

# REALIST THEORIES AND PRACTICE

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# Realist Theories and Practice

**Stefano Guzzini**

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With this Polish translation, the book returns to its origins. It started as a lecture series for a Summer School in Kraków. In July 1991, the newly created *College for New Europe*, part then of the International Cultural Centre and associated with the Jagiellonian University, launched a course that went under the title of 'A New Era of Democracy'. It was organised by the late Prof. Halina Nieć who put all her incredible energy and enthusiasm into making this experiment work. I taught daily for three weeks on 'International Politics, International and Intergroup Conflicts and the Search for a New International Order', or so at least the course title said.

Tucked away on the hill of Przegorzały, I was indeed to get the feeling of a New Europe, in the very intense meeting, teaching, and learning from some 45 participants who joined from East and West: among others, the USSR, Poland, Germany, the UK, and the US, and participants who were already listed to originate from Armenia, Estonia and Lithuania. We all wanted to taste the new opportunities, getting to know people who were no longer behind whatever side of the Iron Curtain. The curiosity was boundless. This was paired with a certain sense of precariousness, since we were not sure how it would all end, afraid that the USSR would take the civil war in Yugoslavia, and the foreign 'meddling in there, as a mirror of a future to be avoided, potentially by all means. Nobody predicted the August coup, only weeks away, even less its result. Yet nobody felt assured that all would go smooth, either. Hence, whatever was to follow, we were to make the best out of these weeks; and so we did. I will surely never forget the incredibly warm (surprise) farewell party with all the participants that Halina Nieć organised on the night of my departure.

I returned to teach at the College for the summers of 1992 and 1993, with the overall course renamed 'Basic Political, Economic and Cultural Problems of New Europe'.

It is no exaggeration to say that these courses in Kraków proved highly consequential for my future. Not only had I met such towering figures like the late Jacek Woźniakowski who, merely by his biography and knowledge, made me understand just how much of the vast European tradition I was (and am) not even aware of.<sup>1</sup> I also ended up taking the resolution that if there were to be an academic institution in Central and Eastern Europe that would want me to teach there, I would go. I was lucky and got my first academic position in 1994 at the *Central European University* in Budapest where I stayed for six years. Meanwhile, the 'Kraków lectures' of the first course were turned into the longest Working Paper in the history of the *European University Institute*, meant as an investment into didactics, since hardcopies of the Working Paper constituted the course material for the next years.<sup>2</sup> With some revision, this became the present book, which has seen a Chinese, Czech, Italian, Romanian and now a Polish translation.

When faced with the task of establishing a course for non-specialists that would give them some introduction into international relations, I decided after some hesitation to re-trace the development of the realist school of thought, and this for two reasons. First, I wanted to insist that understanding world affairs cannot be done without theorising. No explanation, no empirical statement of any significance is bereft of theoretical assumptions and conceptual links. Without those assumptions, we have no analytical lens and cannot separate the 'facts' (lat. *facere*: to do, to make) from the sheer noise of history. The course intended to make participants aware that whenever they discuss international politics, or see analyses of world affairs, they can understand them better, if they can decipher the assumptions and the conceptual links from which the explanations derive. This is not a question of ideology, although this can of course play a role, too. It is a question of epistemology.

Second, this attempt to raise the consciousness about theories that guide our selection of material, the understanding of facts, the questions we ask and the answers we search, was to be illustrated with realism. The choice was logical. Realism is not only a theory with which observers explain international relations; it is also a common sense shared by practitioners when they make sense of world politics. Realism is a theoretical language of observation and a practical language of action in which international relations is thought and spoken. 'National interest', 'balance of power', 'power politics', 'prudence', 'self-restraint', a nation's 'credibility' and 'personality', 'raison d'État', 'the primacy of foreign policy', all these realist concepts are core references of diplomatic language. Learning the language of realism is an initiation to see the world with the terms practitioners use (international law being traditionally the other one). Hence, realism would serve both as an example of theorising and as a hermeneutic bridge to the world of practice.

When the Working Paper was turned into a book, the story of realism got embedded in the disciplinary history of International Relations. For realism has yet another special place among theories of international relations. Not only does it link the level of practice and the level of observation, this school of thought is also intrinsically connected to the disciplinary boundaries of the study of world affairs.

Realism carved out a specifically 'political' approach to international affairs; and so, any perceived change of the nature of world politics would be seen as a critique of realism, then asked to redefine itself and the core of the discipline.

In the following, I will take up the two points mentioned. I start by discussing the important role theories play for any explanation and the constitutive function of theories for acquiring knowledge. I then develop the relationship between realist theory and practice in general, including the odd confusion between theory and foreign policy strategy, and between realist strategy based on the national interest and a nationalist foreign policy.

# 1. THE NECESSITY OF THEORISING AND THE CONSTITUTIVE FUNCTION OF THEORIES

In 1991, the participants in the *College for New Europe* were all consciously living world history. They were experiencing the end of the Cold War. The map of Europe was re-drafted, their lives profoundly altered. The political order was changing before their eyes. How could one best understand this? How could we explain the origins and implications of these changes? Indeed, what was it that was changing in the first place?

To answer these questions, we cannot avoid theory. All explanations, whether or not the agent or observer is aware of it, imply theoretical assumptions and concepts that help us select the significant from the insignificant, and the reasons that can justify such inevitable selection. Pure induction, as already Karl Popper told us, is not possible; knowledge starts from and returns to its constitutive concepts. If theory is unavoidable, how can we best grasp its role in our explanations? There is no agreement in the social sciences about the role and nature of theory.<sup>3</sup>

## Theory as 'know how' or practical knowledge

The traditional way to teach theoretical premises in international relations consists in socialising neophytes into the 'know how' of world politics. Here theory is practical knowledge, which generations pass on to the next ones, by learning key lessons of history from which principles of behaviour or 'maxims' can be derived. I was socialised in this manner during my studies at Sciences-Po in Paris, whose program in International Relations in the 1980s encompassed diplomatic history, non-mathematical economics, international law, and strategic studies conceived in terms of the history of military strategy. This conception of practical knowledge-as-theory has almost disappeared in other social sciences, with the notable exception of management studies. In International Relations, however, it still commands a wide audience and prestige. This comes as no surprise when proposed by practitioners themselves. Diplomats and officers will obviously value the knowledge acquired through their own or their predecessors' experiences. This has its justifications, and not only because it provides them with the status of a unique expertise. Less expected, perhaps, theory as know-how is also shared by other experts and some think tanks. Proud to distance themselves from 'academic' knowledge, hereby constructed as the useless ruminations of armchair 'theoreticians', they derive their privileged status in frequenting practitioners, and the expert field at large, by defending the superiority of practical knowledge. Being themselves often no practitioners, either, their endorsement of practical knowledge and its language is the concession one makes by accepting, not always grudgingly, to become acceptable to the powers there are.<sup>4</sup>

Yet far from being the strong point of this theorising, the reference to history and its lessons is its intrinsic weakness. For such a move assumes as resolved what needs to be established in the first place: that there are unambiguous lessons of history. Although individual historians may at times tend to think so, historiography is informed by the plurality of possible interpretations. Surely, some interpretations

will simply not do because they invent events and facts, forget them, line them up in an incoherent manner, or, in their interpretation, miss alternative historical paths that could have led to the same result. However, the important moments in history, those that we make constitute our collective memory and history-writing, are neither a relativist place where 'any interpretation goes', nor one where there is necessarily a single story. Just think about the ongoing debate on the origins of the Cold War, or its end.

When the lessons of history are ambivalent, this produces a logical circle for practical knowledge. Practical knowledge affirms that it is historical experience from which to derive long-lasting principles of diplomacy and warfare. Yet when that historical experience is not self-evident, we need criteria for selecting which interpretation is to be considered the 'right' practical knowledge. For making the selection, practical knowledge has however no other ground than referring to those historical lessons, since it refuses an external theoretical standpoint. The truthfulness of historical maxims is shown by referring to the ... truthfulness of those historical maxims. In practice, the selection work is then usually done by implicit assumptions or some generic references to philosophy. This can work in practice, as long as people share the same view of the world and trust the people who initiate them into this know-how (see more on the 'conservative dilemma' in this book). But, when challenged, this justification does not carry, and the mere reference to history and its lessons will beg the question. An explicit treatment of theory cannot be avoided.

### **Theory as theoretical deduction and empirical test**

A second solution to conceive of theories is not history and experience driven, but theoretically controlled empirical generalisation. Here, we start not from practical experience as such. Either we infer from empirical regularities more general theoretical (probabilistic) laws, or, if they are already there, we deduct from such probabilistic laws hypotheses that are to be tested empirically. This bottom-up and top-down movement between empirics and theory can be combined and/or sequenced over time.

The difference to practical knowledge is fundamental. When using such an approach to theorising, for instance, the balance of power is not a practical institution developed in international society over time for the sake of limiting conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it is a causal and potentially universal mechanism, a behavioural equilibrium, that applies whenever rational actors face each other in a political environment without central sanctioning body (like a government), i.e. 'anarchy' in the jargon of international relations. Theory consists in these probabilistic law-like empirical generalisations; and theoretical education consists in learning how to derive stringent hypotheses from theories and/or how to control them empirically.

Compared to theory as 'know-how', the advantage of such an approach to theory is its theoretical consciousness. Data does not speak for itself. In fact, any data is an observation that is already theory-laden. Theory is always already there: it constitutes what counts as facts or data in the stream of history. Yet it shares an



equivalent default with the previous version: whereas practical knowledge assumes a single historical world, this more analytical knowledge assumes a single epistemic world. Although starting from the thesis that the identification of facts and surely the use of facts in explanation is theory-dependent, the empirical world, somewhat miraculously, can constitute itself as neutral ground for tests between theories. Since the implication of this tension have given rise to some confusion, let me expand a bit.

Even if theory is always already there, different explanations can share the same facts to start with. The Nazi government ordered its troops to attack Poland on 1 September 1939 and blatantly lied about being attacked first. There are no 'alternative facts' in this regard, to use an infamously mendacious expression of recent.<sup>6</sup> Only when we move beyond the mere descriptive statement of facts, however, and integrate it into wider historical explanations about e.g. the origins of the Second World War, we will weigh those facts differently. Theories underlie different causal stories and this affects the meaning or role of these facts *in the explanation*. To take an illustrious example, for Ernst Nolte, there is no dispute about what happened on 1 September in material terms. However, in Nolte's reading, this is not the start of the war, but just a further battle in the ongoing 'European civil war' against bolshevism which started with the 1917 Revolution, and in which Germany acted in almost preemptive defense (also against potential future anti-German policies of Poland).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, as historiography in general, Nolte's thesis treats Adolf Hitler's racism as an indisputable fact of history by the conventional understanding of that term. Yet he heavily downgrades its role for the Nazi movement and the outbreak of the war.

It is possible that a few historical explanations can subsist, side by side, since the facts line up with more than one of them, as e.g. in the debate around the origins of the Cold War. History is not unambiguous. But before historiography in the social sciences accepts the multiplicity of possible interpretations, it does check all the facts that these different interpretations mobilise, the methodological soundness and, since data does not speak for itself, the internal theoretical logic of the argument. In all respects, Nolte's thesis has been found wanting.<sup>8</sup> Seeing in Bolshevism (the original) the causal nexus for Nazism (the copy) produces considerable tensions when trying to explain the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the attack on Western liberal democracies, and the Nazi obsession, well beyond any military or anti-bolshevist need, with the Jewish Holocaust (and other minorities that were systematically killed, like Roma and homosexuals). Besides a selective and uncritical reading of sources and material facts, in its mono-causality (anti-bolshevism), it reverses even chronological order, and cannot make much coherent sense of the driving force of anti-Semitism and German nationalism.<sup>9</sup>

What is important to stress is that Nolte faced such a critique not because he had to interpret facts for including them in his explanation. All historians or social scientists do that. He was not criticised because he produced a different explanatory line, driven by a different theory of what affects historical action, since important events in history are often important because they cannot be easily reduced to a single interpretation. Again, all scientific observers do that. He faced critique

because he committed factual, methodological and logical errors. True: reality is not a blank sheet, data does not speak for itself; its facts are made sense in interpretations which, in turn, are supported by underlying theories; and more than one set of interpretations may be both factually and logically supportable. Still, not anything goes. The theory dependence of facts means that besides whether the facts actually existed, the basic fact check denied by 'alternative facts', we can have alternative explanations and need to check those explanations against each other, in their internal logic and use of facts.

### **The constitutive function and performative effects of theories**

If empirical analysis ultimately needs to include a check of theories in their underlying assumptions and logic such as to adjudicate between different explanations, then this leads us to consider another function of theories. In the empirical tradition, theories have mainly an instrumental function for knowledge. They can be like a toolbox in which one picks the right utensil for every explanatory problem. If the aim is to lower the value of a freely convertible currency, lowering interest rates is a good strategy: since the return on monetary investments in this currency diminishes, the demand for the currency should diminish and hence its value on the currency market.<sup>10</sup> Such a use of theories is possible in particular in situations of aggregated human interaction and stable conditions.

At the same time, theories have a crucial constitutive function for knowledge. All knowledge is socially constructed in the trivial sense, that we need concepts to identify and signify facts: concepts are the condition for the possibility of knowledge. They predispose to how we decipher the world. In fact, we do not passively perceive the world; we look at the world by trying to match it to the concepts we know (which does not always work). And those concepts are social in the sense that they are not our individual unique invention, but just as in any language, something whose meaning is shared and given in a community of speakers; they are intersubjective. Therefore, theory is always already there and becoming aware of the underlying assumptions and concepts is a way to do theory and to understand the different ways to see the world. They provide 'analytical lenses'. The check of the coherence of such lenses is usually done in political theory (for the meaning of concepts, also over time) and meta-theory for the consistency of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.

The identification of facts is hence theory dependent in our explanations. On top of that, theories can interact, in themselves, with social reality. When Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilization* appeared, there was yet relatively little in world politics that would warrant this divide to be considered on a par with the previous ideological divide (and the many wars it informed, from Korea to Vietnam, or the many military coups, as in Chile, or invasions, as in Hungary). Yet, observers were quick to react lest it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Huntington's thesis was no outside explanation only, it was an intervention into world affairs; for if everyone would start thinking in his terms, the world would turn this assumed divide into its reality (until today many more people die in conflicts within religious communities than between them). It had performative effects. Or for using an

example in economics: at the stock market, financial models meant to analyse and predict markets, have become part of the expectations and hence part of the very present and future, they were supposed to only externally observe.<sup>11</sup>

This means that the analysis of the 'analytical lenses' is not just internal theoretical work. If theories interact with social reality, then their analysis is about social practices and politics. Theory is not confined to an 'ideal' world, somewhat outside of reality. Ideas are real, just as much as matter is. Hence their analysis helps us both to make better explanations and to approach a part of social reality itself. And this interaction between thought and social reality introduces a normative element in any theorising, which may or may not turn out politically significant.

## 2. REALISM AS THEORY AND PRAXIS

Realism plays a special role in political practice, since it functions as the reservoir of practical lessons of the past. This book analyses realism as the repeated, but so far unsuccessful, translation of such practical knowledge into an explanatory theory.<sup>12</sup> This preface will not add to the argument that the book will present. However I would like to dissipate two common confusions from the very start, namely that between realism as a theory and as a foreign policy strategy, and within the latter, the confusion of the national interest with a nationalist agenda.

### Realism as theory or foreign policy strategy

Realism used to be under attack at the end of the Cold War and almost all the 1990s, since cooperation unexpectedly overcame the security dilemma. In reverse, it seems to have some renaissance more recently, in particularly with the Russian invasion of Crimea. At face value, both judgements, the indictment and the endorsement, are wrong. For they confuse description with explanation.<sup>13</sup>

'Realism' is a term, which is used in at least two domains. On the one hand, it refers to the observational *theory* of international relations that has to find explanations for things like the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, realism refers to a particular foreign policy / security doctrine or *strategy*, often associated with strategies of containment or military preparedness for war. In the first case, it is an external view to analyse the world, often focused on explaining actors' behaviours. In the second, it corresponds to devise an actor's general plan of action. It is not hard to see how the two can be confused. Although widespread, it is wrong nevertheless. In that confusion, whenever things turn sour, whenever the world is experiencing violence or war, when people use realist *strategies*, then allegedly realist *theory* explaining that action is vindicated; and whenever diplomacy succeeds, war is avoided and cooperation achieved, then 'liberalism', 'idealism' or whatever term chosen, is right.

Obviously, that makes little sense on either level. Realist theory is not only able to explain violence and war; for being a credible theory, it must also be able to explain cooperation and harmony. The same applies for any other theory. There are realist explanations of European integration just as there are constructivist explanations of the security dilemma.<sup>14</sup> The question is not the descriptive point whether war or peace happens, but the explanatory question: for which reason? Moreover, as I will take some time to discuss later, it is by no means necessary for a liberal foreign policy to exclude violence or war, or for a realist strategy to prefer war to cooperation in all circumstances. To top it, sometimes, in public debates, realism is even more vaguely connected to a sense of pessimism. Again, although that can be defended on the philosophical level for scholars like Hans Morgenthau, for instance, who derives it from a specific vision of human nature<sup>15</sup>, pessimism as such is not unique to realism. If you were a constructivist scholar seeing the ongoing world political processes in terms of the militarisation of politics and the essentialisation of identities<sup>16</sup>, you may be more pessimistic than some rationalist or defensive realists, these days.

Hence, when realist theories came under attack at the end of the Cold War, it was not mainly because they had not foreseen the end, a fate it shared with all other theories. Nor was it because things turned 'nice' in Europe. The problem was that the logic of the theory could not really explain the very way it came to an end.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the mere fact that territorial conflicts subsist in Europe, as recently in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, is not yet an indicator that the realist way for explaining them is the right one, since such conflicts can have other primary reasons than power or security maximisation.

The confusion between theory and strategy, between explanation from a distance and maxims for action, is rarely found in other social sciences. That it regularly happens in the expert debate on international relations has a good reason: this binary simplification does not originate in the field of science, although it is reproduced there. Its origin is in the discourse of world diplomacy. Its conduit is the classical debate between political realism and idealism, and the former's conception of the superiority of practical knowledge. It is not with the distant view of science that social and political practice is improved; it is rather the other way round: it is through recourse to the lessons of practice that science is constituted. If the evolution of societies had made science necessary — for knowledge, control and for the legitimacy of rule — then the late-coming discipline of IR was to become the necessary detour to convince the new and enlarged world diplomatic society about, and thus preserve, the already-existing practical knowledge of its diplomatic and military elite. Science did not turn against tradition; tradition fitted itself into its science. The discipline was not there to produce knowledge; knowledge produced its discipline.<sup>18</sup>

### **Realism in practice: the national interest vs militarism and national primacy**

This book is about realist theories in International Relations. But given the close link to practice, it touches foreign policy practice, mainly in the US. It shows that realism, even when understood as a foreign policy strategy, is not to be confused with militarism or national primacy, even if many self-styled realists may tend to do so.

A first wide-spread perception of realism is that it is mainly associated with war and the military. Indeed, some of the most prominent realists are connected to 'strategic studies' (sic, not: security studies), such as John Mearsheimer. It is hence understandable that any more muscular or warring policy is considered part of a realist strategy. When not heavily qualified, it is nevertheless wrong. A first indicator may already be the fact that prominent US realists opposed US interventions abroad, such as George Kennan who opposed the very creation of NATO, Hans Morgenthau who opposed the Vietnam War, and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt who warned against an intervention in the running up of the war in Iraq.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, many self-identifying realists have been in favour of all three strategic decisions, not least Henry Kissinger. It is hence fair to say that the role of military politics is contested within realist strategy. That implies, however, that a reduction of realist strategy to military politics alone is not permissive. 'Violence' is not the only language international actors understand; it may provoke that which it is intended to avoid. Indeed, realists themselves have warned against

two particularly pernicious consequences of this reduction, the confusion of military might with power, and the reversal of Clausewitz's famous dictum.

Morgenthau puts the first confusion succinctly:

*'To speak loudly and carry a big stick, to rephrase Theodore Roosevelt's famous dictum, is indeed the preferred method of militaristic diplomacy. The proponents of this method are unaware that it is sometimes wise to speak softly and carry a big stick; that it is sometimes even wise to leave the big stick at home where it is available when needed. In its exclusive concern with military strength, militarism is contemptuous of the intangibles of power. Without them, a powerful nation may frighten other nations into submission or it may conquer by sheer overwhelming force, but it cannot rule what it has conquered for it cannot gain voluntary acceptance for its rule. In the end, the power of militarism must yield to a power tempered with self restraint which seeks the effectiveness of national power in the infrequency of its military use.'*<sup>20</sup>

Power lies not in the resources alone, as mighty as they may be, but in the legitimacy of rule. It is not simply an expression of carrying big sticks; indeed, having such big sticks may well be at times a disadvantage. As Kenneth Waltz puts it, the most powerful police is the one that does not need to fire a single shot.<sup>21</sup> In other words, trying to maximise power by maximising military resources; trying to streamline foreign policy strategy to military goals ends up confusing power and strength with the instruments of war.

This feeds into a related and equally pernicious reduction. Raymond Aron has been warning against the reversal of Clausewitz.<sup>22</sup> According to Clausewitz's famous dictum, war is the prolongation of politics by other means. Although often misunderstood, this implies that the military is but an instrument in the pursuit of political aims, not the end in itself. A fixation on the means can never establish the ends. Indeed, it would end up reversing and perverting Clausewitz when politics becomes the prolongation of war by other means. Hence, the military slogan 'if you want peace, prepare for war' is only correct, if the analysis of the conditions for peace is put before planning the type of military preparation. The preparation for war in itself should not become an end, putting literally the cart before the horse. Such a risk exists also with the so-called 'law of the instrument', accredited to both Abraham Kaplan and Abraham Maslow.<sup>23</sup> In its short version, it runs that 'if all you have is a hammer, then you tend to treat everything like a nail.' Indeed, the most pernicious effect is that the means 'might affect our aims in a manner that can lead to the reinforcement of the usage of the same instrument'.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the often-heard statement of 'having won the war, but lost the peace' can be an indicator of a Clausewitz reversed. Obviously, major wars are unpredictable, as Clausewitz also reminded his readers. Hence, the planned peace may not have worked out. Still, that should not make us lose from sight that the whole objective of the war was to win the peace. That is more than just having an 'exit-strategy' for the military, although that does not harm. If the post-war peace had not been planned before any military action was taken, then the focus on military means has pernicious effects. It is hence important to see that realism as a foreign policy strategy is not committed

to militarism, even if it a certain number of scholars in (neo-)classical geopolitics would end up doing so.

The second conflation happens when the pursuit of the national interest is misunderstood as the search for national primacy. Realists have often cautioned against it.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, the idea of a national interest is centrally concerned with what is politically good for the given state, however contested the definition of 'good' is. But this does not entail some rapacious egoism, nor does it exclude cooperation, or the development of forms of common interest.

Such confusion is most visible in greater powers' attempts to 'go it alone' and to devise action unilaterally in which alliances and cooperation become passive and secondary followers as in the Bush jr. administration's idea of a 'coalition of the willing' in the run-up to the Iraq war. Now, unilateralism may sound like the best defence of a national interest, but most often it is not. Whether it comes wrapped up as isolationism or interventionism, it tends to see any international event as a singular one. Yet countries continue meeting each other in international society. These are no singular encounters, but historically developing relationships. One cannot pretend to be the lonely Robinson when the island is heavily populated. Then retreating into a cave or bullying everyone around will not do. Therefore, realists tend to think that unilateralism will have potential deleterious diplomatic consequences in the short, and surely in the mid and long run. If power is most effective when it is legitimate and reputed, then unilateralism undermines it.

This reduction of the national interest to a nationalist interest forgets the origins of realist strategy in the practices of the European aristocratic society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where the reason of state allowed egoistic action yet limited by the rules of a society of states. Indeed, to some extent it was exactly for its limited nature that an egoistic national interest had become permissive in the first place. Napoleon's non-respect of these limits brought about his ultimate isolation, testified by Metternich's prudent volte-face once it became clear that the French Emperor would not accept the rules of the game (and the military tide was turning).<sup>26</sup>

As Metternich's example also shows, the rules of the game allow some extra leverage in situations of true self-defence. But the assessment whether it is a legitimate form of self-defence is not left to the individual country. This has obvious reasons. If every country were allowed to overrule the norms which limit the scope of war or the permissive means of diplomacy by simply declaring all situations to self-defence, then the system would be impossible from the start. Self-defence has to be legitimate in the eyes of international society. It is here where nationalism can be most detrimental to the national interest. Nationalism is usually fuelled by a self-perception of victimhood, even perennial victimhood. This feeds into a policy of permanent self-defence. Such policy can be applied as a mere ploy to allow oneself special exceptions from the rules that should apply only to others. Such ploy, even if temporarily successful because unopposed, will however undermine the position in the future, also for 'great powers'. A policy of permanent self-defence can also be applied in earnest by countries where national narratives of victimhood are strong. However, such permanent self-defence resembles a policy seeking 'absolute

security', as Kissinger called it, which ends up making everyone else feel insecure. Avoiding such highly unstable situation is the aim of realist diplomacy.

Hence, self-defence is a card allowed in the game of international affairs to be freed from some behavioural norms. It is no unconditional joker, however. The conditions which are fixed by the game, not its individual players. Of course, the rules can be not God-given or immutable: they are established by the (changing) accepted practices of international society. But they exist and hence self-defence needs to be justified in terms of international norms and to international society. Invoking it to *avoid* such justification is not permissible for international stability: if all players accepted unrestricted self-defence as a rule, realism's diplomacy of prudence and limitation of conflicts would collapse. It is also self-defeating since it prompts diplomatic isolation with nothing in return on the international level.

Obviously, such grand-standing can cater to domestic audiences and short-term popularity. The more a country isolates itself from the outside, the easier this gets. But realists insist in the 'primacy of foreign policy' and see it as an indicator of faulty statesmanship if politicians are not able to carry it through. For realists, it is not in anyone's legitimate national interest to have that happen (although that is no guarantee against its happening). It is hence in the nature of the realist national interest that it needs to be justified in the eyes of the international society. Not by coincidence do realists see in the rise of nationalism one of the greatest threats to the international order.<sup>27</sup> Even without the nostalgia of some golden European age that surely never was – and not only for the colonial part of the world, for too long mere object and not subject of this international society – realists will point to the consequentialist logic of their argument. Looking back from the dire consequences of a nationalist interest, a pragmatic political imperative and an ethics of responsibility must oppose it.



### **3. CONCLUSION**

For its multiple positions in theorising, practical, explanatory and constitutive, for its bridge but also confusion between theory and strategy, a biography of post-war realism will probably disappoint readers in search of an enemy or of a hero. Yet such was never my aim. Precisely for its multiple roles, it is important to understand the content of realism, or rather, its multiple contents. There is not one realism; there are many realisms. Using theoretical analysis will unpack the many realisms there are; in return, such unpacking shows many of the problems of theorising international relations at large. It may not be the final stage in our quest for knowledge – and the book will show several dilemmas – but it is indispensable for understanding world affairs, if only because many practitioners share its tenets, sometimes without understanding them, while observers need to understand them, whether or not they share them.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I still remember his lecture on 'the tree' in European art and culture. Not speaking half of his languages, I was however able to read one translated book (Woźniakowski 1990).
- <sup>2</sup> Guzzini 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of different ways of theorising, see Guzzini 2013a.
- <sup>4</sup> The phrasing is taken from Bourdieu 2001, p. 114.
- <sup>5</sup> This would be typically the approach of classical realism and of the English School, as e.g. in Bull 1977, Buzan 2004. See also the discussion in Little 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> During a Meet the Press interview on January 22nd, 2017, U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway used this phrase to defend White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance at Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States.
- <sup>7</sup> Nolte 1987.
- <sup>8</sup> For the methodological critique, see Schieder 1989; for the historical critique, see Mommsen 1988. Earlier versions of Nolte's thesis have been part of the Historikerstreit in Germany of the mid-1980s. There is a quite vast literature on the content of this debate.
- <sup>9</sup> Hitler's racism is well documented already from his early writings (Jäckel and Kuhn 1980); his knowledge about Soviet camps post-dates his persecution of Jews and others.
- <sup>10</sup> We also know of a countering mechanism, when lowering rates make economic actors expect an economic boom for the availability of cheap credit that makes them invest on the market, which implies demand for the currency and hence its appreciation.
- <sup>11</sup> MacKenzie 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> One of the main issues of the book is the treatment of the concept of power in realism that cannot shoulder the explanatory weight realism assigned to it. For some further analysis, see also Guzzini 2013b.
- <sup>13</sup> Wendt 1995, p. 76. See also Aron 1964, p. 27, 44-45, for a related but distinct admonition that *Machtpolitik* is used both as an ontological claim about the 'essence' of relations between states and as a particular foreign policy 'doctrine'.
- <sup>14</sup> For the first, see Grieco 1996; for the second, see Mitzen 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> E.g. Morgenthau 1945; 1946.
- <sup>16</sup> Guzzini 2012.
- <sup>17</sup> Patomäki 1992. The first critical round by e.g. Lebow 1994, Risse-Kappen 1991, was answered by realists later, like e.g. Wohlforth 1994/1995; 1998, Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/01, which, in turn, was criticised for not understanding the actual process of the demise: Kramer 1999; 2001 and English 2002; 2005. For a summary of the debate, see Petrova 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> For this, see Guzzini 2013a, pp. 524ff.
- <sup>19</sup> See respectively Kennan 1967, Morgenthau 1965, and Mearsheimer and Walt 2003.
- <sup>20</sup> Morgenthau 1948, p. 121.
- <sup>21</sup> Waltz 1969 [1967].
- <sup>22</sup> Aron 1972, section III; Aron 1976.
- <sup>23</sup> Kaplan 1964, p. 28, and Maslow 1966, p. 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Abdulal 2014, p. 11.
- <sup>25</sup> See e.g. Jervis 1993. For a classical treatment, see Hoffmann 1978. See Kirshner 2012, pp. 61-65, for a related critique of Mearsheimer's plea for a more aggressive US anti-China policy.

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<sup>26</sup> Kissinger 1957.

<sup>27</sup> See again Kissinger 1957. See also Morgenthau's scathing critique of 'nationalist universalism' in Morgenthau 1948.

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