The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics
Author(s): Friedrich Kratochwil
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Cambridge University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097320
Accessed: 04/01/2012 20:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp.
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
The embarrassment of changes: neo-realism as the science of Realpolitik without politics*

FRIEDRICH KRATOCHWIL

Introduction

The fundamental change occasioned by perestroika, the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc, the reunification of Germany, and the end of the ‘Cold War’ has become a crucial test for the explanation of change provided by the established paradigm of international politics, neo-realism. In at least three respects, this approach was embarrassed by the chain of events.

First, accustomed to explaining changes in terms of shifting patterns of growth or the distribution of capabilities, neo-realism had to contend with the fact that the radical changes of 1989/90, were not the result of such redistributions. Soviet military capabilities remained virtually the same the year before and after the Berlin Wall fell. Furthermore, these changes had occurred in a rather unexpected way, i.e. without the outbreak of hegemonic war.¹

Second, given that international change resulted from the reconstitution of the domestic political systems rather than from systemic factors—vide the importance of human rights and democratization leading to a new ‘civil society’ in Eastern Europe—neo-realism had no conceptual apparatus for understanding the nature, scope and direction of change. Thus, the famous Thucydidean adage, frequently and lovingly quoted by realists, that ‘the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’ might still have some validity. But the strong suddenly realized that what they ‘can’ do was as different from the repertoire of politics as usual, and the weak noticed that the modality of ‘must’ was also undergoing a nearly unheard of transformation. A curious reversal had occurred. The mass movements brought about sweeping changes through a new conception of empowerment,² while the realization of ‘powerlessness’ of the leading strata pointed to a crisis in ‘power’. Neo-realism as a theory of power, oddly enough, had no way of comprehending either phenomenon.

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Lawrence B. Simon Chair and the research help of Rey Koslowski in completing this paper. Joe Grieco, Joseph Nye, David Sprio, and Deborah Larson read earlier versions and offered helpful criticism, as did the editor and three anonymous reviewers of this journal. To all of them my sincerest thanks. Errors of fact and judgement are, as usual, exclusively mine.

² On the role of war as the fundamental mechanism of change in the international system, see Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge, 1981).

² See Vaclav Havel et al., The Power of the Powerless; Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe, (London, 1985).
This above-mentioned embarrassment was all the more significant since the initial realist designers of US foreign policy, had indicated that international accommodation, if it were to occur, would come about in precisely this fashion, i.e., through fundamental domestic change. This leads to a third embarrassing paradox which is perhaps most galling. The academic exponents of ‘realism’ had prided themselves on giving greater precision, depth and, above all, scientific respectability, to the fuzzy realism practised or preached by mere theologians, or historians, such as Niebuhr or Kennan. But, despite the fact that the realist practitioners of yester-year had clearly identified the linkages between domestic and international change, most academic realists had cut themselves off some of the most significant insights realism as a practice had to offer.

In this paper I argue, that, first, the attempt to turn realism as a practice into a scientific ‘theory’ by applying the ‘scientific’ method is misconceived and goes a long way in explaining the three above paradoxes. The search for invariable laws of international politics has not only significantly reduced the set of interesting questions, it also has led to premature closure. Political practices which pose conceptually difficult problems for theory building are either ‘solved’ by wrong analogies, such as by likening power to money because of methodological convenience, or they are dealt with by ‘assumption’. The result is predictable. As in the world of love, reality increasingly proves nothing. Neo-realists are more and more engaged in a Platonist preoccupation with form (anarchy, law of uneven growth). The changing or cyclical nature of international politics substituted for the investigation of actual processes and decisions. Whole sectors of international reality become marginalized, such as the considerable amount of cooperation, the importance of common conventions for sustaining international systems, and the links between domestic order and efforts of institutionalizing international interactions.

Second, I argue that the preoccupation with method and the scientific character of the study of politics reinforces many of the pathologies that are likely to occur when we abandon the traditional standards of criticism by which we subject practical problems and issues of judgement to reasoned debate. Political ‘science’ as a discipline is, therefore, in the unenviable position of not measuring up to the standards of science in producing warrantable knowledge while having at the same time lost its critical dimension through the ensoncing of orthodoxies based on a mistaken ideal. According to the conception of a ‘market of ideas’ good arguments win through persuasive, if not logically compelling, force. Unfortunately, the growth of credentialism in the discipline is stifling debate and critical thought. It does so by a mixture of pseudo-scientific pretensions and by the often vigorous defence of privileged positions in controlling the agenda of academic discussions.

3 Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York, 1953).
4 George Kennan, American Diplomacy 1900–1950 (Chicago, 1951).
5 On anarchy, see Kenneth Oye (ed.), Cooperation Under Anarchy (Princeton, 1986); on the law of uneven growth, see Robert Gilpin, War and Change.
6 My argument here is that a critical reflection on political praxis could profit more from a coherent elaboration of the standards of practical reason and judgement than from the problematic attempt of applying the model of theoretical reason to practical problems. In other words, the appropriate model for a critical examination of practice is Kant’s second and third rather than first critique. For an attempt of applying the approach outlined in Kant’s Kritik der Urteilskraft to the problem of politics see Ronald Beiner, Political Judgement (Chicago, 1983)
The warnings of a ‘scientific’ approach are familiar from the writings of Bull7 and Hirschman.8 The pathologies in the organization of knowledge engendered by the disciplinary organization of a science of politics have been eloquently made by David Ricci.9 What is less clear, however, is how to light a candle instead of simply cursing the darkness.

It is with this goal in mind (task three) that this paper proposes a radical alternative to neo-realism. By examining the ‘silence’ of neo-realist thinking on the changes brought about by glasnost and perestroika, I want to advance an explanation of change in the international system which is quite different from the various ad hoc adjustments of neo-realism. My task is both historical and analytical. Historically, I intend to recover some of the insights of realism conceived of as a practice. Analytically, I demonstrate that a coherent counterposition to the predominant neo-realist approach can be formulated by basing the analysis of world politics on conventions, which are constitutive and regulative of state practice. The conceptual innovation consists in elaborating on the metaphor of a game, constituted by rules and norms.10 Such an approach has several advantages. One, it understands political action in terms of meaningful, rather than purely instrumental, action. Two, this change in perspective fundamentally alters some of the main tenets of the anarchy problematique which serves as the point of departure for neo-realist analysis. Finally, I suggest some reasons why this understanding of practice was eclipsed by neo-realism and why structural theories of international politics became predominant in the discipline.

In order to elaborate on these points, my argument will take the following steps. In section 2, I examine the reasons for the impoverishment of the set of interesting puzzles which were the result of the professionalization of the discipline and the adoption of procedures of evaluation in the name of science. I argue that the perhaps unintended outcome of much of our professional activity results in the, at first, contradictory phenomena of faddism and orthodoxy.

In section 3, I investigate the historical record of post-World War II politics and contrast it with the theoretical propositions allegedly explaining these events. Here the eclipse of interest among academics in multilateralism is particularly noteworthy, especially since the construction of a multilateral order was one of the most important goals for the policy planners and statesmen of the post-war era. Not only did actual decision makers behave quite differently from what realism as a theory of international politics suggests, the practitioners also had a considerably better idea than their academic counterparts of how fundamental change in the international system is likely to occur.

These historical remarks serve then as the backdrop for section 4 in which I elaborate the conception of a conventionalist (constructivist11) approach for the study

---


10 Although I am using here the game metaphor, from what I said above it should be clear that I am not talking about a game-theoretical approach. Rather the term ‘game’ is here used in the sense of Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life’ which is constituted by norms and rules (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 3rd edn, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1968).

11 For a further elaboration on the idea of constructivism, see Nicholas G. Onuf, World of Our Making (Columbia, 1989), ch. 1.
of politics. While such an approach is unlikely to ever possess the rigour of classical physics or even the elegance of micro-economic theory, it does promise to be fruitful and avoid many familiar pitfalls. In addition, such an approach allows for the inclusion of normative concerns without falling prey to idealist or universalist speculations concerning the end of history, or the rise of a new world order.

The profession and the administration of knowledge

Why is it that the specialists of international politics had so little to say about the tremendous changes caused by perestroika and glasnost? My preliminary answer is that the conjunction of a radically reduced agenda of interesting questions and the organization of knowledge in the discipline are to blame. At least policy makers had to engage in comprehensive policy reviews when practice and the theory explaining it dramatically diverged. But international relations specialists could afford to continue along the lines of business as usual due to their comfortable isolation in departments in which actual events were not supposed to disturb the circles of science. The end of the Cold War cold simply be treated as one event and dismissed as unimportant for theory building. Since theories are not supposed to explain single events, everything seemed to be fine.

To that extent, real events seemed to prove as little as the many objections raised against neo-realism and its anarchy problematique on theoretical grounds. What is surprising is the lack of impact these objections have had over the years in correcting or reorienting the ‘theory’ of international politics. The usual way of dealing with criticisms is to acknowledge them and then simply to continue in the same vein as before. This advances ‘consensus’ in the discipline and harmony in the profession.

Actually, the tolerance for cognitive dissonance in the profession is something bordering on the miraculous. One example might suffice. Although most political scientists still pay lip service to the nomothetic/deductive explanation schemes, no general social laws have been discovered. But this lack of one of the fundamental pre-conditions for the scientific explanation does not diminish the advocacy for the utilization of the scientific method. Even worse for our advocates of ‘science’—while scientists spend a great deal of time on testing and duplicating the efforts of their peers, this does not happen among political scientists. Rarely are studies duplicated.

13 This was the argument made by Robert Keohane at a conference in La Jolla, 6 December 1990. The same point was made over and over again by Steve Walt and Kenneth Waltz among others at a conference at Cornell in October 1991.
15 The perfect illustration of such a gambit is Kenneth Waltz’s acceptance of the criticism that power is misconceived when it is treated as a fungible capability while still maintaining that power ‘is more fungible than [many of the critics] allow’. Kenneth Waltz ‘Reflection on Theory of International Politics: A Response to my Critics’, in Robert Keohane (ed.), Neorealism and its Critics (New York, 1986), pp. 322–45, at p. 333. For an elaboration of the fundamental issues underlying power analysis, in particular the mistaken conceptualization of power as capability and erroneous analogy between power and money, see David Baldwin, Paradoxes of Power (New York, 1989).
This is partially due to the special circumstances of the subject matter, since, in contrast to natural phenomena, political problems usually cannot be studied and subjected to repeated tests under controlled conditions. But even when the admittedly exceptional opportunity for duplication existed, one can seriously doubt whether many political scientists would embark on such a course of action. There is clearly no reward for such efforts considering the requirements of the profession.

Given that the fraternity of political scientists does not behave as a scientific community in examining, checking and rechecking the findings of its members, the scholar who wants to establish him/herself, has above all to learn to master the hurdles of the peer review system. Mastering a particular technique or method, for which a certain expertise can be claimed, is obviously more rewarding than working humbly in the vineyard of science. Furthermore, the common failure of one's peers to carefully read one's work, instead of only skimming the introductions and conclusions, provides for a good chance that one is credited for originality while the actual steps consisting in the specialized and technical demonstration of how one gets from the thesis to the conclusion, remains unexamined.

The spread of this bad habit has not so much to do with individual failings as with the fact that in the absence of agreed procedures for the criticism and corroboration of hypotheses, anything plausible seems sufficient. This leads to both an emphasis on 'originality' in the review process and to the acceptance of neatness rather than truth as the decisive criterion, and, consequently, to a hypertrophic concern with rigour. The latter preference is powerfully buttressed by changing philosophical and epistemological fashions. After the empiricist period of the behavioral revolution, things changed for the discipline when logical positivism became the preferred epistemology. In empiricism, reference to 'facts' was supposed to establish the 'scientific' character of a proposition; now deductive rigour is supposed to deliver the same result single-handedly and without the complications of actual events or data. Thus issues are often discussed on a level of abstraction that defies any further detailed examination.

One recent example is the explanation of the emergence of certain social institutions in terms of transaction costs. Without bothering to specify what is involved in such a cost accounting scheme, for instance, it is easy to show that multilateral institutions save on transaction costs and thereby provide a functional explanation for their existence. However, one can easily prove the opposite. The utilization of bilateral deals stands to reason because thereby both collective action problems are avoided and the stronger party can make full use of its bargaining strength. Without conclusive empirical tests political scientists are in the same position as nuclear physicists before the explosion of the atomic bomb at Trinity site. Some physicists argued convincingly that the bomb would not explode, some argued that it would explode, and a minority feared that if it exploded it would incinerate the world.

The preoccupation with the trappings of sciences has two perverse effects: it fosters specialization and faddism while at the same time ensconcing orthodoxies. These problems therefore go well beyond the personal failings of the leading exponents of

---

16 There would be ways around this problem with quasi-experimental research designs as well as use of hypothetical counterfactuals. → James Fearon, 'Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science', World Politics, 43, no. 2 (Jan. 1991), pp. 169–95.

the profession. They are explainable only as the result of several interrelated pathologies in the organization of knowledge. Indeed the emergence of professionalism and credentialism is only the logical Ersatz for assessing knowledge claims and the largely disappointed hopes in the progress of a science of politics.

Activities in the profession are therefore more often driven by methodological fads and clientilism than by problems and sustained attention to a research programme. Capturing departments and tracking career paths of individuals becomes a ‘professional’ activity that often takes more time than the treatment of substantive questions. Like departments of literary criticism which could deconstruct ad infinitum even if no single line of literature were to be written, political scientists seem to be quite happy to talk shop while paying only the scantiest attention to politics.

We can now also understand why these preoccupations lead to the seemingly contradictory outcomes of legitimizing faddism and the establishment of an orthodoxy. Precisely because specialization and the organization of knowledge cut the practitioners of science off from public debate and effective communication among themselves, notoriety, if not fame, can only be gained by members who do something ostensibly ‘new’ without thereby challenging the few established wisdoms of the profession. Expertise in methodology not only fulfills the former requirement, it is also virtually self-validating as a strategy, at least among those practitioners who believe that science as a cumulative enterprise is the result of following the scientific method. As opposed to the constant attention to methodological issues, many of the substantive assumptions remain unexamined because they represent the last tenuous link of communication among the members of the fraternity that otherwise would have precisely little in common.

The cooptation of Thomas Kuhn’s idea of a ‘paradigm’ 18 provided a convenient excuse for proceeding in such an uncritical fashion. Albert Hirschman’s early warnings that paradigms actually might constitute a ‘hindrance to understanding’, 19 notwithstanding, most political scientists take it as an act of faith that paradigms and revolutionary science absolve the fraternity of political scientists from the charge of a sociology of knowledge.

In addition, the ease with which political scientists bolted Popperian and Kuhnian criteria together makes one wonder whether Kuhn’s criticism was ever appreciated. It hardly augurs well for the practitioners of political science when they apply Kuhnian criteria in a field in which most of the preconditions for a scientific community are not met. As was shown above, the professionals do not behave according to the standards of a scientific community, there is no agreement whether one or several paradigms exist in political science, or what one would consider normal vs. revolutionary science. Given a penchant for abstractions, the parties to the debate on Kuhn ‘tended to dwell less on the facts than on the precise meaning that might be imputed to terms in Kuhn’s lexicon’. 20

It is hard to maintain that political science represents either a normal or a revolutionary science, or to affirm that the collective judgement of the fraternity in privileging certain unquestioned assumptions can marshall much persuasiveness. But

---

19 Hirschman, ‘Paradigms’.
given this unenviable condition, it becomes necessary to raise several disquieting questions:

What would international relations as a discipline look like if the autonomous sphere of activity was, after all, not constituted by the deep structure of ‘anarchy’? What would be the status of realist verities, for which an impressive array of witnesses from Thucydides to Machiavelli, Hobbes and the European tradition of reason of state is invoked, if it turned out that such alleged continuities exist, like beauty, largely in the eye of the beholder? What if those verities were nothing more than highly problematic, not say tendentious interpretations? What if, as Aristotle and Vico already suspected, historical structures were not immutable given but the result of the practices of the actors? What if the way of comprehending them cannot be based on methods that are designed to assuage Cartesian doubts or effectively check physics envy? What if the preoccupation with the scientific method served neither the advance of science nor our understanding of politics whose illumination, after all, presumably is the goal of the discipline?

To raise such questions is not only gauche in terms of the unspoken rules of the profession which, in George Catlin’s words, had tried long and hard to move beyond the ‘endless academic gnawing of the small bones of Kant’. To bring up these questions means to re-open the issue of relevance. It means confronting the profession with the need of appraising whether the new research programs have indeed provided better food for thought than the old philosopher’s bones.

Things look pretty dim on that score. The initial speechlessness with which mainstream international relations theory has dealt with the changes in Europe (East and West) is only paralleled by the inability of American politics as a field to say virtually anything on racial conflicts, poverty, or civil disobedience in the United States during the tumultuous sixties. It is cold comfort that by now the ruling orthodoxy of academic realism has had time to formulate some auxiliary hypotheses which promise to insulate the core of the theory from the inconvenience of being subjected to critical examination.

**History, practice and the problem with IR theory**

Neo-realism not only misunderstands the present, but systematically misconceives the past. This leads to the construal of a phantasmagorical history with the purpose of saving the highly questionable theory instead of criticizing it in the light of contrary evidence.

One of the most surprising facets of contemporary IR analysis is the virtual eclipse of interest in conceptions of a multilateral order, even though it had been central to US post World War II planning and organizational efforts. As John Ruggie has pointed out, in spite of its demanding organizational implications, the institution of

---

multilateralism was chosen by post-war planners because the inter-war experiences had driven home the lesson that older bilateralism, as prescribed by classical realism, was unlikely to provide for a lasting peace with prosperity. The acceptance of multilateralism as an architectural principle then informed the design of particular organization, such as the IMF, NATO and GATT (to name just a few quite diverse arrangements). Multilateralism meant that the post-war order was constructed according to the principles of indivisibility, generalized norms binding upon all members, and diffuse reciprocity. All three principles contradict the central teachings of realism.

In the first place, by agreeing to multilateral arrangements, nations give up the presumption that they will act unilaterally solely according to their own discretion. At a minimum, multilateralism means taking the interests of others into account by treating the relations among members as a ‘whole’ rather than keeping them limited to dyads and to specific bargains. Classical alliances compartmentalized security relations. A conception of collective security, on the other hand, links the units to each other by making an attack on one an attack of all others. Similarly, a free trading order based on non-discrimination and free convertibility of currencies, integrates a whole system of economic relations precisely because there is no gate-keeper through which the members have to pass when they want to interact with each other.

As the above examples show, multilateral orders are based on generalized principles of conduct that limit individual discretion and discrimination on a case by case basis. In addition, multilateral orders can be sustained only when diffuse reciprocity prevails that accepts a wider time horizon and tolerance for temporary imbalances of benefits. Again such decision premises for the conduct of state action are quite at odds with the maxims of realism. The point is not that these demanding principles cannot be violated in particular cases, or that the ‘interests’ of states are no longer important. Rather it means that the basis on which interest calculations are made are thereby decisively altered. The institutions and organizations define now to a large extent the available policy options.

It was in this context of trying to attain Soviet cooperation for the multilateral institutionalization of world politics that American decision makers were disappointed and Kennan’s famous Long Telegram attained decisive importance. They had been puzzled by the Soviet lack of interest in the Bretton Woods system of international organizations. Kennan’s advise, by warning against too exalted expectations of cooperation for a universal multilateral order, contained a good deal of realism, but it was not ‘realist’ in the sense of later international relations theory. After all, the argument of containment was that ‘counterforce’ could stop the largely indirect Soviet aggression. This would be effected by reassuring the weakened European countries on the one hand, and, on the other hand, increase the internal stresses and strains within the Soviet Bloc. Thus, the internal change argument was intrinsically linked through a historical sequence to the international accommodation thesis. Given the pathological nature of Stalin and the Bolshevik leadership, accommodation was only likely when important domestic changes had brought a new

24 See John Ruggie, ‘Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution’, manuscript of the introduction to a forthcoming special issue of International Organization. In the following I base my discussion on the conceptual framework which was adopted for this special issue.

25 See George Kennan, Memoirs 1925–1950 (Boston, 1950), ch. 11.
The embarrassment of changes

The generation of leaders to power. Similarly, bargaining with the Soviets was an option only after Moscow was willing to abandon the conspiratorial outlook on politics rooted in both the Russian and Bolshevik traditions.

Because the dynamics between domestic and international politics was the crucial variable in Kennan’s analysis, he did not advocate the pursuit of power according to the logic of the ‘autonomous’ realm called international politics. Kennan thus conceived of the Soviet challenge not as a classical realist probe, induced by considerations of balance, or by aspirations resulting from the uncertainties of a new distribution of capabilities. Rather, in his view the Soviet challenge was aimed at America’s society and at its conception of a free political community. This ‘test of national quality’ could be weathered only, he told the American public in his X article, if the American people understood, that ‘their entire security as a nation depended on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibility of moral and political leadership that history plainly had intended them to bear’.

In a lecture at the Naval War College, a few years later, Kennan fleshed out this argument in a nearly prophetic fashion by telling his students that the problem of Western democracy was

the crisis produced by the growing disproportion between man’s moral nature and the forces subject to his control. For us in this country the problem boiled down to one of obtaining social mastery over the runaway horse of technology; of confining and bending to our will these forces . . . of creating here at home a stable balance between consumption and resources, between man and nature; in producing here institutions which would demonstrate that a free society can govern without tyrannizing and that man can inhabit a good portion of the earth without devastating it . . . and then, armed with this knowledge . . . going forth to see what we can do in order that stability may be given to all of the noncommunist world.

It is appropriate to reflect with the benefit of hindsight on some of the ‘theoretical understandings’ underlying this advice. First, fundamental change in the European theatre and Soviet accommodation occurred much as Kennan had envisaged. Second, the success of containment in Europe contrasts sharply with the highly problematic results of US foreign policy in other areas of the world. However, in taking the core of Kennan’s advise seriously, we also can see why this differential pattern emerged. In Kennan’s vision security was not conceived primarily in military terms but was largely the result of a well institutionalized processes of domestic and international politics. Much of the security problematique, therefore falls outside the military realm. This was very much in accordance of the old adage attributed variously to Napoleon and Count Schwarzenberg, that ‘one can do a lot with bayonets, save one thing: one cannot sit on them’.

Neo-realism as a theory of international politics has largely forgotten about these concerns. As political science aspired to become more and more scientific, history and the actual practice of states figured less and less in explanations provided by the allegedly rigorous theoretical constructs. Thus, the multilateral order was explained


in terms of the American empire, and international relations theory focused on the nuclear balance, and its alleged similarities and differences to the balance of power. Both of these purported explanations misconstrued the historical record and served as auxiliary hypotheses designed to shelter neo-realism’s core from refuting evidence.

It cannot be the task here to expound further on the hegemonic stability theory. Let it suffice to say that it was based on a peculiar and largely misleading reading of the British hegemony in the nineteenth century. This misreading of the historical record, in turn, was made plausible by the analytical argument derived from the theory of collective goods, which requires the existence of a political entrepreneur for the solution to the collective action problem.

By explaining the existence of order through the concentration of power, the persistence and resilience of the multilateral framework was, in the face of the decline of American hegemony, puzzling. As usual, time lags were invoked, but the real source of conceptual befuddlement was the fundamental error of conceptualizing power largely in terms of capabilities instead of conceiving of it as a relationship. Much of the power of a hegemon is mediated by an institutional framework that develops a considerable life and importance of its own. Thus regimes are not just reflections of some underlying power, they represent power itself, empowering the actors within them and raising the cost of defections and noncompliance with the widely accepted rules and norms.

Furthermore, the institutional implements that solve the collective action problem do neither follow directly from its existence, nor from the privileged position of an actor within the international system. Although Kindleberger, and many others after him, assumed that hegemons will be free traders, it is not clear why this should be so. To explain particular organizational forms we must pay close attention to the influence of political ideas which legitimize or delegitimize certain forms of hegemony. The historical counterfactual of a post-war Nazi hegemony drives home the point that collective action problems could have been overcome quite easily through exploitative bilateralism. In addition, economic theory suggests that hegemonic powers will be rent seekers rather than free traders. Consequently, the emergence, maintenance and the changes in international orders are not simply derivable from theories of international politics that focus only on the positional characteristics of various powers vis à vis each other.

In addition to hegemonic stability theory and its ad hoc adjustments, the other auxiliary hypothesis protecting the neo-realist project from criticism was the exclusive focus on the central balance and its bipolar configuration of post-war politics. Perestroika and glasnost challenged these tenets. The rapid changes that occurred

31 See e.g. Keohane’s argument in his After Hegemony.
since 1989 had hardly anything to do with the changes in Soviet or American capabilities. As the careful analysis of Fred Chernoff showed, the Soviets certainly have suffered from a perhaps excessive defense burden, but 'the defense burden cannot be shown to have increased in the 1980s and thus cannot be shown to link the Reagan military buildup with the collapse of Soviet foreign policy'. 34 Furthermore, given that the economic debacle of the Soviet Union is of long standing, such an approach can neither explain why the changes occurred when they did, nor can it account for the type and direction of change. All three arguments deserve further elaboration.

Declining powers have historically had at their disposal a variety of strategies by which they were able to shore up their position. These strategies range from increasing extraction to military adventurism, to isolation and autarky. From historical precedents, we would have expected that the Soviet Union would respond to a crisis of internal economic and political stagnation in a world of dynamic competitors, 'with a mixture of renewed imperialism and authoritarianism'. 35 Even if we accepted the argument that economic strain is an initiator of change, we still would have to account for the timing and direction of change. Here, traditional explanations frequently become logically incoherent.

For example, the economic crisis followed perestroika rather than preceded it. Furthermore, if the deteriorating Soviet economy was the cause for wide-spread political reforms, then the further deterioration of Soviet economic performance in 1991 should have accelerated the transition to a free market economy rather than resulted in back-tracking by Gorbachev in the Fall of 1990. Finally, what becomes totally unexplainable is that the Soviet Union not only cut its military burden, but that it actively sought to become a member of the very multilateral institutions which it once opposed not only for ideological reasons but on the 'realist' basis of preserving its autonomy and sovereignty.

These brief remarks suggest that the changes brought about by perestroika and glasnost are better explained by the legitimization crisis of communism in Eastern Europe, and by the interaction effects these events had with domestic reforms in the Soviet Union. While the institutional frameworks in Western Europe developed considerable dynamism by the end of the 1980s, both the Warsaw Pact and COMECON were virtually moribund. The reasons are not difficult to fathom. Moscow's bloc organization, based initially on pure bilateral exploitative deals, was never successfully transformed into a multilateral framework. Thus, despite the fact that Moscow increasingly had to subsidize Eastern European economies, such help generated little gratitude or enthusiasm as soon as the prospect of joining Europe and its multilateral order loomed on the horizon. Similarly, instead of creating an integrated command structure, Warsaw Pact forces were simply directed and supervised by Moscow.

Having failed to create within their sphere of influence a viable political order that could instil loyalty and weather changes, Soviet political planners were nevertheless


not blind to the fact that the political and military integration of Western Europe had successfully dealt with two important problems of European politics that had eluded previous peacemakers. First, it had solved the Franco-German problem by making them both part of the Western Alliance. It is an often forgotten fact that the stationing of American troops on the European continent was largely designed to reassure the French (and possibly other Europeans) that a rearmed Germany was not going to once again become a security threat. Second, it also had solved the problem of prosperity for which only insufficient provisions had been made at Versailles. Opting for a united Germany within Western European structures, the Soviet Union was obviously convinced that such a solution was likely to serve its own security interests better than a Germany wandering between East and West.

Precisely because the Soviet Union not only retrenched from its far-flung empire—as classical realism could have predicted—but even tried to join Western multilateral arrangements, the historical changes brought about by glasnost and perestroika cannot be accommodated by the structural framework of neo-realism. Neo-realism’s failure demonstrates the need for the development of alternative approach which is sensitive to history and provides a better heuristic for the explanation of change.

The international system as an institutional structure

As the above section showed, many of the important decisions in the post-war era were made by practitioners who called themselves ‘realists’. They correctly challenged ‘idealists’ who had depreciated the practical problems of establishing a viable international order in actuality. Nevertheless, analyses of actual decision makers, even when they were ‘realists’, does not reveal the single-minded preoccupation with positional strength or with maximization of power, that academic realism as a theory of politics emphasizes.

For those ‘present at the creation’ a concern for power was always part and parcel of a larger effort of building viable political communities and international institutions. The same motive can be adduced for the peacemakers at the Congress of Vienna, or even those at Westphalia. Thus, the praxis of politics cast doubt upon the central tenet of neo-realism, i.e. its anarchy problematicque.

Given these shortcomings an alternative interpretation of the European state tradition needs to be considered and developed further based on criteria appropriate for the illumination of political practice. This tradition was, once upon a time, well represented in academic circles, even though it lost its dominance in the post-war era for reasons I shall examine below. This tradition maintained that international politics was not simply a war of all against all but rather that the functioning of the state system could be illuminated by conceiving it as a ‘Republic of Europe’. Its conceptual elaboration occurred historically in eighteenth century international law.

---

36 By institutions I simply mean settled practices. While it is common to identify international institutions with specific organizations, such as the UN, GATT, NATO, etc., I consider formal organizations particular subsets of institutions. Such a perspective seems to be more useful for it allows the systematic investigation of a variety of forms of institutionalizing political action.

and more recently, in the ‘Grotian’ perspective on international relations, but the ascendancy of neo-realist thinking in the profession developed an inexorable momentum over the last two decades. While adherents of the Grotian perspective were largely united in their opposition to the neo-realist orientation and its scientistic pretensions, they lacked a conceptually well articulated counter-position.

The reasons for this failure were not difficult to fathom. Grounded in the legal tradition, and in particular in the tradition of natural law, this perspective became disengaged from its intellectual roots when, within jurisprudence, a shift to a voluntaristic conception of law occurred. If ‘will’ rather than ‘reason’ determined what the law was, founding international relations on a legal paradigm no longer provided a conceptual alternative. After all, it had been precisely one of Hobbes’ contentions—eagerly accepted by legal positivists such as Austin—that in the absence of a supreme sovereign power, questions of law, of right and wrong, just and unjust, became meaningless. Thus, the identifications of order with hierarchy and central enforcement, prevented the articulation of an independent research programme based on a legal paradigm.

True, Hume seemed to offer a genuine alternative. But much of the persuasiveness of his argument for the solution of collective action problems could be incorporated into realism without great difficulties. Furthermore, although his focus on ‘conventions’ provided a shrewd account for the emergence of cooperation in the absence of central institutions, it was persuasive only for situations, resembling games of coordination. Finally, explaining cooperative behaviour on the basis of the actors’ rule-utilitarian calculations was susceptible to the radical objection that rule-utilitarianism could be collapsed into act-utilitarianism. But if actions were understandable on the basis of an act-utilitarian calculus of a rational actor, then it was not clear why we needed rules and norms for our explanations.

This particular impasse could only be solved when the role of rules and norms in social life was radically reconceptualized. Here the notion of a ‘game’, used as a metaphor for rule-guided action, à la Wittgenstein, provided a fruitful new beginning. It stimulated theoretical efforts in at least three ways: first, it showed that rules and norms are constitutive of social life and that they cannot be understood, therefore, in terms of the regulative rules and injunctions familiar from criminal law or the Decalogue.

Second, it suggested that rules and norms are not simply the distillation of individual utility calculations but rather the antecedent conditions for strategies and for the specification of criteria of rationality. Norms not only establish certain games

---


40 For an elaboration of this point, see my The Humean Perspective on International Relations (World Order Studies Program, Occasional Paper No. 9) (Princeton, 1981).

41 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations. For an early, though problematic, application of this approach to social analysis, see Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy (London, 1958). For a more recent treatment of international relations from this perspective, see Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, Explaining and Understanding International Relations (Oxford, 1990), especially chs. 6–9.

42 Seminal for this distinction going back to Keith Hart, Two Concepts of Rules, Philosophical Review, 64 (1955), pp. 3–52. See also the critical remarks of Anthony Giddens directed at this distinction in his Central Problems of Social Theory (Berkeley, 1979).
and enable the players to pursue their goals within them, they also establish inter-subjective meanings that allow the actors to direct their actions towards each other, communicate with each other, appraise the quality of their actions, criticize claims and justify choices.

Third, it fundamentally changed our conception of action and communication. Since norms are communicated by language, and since our prevailing understanding of language was that of a “mirror” of reality, it was only natural to conceive of norms as epiphenomena, reflecting some underlying ‘objective’ factors such as interests, social forces, or power. However, the theory of speech acts showed that when I say ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony I am not describing an action but I am doing it. Similarly, when I appoint, demand, request, promise, contract, even threaten, etc., I am acting by uttering certain words or doing certain actions in accordance with the norms constituting the settled practices of appointing, contracting, etc. In all these cases, language does not mirror action by sticking a descriptive label on the activity: it is action.

Since I have dealt with these points extensively in another context, I am here concerned mainly with a corollary of the game metaphor. Norms and rules are constitutive of the international game in that they determine who the actors are, what rules they have to follow when they wish to connect certain consequences to their official acts (from treaties to acts of surrender), and how titles to possessions—ranging again from territory to other goods—can be established and transferred. However, the game analogy can also be misleading. Not all games are as neatly structured as chess. Some need umpires, and some games, such as those of children—where rules often are made as the players go along—are very loosely structured. In the latter case many of the rules will be contested and, in extreme instances, their collection no longer constitutes a definite game but rather bounds the activity of playing with others on the basis of communicative and meta-communicative moves.

International politics falls between those extremes of well-defined games and simple communicative moves. The latter, incidentally, can even be nonverbal, such as when troop movements are meant to signal intentions to the opponent. Since in international relations authoritative decisions concerning the permissibility of an action, or even its characterization (was it a treaty?) are rare, the actors themselves have to compensate. It follows that the interpretations of acts by the actors are an irreducible part of their collective existence. It also follows that both these acts and inter-subjective rules are likely to be contested. Patterns of compliance will show, therefore, great discontinuities.

Non-compliance results not only from the well known Hobbesian temptation of defection. It has additional, and quite distinct, sources in the contestability of prescriptions. The image of deviance which underlies Hobbes’s analysis is the all-or-nothing proposition of an ‘ordered’ society, conceived of as an immutable structure, or of an international system characterized by chaos and anarchy. The understanding that changes in regimes have to be analyzed in terms of decay is the logical outcome of such an approach. The structure, once set up by the hegemon, shares the same fate as Platonic ideas in real life: history becomes the story of decay.

By viewing non-compliance simply in terms of the divergence of interests between individual and collective interests, one forgoes consideration of the theoretically interesting problem of how normative structures are reproduced, and of understanding some of the most important source of social change.45

It is, however, easy to see why international systems, as ensembles of normatively constituted practices and contestable value considerations, are particularly prone to disintegrative tendencies. Institutions charged with authoritative determinations, such as presidents or courts, are primarily responsible to domestic constituencies and not to the international community. This weakness is further aggravated by the varying patterns of consensus among the international actors concerning several (most likely even) intransitive orderings of competing values.

Two of the most salient examples in this respect are the disputes over, (1) whether states or subnational groups are bearers of rights and whether state rights or rights to self-determination shall take precedence, and (2) whether self-determination means full sovereignty or autonomous status. Neither question is easy to decide in the light of the conceptual difficulties and varying practices in the international arena. The importance of human rights cannot be understood simply in terms of some international treaties and the rather weak enforcement of the obligations through international supervisory organs. Rather, having challenged the automatic primacy of sovereignty and domestic jurisdiction, human rights play an important part in domestic legitimization and deligitimization efforts, which, in turn, have important international implications. Attempts to hold states to these standards redefines the role of the state and its exercise of powers.

It seems, therefore, fatuous to build theories of international politics that postulate a priori the existence of international structures without paying any attention to their contested reproduction and to the process of interaction between different levels of organization which constitute domestic and international politics. In this context, several distinct but intersecting domains are created.

One, there is the issue of the individual's link to relevant others, including co-patriots. This is the realm of self-identification and membership in a community. Two, there is the problem of allocating rights and duties, and thus delineating the status of the individual within that community, as well as the circumstances in which public concerns can override individual interests. At least since the seventeenth and eighteenth century this has been the domain of constitutional, or human rights. As pointed out, the shift from a discourse emphasizing questions of right and wrong to one of 'having a right' was decisive.46 Having a right means that actors can do 'the wrong thing' without losing their entitlement. It also means that societal order is no longer dependent upon a universally accepted value hierarchy but is rather based on the acceptance of value incoherence, while fractionating the conflicts arising out of such value incompatibilities.

The third domain concerns the autonomy of certain spheres which become organized as separate systems of action. Polanyi's book, The Great Transformation,47


46 On this point, see my Rules, Norms and Decisions, ch. 6.

showed that the emancipation of the market from other social exchanges meant the acceptance of its own logic. It also eliminated, for example, questions of ‘just prices’ from interfering with economic life and it fundamentally redefined the goals and legitimacy of state intervention in this newly constituted sphere. Similar questions arise when we want to decide which problems are to be allocated to professional groups (corporatism of one form or another), or are to be left to family, kinship or sub-national groups. These considerations, in turn, lead to a fourth issue, i.e. the question of how the state attains and maintains its autonomy over other institutions and systems of action.\(^48\)

The patterns of interaction on the systems level result from the various domains of institutionalization just examined. To view international politics as distinct from domestic politics, and thus to argue for an autonomous discipline, is based on mistaking the historically brief period of the balance of power for a paradigm of international politics in general. It was not surprising that during absolutism neither ideologies nor public opinion contested the particular linkages that had emerged domestically and internationally among these various ensembles of practices. When notions of domestic and international legitimacy were widely shared and when the international actors’ interests were truly those of ‘persons of sovereign authority’, the reproduction of structures through actual practice became rather unproblematic. Consequently, the sources of change were few and of ‘systematic’ character. The dynamics of the system consisted largely in the changes brought about by ‘positional’\(^49\) wars and their concomitant re-allocation of capabilities (resources).

But for positional wars not to lead to the disintegration or transformation of the system, the acceptance of a common convention for measuring the balance of power was crucial. As Gulick’s classical study on the European balance of power indicated,\(^50\) territorial possession and tax-paying subjects became a virtual currency. It allowed for the fine tuning of the balance and for the acceptance of various compensations that reconstituted the system after the shocks caused by positional wars. The emergence of such a convention, however, represents the exception rather than the rule in international politics. The existence of a balance of power is, therefore, neither the natural outcome of a multiplicity of actors interacting with each other, nor has it—with one exception—been achieved historically. Only in the case of the classical European state system did the existence of certain shared conventions enable the actors to reproduce the structures through their interactions. Other balances dis-integrated and/or ended in imperial orders.

When normative understandings constituting the practices of the system were no longer accepted, the balance of power could no longer fulfil its regulative role in reproducing the system. It began to exacerbate conflict rather than manage it.\(^51\) It was, after all, one of the major insights of the Wilsonian vision that a balance of power could no longer be practiced by states in the face of the radically transformed institutions of domestic politics. Missing from the Wilsonian design, however, was the appreciation of the complexity of the new task of creating institutions adequate for

---

\(^{48}\) It is insufficient to merely ‘bring the state back in’. Rather, what is necessary is a fundamental examination of the state, market and society, as spheres of action. On this point \(\rightarrow\) Timothy Mitchell, ‘The Limits of the State’, *American Political Science Review*, 85 (March 1991), pp. 77–96.


reconstituting domestic and international politics in tandem. Instead, the crucial institutional change, advocated as a virtual panacea for the problem of internal and external politics alike, was self-determination. Its failure to link domestic and international order, however, first became visible in the minority problem of Eastern Europe. Self-determination had explosive political implications not only for the domestic order in the newly created states but also for peace and security in Europe.

Similarly, the collective security arrangement of the League failed not merely because of the non-participation of the US. It was also conceptually flawed. Collective security was still based on beliefs underlying the balance of power, i.e., that a viable international order can be created by establishing only one, although new, institutional framework for military security. The most egregious shortcoming of this perspective was its failure to address the no less serious need for an institutionalization of the world economy, after the old equilibrating mechanisms of free trade and the Gold Standard had been rendered inoperative. Domestically, the acceptance of new state goals after World War I, such as full employment, fundamentally altered the relationship between the spheres of the market (in particular, the labor market) and the state. Internationally, it led to externalities, such as competitive devaluations and ‘beggar thy neighbour’ policies. These measures deepened the world economic crisis and contributed to the rise of fascism, which, in turn, upset the security regime.

It was these lessons, as well as the domestic experiences with the new regulatory state, which influenced American post-war planning. Compared with World War I, American decision makers had learned some valuable lessons. Above all, there was a recognition that the international system cannot be organized simply on the basis of one institutional structure alone, even if that might be the most important one. Underlying the older conception had been an image of the state as an organization of (legitimate) force. But precisely because the state has a variety of tasks whose organization domestically create a whole hosts of international externalities, the organization of force is only one, and sometimes not even the most salient dimension. This recognition drove home the need for a variety of institutional responses on the international level, ranging from the creation of regimes to full-fledged international functional agencies. Without such a complex network of institutionalized behavior the management of international relations had become impossible. To that extent, interpretation of current change as necessitating a return to the neo-realist logic of power maximization misunderstands the practices of world politics, distorts the historical record, and provides dangerous policy advice.52

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a criticism of the neo-realist theory of international politics and to advance an alternative framework for the analysis of international political practice. Considering the scant attention the tremendous changes of the international system have received by mainstream international

relations theory, I inquired into the reasons why these changes were not taken as a crucial test case for our theories of international politics.

My answer to this question concerned the conjunction of two factors which seemed to account for these shortcomings. The reduction in the set of interesting questions which resulted from the attempt of building a science of politics led to premature closure and to the ascendancy of methodological over substantive concerns. The pursuit of methodological rigour in accordance with the changing epistemological fashion from empiricism to logical positivism and deduction favoured ahistorical closed models over both 'richer' theories and traditional analyses of state practice.

In the absence of the necessary conditions for both revolutionary and normal science, the fate of the academic discourse on politics was largely determined by sociological factors, rather than by the traditional criteria of public debate or scientific procedure. Thus, the claim to scientific standards had the perverse effect of breeding both faddism and enconcing orthodoxies. Both factors go a long way in explaining the original silence and later defensive reaction of neo-realism to interpretations of glasnost and perestroika as harbingers of change in the international system.

Against these defensive gambits, I suggested an alternative approach to the analysis of change in the international system, proceeding both historically and analytically. First, I corrected the curious historical record which neo-realism has constructed in order to explain state practice. Second, by drawing on the Grotian tradition, I showed that a radically revised and non-legalistic research agenda which focuses on political action as a rule governed activity, is better able to enhance our understanding of the construction, maintenance and change of the structures of international life.