



# 2

## Realism

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## Introduction

This chapter reflects on the tradition of political thought known as realism. Its main purpose is to identify who realists are, and to explain what realism is in the study of international relations. The first part of the chapter introduces students to some important thinkers, both ancient and modern, ascribed to the realist tradition of thought. It also identifies two broad strands of realist thought: 'classical' and 'structural' or 'neorealist'. The second part investigates attempts to conceive realism as a unified theory and practice of international relations. It highlights realism's central concepts of the state and anarchy before reflecting on realism's normative dimension.

**Realism** has historically been the dominant theory of International Relations and a point of reference for alternative theories, even if only critically. It aspires to be suprahistorical, explaining in all epochs the fundamental features of international politics: first and foremost, conflict and war. Emerging in the 1930s, realism's polemical target was the progressive, reformist optimism connected with **liberal** internationalists such as American president Woodrow Wilson. Against this optimism, realism comported a more pessimistic outlook which was felt to be necessary in the tragic realm of international politics.

Realists lay claim to a long tradition of political thought, including such eminent thinkers as **Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes**, whose point of departure is the study of conflict and power politics. **According to realists, conflict is inevitable, even necessary in international politics. When disputes cannot be resolved peacefully or diplomatically, force, and ultimately war, is a decisive means of settling matters. Insofar as order exists in international relations, it is the precarious product of the balance of power or hegemony (domination by a great power and its allies), say realists (Dehio 1962; J. Levy 1983).** The pragmatic acceptance of conflict and power politics are essential to realism's outlook. But who are the realists? And what is realism? This chapter provides answers these two questions.

It will be suggested here that realism is best understood, first, as an eclectic and plural tradition of thought, rather than a theory as such; and second, as a practical guide to the politics of international relations. **Realists are political theorists and practitioners who, since the interwar years (1918–1938), have self-consciously subscribed to this tradition of thought.**

Despite the efforts of late **twentieth-century neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979)**, realism is not properly speaking a theory – an explicative coherent whole, clearly defined by an explicit set of axioms and propositions. Rather, realism is the name given by exponents and critics alike to a tradition of thought, signifying an approach to international relations which claims to avoid wishful thinking by dealing with international politics as they actually are, rather than as we would like them to be. It does not abandon morality altogether, but it does extol a morality specific to the state (**raison d'état** or **reason of state**) and statesman (ethics of responsibility). So although **realism rejects morality as the starting point for the theory and practice of international relations, it does not eschew morality altogether** (A. Murray 1997: chapter 3; Hulsman and Lieven 2005).

## Who are the realists? Genesis of a tradition of thought

### The classical approach: realism

In one of his 1950s lectures, Martin Wight, a British professor, told his students: 'The initial pointer towards the Realists was that they are those who emphasize in international relations the element of anarchy, of power politics, and of warfare. Everyone is a Realist nowadays, and the term in this sense needs no argument' (Wight 1991: 15). Wight here is emphasising the distinctive importance and disciplinary dominance of realism as a tradition in the theory and practice of international politics. But he also alludes to some of realism's key tenets: the concept of anarchy and the historical supposition that international relations are unavoidably shaped by power politics and war. According to the realist construction of the tradition, the intellectual origins of these tenets may be traced back to the historical and political thought of arguably the first and the greatest political realists respectively, Athenian general (*strategos*) and historian, Thucydides (c. 460–406 BC) and Florentine diplomat and writer, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).

One of the reasons for realism's enduring relevance is its emphasis on history. Realism claims to speak about historical reality and takes its convictions, orientations and practice from history. Thus, it is not surprising that we can locate its roots in the Greek political and historical thought of the fifth century BC as embodied in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1972) (see Box 0.3). Looking at the clash between the great powers of his time (Athens, Sparta and Persia), Thucydides searched for the fundamental causes of conflict, the profound logics behind political events, and the instruments of power which political actors deployed, either openly, secretly, or through dissimulation. He concentrated on war because war is the ultimate test for those who want to distinguish reality from appearance in international politics. As the name itself reveals, this resolute striving to engage with stubborn political realities, no matter how violent or tragic, is one of the principal claims of realism as a tradition of thought.

In the most controversial and powerful advice-book for rulers ever written, *The prince* ([1513] 1998), authored by Machiavelli during the critical age of the Italian city-states, we can detect a view of international politics partially inherited from Thucydides. We find, for example, a cyclical conception of history based on a recurrent nexus of necessity, chance and human decision. Using a modern expression, international relations are conceived as a 'realm of recurrence and repetition' where 'political action is most regularly necessitous' (Wight 1966b: 26). The essence of this recurrence and repetition lies in the historical fact that rulers are regularly called upon to suspend conventional moral and legal rules to deflect threats to the state. We can call this Machiavelli's doctrine of necessity, which is central to the logic of politics.

We see in Machiavelli's writings recognition of the autonomy of politics from other realms of human action, most especially its ultimate independence from morality and law. Politics has its own rules, and cannot be reduced to or contained by moral or legal rules since it must respond to the demands of necessity. We also see the primacy of the political, because conflict and competition for power are inevitable and irrepressible. Four centuries later, these notions of the autonomy and primacy of the political were

rearticulated and reformulated by two influential German jurists, Hans J. Morgenthau (2010) and Carl Schmitt (1976), who identified the intense antagonism between friend and enemy as the crucial dimension of concrete historical politics.

Above all, it was through Machiavelli's analytical lens that it became possible to regard international politics free of ethical prescriptions. He insisted on attending to 'the effectual truth' of political matters, not idealised or utopian constructions (Machiavelli 1998: 52). In other words, he advocated a clear-eyed, pragmatic consideration of the amorality of power that St Augustine (AD354–430) acknowledged from a Christian perspective and that was to become so influential on many twentieth-century realists, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield. Significantly, Carr (1946: 63) considers Machiavelli 'the first important political realist'. From Machiavelli he deduces three essential realist tenets. First, 'history is a sequence of cause and effect, whose course can be analysed and understood by intellectual effort, but not ... directed by "imagination"'. Second, 'theory does not create practice ..., but practice theory'. Third, and most contentious of all, 'morality is the product of power' (Carr 1946: 63–64). Finally, Machiavelli, like Thucydides and St Augustine, draws our attention to certain anthropological and psychological features alleged to be constant. They discern the political dimension of human nature, and the role of fear, avarice and ambition in driving political action and generating conflict.

This combination corresponds to the causes of war indicated by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). His masterpiece *Leviathan* ([1651] 1968) has provided the realist tradition with perhaps its most fundamental idea, later taken up by the French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778): that international life is a miserable condition because it is actually a condition of war, whether latent or actual. Realists conceive the anarchical structure of international relations through an analogy with an imaginary and primordial condition called the state of nature. In this 'natural condition' conjectured by Hobbes in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan* ([1651] 1968: 185), individuals exist in a lawless or ungoverned environment, 'without a common Power to keep them all in awe'. Hobbes equates this state of nature, which exists prior to the establishment of a state, with a state of war (see Box 2.1). To escape this intolerable condition, individuals agree to enter a civil society and install a sovereign power. But though individuals may escape this state of war, the states they form do not, Hobbes suggests; international relations are thus a state of war.

This condition originates in the absence of an overarching sovereign power. Therefore domestic political life, where sovereignty is present, is essentially different from international life, where there is no world government. This latter condition is properly described in modern terms as international anarchy. This does not indicate a state of disorder or chaos, but rather captures the fact that sovereign states do not recognise any other higher authority above

## BOX 2.1: TERMINOLOGY

### Hobbes's 'state of nature'

In *Leviathan* ([1651] 1968) Hobbes portrays the state of nature as the antithesis of the civil society that forms when individuals agree to establish a state and sovereign authority. The state of nature, says Hobbes, is a state of war that pits 'every man, against every man' because there is no 'common Power to keep them all in awe' (p. 185). In such a condition there is no justice, no law, and no property, says Hobbes (p. 188); 'every man has a Right to every thing' (p. 190). This is why Hobbes famously described the life of individuals in this condition as 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' (p. 186).

themselves. Two consequences derive from the absence of world government (or the presence of a state of nature) according to realists: first, nothing can impede the normal recurrence of war; and second, states are responsible for their own self-preservation.

### A turning point: the 'international anarchy'

The expression 'international **anarchy**' made its first appearance during the **Great War**, and became a fundamental concept not just for realists but more generally for International Relations as a twentieth-century academic discipline. Ironically, **G. Lowes Dickinson**, who published books titled *The European anarchy* (1916) and *The international anarchy* (1926), was one of the authors whom British diplomat, newspaper editor and historian E. H. Carr discredited as a naïve idealist in his classic, *The twenty years' crisis*. This latter book, considered by one historian as 'the first coherent realist theory yet in print' (Haslam 2002: 187), has had an immense impact not just on realist thought but on the development of IR as a discipline.

Carr's seminal text has been perpetually discussed and debated since it was published on the brink of World War II. Originally proposed under the title *Utopia and reality*, it consists of a polemical attack in the name of realism against the so-called utopian approach. Carr considered this intellectual approach, basically consistent with nineteenth-century principles of liberalism (see Chapter 3), flawed and in many respects responsible for the disaster of World War I. The most important, and the most problematic, assumption was that of a natural harmony of interests in international relations, born of 'the almost total neglect of the factor of **power**' (Carr 1946: cv).

For Carr international relations have an oligarchical configuration, where a few states are more important than others. States are basically divided into two classes, which he called the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The inescapable disparity between the 'haves', states that possess wealth and influence and that are satisfied with the existing international **order (status quo powers)**, and the 'have-nots', dissatisfied states or **revisionist powers**, explains recurrent tensions. Therefore, Carr rejects 'the utopian assumption that there is a world interest in peace which is identifiable with the interest of each individual **nation**' (Carr 1946: 51). This 'harmony of interests' assumption fulfils an ideological rather than analytical function, concealing 'the unpalatable fact of a fundamental divergence of interest between nations desirous of maintaining the status quo and nations desirous of changing it' (Carr 1946: 51).

At the end of World War II, Hans **J. Morgenthau**, a German-Jew who escaped from Nazi Germany to the United States, would again declare the end of liberal illusion and its **rationalist faith in progress**. Echoing Nietzschean sentiments, Morgenthau conceded 'the tragic presence of evil in all political action', and 'the lust for power [which] manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it' (Morgenthau 1946: 202–203, 192). Morgenthau, like US ambassador George Kennan (1951), was sceptical about human rationality in international politics and critical of the excessive American confidence in a 'legalistic-moralistic approach' to international relations (Morgenthau 1973: 11). These realists stress the corrupting and pervasive influence of power on human relations, including international relations. Morgenthau's seminal book, *Politics among nations* (1973), first published in 1948, places power at the centre of the political universe, declaring: 'International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power' (Morgenthau

1973: 25). However, this struggle does not obstruct a search for a rational – as opposed to a ‘rationalist’ – understanding and conduct of international politics.

Morgenthau’s commitment is summarised in six general principles of political realism, which are a concise formalisation of a more complex theory (Morgenthau 1973: 3–13). Here we can recognise some of the typical elements we have seen in other realists: a flawed human nature in which the laws of politics have their roots; politics as an autonomous field of human activity; moral principles with relative, rather than universal, value (see Box 2.2 for Morgenthau’s full list of realist principles). Among these principles, one deserves particular attention. According to Morgenthau, there is a ‘main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics’: this is ‘the concept of interest defined in terms of power’, which he considers ‘an objective category which is universally valid’. It is this concept that makes possible the distinction between political and non-political facts. It also provides the ‘link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood’ (Morgenthau 1973: 5). The rationale behind this notion is linear: if we think in terms of interest defined as power, we think as statesmen and stateswomen think. Thus, we can understand, and perhaps foresee, their thought and actions. However, before any other purpose in foreign policy, these actions are, or should be, directed towards the defence of the **national interest**, what one’s own nation needs and wants in order to reach its aims.

## BOX 2.2: DISCUSSION POINTS

### Hans J. Morgenthau’s six principles of political realism

1. Politics are governed by ‘objective laws that have their roots in human nature’.
2. The concept of ‘national interest defined in terms of power’ is the most important foreign policy goal.
3. While ‘interest defined as power’ remains unaffected by historical change, the exercise of power is permanent.
4. ‘Universal moral principles’ cannot be used to judge the actions of states in their abstract formulation. Prudence is the morality proper to politics.
5. ‘Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe’.
6. Politics is an autonomous sphere, distinct from, and not subordinate to the standards of, economics, law, morality, and so on (Morgenthau, 1973: 3–13).

Notwithstanding the contested nature of the national interest, in the context of international anarchy **security** is one of the interests that Raymond Aron (1966: 72), following Hobbes, calls ‘eternal’. As in the state of nature, self-help is the only certain means to the uncertain end of self-preservation or survival. Each state aspires to survive as independent, making major decisions on its own. But, in the last analysis, it can count only on itself. Since sovereign states do not recognise any other higher authority, nothing other than states themselves can prevent, or counter, the use of force in their relations. It is only through the **balance of power** that states, alone or through **alliances**, can check the power of other states. Most importantly, the balance of power can preserve a state’s independent existence from threat, aggression and **hegemony** (the domination by a great power and its allies). It is for these reasons that realists see the balance of power as the only real means of achieving **common security**.

**Diplomacy**, the art of communication and negotiation between powers (see Chapter 18), is an essential part for the conscious preservation of political equilibrium among states. It is also for this reason that some realists (Aron 1966; Wight 1978), including former US Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize winner Henry Kissinger (1964) and George Kennan, have assigned a relevant role not just to power and its distribution among states, or to the motives and intentions of statesmen and stateswomen, but also to the nature of states and their internal characteristics. Cultural and ideological factors matter because states that belong to the same type and share common policy goals prefer resolving disputes through the work of a trusted diplomacy. Having considered the concepts and ideas of some authors of classical realism, we should now explore what is called structural realism or neorealism.

## The structural approach: neorealism

The basis of **neorealism** is a scientific method that systematises core doctrines of realist thought into a structural model of international relations. Elaborated during the second half of the Cold War (see Chapter 20), it is based more on economic theory and philosophy of science than on historical reflection. In Waltz's (1959, 1979) parsimonious version, neorealism breaks the connection between the internal and external dimensions of politics, denying that the internal structure of states has any serious effect on inter-state relations. By defining the structure of the international system, neorealism seeks to establish the autonomy of international politics.

Waltz rejects the classical realist arguments that human nature or the domestic character of states are relevant factors in explaining fundamental aspects of international relations. War, alliances, the formation of a balance of power, and the precariousness of cooperation cannot be explained by focusing on the behaviour of the 'units' or states in themselves, an approach Waltz criticises as reductionist. States, or 'units', according to Waltz, must be treated as empty boxes because their domestic arrangements and characteristics do not really make a difference at the level of the international system, which is the concern of international relations theories. At the system level, it is the fundamental structure of anarchy that shapes the behaviour of states or units, not their internal make-up.

For a systemic analysis of structure, Waltz says, there are only three elements that matter: the differentiation of units, the organising principle, and the distribution of capabilities (see Box 2.3). However, with regard to the international system, the differentiation of units is irrelevant since states are undifferentiated in their primary function: to produce their own security. States are required to pursue their own security because no one else can

### BOX 2.3: TERMINOLOGY

#### Waltz's theory of international politics: key terms

System = structure + interacting units.

Structure, Waltz says (1979, 79) is 'the system-wide component that makes it possible to think of the system as a whole'. It is made up of three components:

1. ordering principle, sometimes called 'deep structure' (either hierarchy or anarchy)
2. differentiation of units according to their function (in international relations the units (states) are functionally the same or *undifferentiated* – performing the same range of functions and concerned primarily with security)
3. distribution of capabilities (how states stand in relation to one another, according to the power they can mobilise and the aggregation of power around one or more poles – unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity).

be counted on to do so. The reason is that the organising principle of the international system is anarchy, not hierarchy; and 'self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order' (Waltz 1979: 111). This structural condition obliges each state constantly to guard its security and defend its relative position with regard to other states without relying on others.

Anarchy imposes mistrust and uncertainty on others' intentions, obstructing mutually advantageous cooperation even in 'soft' dimensions like economics and trade (Grieco 1990). States, like oligopolistic firms, must be concerned with the asymmetric distribution of advantage, worrying about relative gains ('Who will gain more?') rather than absolute gains ('Will both of us make some gain?'). Further, cooperation under anarchy is limited because to be dependent on others who are free to cheat is risky. **Interdependence** thus produces not just amity, as liberals claim, but also, and more importantly, reciprocal vulnerability, according to neorealists.

Virtually all states 'at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination' (Waltz 1979: 118). Hence the distribution of capabilities across states, especially in the military field, is the only fundamental changing element in the international system. As a result it can be **bipolar** (with two great powers) or **multipolar** (more than two). These systemic configurations are regularly produced by the balance of power, which counteracts excessive accumulation of power, even provoking war. Waltz (1979) thinks, like Rousseau ([1756] 1917: 138), that the balance of power works as an automatic mechanism. It is not the product of intentional diplomatic efforts made by states. On the contrary, it is an unintentional and inevitable outcome of their interactions under conditions of anarchy. Facing the unavoidable repercussions of balance of power constraints, great powers tend to adopt a defensive behaviour that upholds the status quo. For this reason the international system, like the market, always tends towards equilibrium, according to Waltz's theory of international politics.

Neorealists, however, present at least one other view. John Mearsheimer (2001: 29, 250), concentrating on war and strategy in his *Tragedy of great power politics*, suggests that great powers 'are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals'. Here Mearsheimer diverges from both Waltz and Carr. Great powers, he argues, are rarely satisfied and, instead, seek to extend their hegemony. This implies that the ultimate concern for states is not simply for security, as Waltz asserted (1979), but for maximising power. Here Mearsheimer's offensive realism is closer to Morgenthau's classical realism than to Waltz's neorealism.

Mearsheimer has studied how offensively-oriented states could behave as **revisionist** powers in response to structural constraints. Thus he has considered one of the criticisms made of neorealism by contemporary realists. These realists, who have integrated into their thinking elements of the classical tradition (and thus earn the name 'neoclassical' realists), have contested neorealism's assumption that all states have an equal set of interests (Schweller 1998). Some have reaffirmed the relevance of domestic politics and human nature factors, like perceptions and motivations (Walt 1987); others have challenged the automaticity that neorealism attributes to the political process, primarily the balance of power (Schweller 2006). All this suggests that realism is a broad tradition of thought with an ongoing debate about the relative importance of power and security in grasping the interests of states under conditions of anarchy.



## What is realism? Synthesising theory and practice

The previous section has shown that realists compose an eclectic and heterogeneous tradition of thought with at least two main approaches, classical and structural, named realism and neorealism. Despite their differences, however, the two varieties of realism share key concepts and doctrines, as explained above. In this section we are going to reconcile the two varieties of realism in a single scheme of thought. Two shared assumptions are analysed: the state as the main actor in world politics and the logic of anarchy as a dominant constraint in international relations. Finally we will consider realism as a practical guide to politics that, despite allegations to the contrary, affirms two moral values: prudence and responsibility.

### The state

We have seen that realism, as a theory of international politics, is principally concerned with states as power- and security-maximising actors in a context of international anarchy. States are the fundamental units of organised, hierarchical power and their relations dominate world politics. We may identify three key features of the state as understood by realism. First, states possess **sovereignty**, the supreme authority to make and enforce laws. Second, states govern by exercising a monopoly over both internal and external instruments of legitimate violence (embodied in the police and armed forces respectively). Third, these sovereign organisations are territorial, partitioning the Earth by imposing both material and immaterial barriers between people (namely, borders and citizenship respectively).

Other existing organisations – international (e.g. United Nations), supranational (e.g. European Union), transnational (e.g. NGOs) – perform important roles but are always ultimately subordinate to states, or, at least, to the most powerful among them. **International law** occupies an analogous condition of subordination, being the product of the contingent will and actual practice of the states (see Chapter 16). Individuals and other non-state actors (e.g. activists, transnational corporations) without the state's support have reduced political space to conduct their transborder activities in international relations (see Chapter 22).

States perform essential political, social and economic functions for all other actors in world politics and no other organisation appears today as a possible competitor (Spruyt 1994). In particular, most powerful states make the rules and maintain the institutions that shape international life, including its economic and cultural dimensions, popularly known as 'globalisation' (Waltz 1999). That is why even today globalisation's core values are those championed by the United States and its liberal and capitalist allies, predominantly in the West. These values could change if another state with different values and interests, perhaps China, were to achieve hegemony in international relations; but the point for realism is that dominant global trends generally depend on the power and interests of hegemonic states.

For realism the international use of violence by civil factions, like terrorists, against a foreign enemy's territory is nothing new or unusual. There are historical precedents, such as the Egyptian-based *fedayeen* raid against Israel before the 1956 war. What is new are the ideological goals and the worldwide nature of Islamist terrorism, in particular its links across frontiers, as in the case of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US (see Chapter 29). Among other things, these attacks represented a challenge

to the claim that only states may legitimately employ violence. In response, a US-led coalition of states destroyed the Afghan-based terrorist headquarters of al-Qaeda and overthrew the ruling Taliban government. Shortly thereafter, 'September 11' was taken as an opportunity by the world's most powerful state and its allies to launch a war against Iraq, despite opposition from many states and by the UN. The US thus reasserted its legitimacy and power in the face of the terrorist challenge by attacking states alleged to be complicit with terrorism. Moreover, the US's actions are consistent with Mearsheimer's logic of offensive realism. Since opposition to the Iraq War did not generate a balancing coalition, US power was thus left unchecked. This may be considered a concrete sign of **unipolarity**, meaning the supremacy of the US in an international system bereft of any comparable power.

## Anarchy

The logic of international anarchy conditions and constrains inter-state relations. For realism, conflict over power and insecurity can only be definitively superseded through a hierarchical structure of dominion based on command and obedience – in other words, when world government supersedes anarchy. In the absence of world government, however, security can only be obtained through self-help. For this reason survival in international relations is of paramount relevance and fear is a fundamental emotion because it is an indispensable emotion for survival.

The absence of an overarching authority to prevent and counter the use of force creates a crucial uncertainty about others' intentions. This lack of trust generates what in 1748 the French philosopher Montesquieu (2000: 224) called a 'disease' that has 'necessarily become contagious'. He was noting that 'as soon as one state increases what it calls its troops, the other suddenly increases theirs, so that nothing is gained thereby but the common ruin. Each monarch keeps ready all the armies ... and this state in which all strain against all is called peace'. In modern terms this spiral of insecurity is called the **security dilemma** (Herz 1962). It means that providing for one's own security can, often inadvertently, increase the sense of insecurity in other states. Thus the military arrangements of one state, including 'defensive' ones, are likely to be matched by other states, thereby creating a dangerous spiral that, paradoxically, leaves every state feeling even more insecure.

International anarchy breeds not only fear but also hostility among states. When this hostility is mixed with scarcity of resources it makes peaceful and just solutions to political conflicts difficult to achieve. Indeed, without hostility an equal distribution of resources, or power, would be possible. Without scarcity, hostility could be neutralised. For realism this is not the case in international politics. Hostility and scarcity are structural conditions left unsettled by the absence of a common government. Hence conflict is inevitable and may always reach the point where **war** becomes a legitimate instrument for reaching a final decision.

## Prudence and responsibility

Neorealism is more theoretically rigorous but less historically or normatively rich than classical realism. The scientific inspiration of the former reduces, or removes, the latter's normative interest in the tension between morality and politics; a tension that inevitably affects the conduct of statesmen and stateswomen in the realm of international

relations. However, we can find, implicitly or explicitly, a common normative theme: the ethic of responsibility.

The logic of international politics grants supreme moral value to the survival of the state and its interests. This supreme moral value – which legitimates the infringement of ‘secondary’ values such as liberty and justice, because they depend on the state’s survival first and foremost – yields the doctrine of reason of state (Meinecke 1962). Reason of state (from the original French, *raison d’état*) is a specifically political form of reasoning that responds to necessity. It is based on the idea that politics is both autonomous and primary; that political reasoning, especially when the state’s vital interests or survival are at stake, obeys its own rules and logics, independently of morality or law.

But this is not to say that reason of state is completely free of normative intent (see Box 2.4). As already indicated, reason of state is a morality of and for states; it generates an ‘ethic of responsibility’, as opposed to an ‘ethic of conviction’, to use Max Weber’s (1948) terms. The latter conceives politics as the realisation of morally pure ‘ultimate ends’. The former, by contrast, is based on a sharp distinction between personal and political moral behaviour, and privileges consequences over intentions. Good intentions or convictions do not matter in international politics as much as the consequences of actions, which is why realists have often been outspoken critics of US foreign policy adventurism (see Box 2.5). The duty of statesmen and stateswomen is to accept the responsibility for these consequences on behalf of the nation. Justifying bad consequences in terms of good convictions is politically unacceptable. On the contrary, leaders must confront the reality that good political consequences often require morally questionable, or even evil, means. For Machiavelli (1998: 60), this meant rulers were often obliged to act against conventional ethics, and should be prepared ‘to enter into evil when necessity commands’.

## BOX 2.4: DISCUSSION POINTS

### Realism’s political morality

Morgenthau (1973: 3–4) on the ‘lesser evil’:

‘This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized ... [Realism] appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles, and aims at the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good’.

Kennan (1996: 270) on the amorality of reason of state:

‘The interests of the national society for which government must concern itself are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life, and the well-being of its people. These needs have no moral quality. They arise from the very existence of the national state and from the status of national sovereignty it enjoys. They are the unavoidable necessities of a national existence and therefore not subject to classification as either “good” or “bad”’.

Morgenthau (1973: 12) on prudence:

‘There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence ... to be the supreme virtue in politics’.

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For realists, IR theories built on an ethic of conviction cannot solve the dilemmas and paradoxes of international politics. Hence, the ethic of responsibility is the proper

political ethic, and prudence, as the judging of consequences of different political actions, is the supreme moral virtue in politics. The distinction between an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of conviction, made by Max Weber, can be considered a lasting, albeit inconclusive, word from realism about the morality of states.

## BOX 2.5: CASE STUDY

### Realism and the Iraq War

It may seem curious, but realists have often been outspoken critics of war, especially 'unnecessary wars'. In early 2003, before the US launched its war against Iraq (19 March 2003), John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2003), two prominent US realists, published a powerful critique of the neoconservative case for war. They rejected claims made by the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein's Iraq could not be managed through a policy of containment. Hussein's past behaviour, they argued, however deplorable, was not irrational. Though a brutal dictator with a history of aggression (the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–88 and Gulf War, 1990–91), Hussein would remain deterrable, even in the event of acquiring a chemical or nuclear weapons capability. 'Why? Because the United States and its regional allies are far stronger than Iraq' (2003: 59).

Mearsheimer also argued elsewhere (2005) that this critique of the Iraq War was consistent with Hans Morgenthau's critique of the Vietnam War. The neo-conservative case for war, built around Wilsonian idealism 'with teeth', failed to appreciate the historical tendency of states to balance against power (rather than bandwagon), and failed to recognise nationalism as a more powerful ideological force than democracy. Following Morgenthau, Mearsheimer emphasised the dangers of pursuing global crusades (whether against **communism** or for democracy). Mearsheimer concluded that Morgenthau 'would have opposed [the Iraq War] as well if he had been alive'.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that, despite some differences among realists, realism offers a range of concepts and ideas to capture enduring, if tragic, aspects of international relations. But we have also understood that the barycentre of realism is historical continuity. This reveals a tendency to occlude a crucial dimension of international relations – change (Ruggie 1983). Theories influenced by the 'critical turn' (Marxism, Critical Theory, postmodernism feminism and constructivism) and liberalism are sceptical about realism's assumption of anarchy's historical permanence, and enquire into logics of transformation and potentials for change neglected by realism.

States continue to be the dominant political units in international relations and do not show much inclination to abandon their sovereign powers or to convert international anarchy into some kind of formal hierarchy. On the contrary, they seem to sustain the logic of international anarchy that realists describe. In international relations, power and its immediate expression, force, remain central preoccupations. Demands for justice are commonly outweighed by reasons of state, and human interests are often sacrificed for national interests. These are but some of the reasons why realism remains an indispensable tradition of thought for any student of international relations today.