The Enduring Dilemmas of Realism in International Relations
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The present article argues that the discipline of international relations is bound to repeat its rounds of debates about realism as long as the underlying dynamic intrinsic to the realist tradition is not understood. Whereas present debates tend to criticize contemporary realists for going astray (an unhappy conjuncture, as it were), this article claims that there exists a systematic theoretical problem with the way realist theorizing has developed within international relations, and consisting of two fundamental dilemmas. The first or ‘identity dilemma’, the choice between distinctiveness and determinacy, results from the characteristics of the central concept ‘power’ — realists either keep a distinct and single micro–macro link through concepts of power/influence which provides indeterminate explanations or they improve their explanations, but must do so by relaxing their assumptions, thereby losing distinctiveness. The second or ‘conservative dilemma’, the choice between tradition and justification, results from the fact that realism is a form of practical knowledge, which needs some form of justification other than the recourse to mere tradition. Hence, realists either update the practical knowledge of a shared diplomatic culture while losing scientific credibility or, reaching for logical persuasiveness, cast their maxims in a scientific mould which distorts the realist tradition. Realism in international relations is fated to return to these dilemmas until it abandons its own identity as derived from the ‘first debate’ between realism and idealism. By doing so, however, it would be free to join a series of meta-theoretical and theoretical research avenues which it has so far left to other schools of thought.

**KEY WORDS** realism • power • constructivism • power–money analogy • positivism

After the end of the Cold War, realism has been again on the defensive.¹ A first debate was triggered by a piece John Vasquez (1997) published in the
American Political Science Review. In this blunt attack, Vasquez argued that realists reject the systematic use of scientific criteria for assessing theoretical knowledge. Vasquez charged (neo)realism either for producing blatantly banal statements or for being non-falsifiable, i.e. ideological. A second debate followed an article by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999) in International Security. Realists were asked to accept that their recent work was good only because they have incorporated ideas and causal variables from other approaches. Here, realism is not denied scientific status. But by being allotted a small and usually insufficient terrain on the academic turf, realism becomes structurally dependent on a division of theoretical labour defined elsewhere.

Whereas these debates tended to focus on realism’s recent developments, this article argues that they are but the latest manifestations of two intrinsic and enduring dilemmas of realism in International Relations (IR). I will call them the ‘identity dilemma’ and the ‘conservative dilemma’.

As I will expose in more detail, realism’s identity or determinacy/distinctiveness dilemma results from the fact that classical realists, when making more determinate empirical claims, usually relied on explanatory elements which were not genuinely realist. Much of the ‘richness of the realist tradition’ stems from these wider sources. As this article will show, the reason is to be found in the indeterminacy of its central concept of power, which can simply not bear the theoretical weight assigned to it. As long as realism needed no exact delimitation (its vocabulary being often confused with the discipline of IR at large), this was of little theoretical consequence. But in times of open theoretical debate, this necessary eclecticism leads to a dilemma: contemporary realism may be distinct from other approaches at the price of being theoretically indeterminate. It may also produce more determinate hypotheses which are then indistinguishable from (or worse, subsumable by) some other approaches in IR. In other words, while Legro and Moravcsik are right in their critique, they stop short of drawing the full consequences. They ultimately persist in the belief that realism, properly defined, can serve as an adequate explanatory theory. I claim that realist ambiguities are not accidents of recent realist research, but necessary consequences of an enduring theoretical dilemma.

Following Kissinger’s (1957: Ch. XI) analysis of Metternich, I propose to call the second enduring dilemma of realism the ‘conservative’ or justification/tradition dilemma. Faced with criticism of realism’s scientific character or its findings, I will argue that realists have been repeatedly tempted to lean towards less stringent understandings of their own theory’s status. Realism then refers to a philosophical tradition or more generally to ‘an attitude regarding the human condition’ (Gilpin, 1986: 304). Yet, when realists want to retreat to a more ‘traditionalist’ position, they are caught by a dilemma
which has existed since its beginnings in IR. Despite Morgenthau’s (1946) early insistence on the intuitions of statesmen and the ‘art’ of politics, realism derived much of its appeal from its claim to understand reality ‘as it is’ rather than as it should be (Carr, 1946). But ever since the foreign policy maxims of realpolitik have ceased to be commonly shared knowledge or understood as legitimate politics, realism cannot refer to the world as it is and rely on its intuitive understanding by a responsible elite. Instead, it needs to justify the value of traditional practical knowledge and diplomacy. To be persuasive, such a justification comes today in the form of controllable knowledge. Moreover, since realism self-consciously refers to the world ‘as it is, not as we would like it to be’ (Mearsheimer, 2001: 4), it necessarily requires a kind of objective status. In other words, by avoiding justification, realism loses its persuasiveness in times of a rational debate it decides not to address. Alternatively, by consistently justifying a world-view that should be natural and taken for granted, realist defences testify to realism’s very demise. Today, there is no way back to a time when realism needed little justification.

In a last section, I draw some implications from these two dilemmas. I will argue that IR realism is fated to return to these dilemmas if it does not give up its own identity of the so-called first debate between realism and idealism. It is this relentlessly reproduced opposition which has generally impoverished IR realism as a branch of political realism — political realism is defined not only by its counter-position to a (utopian) ‘ideal’, whether or not this has really existed in IR, but also to an ‘apparent’ masking of existing power relations. It is a twofold negation, both anti-idealist and anti-conservative. By concentrating on its practical knowledge, not its explanatory theory, and getting out of the ‘first debate’, IR realism would be free to join in a series of meta-theoretical and theoretical research avenues, which it has heretofore left to other schools. The need to defend IR ‘realism’ as such seems, therefore, too costly on strictly intellectual grounds — for realists, but also for IR at large.

The Identity Dilemma — the Choice Between Determinacy and Distinctiveness

Which Realism?

In a general move to get realism out of the Waltzian straightjacket, it has become a commonplace to point to the diversity of realist writings, old and new (e.g. see Brooks, 1997; Guzzini, 1998), and this for good reasons. Realists are often at pains to recognize themselves in the portrayal of their detractors. Showing the ‘richness of the tradition’ can justifiably undermine some of the criticism.
But having nearly as many realisms as realist protagonists also produces a severe problem for realists themselves. At some point, the ‘richness’ argument begs the question of whether realism is a coherent tradition in the first place. It is paradoxical that IR (and indeed realists themselves) seem unable to agree on a definition of realism when this very school, we are told, has held sway over the discipline for so long. The most recent textbook on realism compares a series of often quite incompatible definitions and ends up with little more than a family resemblance or a certain ‘style’, concluding that ‘we may not be able to define [realism], but we know it when we see it’ (Donnelly, 2000: 9).

One of the reasons for this difficult definition stems from the original confusion of realism and the early subject matter of IR. Many of the underlying assumptions believed to be unique to realism were not. This includes, most prominently, the micro-assumption of self-interest (and hence, disclaimers notwithstanding, instrumental rationality) and the macro-assumption of anarchy, both widely shared among non-realists who did not dispute the absence of a world government setting international affairs apart from domestic politics, but only its necessity (e.g. see Claude, 1962; Czempiel, 1981; Deutsch, 1968; Senghaas, 1987). If defined just in terms of self-help under anarchy, definitions of realism are too encompassing, collapsing realism with the early self-definition of IR. In the recent exchange, for instance, Vásquez (1998: 37) defined the realist paradigm through three tenets, namely, the assumptions of anarchy, of statism, and of politics as the struggle for power and peace. In such a case, it would be more correct, however, to follow Holsti (1985), who calls this wider category the ‘classical tradition’, which correctly includes non-realists.

A more distinctive definition is therefore warranted. If solely understood as a political theory, I assume that realism is characterized by a particular understanding of the two above-mentioned assumptions (a different way of defining realism will be introduced later). Realism’s theory of action is based on a self-interest which is defined in a predominantly materialist way in order to distinguish itself from idealism. Moreover, the macro-assumption does not concern anarchy as such, but a theory of history which is cyclical, that is, pessimistic about progress. It is this vision of history which, in the view of realists, sets realism apart not only from liberalism, but also from other materialist theories, such as Marxism (Gilpin, 1987: 43). The materialist theory of action and the cyclical theory of history together entail that international relations are necessarily a realm of power politics — materialist self-interest must look at the position of individual power and security first.

Looking for distinct definitions of the fundamental assumptions of realism comes with a risk — in the huge realist tradition, there will almost always be
an exception. Likewise, some realists may find a description such as mine too narrow, if not consciously skewed in favour of realism’s critiques (see e.g. the contributions in Feaver et al., 2000; Jervis, 2003: 279 fn. 3). Yet, a more restrictive definition has become necessary over past decades, because we are now comparing quite different theories with each other. Realism has become just one box in the typologies of the Inter-Paradigm Debate. These boxes require a logical consistency if one school is to be demarcated from another. It is not fortuitous that in this period realists themselves, such as Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* (1979), provided such a narrow definition. Hence, although a more narrow definition might look skewed in favour of realism’s critiques, it is part of a game realism cannot avoid engaging in — it must find a distinct and logically consistent definition of itself (for this point, see also James, 2002: 52).

This produces a tension. Realism is caught between the need to define a more restricted field for realism and the often justified sense that this very narrowness impoverishes ‘realism’ as compared with some of the work of its classical protagonists. Consequently, there has been a consistent drive to reappropriate more classical (and eclectic) insights — incurring the risk of also including non-specifically realist items once again.

This tension lies at the heart of the identity dilemma of realism in IR: formulations of realism can be either distinct or determinate, but not both.\(^4\) I will argue that the fundamental reason for the realist identity dilemma lies in a concept of power which cannot offer what realism needs from it — an analogous role to money in utilitarian theories.

**Power Indeterminacy and the Micro–Macro Link in Realist Theorizing**

The concept of power has a demanding task in realist theories.\(^5\) It is essential for a realist theory of action: whether for international anarchy or for reasons of human nature, international actors are bound to look for power, indeed to maximize their power position (or security, regarding which more will be said later). Moreover, ‘power’, traditionally understood as resources or ‘capabilities’, has been used as an indicator for the strength of actors, and consequently, of the capacity to affect or even control outcomes. Thus, power provides the micro–macro link of the theory: a general capacity to control outcomes can be used as an indicator for ranking international actors and for the ruling of the international system.\(^6\)

Such a demanding task has, in turn, demanding implications for the very concept of power — it must be measurable (see e.g. Frei, 1969; Walt, 2002: 222–3). For those realist scholars who concentrate on the micro-side of realist theory, power must be measurable, since they assume that international actors try to increase (relative) power or influence, something
shared by both classical realists (e.g. Morgenthau, 1948) and contemporary realists (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2001; Zakaria, 1998). The very idea of an increase needs a measure in order not to be void or arbitrary. The best increase (or maximization) of power or security is the observer’s measuring rod for an efficient foreign policy. Those realists specializing in the macro-level need a measure of power to make sense of the idea of systemic power shifts or the very ‘balance’ of power. All must have an empirical equivalent of what ‘more’ power or ‘equal’ power means. They must have a measure.

Yet, Dahl had already insisted on one conceptual complication which vitiates the easy use of power in utilitarian theories — power is a relational and not a property concept (e.g. Dahl, 1968). Dahl’s relational power is fundamentally connected to a Weberian understanding of social action, which also underlies Morgenthau’s theory. Weber understood power as the capacity to influence the other against his or her will. This requires a more interpretivist approach since observers have to assess the will and, hence, the respective value systems of the actors. Consequently, knowing resources does not necessarily say much about actual power, which resides in the specific human interaction or relation. Indeed, it implies that what counts as a power resource in the first place cannot be assessed \textit{ex ante} independently from general norms, the actors’ particular value systems, and the specific historical context of the interaction. In this tradition, power is not and cannot be a property concept. Morgenthau (1948: 14 ff.) understood that well when he distinguished between military power as a physical relation and political power, which is fundamentally a psychological relation influencing the other’s mind. This parallels the Weberian distinction between violence or force and power. Morgenthau makes clear that military power alone is not enough to understand power relations in IR. But the implication is perhaps wider than Morgenthau himself thought. If resources cannot be independently defined from the interaction or relation, such an analysis is incompatible with the deductive balance of power theory on which narrow realism is based, but also with any attempt to have an \textit{ex ante} theory of behaviour which could claim to be primarily materialist.

But even if we abstract from the relational character of power, even if we grant that all actors want to avoid being possibly threatened by material resources (mainly force), this still begs the question — how much, as compared to other options? Economists can express this in terms of a monetary value. Can political scientists do this with an analogous material value? The received wisdom in political theory would say that they cannot.

A first step in this argument must specify the terms of the analogy. To produce a power-materialist theory of action, one would need to assume an analogy between the role of power in IR and the function of money in
As Mearsheimer (2001: 12) put it — ‘Power is the currency of great-power politics, and states compete for it among themselves. What money is to economics, power is to international relations.’ In this analogy, utility (wealth) maximization, which can be expressed and measured in terms of money, parallels the pursuit of the national interest (i.e. security) expressed in terms of (relative) power.

This characterization addresses the debate concerning whether realism implies the maximization of power or security. In a move which allegedly sets neorealism apart from classical realism, Waltz’s theory assumes that actors maximize security, not power. Waltz wants to account for those situations where a further increase in power (then understood as mere capabilities) does not imply an increase in security.

The difference between maximizing power and security is, however, not as clear as it seems, neither in Waltz (for this critique, see also Grieco, 1997: 186–91) nor in general. If it just means that power cannot be the final aim, but security, then Morgenthau would certainly agree — ‘Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim’ (1948: 13). So would Mearsheimer, who states that ‘there is no question that great powers maximise security. . . by maximising their share of power’ (2001: 410 n. 46). No realist would sign a statement that in the pursuit of their national interest, states are expected to, or indeed rationally should, increase power even if it harmed their security. That a permanent worst-case assumption in the pursuit of power can produce a self-defeating strategy (if not a self-fulfilling prophecy) which a prudent statesman tries to avoid is old hat for classical realists (it is one of the central themes in Wolfers, 1962), only to be rediscovered by defensive realists (Glaser, 2003).

If, however, this distinction implies that, for a realist, security can be thought of totally independent from the pursuit of power, then it seems to contradict realism. Security might not be entirely reducible to relative gains for all realists, but it is never independent of it (see also James, 2002: 52), just as in classical realism. In other words, (neo)realists assume states to have an aim of security which includes as means (or as an immediate aim) being rank maximizers, i.e. relative gain seekers. Important for my argument, and consistent with realism, is that such gains be measured on a common scale (the final rank), which realists commonly establish with reference to power.

After having established the terms of the analogy, we can now, in a second step, assess its validity. Here also, looking back into the literature is enough. In an astonishingly overlooked argument, Raymond Aron opposed this very transfer of economic theory to IR theory some 40 years ago. First, for Aron, it made empirically little sense to liken the maximization of security as expressed in power to the maximization of utility as expressed in terms of

neoclassical economics. As Mearsheimer (2001: 12) put it — ‘Power is the currency of great-power politics, and states compete for it among themselves. What money is to economics, power is to international relations.’ In this analogy, utility (wealth) maximization, which can be expressed and measured in terms of money, parallels the pursuit of the national interest (i.e. security) expressed in terms of (relative) power.

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money. Based on historical evidence, Aron (1962: 28–9) argued that there are three classical foreign policy goals (puissance, security, and glory or ideals — here following Hobbes!) that cannot be reduced one into the other. Without a single aim, no optimal rational choice could occur. In the language of rational choice, foreign policy is indeterminate since alternative ends are incommensurable. If this were correct, then rational choice theorists (e.g. Elster, 1989: 31–3) would accept that their approach cannot be applied for explanatory purposes (see also Guzzini, 1994: 83–6).

Aron’s claim is based on what the literature calls the different degree of ‘fungibility’ of money and power resources which undergirds the necessary multidimensionality of power. The term ‘fungibility’ refers to the idea of a moveable good that can be freely substituted by another of the same class. Fungible goods are those that are universally applicable or convertible, in contrast to those that retain value only in a specific context. Fungibility seems a plausible assumption in monetarized economies. In international politics, however, even apparently ultimate power resources, such as weapons of mass destruction, might not necessarily be of great help for getting another state to change its monetary policies.8

Aron did, of course, recognize that economic theory can be used to model behaviour on the basis of a variety of preferences that also conflict. But for him, with the advent of money as a general standard of value within which these competing preferences could be put on the same scale, compared, and traded off, economists were able to reduce the variety of preferences to one utility function. In world politics, power lacks real-world fungibility, and thus cannot play a corresponding role as a standard of value. Without the power–money analogy, there is also no analogy between the integrated value of utility and the ‘national interest’ (security) (Guzzini, 1993: 453). Consequently, in a chapter section appropriately entitled ‘The Indeterminacy of Diplomatic-Strategic Behaviour’, Aron (1962: 102) concludes that (realist) theoreticians in IR cannot use economic theory as a model.

Responding to Aron, Waltz (1990) acknowledged the centrality of Aron’s argument, but said that the analogy between power and money was not vitiated by a qualitative difference. Rather, the problem was simply one of more complicated measurement. Power, Waltz argued, does nonetheless function as a medium of exchange. Similarly, when taken to issue by Keohane (1986: 184) on the fungibility assumption, Waltz remained unimpressed, answering:

Obviously, power is not as fungible as money. Not much is. But power is much more fungible than Keohane allows. As ever, the distinction between strong and weak states is important. The stronger the state, the greater the variety of
its capabilities. Power may be only slightly fungible for weak states, but it is highly so for strong ones. (Waltz, 1986: 333)

Waltz’s defence, however, is inconsistent. If power resources were so highly fungible that they could be used in different domains, then one does not need to argue with their variety: military or economic capabilities could be used for producing political, social, or cultural outcomes. If, however, one assumes a great variety of capabilities, one implicitly assumes that a strong actor is strong not because it has a lot of overall power, but because it possesses a high level of capabilities in distinct domains.

This is still no case for the fungibility of power. As a result, it is simply guesswork regarding how to aggregate power resources — there is no case for a ‘lump’ concept of power, as balance of power theories would require. For if power resources cannot be necessarily aggregated, we have lost the indicator for predicting control over outcomes. Without this, we have no link to the final aim of security. What in the wake of the Vietnam War was called the ‘paradox of unrealised power’ (Baldwin, 1989a: 139) can always be rearranged by saying that another resource would have been more significant or (the deus ex machina of ex post fixing) that actors lacked the will to use their existing resources. Resources never fail, politicians and analysts do.

In view of these intrinsic theoretical problems, early institutionalist writers have criticized balance of power theories for assuming a single international power structure (Keohane and Nye, 1977). They argued that if power is segmented, that is, if capacities are issue specific, then the positioning of power in a general balance is guesswork. As Baldwin has shown some time ago, a single international power structure relies either on the assumption of a single dominant issue area or on a high fungibility of power resources. Since both are of little avail, it ‘is time to recognize that the notion of a single overall international power structure unrelated to any particular issue area is based on a concept of power that is virtually meaningless’ (Baldwin, 1989b: 167).

Given this central, albeit weak dimension of their theory, even sophisticated realist theoreticians have resorted to rhetoric instead of arguments for defending their position. Hedley Bull, for instance, after assessing the difficulties in constructing an ‘over-all’ concept of power, candidly writes that the ‘relative position of states in over-all power nevertheless makes itself apparent in bargaining among states, and the conception of over-all power is one we cannot do without’ (1977: 114). His first argument, deriving power ex post from its effects, comes close to the usual power tautologies. The second argument confuses the theoretical and practical levels.
It is precisely this confusion between the theoretical level and the level of actual politics on which Robert Art’s and David Baldwin’s most recent exchange on fungibility trades (Art, 1996, 1999; Baldwin, 1999). Art responds to Baldwin’s by now classical, if neglected, theoretical charge by moving to the level of state actors’ perception and action (Art, 1999: 184–6). By this move, Baldwin’s critique is reinterpreted to imply that policy-makers have no way to devise overall power measures. And then, Art has little difficulty in showing that they at least try to do so all the time.

But Art’s argument is based on the initial move, which is a category mistake and hence does not add up to a rebuttal to Baldwin. Of course, Art is right that policy-makers can and often do come up with an idea of overall power and ranking. But what does that mean for realist theory? It means that rankings could differ according to historical circumstances, and various positions and assumptions policy-makers may have about the composition of material capabilities and the fungibility of such elements. This is, hence, a contentious issue for deliberation and potentially subjective assessment. Gorbachev apparently thought that military might was not all that important at the end of the day and changed course. Any measure, if politically shared and hence dominant, will do.

Indeed, if power assessments were not in principle malleable, it would make little sense to see so many writers, including Art (but also Joseph Nye (1990) in ‘Soft Power’), try to make our understandings of power converge on which resources ‘really’ count. But that is not what happens with money. With €10 we can generally expect to get goods which have no more expensive a price tag than €10, independent of whether we have a subjective feeling we should. Hence, having no real-life equivalent of money does not make a measure as such impossible, but it is not standardized. Moreover, this standard is necessary for making realist theorizing about ‘increase or maximization’ useful for a rationalist theory.11 As Baldwin has reminded us before, to make the power–money analogy work, power needs to be an (objectivized) standardized measure of value, as well. Apparently, it is not (Baldwin, 1993: 21–2). For this reason, the repeated attempts to base realist theorizing on a power and influence improving or maximizing aim cannot be theoretically defended.

This discussion leads, therefore, away from realism to two constructivist points. First, although Bull and Art can easily show that diplomats might agree on some approximations for their dealings, this is not because they have an objectivized measure, but because they have come to agree on one. Far from being a materialist necessity, it is a social (and often politically bargained) construct. In classical diplomacy, with its arbitrations and compensations, diplomats must find a common understanding of overall
power. Diplomats must first agree on what counts before they can start counting.12

This leads to a second and related constructivist point. Debates about the fungibility of power are part and parcel of the measure of power. Defining power is not an innocent analytical act — it is part of politics. Since it is not standardized, definitions influence the value of resources in power relations, the way power is assessed, and hence the way politics as the art of the possible is understood and conducted (for constructivism and conceptual analysis, see Guzzini, 2002). ‘Defining the national interest’ is in itself an act of power which affects what is politically thinkable and legitimate.

This leads to the conclusion that overall power is no objectively deductible variable. An interest in security, expressed as the maximization of rank through power, is indeterminate since, whether or not such a single aim exists, it cannot be expressed on one standardized yardstick. Consequently, the national interest expressed in terms of rank and ‘power’ is a hollow shell which has been, and indeed can only be, filled by auxiliary hypotheses on preference formation, be they liberal, institutionalist, or sociological, if inspired by a constructivist meta-theory (for the latter, see e.g. Weldes, 1996).

As a result, realism needs to add up to something. Invariably realists have been relaxing their materialist assumptions. On the micro-level, for instance, Kissinger (1969) insisted upon diplomatic skills and types of foreign policy personalities and Morgenthau (1970b: 245) claimed that power cannot be equated with military might and is basically unmeasurable outside qualitative judgement (typically left unspecified). Once this micro–macro link had been foregone (not being able to deduce ‘who governs’ from resources) realists qualified the macro-level of anarchy. They defined different types of international systems that cannot be reduced to simple power polarity or polarization. Wolfers (1962: Ch. 6) theorized amity and enmity along a continuum from the pole of power to the pole of indifference. Kissinger (1957: 1–3) distinguished revolutionary from legitimate international systems, while Aron (1962: 108–13) contrasted homogeneous with heterogeneous systems.

Among contemporary neoclassical realists, William Wohlforth explicitly relaxes materialist assumptions and joins adjacent terrain not because he downplays the concept of power, but because he thoughtfully engages with it. He faces the fact that power is not part of the solution to realist explanatory problems, but part of the problem (Guzzini, 1993) — for all its centrality in the theory, ‘power cannot be tested’ (Wohlforth, 1993: 306). Working from the indeterminacy of any realist power theory and the impossibility of measuring power, Wohlforth looks for a very situation-specific and interpretivist analysis of international relations, giving special
place to non-material capabilities and perceptions in an anarchical environment which is not primarily material, but social (for the last point, see Wohlforth, 2003: 265 fn. 1).

Probably all classical realists have travelled on institutionalist or constructivism-inspired terrain. Blurring realist distinctiveness purchased better explanations, but the cost incurred has risen. When, in the wake of the Inter-Paradigm Debate, realism became just one theory among others, the present identity dilemma emerged — either realists keep a distinct and single micro–macro link through concepts of power and influence which, given the nature of the concept, provides indeterminate explanations or they improve their explanations, but must do so by relaxing their assumptions, hence losing distinctiveness.

*Realism as Indistinguishable Science — ‘Has Anybody Ever Been a Realist?’*

The somewhat ironic implication of this argument is that if one defines realism as a coherent, distinct and determinate theory, there has indeed never been such a thing as a realist theory — the question is not ‘Is anybody still a realist?’, but ‘Has anybody ever been a realist?’

It is only natural that, in response to its critiques, realists would refer to some classical thinkers to get out of the Waltzian straightjacket (Feaver et al., 2000). Although this argument contains some truth, realists draw the wrong implications, for a simple enlargement will only put realism back into the same dilemma. As the preceding section has argued, the assumptions and basic concepts of realist theorizing inevitably call for borrowing from elsewhere. In this, the present realist amendments to Waltz simply pursue a necessity already encountered by earlier realists. Indeed, the present critique is but a reiteration of Michael Banks’s description of the ‘hoover-effect’ of realism, that is, its tendency to swallow everything valuable stemming from other paradigms. He called this strategy ‘realism-plus-grafted-on-components’ (Banks, 1984: 18). The repeated realist endeavour to widen, and the repeated resistance of others to let this be in the name of realism, exemplify this basic dilemma of realism, once it is no longer the taken-for-granted language of IR and needs to be differentiated and justify itself. This problem lies within realist theorizing itself, not with its use by its detractors.

*The ‘Conservative Dilemma’ — the Choice Between Tradition and Justification*

Legro and Moravcsik put the stakes very high — what should be the normal science of IR? They ask for a multi-paradigmatic synthesis on the basis of a causal theory of action which takes into account a variety of factors that can
be linked to the four schools of thought they mention. Indeed, they ask that any analysis start from such a multi-paradigmatic setting, and not from any version of realism. Realist explanations become one type among others, almost never sufficient alone and often, depending on the initial conditions, not even applicable.

Despite its similar outlook, such a move undermines the realist defence that all is about the specification of scope conditions (Schweller, 1997). The difference lies in the understanding of indeterminacy and hence the sequence of the argument. Realists put scope conditions second. The analysis starts with a very parsimonious, realist structural account (e.g. Waltz) and is only subsequently qualified (the same strategy applies for the inclusion of other levels of analysis, see Sterling-Folker, 1997). I think detractors are right to suggest that this stacks the deck too much in favour of realism. If indeterminacy derived just from the parsimony of materialist structural theorizing, then a later scope condition might work. Once it is understood that power is not strong enough to provide realism with a theory of action, the necessary micro–macro link, the very materialist structural theorizing itself is at stake. As a result, scholars have to deal with the underlying reason for indeterminacy from the start. As a result, a primarily materialist explanation in terms of the pursuit of power or security becomes just one possible starting point for which certain conditions need first to be united. Choosing realism would have to wait.

This implies that realism would become a sub-theory subsumed under a wider and, therefore, more encompassing theory. It is only in this particular, but very important sense that the realist rejoinders had a point when they saw in Legro and Moravcsik’s writings an attempted hostile takeover. Realism would be reduced to the place where it is already for all non-realists — a special case in need of justification. For instance, the simple argument that materialism matters (see Feaver et al., 2000), in turn, no longer matters, since all other theories have always been able to integrate that component. What made the ‘neo-neo debate’ (Waever, 1996) so futile from the start is that Keohane et al. were not arguing that realists were always wrong — they simply tried to define the conditions under which they were. Neorealist defences, therefore, often missed the point, at least for the non-realist (see the debate in Baldwin, 1993).

But more than any other theory, realism cannot be comfortable with being subsumed under a theoretical roof which, by necessity, is not realist, for realism has always claimed an inherent superiority for its supposed closeness to reality. That reality is and it cannot only sometimes be, for then Pandora’s box is open again regarding the limits of realism and ‘its’ reality.
Consequently, realism has to find a different line of defence. It is not allowed to cover the universe of IR either by expanding such as to include assumptions and causal variables from competitors or by defining purely theory-internal scope conditions. In this situation, one could construct a last logical defence by simply ditching the very need to justify realism and returning to business as usual — the problem lies with an erroneous conception of science, not with realism. Indeed, such a defence of IR realism has been proposed by Kenneth Waltz, whose recent anti-positivism can, however, no longer be considered at all representative of mainstream, contemporary IR realism. Yet, it does include a recurrent theme typical of realism as understood in this article — the reality check for a theory ultimately refers to the world of practice, not knowledge. I will use Waltz’s last turn as a foil to exemplify the inherent logic of the second dilemma, i.e. the ‘conservative dilemma of realism’.

The Conservative Dilemma of the Realist Tradition in IR

If realism is to be understood within the discipline of IR, this article applies a different type of definition. As in my earlier study (Guzzini, 1998: ix–x), I define realism in IR as a scholarly tradition characterized by the repeated, and for its basic indeterminacy repeatedly failed, attempt to translate the practical rules or maxims of European diplomacy into the scientific laws of a US social science. Realist IR scholars have always faced the same basic dilemma: either they update the practical knowledge of a shared diplomatic culture, but then lose scientific credibility, or reaching for logical persuasiveness, they cast their maxims in a scientific mould, but end up distorting their practical knowledge.

In ‘Metternich and the Conservative Dilemma’, one of the most evocative chapters ever written by a realist on realism, Kissinger (1957) depicts several facets of the politics of conservatism in a revolutionary era, a politics necessarily tragic. Conservatives must openly defend what should be tacitly taken for granted; they must strive for socialized values in a time in which values have become self-conscious. Put in the limelight of contestation and conflict, the conservative has three answers:

- fighting as anonymously as possible, has been the classic conservative reply . . .
- To fight for conservatism in the name of historical forces, to reject the validity of the revolutionary question because of its denial of the temporal aspect of society and the social contract — this was the answer of Burke. To fight the revolutionary in the name of reason, to deny the validity of the question on epistemological grounds, as contrary to the structure of the universe — this was the answer of Metternich. (Kissinger, 1957: 193)

But Metternich’s answer confronted the same dilemma:
While Metternich desperately attempted to protect ‘reality’ against its enemies, the issue increasingly became a debate about its nature and the nature of ‘truth’. Had ‘reality’ still proved unambiguous, he would not have needed to affirm it. By the increasing insistence of his affirmation, he testified to its disintegration. (Kissinger, 1957: 202)

Morgenthau stays paradigmatic with regard to this birth defect of realism in international relations in his attempt to preserve the rules of a conservative diplomacy of the 18th century in a 20th century in which nationalism, and to some extent democracy, had destroyed the very basis for its rule. Like Metternich, he does not concede the ‘truly rational’ (see Note 2) ground to adversaries, but confronts them on the question of ‘the world as it really is’. Like Metternich, he eventually has to confront an audience which, by his very insistence on his realism, starts to question whether it is all that self-evident and natural.

Morgenthau follows a realist ritual in opposing what he perceives as dangerous idealist pipedreams. Interestingly enough, his opponents were initially the ‘scientific men’ of the enlightenment (Morgenthau, 1946). Here, Morgenthau is still the (German) romantic, conservative critic of rationalism. Successive editions of his famous Politics Among Nations show his conversion to a rationalist conservatism.

Morgenthau’s conversion to a ‘scientific’ self-image is best understood as an adaptation to his new environment. In crossing the Atlantic, the maxims of realpolitik became exposed to a political culture and foreign policy tradition defined in opposition to European foreign policy culture. He perceived it as much less accepting of the categorical distinction between the internal and the external aspects of politics, let alone the Primat der Außenpolitik.

Morgenthau tried his best to convince his adopted country(wo)men that such a world-view was useless before the disaster that had shattered the world in the midst of the last century. For him, such naivety had been responsible for the calamity. His approach combined the outlook of aristocratic European diplomacy with the new challenges that arose as societies became more tightly integrated and mobilized, and as legitimacy and domestic sovereignty became increasingly bound to broad popular consent (Morgenthau, 1948: 74).

IR would be the academic support for the diffusion of the practical knowledge shared by the former Concert of Europe. Though diplomatic culture could no longer be reproduced by a transnational and often aristocratic elite, science was there to help the new elites to come to grips with the nature of international politics as conceived by realists. It is at this point that the evolution of realism, the perception of world politics from a
US foreign policy perspective, and of the discipline of IR became inextricably linked. To enable the pre-eminent international power to fulfil its responsibilities, Morgenthau packaged the practical realist maxims of scepticism and policy prescriptions into a rational and ‘scientific’ approach.

But then Morgenthau faced the conservative dilemma. If realism is practical knowledge, then it can be said to exist in the cumulative lessons of history shared by a diplomatic community; it does not need explicit justification. Yet, if the same realist maxims are no longer or not necessarily self-evident and need justification in our democratic times, this foundation cannot simply rely on tradition; instead, it must argue with evidence which can be intersubjectively shared. To defend realism, Morgenthau was forced to take the second road, although he might have believed in the first.

For this reason, it is against the very tradition of realism to try to diminish its scientific status — a return to pure tradition would merely return it to the conservative dilemma. It would undermine the traditional appeal of realism, i.e. its claim to be analytical, unlike normative idealism. Realism brought positivity to IR. As Chris Brown (1992: 90) has very rightly pointed out, this pressure to be ‘scientific’ is, to some extent, preordained by the realist world-view itself: Realism claims to refer to an unproblematic reality, a claim that must invite objectivist methods. Retreating from this claim might save a classical version of realism — one which, however, is then hardly distinguishable from the wider classical tradition. Here, the second dilemma meets the first.

A Critique of Science as a Defence of Realism

It is curious to note that when realism is criticized from the more scientific branches of the discipline, some of its defenders easily embrace anti-scientific, if not anti-positivist ideas. Earlier, in the second debate, realists simply brushed aside any empirically controlled critiques of realist analyses, be they quantitative or not, as Morgenthau (1970a, 1970b) and Bull (1969) famously did. Later, more explicit meta-theoretical and post-positivist arguments were used. When Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (1985) attacked IR for lacking scientificity, Stephen Krasner (1985) retorted by (correctly) showing that even Lakatos is ‘debating in an arena which has been defined by Kuhn, an arena in which the traditional view of science has been severely undermined’. In particular, Krasner argued that meaning and topic incommensurability, as well as competing normative prescriptions and ‘the complex but often intimate relations with external communities’, make claims about progressive shifts across paradigms extremely difficult. Basically, the discipline can only debate within given paradigms. After Krasner, Waltz (1997) and Wohlfirth (2003) responding to Vasquez as well as Hellmann
Feaver et al., 2000: 169–74) responding to Legro and Morvacsik have also argued that if the science of IR encounters troubles with realism, this is not because realism is wrong, but because IR should not be a (positivist?) ‘science’. Is no further justification needed?

I will concentrate on the most radical anti-positivist version, since it would provide the ideal solution to the conservative dilemma — it opposes the terms in which the dilemma is posed. In my reading, it comes in a version of scientific pragmatism, implicitly exposed in Waltz’s answer to Vasquez. There, Waltz argues that science is actually not really possible, hence justification not conclusive, and therefore his theory is as good as one can get.15 Hence, realism should be allowed to continue according to the pragmatist attitude that if it is not broken, do not fix it.

Waltz’s (1997) rejoinder to Vasquez’s critique seems to indicate the final destination of a journey he started with his *Theory of International Politics*. Increasingly, the underlying ambiguity of his concept of ‘theory’ is apparent. Waltz wanted scientific status for his theory. He appealed to some scientific respectability by using a neoclassical economic analogy and distinguished his theory from mere realist ‘thought’ (Waltz, 1990). Yet even then, he was already careful to point out that positivist standards cannot really apply. Still, whereas his book talked about ‘testing’ theories against empirical evidence (Waltz, 1979: 16, 123), the caveats about science have become much more prominent.

This curious use of ‘theory’ to evade the need for theoretical justification is probably based on a radicalized pragmatic understanding of science. This only probable interpretation is based on the fact that Waltz has already used a Friedman-inspired pragmatic (yet then positivist) position for his book. Waltz retained three main features. First, in good non-empiricist manner, ‘data does not speak for itself’ — what counts as a fact is theory dependent. Second, assumptions and central concepts have to be as parsimonious as possible, but not realistic as long as they show empirical fit. Lastly, and contrary to the falsificationist ideal, this empirical fit is defined in a much weaker, ‘pragmatic’ way, since he admits that the distribution of power is actually difficult to assess and hence not really usable for disconfirming balance of power hypotheses (Waltz, 1979: 124).

Now, Waltz even more explicitly restricts this position by claiming that ‘success in explaining, not in predicting, is the ultimate criterion of good theory’ (Waltz, 1997: 916). Leaving aside the ambivalence of the term ‘ultimate’, this statement sits very uncomfortably with Friedman’s positivist pragmatism. Here, being lax at the start by defining unrealistic assumptions is only possible because it is coupled with stringent tests at the end. This testing is done on explanation and prediction, since positivists do not see any qualitative difference between the two — the law of gravity explains past
events in the same way as it predicts future events under similar conditions. Indeed, the stress on prediction is important for positivists since it allows the only really independent check of the empirical fit of a theory. Gary Becker (1986), for instance, was always unhappy about economic explanations in terms of ‘revealed preferences’, since they could rearrange anything *ex post facto*.

With these moves, Waltz has systematically ruled out theoretical checks via (realistic) assumptions, (possible) predictions, and empirical testing. Here, the radical pragmatic argument comes in — the real world strikes back on those states who do not pursue policies that fall within the range of structural imperatives (Waltz, 1997: 915). But *knowing* about this check then miraculously escapes the theory dependence of facts which he used to undermine stringent tests of his theory. Indeed, this question never actually arises, for this check occurs on another level altogether. Waltz does not care much about the ‘artificial’ world of researchers who devise tests for the explanation they put forward. He thinks about the more powerful vengeance of the material, ‘real’ world when its ‘laws’ are not observed. The check appears neither in the theoretical nor the controlled empirical world, but in the world of practice. In a curious way, Waltz’s response divorces the world of knowledge entirely from the historical (and material) world, to be linked up through foreign policy practice. Put differently, Waltz argues for a theory dependence of facts when it serves to show that theories cannot be falsified (world of knowledge). There is, however, also a structural dependence of *policies* (world of practice) which can be used to check his theory (the link between the two). He does not answer, however, how we would actually *know* what this link is. How does Waltz know what actually struck back or that there was a strike to start with? Hence, this pragmatic position produces a huge justification deficit not only for defending its claims (which it admits), but for the initial choice of this theory as compared to any other.

Not having a justification for his theory choice is moreover important, since as with all realist theories in the past, Waltz’s theory is easily criticizable for its potentially self-fulfilling effects. Contrary to constructivism, and consonant with positivism, Waltz seems to hold that the social and natural world are similar, at least in so far as, in materialist fashion, they are independent of the way we think about them. Positivists hold that basically there is no difference between the natural and the social sciences and that the subject (observer) to object relationship is unproblematic for the basic independence of the world from our thoughts. Constructivists hold that the *social* world is dependent on the way we think about it.\(^\text{16}\) Now, how does Waltz know that actors inspired by his understanding (which cannot be empirically checked) are not reproducing the very things he sees in the world? Wendt, and decades of peace research, have argued quite conclusively
that if everybody believed that they lived in a jungle, the world would look alike.  

In short, Waltz asks us to accept a theory (1) whose premises might be unrealistic, (2) which cannot be assessed in comparison with other theories, and (3) which informs explanations which cannot be assessed empirically, but (4) which should influence our thinking about the real world and hence our actions in foreign affairs (as if our thinking and actions are independent of that very real world) lest we be punished by the laws of the international structure for whose existence we have no proof. Consequently, this position has a permanent justification deficit and eventually does not escape the conservative dilemma of realism.

**No Pragmatist Way Out of the Realist Dilemma**

I myself would defend realist reactions to empiricism or Lakatosian falsificationism (e.g. Walt, 1997; Wohlforth, 2003). But again, as with the first dilemma, realists draw the wrong implications. For even if we assume that Lakatos's sophisticated falsificationism is not tenable for the social sciences, this still does not make a case for returning to meta-theoretical business as usual on the grounds that realism’s meta-theoretical value will be eventually decided by history or, as James (2002: 72) put it, by ‘naturally occurring processes in society as a whole’. This defence simply begs the question and asks for even more meta-theory, not less (Elman and Elman, 2002). It just reaffirms the conservative dilemma, for the classical tradition, including realism, would have no reason to be believed more than any other. Hence, when pragmatist arguments are taken seriously, they do not defend realism — as shown by the (fallen) realist Hellmann (2000), who eventually argued for retaining the common language of the entire classical tradition, be it realist or idealist.

Such a justification does not need to come in the form of formal modelling, as feared by many and expressed by Stephen Walt (1999). There are interpretivist versions of rationalism. But, surely, to have some wider appeal, it must come in a defence of the conceptual coherence of the theory, which this article seeks to question, and in some further assessment of how the empirical and theory interact and can be assessed between contending approaches (such as the ‘trial’ analogy advanced by Kratochwil, 2000). Perhaps it would make the life of qualitative research in IR easier if its defenders would refrain from simultaneously attempting to salvage realism’s identity in IR, an endeavour which this article sees as basically impossible. It is here, again, where the two dilemmas meet.
Learning the Lessons of the Dilemmas — the Trap of the Perpetual First Debate

Until now, this article has tried to show that realist debates are bound to reappear for two reasons intrinsic to the realist tradition. I have used present and previous debates to show that there is a systematic theoretical problem with the way realist theorizing has developed within IR which consists in not facing what I have dubbed the identity and the conservative dilemmas of realism in IR. If the dilemmas are left untouched, they provoke a continuing return to such debates, a necessary turning in circles, despite the increasing effect of overkill to which this article obviously contributes. For avoiding such a stale return, I want to argue, at last, that realism should try to get out of the vicious circle of critique and anti-critique into which it has trapped itself by perpetuating the often virtual ‘realism–idealism’ debate.

Realism as a Twofold Negation and the Trap of the Realism–Idealism Debate

In what follows, I argue that one of the underlying reasons why many realists do not face the implications of the identity (distinctiveness/determinacy) and the conservative (justification/tradition) dilemmas comes from the terms of the first debate, in which many realists feel compelled to justify realism. According to this self-understanding, realists are there to remind us about the fearful, cruel side of world politics. This distinct face of international politics inevitably appears when the diplomatic masquerade is over and world history picks up its circular course. By trying to occupy a vantage point of (superior) historical experience, science came as an offer that IR realism could not refuse.

IR realism has repeatedly been thought to have no other choice but to justify this pessimism by distancing itself from other positions, to be non-subsumable. It needed to show that whatever else might temporarily be true, there is an unflinching reality which cannot be avoided. Realism needed to point to a reality which cannot be eventually overcome by politics, to an attitude which would similarly rebuff the embrace of any other intellectual tradition. The ‘first debate’ is usually presented as the place in which this ‘negative’ attitude has been played out, indeed mythically enshrined. It is to this metaphorical foundation to which many self-identified realists return.

Yet, I think that the ‘first debate’ is a place where the thoughts not only of so-called idealist scholars, but also of self-styled realists are unduly impoverished exactly because they are couched in terms of an opposition. When scholars more carefully study this type of opposition, however, they quickly find out that many so-called realist scholars have been critical not only of utopian thought and social engineering, but also of realpolitik.
other words, political realism is not simply an attitude of negation, but of a twofold negation — in the words of R.N. Berki, realism must oppose both the conservative idealism of nostalgia and the revolutionist idealism of imagination (1981: 268–9; Griffiths, 1992: 159).

Norberto Bobbio (1996: xiv–xvii) has developed this twofold negation in his usual lucid style as both a (conservative) realism which opposes the ‘ideal’ and a (critical) realism which opposes the ‘apparent’, a difference too few realists have been able to disentangle. For this double heritage of political realism is full of tensions. Realism as anti-idealism is status quo oriented. It relies on the entire panoply of arguments so beautifully summarized by Alfred Hirschman (1991). According to the futility thesis, any attempt at change is condemned to be without any real effect. The perversity thesis would argue that far from changing things for the better, such policies only add new problems to the already existing ones. In addition, the central jeopardy thesis says that purposeful attempts at social change will only undermine the already achieved. The best is the enemy of the good, and so on. Anti-apparent realism, however, is an attitude more akin to the political theories of suspicion. It looks at what is hidden behind the smokescreen of current ideologies, putting the allegedly self-evident into the limelight of criticism. With the other form of realism it shares a reluctance to accept beautiful ideas as what they claim to be. But it is much more sensitive to the ideological use of such ideas, revolutionary as well as conservative. Whereas anti-ideal realism defends the status quo, anti-apparent realism questions it. It wants to unmask existing power relations.

Some realists, such as E.H. Carr and Susan Strange, have oscillated between these two versions of realism. Both have been strong critics of the status quo, not because it was wrongly led into a kind of utopianism, but because the ideological clothing used by the great powers of the day (the UK and France, and the USA, respectively), whether brandishing an apparent ‘harmony of interests’ or suggesting that ‘there is no alternative’, masked their power and responsibility. For Carr, this oscillation was necessary, since ‘The impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist is one of the most certain and most curious lessons of political science’ (1946: 89).

Consequently, a privileged way for realists to learn from their endemic dilemmas would be to acknowledge the ‘first debate’ for the ritual it is (Thies, 2002). On a purely disciplinary level, Brian Schmidt (1997, 2002) has already convincingly shown that the interwar period experienced no debate reducible to two camps coherently labelled ‘idealists’ and ‘realists’. Similarly, many recent scholars on the realist tradition have emphasized the hybrid character of many of its more prominent protagonists, making them indistinguishable from some ‘idealists’. Griffiths (1992) shows how Hedley
Bull, often not included in the realist canon, comes much closer to a genuine realist position than Morgenthau and Waltz, both judged to be nostalgic or complacent idealists. In the most recent textbook on realism, Jack Donnelly comes to the conclusion that the (better) realist tradition, as exemplified by Herz and Carr, is the one which kept “realist” insights in dialectical tension with wider human aspirations and possibilities — a sense of balance ‘sorely lacking in leading figures such as Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer’ (Donnelly, 2000: 193, 195).

Realists should not recoil from the logical implication Donnelly’s argument entails. If it is true that scholars such as Carr and Herz best express the ‘nature’ of the realist tradition, then the scholars most faithful to the realist tradition are paradoxically the most ‘hedged’, i.e. the least faithful to its assumptions and defining characteristics in the realist–idealist debate. It is only in this context that the unusually candid sentence on Donnelly’s (2000) back cover makes sense — ‘Donnelly argues that common realist propositions . . . are rejected by many leading realists as well.’ This shows that the idealism of the continuing first debate is first and foremost the continuously reinvented ‘other’ logically required to make realist rhetoric and thought work in the first place (Guzzini, 1998: 16), but rarely one which would be opposed in its entirety by leading realists, in particular the classical (and perhaps also the neoclassical) ones (Thies, 2002).

In other words, I think it is counter-productive to defend IR realism’s integrity at any price. In my understanding, it would be more coherent to accept that realism is a practical tradition which has not succeeded in translating its maxims into an explanatory theory. As a consequence, some of the ‘realist’ writings are good precisely because they are at variance with any realism narrowly and distinctively defined.

Instead of hunting after an elusive scientific theory of power politics, this is a non-realist’s plea to concentrate on realism’s practical knowledge, prudence, and sense of contingency. As should be expected, it is nothing new, but just another round in this continuing story of the realism debates. It joins, among others, Ashley’s (1981) re-reading of Herz, Walker’s (1989) plea to move realism beyond the determinism in Hobbes, and Kratochwil’s (1993) focus on Kennan and realist practice.

Limits and Opportunities of Accepting the Dilemmas

Some self-identifying realists (as much as some of their opponents) might not be ready to give up these wonderful identity-providing oppositions. For realism, moreover, this choice would be perceived as costly, since it implies the paradox that realist thought might be best served by abandoning the brand-name of IR realism and exploring the possibilities and limits of realism.
as a twofold negation. But, of course, no theoretical family feels immediately comfortable when having to embrace new bedfellows, let alone sleeping in new beds. Worse, thinking of realism as a twofold negation, while a more coherent way to account for a realist tradition, is no theoretical nirvana either. Rob Walker (1987: 85–6) has long argued that it is not clear why we should start from these dichotomies in the first place. Lastly, the feedback from the language of practitioners, in which the opposition between idealism and realism often prevails as the foundational dichotomy, makes such attempts difficult indeed, and seems to undermine one of the alleged strengths of realism as classically conceived — the resemblance of academics’ and practitioners’ language.

But perhaps realists are increasingly aware of the advantages gained from the acceptance of the dilemmas and the consequent choice to leave a distinct IR realism. Not all are happy with the strategy which consists in picking and choosing within the tradition to defend a version most congenial to a particular scholar. This is simply not rigorous enough truly to delegitimize opposite attempts to box realism in the simple-mindedly portrayed realpolitik which might do justice to some realist scholars at some time, but not to the intellectual tradition at large.

The second advantage of giving up the brand-name is that realists would be freer to concentrate on actual contributions in the debate. First, they could join the rationalist debate in IR in a different manner. Indeed, realists could more openly contribute to the recent reassessment of the concept of rationality which is largely being waged within the Weberian tradition in the social sciences (arguably also a political realist heritage) such as the Habermas-inspired rationalist critique of utilitarian rationalism (Müller, 1994, 1995; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Risse, 2000). Rationalism does not equal rational choice.

A second avenue would be an opening up to more philosophical debates in IR in which some of the tenets of political realism might have been taken more seriously by others than by IR realists themselves. Many so-called post-structuralists (another of these slippery categories for enemy-image use) have shown no particular fear of discussing the fathers of political realism, from Max Weber to Carl Schmitt, as well as their Nietzschean lineage. Foucault is inspired by, although not reducible to, such political realism. Indeed, the conceptual discussion of power has been pursued largely outside of IR realism (Guzzini, 1993). It is not quite clear why realists should leave that field eternally to others, even if this risks asking some hard questions for realism.

Moreover, admitting that realism is best thought of as a twofold negation would lift realist self-understanding on to a more reflexive level where it would be able to answer the charge that realism is simply a special case of a
wider approach proposed by neo-institutionalists, constructivists such as Wendt, and even the very classical IR realist tradition itself. The distinctions made by Wolfers, Kissinger and Aron mentioned above in the discussion on anarchy, all make place for realpolitik as a special case of world politics. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to claim that Keohane and Nye (via the Aron disciple Stanley Hoffmann) are the heirs of that richer realist tradition, rather than Waltz or Mearsheimer.21

In particular, realism could engage on the right footing with the present challenge by Alexander Wendt’s (1999) version of constructivism. Wendt carefully addresses realists in building a more comprehensive synthesis in which both realism and institutionalism are now seen as a special case of a wider constructivist theory.22 Again, Wendt does not say that world politics will never look like realists think it does. But since the materialist and individualist meta-theory on which realism is usually built does not hold, one has to find another, a philosophical idealist grounding for IR theory. As a result, there is no logic, but cultures of anarchy. If power politics exists, it is based on a self-fulfilling prophecy difficult to dispense with. All these would be claims that ‘hedged’ realists such as Aron could have engaged with. Whether or not one agrees with him, Wendt provides a meta-theoretical founding for such a view, something realists have not so far been able to offer. In addition, he offers a wider and more systematically argued theory than any ‘hedged’ realist has done in the past. In short, Wendt’s constructivism is not just another idealism of the continuing ‘first debate’ — he defines both the meta-theoretical and theoretical scope conditions of realism’s existence, something realists (beyond Copeland, 2000 and Sterling-Folker, 2002) should be reflecting upon.

This leaves us with the cost in terms of communicability, or shared experience, with regard to the world of practice. The misleading idealism–realism divide is very prominent in daily politics, and not only in the USA. Giving it up would put further strains on the already difficult communication between the world of the observers and the world of practitioners. Yet, I would claim that the issue is wrongly put and, if redefined, would no longer have these negative implications.

The negative implications of seeing realism on the level of observation defined differently than on the level of practice, double and not only simple negation, stem from the curious assumption that the language of observation has to imitate the language of practice (e.g. Wallace, 1996). This assumption does not follow. It is perfectly possible to be proficient in more than one language. Future scholars could, indeed should, be well versed in both the life-worlds of world politics, be it the language of diplomacy, the military, international business, or transnational civil society as well as in the life-world of academia, where truth claims have to be justified in a coherent
manner (Guzzini, 2001b). Being multilingual in this sense makes people aware of the reflexive relationship between the two worlds, a point perhaps more important for constructivism, but hardly superfluous for realism.

This leads directly to another negative implication which stems from the tacit, but unwarranted assumption that the world of observation is divorced from the world of practice. But there is already some reflexivity which has crept into political discourse and understanding. It is simply not true that the world of politics lacks self-observation. Indeed, Ostpolitik cannot be understand without the conscious attempt to alter the reference points within which Cold War diplomacy has been conducted (Waever, 1995). Reflexivity is hence not only a characteristic at the level of theory, but simply pushes the twofold negation one reflexive step further to a point where self-observation becomes part and parcel of world politics and has wider effects. Indeed, this reflexivity has been an important factor in shaping the end of the Cold War in Europe. Refusing to admit this reifies a language about world politics which no longer necessarily holds. If consciously done, it is not a historical statement, but a status quo (political) argument about how world politics should be thought of. It transforms realism into precisely what Carr said it would be — a theory lacking any vision. There is no reason why realists should be compelled to take only this backward-looking position, nor do all (former) realists feel this need anyway.

**Conclusion: After a ‘20 Years’ Detour’?**

Using two recent and earlier debates around realism as a foil, this article has tried to unravel two underlying and enduring dilemmas of the realist tradition. The main thesis of this article is that recurrence of such debates is not spurious nor a kind of generational rediscovery of realism and its critics. It is systematic as long as the two underlying dilemmas of the realist tradition in IR are not faced.

The identity or distinctiveness/determinacy dilemma resurfaced in the debate spurred by Legro and Moravcsik (1999) in *International Security*. Either realism tries to keep its theoretical distinctiveness and becomes indeterminate in its explanation of the very indeterminacy of its central explanatory concepts, such as power or it strives for determinacy, but must then necessarily rely on auxiliary hypothesis and causal factors which are not uniquely realist. Therefore, the double implication of Legro and Moravcsik’s critique, so acutely sensed by the realist rejoinders, is correct. Realism is basically no more than a special case in need of justification, a theory which can be subsumed under wider theorizing. Moreover, the embracing theories are intrinsically superior to genuinely realist theories in that they are used to problematize the scope conditions under which different sub-theories apply,
i.e. they have integrated an element of theoretical reflexivity which has, in the past, been alien to much of realism.

The ‘conservative dilemma’ haunts realism when it gets caught in between science and tradition, as shown in the Vasquez-spurred debate, for realism cannot avoid a stance on science which goes beyond a simple evocation of ‘tradition’, however satisfactory it might seem to some of the realist rejoinders. There can be no return to a ‘common-sense realism’, as already argued by Spegele (1996). The moment realism is no longer the taken-for-granted background of ‘good’ political practice, it is itself in need of a justification. This justification cannot be provided by an appeal to its intrinsic superiority in grasping reality ‘as it is’; its appeal needs to be backed by scholarly justification. But as long as this appeal to justification is either ignored or answered by some version of a scientific theory of power, it undermines the political and diplomatic insights of its practical tradition. Realism has been the repeated, and repeatedly failed, attempt to turn the practically shared rules of European diplomacy into laws of a US social science.

In other words, the debate around realism shows that the past 20 years have been a gigantic detour for realism. But realists cannot start anew as if nothing happened outside of realism and other approaches in IR. Cognizant of the enduring dilemmas of IR realism, I would hope that IR realists would not want to defend realism’s integrity at any price. If there is no power–money analogy, there is no single aim for expressing state motivation. Hence, Grieco’s (1988) acceptance that state motivations vary in principle and not only due to changing circumstances is more consistent with Aron-or Wolfers-inspired realism. This would call for a theory of rational action much wider than mere distinct materialist utilitarianism, a theory which could also engage more fruitfully with constructivism-inspired approaches.

Thus, IR realism should perhaps reconsider its tradition in a way that no longer mounts a defence of realism as a clearly distinguishable school of thought. If this is the best way to save some realist insights and to engage in arguments in the different meta-theoretical and theoretical debates in IR, so be it.

Notes

The idea for this article started with a small piece entitled ‘Has Anybody Ever Been a Realist?’ which was submitted as a rejoinder to Legro and Moravcsik’s (1999) article in *International Security*. I am indebted to Andrew Moravcsik and to Alexander Astrov for comments on this short piece. Earlier versions of this article, not always with the same title, were presented at the 41st Annual Convention of the International Studies Association in Los Angeles (14–18 March 2000), the annual convention of the Società Italiana di Scienza Politica in Naples (28–30 September 2000).
2000), at a workshop on realism in Copenhagen, and in various guest lectures at the University of Aalborg, the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, the Free University Amsterdam, the University of Copenhagen, the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI), the Institute of International Relations (Prague), the Institute for Liberal Studies (Bucharest), and the University of Warwick. It was also exposed to characteristically undiplomatic critique in two workshop seminars at the late Copenhagen Peace Research Institute. My gratitude for comments, criticisms, and suggestions goes to these audiences and readers, in particular to Pami Aalto, Paul Dragos Aligica, Alexander Astrov, Pavel Barša, Andreas Behnke, Henrik Breitenbauch, Barry Buzan, Walter Carlsnaes, Alessandro Colombo, Petr Drulák, Lene Hansen, Gunther Hellmann, Patrick James, Pertti Joenniemi, Peter Katzenstein, Jan Karlas, Hans Keman, Robert Keohane, Petr Kratochvíl, Anna Leander, Halvard Leira, Richard Little, Ian Manners, Michael Merlingen, Mammo Muchie, Iver B. Neumann, Henk Overbeck, Heikki Patomäki, Karen Lund Petersen, Fabio Petito, Liliana Pop, Ben Rosamond, Sten Rynning, Katalin Sárváry, Brian Schmidt, Jiří Sedivý, Ole Jacob Sending, Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, Colin Wight, Jaap de Wilde, Michael Williams, Anders Wivel, Ole Wæver, Maja Zehfuß, and several referees. An earlier version with the same title was published as COPRI Working Paper 43/2001. I finally want to thank Alexander Maxwell for copy-editing the final manuscript. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. In most, but not all, of this article, I follow Walt’s (2002: 199) proposal to focus on theories themselves, rather than on individual scholars who might embrace or combine different theories. Therefore, I refer generally to ‘realism’ (which can sound odd in English), supporting my argument by punctual documentation from the writings of scholars who are considered realists.

2. The claim that realism implies a rationality assumption, shared both by realism’s detractors (e.g. Keohane, 1986: 164–5) and defenders (e.g. Grieco, 1988; Glaser, 2003), has produced an unnecessary debate. Some realists dispute the need for this assumption (e.g. Waltz, 1986: 330–1; Schweller, 2003: 324–5). Yet their rejoinder trades on any one of three mistaken arguments — a confusion between the level of action and the level of observation, the indefensible claim that Waltz has provided a purely systemic theory of IR, or the belief that the assumption of rationality has anything to do with the ‘power of reason’ to achieve progress, as even Kahler (1998) seems to suggest. First, the rationality assumption does not imply that actors always act rationally — they might misperceive, miscalculate, or erroneously think that no trade-off is implied. It simply means that theories which assume self-interest also assume that actors try to further or improve that interest in ways they believe most fit. As a shorthand, observers assume that this happens as if they assessed means for making ends meet in a world of scarcity. Again on the level of observation, this implies that instrumental rationality is a measuring rod with which to assess individual behaviour, whether or not that behaviour is then called rational. Quite logically, classical (e.g. Morgenthau, 1962: Part 1, 1965; Wolfrers, 1962) and modern realists (e.g. Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003; Mearsheimer, 2001) have spent innumerable pages defending the ‘correct’ assessment of how to meet the
national interest (US security) by improving the means–ends relation in US foreign policies. It is hard to see how Weber, the grandfather of this approach, and his followers in IR (e.g. Aron, 1967; Morgenthau, 1948) could do otherwise. Second, Waltz claims that his theory is a purely systemic theory in which final behaviour is the effect of socialization — a claim repeated by Schweller. Waltz’s internal contradiction of relying both on micro-economics as theoretical inspiration (which, of course, assumes rationality) and some functionalist argument has been exposed in the past — Waltz’s theory is in the last resort micro-driven (Ashley, 1986; Wendt, 1987) and needs a theory of action to function in the first place (Powell, 1994; Guzzini, 1998: Ch. 9). As Wendt (1999) has later shown in more detail, Waltz’s approach to ‘socialization’ falls short of overcoming this. Third, it is true that realists have scorned the possibility of profoundly changing the world through reason. But not believing in the ultimate ‘power of reason’ has nothing to do with a rational theory of action — individually rational behaviour might be constrained in such a way that its effects make collective or historical progress impossible. Indeed, even in the outspoken critique of liberal rationalism in his early book, Morgenthau defends realism as the correct way to be ‘successful and truly “rational” in social action’ (1946: 219). Inversely, a (primarily) non-rationalist theory of action can coexist with a progressive theory of history (see Wendt, 2003). For a good discussion, see also Brooks (1997: 454).

3. For an explicit statement about the centrality of this assumption in political realism, see Bobbio (1981). It is easily visible in IR realism (e.g. Morgenthau, 1946, 1970a; Wight, 1966; Gilpin, 1981).

4. This critique builds on Guzzini (1998), especially Chapter 3.

5. It should be noted that part of this section draws on Guzzini (1993, 2000c).

6. In other words, much of realist IR assumed a double causal link between these two facets, comparable to Dahl’s (1961) famous power analysis in Who governs? In a laudable attempt to eliminate tautological power explanations, Mearsheimer (2001: 56) claims that power can only be defined as capabilities, not as control over outcomes. But that will not do. The maximization of power is a means for maximizing security — as Mearsheimer says himself. Maximizing security, however, implies a statement about outcomes, not just resources. If power is a means to an end, such as hegemony or dominance, then it includes an idea of control; if it does not, then realists would make the claim that amassing (military) resources is the end in itself — an (untenable) claim that virtually all contemporary realists shy away from.

7. For the following, see also Guzzini (1998: 136–7).

8. For the argument on fungibility, see in particular Baldwin (1989a: 25, 34, 209).

9. Hence, by simply requotting Waltz, and then going on with business as usual, Zakaria (1998: 19 fn. 24) does not prove anything.

10. Indeed, some realists agree and draw the far-reaching conclusion that ‘trying to think in terms of aggregate power has led, inter alia, to the overambitious and inconclusive debate about polarity and war’ (Buzan et al., 1993: 61).
11. Hence, it is not enough to footnote this exchange as a proof for the fungibility case in favour of realism, as in Deudney (2000: 10 fn. 22).

12. In this specific sense, measures of wealth and measures of power are similar, since they are institutional facts which only exist because people believe in them (see the classical money example in Searle, 1995). Yet, as argued earlier, they differ in the amount of institutionalization and, hence, objectification they have in the real world.

13. Such a synthesis with its exclusive emphasis on behaviour must leave out theories which at least partly focus their explanations on the reproduction of structures. This applies to purely holistic theories, but also all theories with a dual ontology (agency and structure), such as post-Gramscian approaches interested in the reproduction of the structures of power, or constructivist explanations interested in the reproduction of intersubjective life-worlds of meaning, or ‘cultures’, as in Wendt (1999). Indeed, Wendt is consciously trying to provide an even more encompassing theory in which the conditions for these individualist action theories are spelled out.

14. This is supported by Waltz (1977), who consistently rejects the adding of variables such as perception and so on as extensions of his theory; for him, they do not fix, but abandon his theory.

15. In a later rejoinder prefacing a book on the use of Lakatos for IR, Waltz openly endorses a post-positivist reading of Lakatos — ‘Lakatos’s assaults crush the crassly positivist ideas about how to evaluate theories that are accepted by most political scientists. He demolishes the notion that one can test theories by pitting them against facts’ (2003: xii).

16. For a discussion of constructivist tenets, see Guzzini (2000a).

17. For a discussion of the link between peace research and constructivism, see Guzzini (2004).

18. For a more thorough discussion, see respectively Guzzini (2001a, 2000b). For the inclusion of Strange in the realist tradition, see also Guzzini (1998: 176–83).

19. The literature here is growing rapidly. For its start, see the excellent early piece by Wæver (1989), and also Campbell and Dillon (1993). For the recent engagement with Carl Schmitt in IR, see e.g. Behnke (2000), Colombo (1999), and Huysmans (1999).

20. For recent Foucaultian analysis, see e.g. Prozorov (2004) and Huysmans (2004).

21. Note also that Keohane (1984: 8 fn. 1) finds it difficult fundamentally to disentangle his account from a ‘non-representative’ type of realism such as Stanley Hoffmann’s.

22. For an analysis of Wendt’s aim of a disciplinary and theoretical synthesis, see Guzzini and Leander (2001).

23. This is a finding of the original book on the end of the Cold War debate which has not been undermined by later critiques. See Wendt (1992), Lebow and Risse-Kappen (1995), and the debate which followed, which includes most prominently William Wohlforth (1998) and now also Brooks and Wohlforth (2000). See also

24. This contradicts Walt’s (1999: 26 fn. 56) statement to the opposite. In other words, realism as a coherent theory might go the way of assuming an irreducible variety of state motivations (but then needs to answer how we derive them), instead of a becoming a series of competing schools which can be used to play off contradicting evidence. In this case, however, it will no longer look distinctive from a wider rational action theory. The identity dilemma still applies.

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