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 Book review

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Mladen Lišanin

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade*

The Many Faces of Realism**

THE
 EDINBURGH
 COMPANION TO
**Political
 Realism**
 Edited by Robert Schuett and
 Miles Hollingworth



Robert Schuett and Miles Hollingworth (eds.) 2018. *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 572 p.

* Research Assistant
 mladen.lisanin@ips.ac.rs

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Issues related to realism and its various aspects have pervaded contemporary social science – and International Relations as its subfield – for decades. If we take into account the many predecessors of modern realism, spanning back to the antique times, then we can say that realist worldviews have figured prominently in history, politics, art, and social life in general from the very beginnings of recorded history.

Contemporary academic production has been developing accordingly: many notable authors, such as E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth N. Waltz, or John J. Mearsheimer, explicitly adopted realist frameworks for understanding the intricacies of international politics, while other authors – e.g. Robert Spegele in *Political Realism in International Theory* (1996), Michael C. Williams in *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (2005) or Allison McQueen in *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (2017) – aspired to grasp

the issue of political realism in a comprehensive manner, spanning through the long history of international political theory. (Concepts akin to political realism, such as *realpolitik*, have also been researched extensively – see John Bew’s *Realpolitik: A History* from 2015.)

Nevertheless, not many publications have been as all-embracing as the book edited by Robert Schuett and Miles Hollingworth, *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*. In their encyclopedic endeavor, the editors have convened a multidisciplinary lineup of over 40 authors, affiliated with various institutions around the world, each submitting a chapter on the topic of his/her expertise. The result is a collection of extraordinarily rich materials on political realism and the myriad ways it had been playing out through the history of mankind.

The fundamental presupposition of the volume, as outlined by the editors in the introduction (titled “Political Realism, liberal democracy and world politics”), is that “if there were only two people in the world and a rock, than Political Realism would already have all it needed for its fundamental belief, eve before those two

people had had a chance to open their mouths. The sheer existence of the rock would mean that one of them could be the first to pick it up and raise it over the other’s head.” (p. 1) But the main general framework is quite more complex: the research is designed in such a way that Political Realism is presented in a counter-position to liberal democracy and its various aspects, as an “antidote” to the “depressing picture” painted above.

The argument is presented thusly: “If the original democracy was the plan to stymie the would-be tyrant or mob with the irreproachable imposition of the impartial procedure, then the new liberal democracy was the acknowledgement of all that had happened in between [...]. That is to say, if pure, procedural democracy was a logical response to the problem of someone who would otherwise be able to muscle their way into a polity and rule for as long as that muscle lasted, it harboured a long-term problem, this being its accidental relationship to goodness and virtue. It was not of itself a way of determining who might be fittest to rule.” (*Ibid.*) Upon becoming equated with “all the good and virtuous things that it was said to

be bringing about” – despite its relations to virtue being to a large extent “accidental” – democracy got lost along the way in “gargantuan” post-WW2 social and political structures, designed to “cultivate an ultimate class of citizens”. Political realism plays a prominent role in this story simply because it is “a ‘negative’ doctrine – disengaged and aloof from this discourse of wisdom in the state”, and these exact qualifications “might now equip it to play a larger, more active, even more ‘positive’ role, given liberal democracy’s new and apparently perilous position in the West.” (p. 2)

Political Liberalism “*is* its logic”, and it is “a logic that holds only so long as its view of human nature holds.” (pp. 3, 2) It always “makes *you*, the reader, the ultimate proof of its appeal”, and when it manipulates you, “it manipulates you by means of your self-interest.” Obviously, the way in which the concept of self-interest plays out in the realm of international relations the concept of national interest. “In both cases, interest means ‘survival’, while your desire to survive at all costs is taken to be self-evident.” (p.3) At that level, Political Realism naturally prospers, “while at the same time being resented elsewhere for its

gloomy, almost gleeful reductionism.” In the field of theory and analysis, according to the editors, this proneness to reductions is what explains “Political Realism’s long term fascination with ‘systems’ and ‘structures’”. (*Ibid.*) Although the remark on ‘structures’, arguably, does not do too much justice to non-structural tenets of realism (classical and neoclassical), the focus on ‘interest’ and ‘survival’ is appropriately emphasized. The underlying logic of Political Realism, in the domain of international relations and beyond, is properly identified: it is elaborated in more than three dozen subsequent chapters.

Those are the general points that chapter authors aspire to illustrate and corroborate more than three dozen ensuing contributions. Basic structure of the book is three-fold: Part I deals with “Political Realism and the Political” (eight chapters); Part II covers “Political Realism and Political Thinking” (twenty-two chapters); while Part III deals with the pressing issues of “Political Realism and Foreign Policy” (fourteen chapters).

In the first section, chapter authors take on several important topics which are understood

as quintessentially political, and within which Political Realism features prominently. These topics include human nature (by Erica Benner), strategic theory (Samir Puri), *realpolitik* (by the aforementioned John Bew), civil-military relations (Lindsay P. Cohn), or the English School (Jodok Troy). In addition to these issues, traditionally connected to realism both as a theory and as a worldview, this part includes somewhat atypical matters, such as “Global Reform”, in an engaging chapter in which William E. Scheuerman attempts to identify a tenet of realist thought which wouldn’t be skeptical about possibilities of cosmopolitan reordering of the international system. His main idea behind this bold endeavor is that “retrieving Realism’s neglected reformist components is vital if we are to think creatively and productively about the political and intellectual challenges of the twenty-first century.” (p. 97) He proceeds to analyze the complex relations between realism and Kantian thought, arguing that “a fresh look at their (realists’) complicated relationship to the Kantian legacy helps counter the virtually universal consensus today that realism necessarily opposes significant

global reform. This view badly distorts a more complex and interesting intellectual history.” (p. 106)

Part II of the book, by far the most extensive, delves into the rich tradition of Political Realism in the history of political thought and political theory, covering the period since the ancient times up to post-World War Two intellectual debates. Many authors cover some of the most prominent predecessors of modern realism, while others contribute chapters on some of the doyens of contemporary political realism. As for the predecessors, among others, there are chapters on Thucydides (Neville Morley), Kautilya (Stuart Gray), Niccolò Machiavelli (Markus Fischer), and Thomas Hobbes (Kody W. Cooper). Among the most reputable modern realists – dominantly “first generation” ones – Walter Lippmann (Alan Chong); E. H. Carr (Konstantinos Kostagiannis); Herbert Butterfield (Kenneth B. McIntyre); Raymond Aron (Christopher Adair-Toteff); George F. Kennan (David A. Mayers), Hans J. Morgenthau (Felix Rösch), or John H. Herz (Peter M. R. Stirk).

What adds particular value to the section, and the vol-

ume in general, are chapters on prominent theorists and scholars from diverse disciplines, whose relations to realist thought is not considered as straightforward in most textbooks. In that sense, very innovative perspectives are offered in the chapters on William Shakespeare (Tim Spiekerman), Leo Strauss (Robert Howse); Hans Kelsen (Robert Schuett); Hannah Arendt (Douglas B. Klusmeyer); or Isaiah Berlin (Joshua L. Cherniss). Probably the main takeaway, based on the section as a whole, is the establishment of a clear correlation between political and scientific realism. An extraordinarily rich intellectual tradition, Political Realism thus proves to be exceptionally versatile: spanning through many centuries of social and political thought, covering a lot of theoretically and meta-theoretically relevant fields, and connecting numerous disciplines and areas of scientific and social life.

In Part III, which concludes the volume, key notions originating from the tradition of Political Realism are being applied to the burning issues of international political life. This is, arguably, the area in which political realists usually feel most at home. The section opens with a chapter on “Political Real-

ism and Threat Perception” by John Miller, in which the author argues, utilizing the Cold War struggle to contain communism, that inferring intent from capacities doesn’t necessarily work, as well as considers the ways in which unrealistic threat perceptions can be changed. Some of the contributions are territorially conceived: there are chapters on Russia (David Kerr), China (Derek M. C. Yuen), Iran (Marzieh Kouhi Eshafani), Israel (Uriel Abulof), India (Rashed Uz Zaman), Japan (Masashi Okuyama), as well as the general issue of regionalism (David Martin Jones); others are more problem-oriented, dealing with nationalism, religion, environment, internet, or terrorism. The chapter, and the entire volume, concludes with yet another atypical framework for understanding Political Realism: its relationship to the Open Society; essentially, Todd Breyfogle notices that “while the open society is distinct from political realism in its approach to power, it wrestles with the necessities of interest which form political realism’s backbone.” (p. 554) Thus, the story of Political Realism ends at the point of its inception: the notion of power.

The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism is not

a book for the wide audience; for the most part, it is not for undergraduate students either. Far from being an aspiring encyclopedia of propaedeutic nature, it presupposes certain familiarity with the general topic on the side of the reader. This in no way diminishes the quality of the volume; quite the contrary, it is exactly the type of source to which a social scientist should turn to in his/her yearning for the qualitative move of theoretical and disciplinary boundaries. It is very likely to remain one of the key resources for realist-based, or realist-oriented social research for generations to come.