

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: ENGAGING WITH HANNAH ARENDT AND LEO STRAUSS

Ananya Sharma

Phd Student,

International Politics Division

Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament,

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi

ABSTRACT

International Relations theory has benefitted greatly from growing interaction with political theory and philosophy over the last twenty years¹. The works of Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Lyotard, and Gramsci among others have become an accepted part of the international relations theoretical discourse. However, there has been a tenuous relationship between realism and political philosophy with the former dealing with hard material realities and the latter theorizing in abstraction. Even though there are common concerns addressed by realists and political philosophers, both reach different conclusions and seek distinct explanations and answers. This research paper attempts to understand the political philosophy of two of the most significant thinkers in contemporary philosophy - Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. It is an attempt that seeks to widen the lens through which realism is usually examined, identifying patterns of similarity and difference between realism and the work of Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. Suspicious of utopianism, and of optimistic visions of self and society, realists of different stripes concentrate on power, violence, and inevitability of war, themes which are of consequential significance in the writings of Arendt and Strauss. But the conclusions they draw from this focus vary greatly. Through the course of the paper one can gauge that the interaction between realism and political philosophy can be enriching, leading to a better understanding of contemporary issues.

Key Words: Realism, Political Philosophy, Power, Violence, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss

INTRODUCTION

Realism remains the most significant and controversial vision of international politics. It is a term with multiple meanings and has been used in different ways across the fields of art, literature, epistemology, moral philosophy, and politics. To be a realist, in everyday language, is

¹Brian Schmidt, "Together Again: International relations and political theory" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol.4, No.1, 2002.

to assume a certain attitude towards the world, it implies the will and the ability, to grasp that 'reality' however this might be understood and not to be misled by ephemera.² This sense carries over into its usage in politics, where it has resonant but ambivalent connotations. Before dealing with any school of thought, it is useful to consider the idea of 'tradition' in the interpretation of political thought. One can distinguish between two ideal-typical conceptions, 'expansive' and 'restrictive'. They differ along three main dimensions: abstraction; selectiveness; and agential self-understanding. For the purpose of this paper, I refer to the expansive tradition in political thought. An expansive tradition is characterized by a high level of abstraction used to link the specified individual arguments, texts, and thinkers of political thought across time and space. Thus, Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes can be seen as realists because, despite the profound differences between their ideas and the contexts, they all recognized the centrality of power and violence in political life, the fragility of moral norms, and the selfishness of human nature. A second feature is high degree of selectiveness in appropriating arguments, texts, and thinkers. Proponents of expansive interpretations tend to focus narrowly on parts of the general corpus of arguments produced by the individuals or movements they seek to connect. Realists concentrate mainly on Thucydides's Melian Dialogue, Hobbes's discussion of the state of nature in Leviathan, and Weber's views on the state and the 'ethics of responsibility'. The third defining feature is lack of interest in the self-understandings of historical agents that is none of these thinkers saw themselves as belonging to a distinct 'realist' tradition.

LINKAGES BETWEEN REALISM AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Realism is frequently used as a term to describe approaches that focus on the sources, modalities, and effects of power. It is often associated with a crude form of realpolitik, a deeply conservative position that fetishizes the state and military power, and disdains progressive change in the international order. As stated by Bernard Williams, the 'priority of politics to morality' is the core theme running across realist writings. Much of mid-century political theorizing in the Anglophone world was profoundly influenced by the catastrophic impact of 'total war, totalitarianism, and the holocaust'. This context is, therefore, vital for interpreting the evolution of post-war theorizing about international politics, for it illuminates both the concerns that motivated the realists and the methods they adopted. Also examine aspects of mid-twentieth century political thinking.

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT

Critical and normative international theory has long believed that there is an inevitable and intrinsic ethical deficit in realist political thought. To the extent that realist traditions of political

²Duncan Bell, *Political Thought and International Relations-Variations in the Realist Theme*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.15.

thought are concerned with politics as a form of ruler ship whose essence is violence and domination, it is difficult to imagine a thinker as non-realist as Hannah Arendt.

Arendt's relationship to realist traditions is not straightforward and one needs to engage with various concepts that have been of common concern between the two. In her writing, one finds a form of 'realism' in which attention to reality itself and to face and enlarge one's sense of reality are ends in themselves with serious ethical implications. Witness to the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, Arendt condemned the naivety of interwar liberals who also provoked the wrath of post-war realist international thought. Arendt's political morality especially her criticisms of goodness in politics, overlap with elements of the realist-republican tradition. She considered idealism as central to totalitarianism's hubristic 'contempt for reality' and she expressed little sympathy for grandiose and ideologically motivated programmes for political change³. Arendt, like Morgenthau, believed that moralism in political and international affairs could only lead to disillusionment and the further intensification and brutalization of politics and war. She believed in the centrality and autonomy of politics and praised Machiavelli for his appreciation of the 'splendor of the public realm'. She engaged with the major figures in the realist literature including Thucydides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Rousseau; consenting that the causes of war derived from the 'well-known realities of power politics such as conquest and expansion, defense of vested interests and preservation of power or conservation of power equilibrium' were correct. However, she strongly diverged from the assumptions and methods of neo-realist policy science.

ARENDR ON POWER, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

Robert Gilpin describes the concept of power as 'one of the most troublesome in the field of international relations'⁴. Power in the realist tradition is seen as something that is possessed, an instrument of rule that produces a hierarchical and coercive relationship between rulers and ruled. This relationship has been considered the essence of politics in virtually all traditions and is closely related to the idea that violence is the essence of power. However for Arendt, power is not a possession and politics is fundamentally not about rulership. She unabashedly maintained that the concepts of power and violence refer to basically different things. Power for her, springs up between people as they act together; it belongs to the group and disappears when the group disperses. It is a collective capacity. Power, therefore, cannot be a possession and is an end in itself. Violence, on the other hand, is essentially an instrument that can be possessed and as such it is a means to an end.

³Hannah Arendt, Tradition and the Modern Age," in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Between Past and Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993.) pp. 33.

⁴Robert Gilpin, 'Nobody Loves a Political Realist', *Security Studies*, 5 (1996), pp. 3-28.

The most articulate proponent of political realism's ethic of responsibility, Max Weber defined the state in terms of its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. But for Arendt, violence could not be the essence of the political realm itself. 'Everything', she argued, 'depends on the power behind the violence.'⁵ Power can be channeled by the state apparatus. It is for this reason that under modern conditions power and force appear to be the same and why violence and power, which is 'derived from the power of an organized space', are combined in modern states. But this combination is historically contingent rather than intrinsic and necessary.⁶ It tells us very little about the nature of politics itself. For Arendt, the basic meaning of politics, if it is to have a meaning distinct from other human activities, is the freedom to act in concert with plural equals. The meaning of politics is the freedom to appear among a plurality of equals and to engage in speech and persuasion.

One virtue of realist sensibility is that one does not have to seek to fit all important political events into some overarching historical process. Hannah Arendt identified a tradition of historiography in the writings of Homer and Thucydides in which the meaning of an event is different from its place in any historical process or causal chain. Much modern social science seeks to absorb events within ideal types so that they appear as the manifestation of some deeper structural cause or general framework of which the event is a mere example. Arendt, in contrast, was a theorist of the unprecedented, of political novelty. She warned against efforts at, in her words, 'deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt'.⁷ Arendt railed against the effort of behaviorist social science to predict and control political action.

According to her, the real meaning of an event such as war and of apparently 'haphazard single actions' become clear only once we are able to relate what has happened as part of a story, revealed in the reflections of the political actors and the opinion of the judging spectators. Truth for Thucydides was determined by the plurality of judging spectators, they witness to great events, with each one different and viewing the events from their unique perspective. This method of leaving the interpretation of the choices and events to the reader was endorsed by Arendt completely.

⁵Hannah Arendt, "Preface to the First Edition (1950)," *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New Edn. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1979), pp.145.

⁶Owens, Patricia, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics", in Jerome Kohn ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994), pp.321.

ARENDT'S CRITICAL REALISM

The narrowly construed 'realism' subscribes to the immoral position that favors order over justice and national interest and statesovereignty over human rights. Douglas Klusmeyer has rightly pointedto a lack of engagement with genocide in the writing of post-war realists suchas George Kennan and Morgenthau in contrast to Arendt's central focus on theHolocaust as the defining twentieth-century event. He describes this as Arendt's 'critical realism'⁸. While Arendt like Morgenthau recognizes the centrality of power to politics and the ethically laden nature of political action, she does not see state as being capable of being a proper political actor. According to Arendt agency cannot be incorporated into an artificial political institution like the state whereas Morgenthau along with other relists including Wolfers, Kissinger, Lippmann and Kennan entrust the state with a degree of agency. As Klusmeyer argues that realists state-focussed approach resulted in a failure to appreciate the political significance of holocaust beyond an institutional project of power maximization. On the other hand Arendt's critical realism provides a deeper understanding of one of the most significant events of this century.

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF LEO STRAUSS

A. Centrality of War in Realist and Straussian Understanding

Throughout the history of human political engagements, the use of force has been one of the central questions that haschallenged and perplexed those who seek to understand the character of thepolitical ties. There have been those, perhaps most obviously Thucydides in theancient world and Clausewitz in the modern, who have believed that the key tothe character of politics can be found in the consideration of war. There have been others including, Tertullian, Erasmus, and Tolstoywho have believed that war is perhaps the greatest mistake of humanbeings under any circumstances whatever. In the literature of political theory and international relations, the chief tradition insisting that war is a permanent feature of the humanpolitical landscapeandthat we should understand all politicsinthe light of this fact has usually been termed 'political realism'. It argues that the elimination of war not only is illusory,that is, it can never be achieved, but also dangerous in that it means that thebest ways of actually preserving peace is by paying attention to the reality of war .

In the contemporary context, two broad versions of realism are most prominent. The first and perhaps the most influential is that versionof realism chiefly derived from Kenneth Waltz and his intellectual progeny. 'Neo-realism', as it is usually termed, famously makes all subservient to the structureof the international system an anarchic structure and thus emphasizes that the particular characteristics of the 'units' in the system (states) are irrelevantto their performance; all that

⁸Klusmeyer, Douglas, 'Hannah Arendt's Critical Realism: Power, Justice and Responsibility' in Anthony F. Lang Jr. and John Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Reading across the Lines* (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 126-157.

matters is their material capabilities vis-à-vis each other. The second version, 'classical realism', places far less emphasis on the structure of the system, though they would concede that it certainly plays a role, but rather on the specific characteristics of human knowing and doing.

I want to look at the central realist claim the permanent possibility of war as it has been approached from a very different angle of vision and ask how we might understand realism and its central concerns in the light of it. The perhaps unlikely source of this version of the realist case is the political thought of Leo Strauss. Leo Strauss was a realist in so far as he viewed war as a tragically in-eliminable aspect of the human condition, but that he reached this conclusion via a route that marked his distance from the self-proclaimed realists. What differentiated him was chiefly the way in which he focused on particular types of regime- democracy. There is for Strauss a 'hidden dialogue' between the character of political regimes and the reality of the political world, and it is this that accounts for the permanent possibility of war and conflict in world politics.⁹ He therefore agrees on the central realist insight, but for reasons very different from most conventional realists, of any stripe.

Strauss's real thoughts about politics, his political theory must be sought in his encounters with other theories; through his engagements with the many texts. In distilling Strauss's understanding of war and politics, it is necessary to understand the distinctive crisis of modernity which depends upon his reading of the character of modernity expressed through its own self-understanding. His critique of Schmitt is revealing and his differences from realists' like Morgenthau and Niebuhr profound, however much he might share aspects of their conclusions. At the same time, his distance from contemporary liberal and radical thought is great. Strauss is clearly a profound critic of modern progressivism, as many realists would be.

The noted Straussian scholar Heinrich Meier, as is well known, entitled his book on the relationship between Strauss and Carl Schmitt, the 'Hidden Dialogue', one between war and politics¹⁰. Schmitt, as is well known, saw politics as, in effect, the continuation of war by other means, thus reversing Clausewitz's famous dictum. In his early work *Political Romanticism*, Schmitt explicitly states that war will be a permanent possibility 'till the end of time' because war is based on what he terms 'metaphysical oppositions'. These can be hidden, forgotten, or ignored; they cannot be eliminated, thus neither can war.¹¹ It is precisely the attempt to eliminate them that Schmitt thinks is so problematic about liberalism and is the source of his excoriating hostility to liberal politics.

⁹Owens, Patricia, 'Beyond Strauss, Lies and the War in Iraq: Hannah Arendt's Critique of Neo-Conservatism', *The Review of International Studies*, 33 (2007), pp. 265–83.

¹⁰Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans J. Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

¹¹Williams, C. Michael, 'The Neoconservative Challenge in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11 (2005), pp. 307–37.

It is this error that is the concern that Strauss picks up in his celebrated commentary on 'The Concept of the Political'. In his commentary, he notes that for Schmitt: . . . "war is not merely the most extreme political measure; war is the dire emergency not merely in an autonomous region the region of the political but for man simply, because war has and retains a relationship to the real possibility of physical killing: this orientation, which is constitutive for the political shows that the political is fundamental and not a relatively independent domain among others."¹²

Rather than 'enmity' being the essence of the political, as with Schmitt, it is rather the complete impossibility of political justice for Strauss that creates the permanent possibility of war. War then is a permanent possibility the realists are right about that but not for any of the usual reasons they give, but rather because of the character of human political society itself. The usual way the realist case is put, for Strauss, is an essentially modern one, and as such it fails to engage with either the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns or the theologico-political problem and thus reaches the right conclusion for the wrong reasons.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ARENDT AND STRAUSS

Engaging with the philosophy of Hannah Arendt enables one to understand a conception of power as being 'collective' than individual possession. It helps in formulating alternative conceptions of politics whereby power could be used productively rather than coercively. It is this diversity and shift from the mainstream realist understanding of power which makes Arendt a political philosopher worth reckoning with. Similarly, realists of all stripes, Strauss included want to make the claim that we could never escape the possibility of war and that therefore we are constrained to accept the consequences. One can't simply ignore the obvious fact that the resort to force is a permanent possibility in politics and will remain so for as long as politics takes on anything like its present shape. The realist, and the Straussian, however differently, accepts the view of the world. The claim that conventional realists and Strauss makes too is that human beings are fundamentally creatures of appetite and fear and, no doubt, they are often right. But often is not the same as always. It is a small distinction, perhaps, but a crucial one. Once you admit it, one can face the reality of the intractability of the world without thinking one has to agree with the judgment of the world or, indeed, the standards of that world. Realism thinks one must. Strauss does too as he seems to think that philosophy must hide, lest it be destroyed by the world. Yet these claims are only true if one accepts that the world is monochrome.¹³ Moreover, and more importantly, one is not required to think as the world thinks.

¹²Smith, B. Steven, 'Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, and Judaism' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹³Rengger, Nicholas, 'International Relations, Political Theory, and the Problem of Order: Beyond International Relations Theory?' (London: Routledge, 2000).

Hence it is useful to reflect upon the thought of someone as profound, as original and as unflinching as Leo Strauss.

Enquiring into the nature and dilemmas of political modernity is not an activity that has found much of a place in recent Realist thinking. However, recovering these concerns is not only important in providing a better understanding of the Realist tradition in International Relations, it is also essential in improving the relationship between Realism and Political philosophy. Only by expanding the purview of realist tradition, one can get a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of current dilemmas facing the human kind.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Duncan, *Political Thought and International Relations-Variations in the Realist Theme*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Buzan, Barry, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism', in Ken Booth, Steve Smith, and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 47–65.
- Haslam, Jonathan, *No Virtue like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (London: Yale University Press, 2002).
- Jackson, Thaddeus, Patrick, 'Foregrounding Ontology: Dualism, Monism, and IR Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008), pp. 129–53.
- Klusmeyer, Douglas, 'Hannah Arendt's Critical Realism: Power, Justice and Responsibility' in Anthony F. Lang Jr. and John Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Reading across the Lines* (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 126-157.
- Lebow, Ned, Richard, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Owens, Patricia, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Owens, Patricia, 'Beyond Strauss, Lies and the War in Iraq: Hannah Arendt's Critique of Neo-Conservatism', *The Review of International Studies*, 33 (2007), pp. 265–83.
- Rengger, Nicholas, *International Relations, Political Theory, and the Problem of Order: Beyond International Relations Theory?* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- Smith, B. Steven, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, and Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- Tjalve, Schou, Vibeke, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace: Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and the Politics of Patriotic Dissent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).
- Williams, C. Michael, 'The Neoconservative Challenge in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11 (2005), pp. 307–37.