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MSc(Econ) Security Studies (S)

# **Lost in Polemics**

## **The Development of Anti-Realism in International Relations Theory**

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**The word length of this dissertation is 14998**

*DECLARATION*

*This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any other degree.*

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*STATEMENT I*

*This work is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).*

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## **Abstract**

*In this dissertation I provide a more accurate reading of Hans J. Morgenthau's writings that lead to an understanding of his realism as a dynamic approach to politics in general and international politics in particular. This realism has two components. The first component, the 'hard core', consists of core concepts that can be understood as philosophical anchorages of Morgenthau's realism, namely 'the political', the ethic of responsibility, the nature of men, the world, and reason, and finally, the national interest. The second dynamic component is a continuous reflection on and a commitment to the given historical and political circumstances. Morgenthau's core concepts are, even from his own perception elusive. Hence, the second dimension is important to give meaning to these concepts in order to fill them with concrete content. From this understanding of realism the tyranny of false polarities dominating current international relations theory has to be reconsidered. Indeed, Hans Morgenthau's contribution leads us to an appreciation of limits: the limits of power, the limits of international law, and the limits of knowledge, which weaken our ability to understand. Considering the latter, the deep rifts that beset contemporary international politics are a major obstacle to find political solutions, even if transient, to urgent problems in the real world.*

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Finally, I apologize to all my friends who suffered from endless passionate monologues about Morgenthau in almost every location in Aberystwyth. I want to name just a few of them. First of all my deep appreciation goes to my dear friend Kane Morgan for his engaged and critical proof reading of my thesis. Additionally, I thank my very good friend Wiebke Sørensen for her help in academic and non-academic situations during this year. Thank you both, without you this year would have been different indeed. Last but not least a warm thank you to Une and Kaja. You gave me inspiration when I needed it the most.

*I had occasion in the preface to the second edition, finding solace in Montesquieu's similar experience, to bemoan the fate of authors "to be criticized for ideas one has never held." I am still being criticized. I am still being told that I believe in the permanence of the international system based upon the nation state, although the obsolescence of the nation state and the need to merge it into supranational organisations of a functional nature was already one of the main points of the first edition of 1948. I am still being told that I am making success the standard of political action. Even so, as far back as 1955 I refuted that conception of politics with the very same arguments which are being used against me. And of course, I am still being accused of indifference to the moral problem in spite of abundant evidence, in this book and elsewhere, to the contrary.*

*Morgenthau in the preface of the third edition of Politics Among Nations*

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## I Introduction

In this dissertation I provide a more accurate reading of Hans J. Morgenthau's writings that leads to an understanding of his realism as a *dynamic approach* to politics in general and international politics in particular. This realism has two components. The first component, the 'hard core', consists of core concepts that can be understood as *philosophical anchorages* of Morgenthau's realism, namely 'the political', the ethic of responsibility, the nature of men, world, and reason, and, finally, the national interest. The second dynamic component is a *continuous reflection* on and a commitment to the given historical and political circumstances. Morgenthau's core concepts are, even from his own perception elusive. Hence the second dimension is important to give meaning to these concepts, to fill them with *concrete content*. Unfortunately, Morgenthau's realism has often been misread, misunderstood, reduced and been used as a straw man for the purpose of academic *shadowboxing* with a caricatured opponent. However, we have recently witnessed major efforts<sup>1</sup> to correct these misreadings, to revise or reintroduce one of the *classic* figures of the discipline. These efforts focus on Morgenthau's intellectual debt to a German tradition, specifically in the writings of Nietzsche, Freud, Weber and Schmitt. Others tried to emphasise the role of morality and ethics in Morgenthau's account of Realism. In reading Morgenthau as a representative of the respective tradition of thought, they fail, however, to grasp that Morgenthau's realism, though based on some core concepts, is a *dynamic approach*.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson 1999; Bain 2000; Frei 2001; Ned Lebow 2003; Craig 2003 & 2007; Williams 2004 & 2007; Pin-Fat 2007; Schuett 2007; Cozette 2008; Tjalve 2008; Scheuermann 2007 & 2009

I focus on Morgenthau, the godfather of realism, for he is arguably the most influential thinker<sup>2</sup>, who dominated IR theory for decades, and who's major book *Politics among Nations* has been the standard textbook for generations of students studying IR theory. However, being a major figure in the newly founded discipline did not save Morgenthau from a *Cassandrian* fate. Tragically, so to speak, the core messages of Morgenthau's work have been neglected, or were simply lost for different reasons. Paradoxically, most of the famous resentments held against Morgenthau should not succeed a reading of the first fifty pages of *Politics Among Nations*, yet they do survive. In order to develop a more accurate understanding of Morgenthau, I identify four major themes in order to answer the question *why Morgenthau has been misunderstood*. Ironically, the responsibility for these misunderstandings is, at least partly, Morgenthau's. As a consequence, he is often portrayed as the hard-hearted cold warrior that recommends a pure *realpolitik* based on the eternal wisdoms and insights of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these themes is Morgenthau's debt to the German *Staatslehre* tradition that he himself was unwilling to emphasise because of the historical circumstances in 1946, when he published his first English book, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. Following from that, core conceptions in Morgenthau's Realism, like the concept of 'the political', the nature of the social world, the nature of reason, and most prominently the concept of the national interest have been misunderstood. All these concepts have their roots in particular tradition with which his new *American audience* was unfamiliar. Ironically, often accused to be at best a conservative liberal<sup>4</sup> and at worst a cold-hearted militarist, Morgenthau's roots are actually found in the left-wing intellectual elite of the Weimar Republic. Hans Kelsen and his lifelong

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<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations'.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffmann, Hans Morgenthau: Limits and Influence of Realism'.



mentor and friend Hugo Sinzheimer are important names that stand for this tradition. Hence, important dimensions have been lost.

Secondly, Morgenthau was certainly ambitious to influence and help “real people in real places”<sup>5</sup>, specifically those who were influential in terms of foreign policy. Accordingly, he expressed his opinion not only in plain language, but made heavy use of polemics. Blinded by these heavy attacks on rationalism in general and political liberalism in particular, the core message and the subtext have been *lost in polemics*.

Thirdly, and perhaps most tragically, Morgenthau’s concepts were easily applicable in foreign policy, but they were not applied in a way he had in mind when he thought of them with the most prominent example being the concept of the national interest. Here the lack of understanding has the biggest consequences: The confusion between the development and systematisation of knowledge and concepts, i.e. ideal types, and the use and abuse of such concepts for political purposes in domestic and international politics.

Fourth and finally, Morgenthau’s focus on ‘the political’ took emphasis away from another important aspect of his writings: the need for reform on the domestic level as well as on the international level. Morgenthau’s focus on the distinctiveness of ‘the political’ as a realm of conflict and of domination of men over men was not an attempt to maintain the status quo, quite the opposite. Perhaps his approach is best understood in terms of a warning and a calling for awareness that even the best intentions might lead to disastrous outcomes. This is certainly not to say that change as such is impossible or even undesirable. What is more, losing this *scepticism* while relying on *wishful thinking* is, perhaps, one of the major obstacles on the stony path to peaceful international reform.

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<sup>5</sup> Booth, “Security and Self: Reflections of a Fallen Realist”, p. 114.

Thus, all these elements together, combined with the influence Morgenthau had on IR theory, led to a particular understanding of realism, which was, and still is, frequently reiterated in current writings in the field of international politics. Accordingly, realism is usually understood as the ‘dark side’ of IR, an approach, theory or paradigm that denies ethics and morality a place in political thought. Even more unfitting is the notion of being a realist is to be equalised with being non-progressive, simply a *status quo* maintainer or even *reifier*.<sup>6</sup> To establish a more accurate understanding of Morgenthau, I will proceed first with a general layout of the *philosophical anchorages*, which Morgenthau uses to make his arguments. In doing this I will follow the evolution *and* development of Morgenthau’s ideas while at the same time emphasising the dynamic elements in his realist framework. This is genuinely necessary in order to have a clear understanding of how Morgenthau uses his concepts and how they represent a tradition of thinking that is inherently connected to his German intellectual legacy.

Then, I will examine the major criticisms against Morgenthau, highlighting how measured against his own standards he has been misunderstood, reinterpreted, and reduced to someone he never wanted to be in the first place. Ironically, this has to be done against his realist offspring as well. This section will argue that these criticisms are highly suspect, and, indeed, ultimately led to a construction of the discipline of IR theory that is at best described as consisting of the ‘tyranny of false polarities’<sup>7</sup> and at worst as intellectual endeavour that is irrelevant for what laid at the heart of the birth of the discipline and for Morgenthau’s thinking: the prospect and conduct of foreign policy.

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<sup>6</sup> Cozette, „Reclaiming the critical dimension of realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the ethics of Scholarship“.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *The Realist Tradition*.

**The student has requested that this electronic version of the thesis does not include the main body of the work - i.e. the chapters and conclusion. The other sections of the thesis are available as a research resource.**

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