent and structure were delimited; it is an extraordinarily parsimonious and elegant option that scholars may use as something of a standard base model, and it provides enduring stimulus for thought and debate. Frankly, these achievements are stunning. No social science has a longer scholarly history than international politics—that innovations are still being made is spectacular.

We agree the neorealist view captures some truth. Classical realists do find human nature a significant element of their worldview.³² Niebuhr especially, as the sole theologian, was fixated on sin and pride and felt it was an important part of his explanations. Because they tended to be historians, like Meinecke, or were strongly influenced by historians, like Morgenthau, or were trying to gain the ear of policymakers unimpressed by social science, like Kennan, their works contain a multiplicity of causes for at least as many outcomes on every level of analysis and a bias against deduction and formal theory.³³ But these concerns should not be pushed far.

Realists of any age invoke a number of causes, but when they discourse on international politics, they put superlative stress on structure. Unquestionably, when trying to make detailed explanations, classical causal models were more complex than structure alone, but that is no different than neorealists. As Waltz remarks (1959:231; cp. Barkin 2003:330; Schuett 2010:7), “We still have to look to motivation and circumstances in order to explain individual acts.” Waltz’s second book (1967), after all, was about domestic politics and foreign policy. Comparing apples to apples, classical realists and neorealists use the same factors to explain the same recurrent patterns. And as Stephen Walt’s work indicates, neorealists remain about as unfavorably disposed to deduction and formal theory as their predecessors, but neither should be called atheoretical for that.³⁴

To sum our two main arguments, classical realists did indeed see an urge for power in international politics, but they saw an urge for power in *all* aspects of social life. Realists as a rule toed the Hobbesian line that it is anarchy that differentiates the international realm. Anarchy permitted security-seeking states to get embroiled in hostility spirals, which led to expansion, balancing, and war. How states behaved in this dynamic was mostly a function of relative power. By explaining the same patterns with essentially the same concepts and logic as neorealists, classical realists escape charges of human nature realism and theoretical incompetence.

³¹See Abbott (2001:17–27); Weber (1958:138); cf. Wight (2002:23–51). See also Gaddis (1986); Schroeder (1994); Trachtenberg (2003).

³²See, for example, Kennan (1967: 483; 1993:28); Aron (1966:72–73, 87, 144, 598); Smith (1986:17, 102–104, 110, 130); Morgenthau (1993:45, 290); Niebuhr (2001:18, 35, 46).

³³On the historical bent of classical realism, see Aron (1985:281–282); Kennan (1954:92; 1956:vii); Kennan (1958:83, 209, 383). On the historian’s bias against highly systematic theory, see Guicciardini (1972:42, 62, 69); Aron (1966:93); Morgenthau (1946:127).

³⁴See Walt (1999). On realists reluctance to systematize, see Gilpin (1986:304–308); Carr in Haslam (2002:236); Elman and Fendius Elman (2001).

Why the Confusion?

A natural question to ask at this point is: why did neorealists conflate classical and human nature realism? We venture a few conjectures. One is that terms have changed. Quincy Wright's early survey of human nature explanations for war found four groups: (i) necessity, the fight for survival, (ii) desire, war as the last ditch effort for wealth, power, and solidarity, (iii) ideological, fighting for an ideal, and (iv) war as consumption good, people are bored or pugnacious and fight for "relief or relaxation." (1983:107, chap. 18) Not all of these variants are still considered human nature realism, or if they are then everyone is a human nature realist. The meanings of classical and human nature realism have shifted, and while for a time they were isomorphic they are no longer so.

Another explanation is structural. Conditions impel neorealists to ornament their contributions to realism and conditions hinder readers from detecting the embroidery. Addressing each point respectively, the neorealist take on classical realism does not come from impartial spectators. Our sources are advancing their own refinements to realist theory, and it is unrealistic to expect people in this position not to frame their attainments as positively as possible. Motivated bias is built in to their circumstances—it would only be surprising if they underplayed their originality, which to their credit they occasionally do (Haslam 2002:230). As arch-structuralist George Stigler puts it (1982:111): "New ideas are sold very much the way new automobiles are sold: by exaggerating their superiority over the older models."

Further, the division of labor is limited by the extent of the market. Common sense suggests, and the evidence supports, the belief that classical realists were less specialized than modern realists. There was a larger incentive to proffer realism as a theory of international politics, foreign policy, and decision making simultaneously. It is not only that classical realists were trying to do multiple tasks at once; they were also, as a rule, prolific individually and collectively. On top of all this, they are not around to explicate and stand up for their work. If students are daunted by this aggregation of obstacles, and if they learn that these authors have "no theory" or are easily dismissed because they foolishly subordinate structure to human nature, then students are less likely to read them.

Implications and Extensions: Corrupting the Classics?

Certainly, classical realists did not have all the answers—nor if they did would they all remain relevant today. For example, the tendency for states to balance, a signature feature of realist thought, has come under attack recently (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; cf. Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann 2004; Pape 2005). But while realist writings offer inspiration to diverse audiences, their sturdiest axioms do not validate all views equally.

In this section, we make the case that neorealists have overstated a disjuncture in realist tradition, neoclassical realists have embraced and advanced realist tradition, and motivational realists are more usurping imposters than rightful heirs to realist tradition. The classics ought to be spared the indignity, on one side, of having their theoretical contributions diminished by neorealists, and, on the other side, of having their mantle falsely claimed by motivational realists who exaggerate state agency.

Neorealism: Mostly Old Wine in Neo Bottles

If our analysis is correct, then the critical implication for neorealism is that it is a valuable step forward, but less of a leap than Mearsheimer and Waltz portray

it as. And this makes neorealism more realist. Realism is about structure influencing thought and action; so when the structure of international politics does not change, why would realist thinking on structure change? Realists have always thought of structure as the deepest cause, and they have always had an advanced understanding of theory. Thucydides inaugurates this heritage by ridiculing Herodotus' methods, Machiavelli has a strong claim to founding modern social science, and Carr, among others, was deeply involved with theory.³⁵ Realism is a paradigm filled with people who think history is "the same damn thing over and over," yet they do not deny that change—sometimes even progress—occurs over time; they just believe that development is generally incremental.

No one would mistake classical realists for full-blown neorealists, and this is a mark, somewhat ironically, of progress. As we laid out in section three, neorealism affords a number of advantages; neorealists have no need to embellish their accomplishments. Fitting for realists, the modern cohort is quite continuous with its ancestors, and their debts should be made plain. Structural realism did not leap fully formed from Thucydides any more than it did from Waltz; there has been a gradual, painstaking march.

Neoclassical Realism: The Reserves in the Realist Ranks

Up to this point, we have discussed only the intersection of classical and neorealism, yet our analysis has repercussions for other groups working under the banner of realism. From this point until the conclusion, we switch to discussing theories of foreign policy, to better address these authors on their level of analysis. One band of scholars that evolved out of neorealism is neoclassical realism. Gideon Rose outlines what this school of thought embodies:

It explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical.³⁶

Neoclassical realists take the spare, versatile foundation of neorealist thought and add domestic factors to explain foreign policy. They do this because domestic variables provide assistance in two ways: catching details and lag effects. The more one desires a finer-grained dependent variable, the more one has need of additional variables; in the extreme, this produces exquisite diplomatic history. Domestic variables can also tell us a great deal about the timing and magnitude of state responses to systemic pressures; political winds invariably change and some states trim their sails better than others. When states react to their environment outside the bounds of a reasonable actor—too little, too late, too much, too quickly—then it makes sense to probe domestic politics.

Neoclassical research is in the grand realist tradition of theories of foreign policy. We have seen that classical realists were frequently occupied by pressing problems of their day, and they charted the behavior of states and leaders by structural stars. They generated explanations of foreign policy and why

³⁵On Thucydides, see Collingwood (1998:435–442); Finley (1977:7–14); Ober (1998:53–63); Bolotin (1987:7–8). On Machiavelli, see Butterfield (1967); Olschki (1945). On Carr, see Jones (1998):chap. 6.

³⁶Rose (1998:146). For examples, see Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009); Hagan (1994); Labs (1997: 11); Frankel (1996:xvi); Zakaria (1992); cf. Rosecrance and Stein (1993).

given policies were likely to run aground. Neoclassical realists draw on this lineage of intervening domestic factors while retaining realism's primacy of structure. Whether neoclassical scholarship represents "theory" in the proper sense is an issue that has been debated fully elsewhere (Elman 1996; Waltz 1996; Rose 1998). But neoclassical research is a vibrant and promising area of inquiry and advances the standards of classical realists; along with realist thought on other levels of analysis, it also gives the lie to critics who bemoan the "inherent theoretical poverty of realism" (Boix, Codenotti, and Resta 2006:6) or its "impoverished conceptions of human motives" (Lebow 2006:438).

Motivational Realism: Keeping the Classics Safe from Kidnappers

The corps of modern realism that claims to be most engaged with the classics is not. Motivational realists—the name is Andrew Kydd's—have attempted to return to what they see as the origins of realism to create a larger role for diverse state motivations.³⁷ The provenance of these preferences is manifold, but what these thinkers have in common is the belief that innate state preferences can trump system imperatives for longer than the short run. Wolfers aptly frames (1962:18; cf. Spirtas 1996:398) the analytical choice:

Almost all analysts of international politics distinguish between nations that are satisfied with the *status quo* and other that are eager to change it. The controversial question is whether states fall into one category or the other primarily because of differences in the psychology of their leaders and peoples or because of differences in the objective conditions in which they find themselves.

Indeed, motivational realists typically phrase a state's motivation as either revisionist or status quo, but they furnish the state with a type largely independent of conditions. Differences in state type cast the shadow of war, cause variation in systemic outcomes, and generate the preponderance of the security dilemma (Schweller 1996; Kydd 1997b, 2005).

Motivational realists advance claims that run counter to classical realist thought. By putting so much weight on state intentions, motivational realists are definitely motivational but dubiously realist. On balance, classical realists staunchly oppose shifting the explanatory emphasis from outside in to inside out factors. Motivational realists believe that non-security-seeking behavior is a major component of world politics; classical realists do not concur. With so much attention on multiple motives, constructing a compelling theory grows more elusive. Without a universal assumption about motivation, systemic predictions lurch toward the indeterminate. Wolfers had (1962:86) a sage skepticism of status quo and revisionist explanations:

distinctions such as these ... rob theory of the determinate and predictive character that seemed to give the pure power hypothesis its peculiar value. It can no longer be said, for example, that a power vacuum cannot exist for any length of time; a vacuum surrounded by "satiated" or "*status quo*" states would remain as it is unless its existence were to change the character of these states and put them into the category of "imperialist," "unsatiated," or "dynamic" states.

Motivational arguments pay a punishing penalty for their heavy reliance on motives.

³⁷For the motivational realist label, see Kydd (1997b:115). On motivational realist research, see Kydd (1997a:371–400; 2000; 2005). Some of the work of Randall Schweller and Charles Glaser also fits under this rubric. See Schweller (1997:927–930; 1998; 2004:164, 166, 168–9, 171); Glaser (1994/1995:56).

Kydd suggests (1997b:117, 153; cf. Glaser 1997:184; Lebow 2006:437, 442, 447) that a “world of security seekers, in which it was common knowledge that everyone was a security seeker, would be peaceful.... The search for security does not lead to conflict in the absence of genuinely aggressive states.” He expands (1997b:124) on the possibility of permanent peace, based on the idea that a group of satisfied states can recognize each other as such and avoid the dangers of anarchy:

a group of security-seeking states has the power to render itself perfectly secure by simply deciding to refrain from attacking each other for ever.... This outcome would be an equilibrium because no state would have an incentive to attack, given that all other states refrain from attacking.... This outcome also has the happy characteristic of being the best possible outcome for each state.

This argument may be right, but it is not realist.

Classical realists are skeptical that “security seekers” would inherently, inevitably, or interminably favor maintaining the status quo. As the classics make clear, states that seek security have to engage in the competition for power, which means that even if they wanted to, they cannot consistently pass up opportunities to surpass rivals. Another problem is that states signaling a peaceable disposition may invite exploitation, perhaps from an observer, perhaps from a scheming partner. In international relations, niceness often signifies weakness, and Kydd’s argument unravels if this is the case. Paraphrasing R.H. Coase, Kydd’s model makes interesting “blackboard political science,” but because it lacks an essential feature of reality it is bled of utility.³⁸

Motivational realists emphasize that the solution to security problems lies in convincing others of one’s benign intentions. For instance, Kydd describes how in 1908 the German ambassador to England recognized two currents within English thought regarding the growth of Germany’s fleet. Either its augmentation was for the “purposes of attacking England” or that it was “not a deliberate threat of aggression.” The naval arms race and security dilemma that ensued, Kydd posits, was due to the German failure to signal benign intent: “By signaling, states can eliminate the uncertainty at the heart of the spiral model and avoid war.”³⁹

But the historical record indicates that the action–reaction could not have been eliminated had Germany credibly signaled a lack of revisionist intent. Sir Eyre Crowe’s influential memorandum in 1907 shows that there was little chance Germany could signal its plans were not aggressive but defensive: “For it is clear that the second scheme ... may at any stage, merge into the first...”⁴⁰ The British elite and public were threatened by the capacity of the German naval building program and were not mollified by protestations of pacific intent. Asserting that some states have greedy goals while others do not obscures the unfortunate fact that power can overshadow motives.

³⁸See Coase (1990:3, 28–30); cf. Taylor (1977:361); Machiavelli (1998:chaps. 17–18). Coase continues (1990:185): “In my youth it was said that what was too silly to be said may be sung. In modern economics it may be put into mathematics.” Hirschman seconds (2002:80–81): “as a result of a long process of refinement, economic analysis has moved so far away from common sense that to reestablish contact between economics and common sense while still using the concepts of economics is sometimes no simple matter.” In Kydd’s defense, he appreciates this deficiency, see Kydd (2005:116).

³⁹Kydd (1997a:371–373). Kydd suggests that “While a group of sheep can get along fine with each other if they were fully convinced that all the animals in the flock were sheep, some may be wolves in sheep’s clothing.” See Kydd (1997b:116). He out-of-hand dismisses the problem of savage competition between sheep should they be comfortable that no wolf was in their midst. But a reason sheep cannot so compete is that they have shepherds.

⁴⁰Crowe (1907:417). See also Taylor (1977:458); Friedberg (1988: 179, 184, 200–203, esp. 190n195); Mercer (1995:101–103); cf. Edelstein (2002); Mearsheimer (2001:213).

Conclusion

This paper argued that even on a sympathetic realist reading, neorealists do not represent their ancestors accurately. Two positions are untenable. One is that classical realists are human nature realists. What makes a realist a realist is superlative emphasis on the power of external circumstances, and this trait has been as impressively (or depressively) uniform over time as the prevalent patterns they have always explained. What has not changed in realism is that states are the primary actors in politics, they compete for security in anarchy, and balancing and sameness are the usual results.

The other untenable position is that classical realists are atheoretical. They may not have obeyed modern theoretical canons, but they were intensely engaged in crafting theory and acquired a valuable stockpile of it over the millennia. Naturally, everyone strives to produce and consume the most robust theory possible, and classical realists made mistakes that are not worth repeating. But classics are classic because they have been continually relevant—what better test of robustness is there? If we insist on retrospectively imposing an austere vision of what qualifies as theory, the practical effect will be an increasing isolation from some of the best minds in history. No group of scholars is custodian of a wealthier patrimony than realism; it would be a travesty to fritter away fine portions of it on minor methodological grounds.

By defending classical realism, we do not desire a return to some supposed golden age or to put modern realists in some procrustean bed. We wish only to blunt the twin dangers of alienating students from provocative works that have stood the test of time and incorporating ideas into realism that suborn the classics. As always, reverence must be balanced with irreverence. And we harbor no delusions of special status in interpreting classical realism; on the contrary, we welcome company, competing or concurring. At the end of the day, mainstream scholarship is strongest when it fights on two fronts: the vanguard engages the best of the present while the rearguard engages the best of the past. We respectfully urge the rearguard to press its defense with greater ferocity.

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