

Power and Morality

Christian Hacke on the Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau

Last year, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his death, the western democratic world remembered the life and works of the great philosopher of the enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. His treatise on the "perpetual peace" remains beyond comparison and continues to inspire liberal idealists who see democratic peace as the *telos* of International Politics. They are opposed by realists who, appalled by the dark errors of history, focus on the actual present rather than on utopian ideas. To the main representatives of realism, this present was always determined by conflict and war: Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War, Machiavelli about the war in Northern Italy, Hobbes about the English civil war, Clausewitz under the impression of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, and E. H. Carr wrote against the background of World War I.

The German-born Hans Joachim Morgenthau, who would have celebrated his 100th birthday on February 17, 2004, was also a realist of his times. His character was shaped by the German Empire and its defeat in World War I as well as by the turmoil of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler's National Socialism. As a doctor of law, he was equally repulsed by the naïveté of liberal Democrats and the raw power politics of Carl Schmitt's Manichean thought. Because of his Jewish faith, he had to flee from Nazi Germany, seeking refuge in the United States. He became a professor at the University of Chicago, and his main work "Politics among Nations—The Struggle for Power and Peace," published in 1948, secured him lasting worldwide fame. In that seminal book, which influenced several generations of scholars and politicians, he employed the central terms "power" and "interest" to develop a realist model for the

study of international relations that described objective patterns in the structure and dynamism of world politics. A crucial insight was that moral and ethic premises alone are not enough to understand international politics—they have to be brought into balance with hard power interests. Morgenthau was suspicious of far-fetched idealism, because it widely neglected the horrible and pessimistic lessons of history. His most famous student, Henry Kissinger, who was also forced to flee from Nazi Germany, stated, "Hans Morgenthau has turned contemporary study of international relations into a major science. All of us teaching in this field after him had to start from the ground he had laid."¹ The academic discipline of international relations does not have a founder in the way Sigmund Freud was the founder of modern psychology. However, if anybody comes close, it would be Hans Joachim Morgenthau.

According to Morgenthau, an ethics of evil is an inevitable part of politics because—particularly in foreign policy—only rarely is there a free choice in decision-making. Instead, statesmen are frequently confronted with dilemmas and cannot choose between good and evil or right and wrong, but rather have to choose between bad and worse.

As a realist, Morgenthau emphasizes this tragic dimension of foreign policy which is usually heavily influenced by adverse circumstances. This is why he created an ethics of situation that is in accordance with Max Weber's ethics of responsibility and that welds power and morality together.

The failure of the League of Nations, the inter-war years, the havoc of fascism, the danger of communism, and the devaluation of democracy as a form of government convinced him that morality alone was not only ineffective in international politics but that it was even threatening the existence of the nation-state. Hence, national interests have to be at a

¹ Henry Kissinger, A Gentle Analyst of Power – Hans J. Morgenthau, in: *The New Republic*, 2./9. August 1980.

premium—as long as they contribute to a balance of power. Power, Interest, and ethic norms have to be balanced. Accordingly, Morgenthau's judgment about liberal do-gooders is harsh: "Starry-eyed idealism belongs to adolescence only." His maxim was: "To say how things are is more worthwhile, more earnest than any 'that is how things should be'."²

This distinction between reality and utopia dominated Morgenthau's analysis of international affairs: "I prefer the brutality of realist inquiry over the confused sentimentality that neglects its interests and does not get to the point."³ His "realist inquiry" focused on man's desire for power, which to him, is at the core of all politics. According to Morgenthau, the strife for power makes man asocial, because individuals want everything for themselves and nothing for their neighbors. Because of this realist(ic) diagnosis, Morgenthau is often portrayed as an proponent of unlimited power politics. In fact, however, realism offers a peculiar moral and ethical dimension that seeks to instrumentalize power in order to attain morally good results. Power, morality, and justice influence each other reciprocally. Morgenthau's demand to limit power *as well as* morality in international relations and his plea for tolerance, balance, and self-constraint form the most appealing aspect of his model of realism.

It has been ignored for too long that Morgenthau is a moralist himself. He was not just on a realist quest to define the state of being, but he was also an idealist, trying to formulate ultimate values. He agreed with Max Weber that decisions based on moral values could not be justified rationally. Similarly, no worldview could be scientifically legitimated. Thus, Morgenthau concluded that any science that remained "pure," without a moral foundation and neutral with regard to ethic dilemmas,

² Hans J. Morgenthau, Quoted, in: Christoph Frei, Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 2001, P. 122.

³ *Ibde.*

was helpless in the face of the powers that be—no matter if these powers were good or evil, liberal or socialist, or democratic or totalitarian. What he analyzed as a scholar, he damned as a moralist, because evil was rooted in the strife for power itself. Morgenthau always thought in a dualistic manner: To him, the world seemed morally imperfect and corrupt, and must therefore be permeated by morality. In his blunt criticism of the Vietnam War, which he opposed from the beginning, it is evident that Morgenthau lived what he preached. He criticized the missionary impulse of American foreign policy and called for a pragmatist policy based on the national interest. Accordingly, he disdained the moralizing anti-Communists of his time.

As early as in the 1950s, Morgenthau denounced American interventions on the Asian mainland and pleaded for a clear focus on the American interests in Europe. Consequently, he favored a restrictive interpretation of the Truman Doctrine, which was shaped by realist considerations. It is not surprising that he thought Dean Acheson was the best secretary of state of the post-war era. Just like Acheson, he was a staunch anti-Communist and warned against a globalization and militarization of containment. In the long run, Morgenthau—as well as his realist contemporary, George F. Kennan—hoped for a peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Impressed by the dialectics of the nuclear age, Morgenthau advocated a dual strategy of military strength and a willingness to seek *détente*. Hence, he was appalled by what he called the "idiotic" short-sightedness and over-simplicity of the strategy of massive retaliation and President Eisenhower's idea of roll back.

Maybe for the first time, Morgenthau was reconciled with American foreign policy when the Nixon/Kissinger administration chose a more sober, realist approach to world politics and sought *détente* with the Soviet Union and China, creating a multipolar world order under

American leadership. Kissinger turned out to be a faithful student of Morgenthau's, working for a balance of traditional containment and realistic détente.⁴

Already in 1964, Morgenthau envisioned the ultimate faith of the Soviet Union: "The disintegration of the Soviet bloc will proceed . . . either the objective circumstances of Soviet policy will change radically or an ingenious statesman will transcend these circumstances—then, and only then, Soviet leaders will be able to rule without suffocating from the inner contradictions of communism which will ultimately ruin them."⁵

Morgenthau was a staunch anti-Communist, but he knew that the Soviet Union could not be defeated from the outside; it had to be changed from within. Therefore, a combination of hard and soft power was advisable to bring about the implosion of the Soviet Union. It would have been interesting to hear his assessment of Ronald Reagan's Soviet policy, but Morgenthau died in 1980. However, his realist motto, "Don't neglect the past, don't expect too much from the future, and don't overestimate yourself"⁶ certainly would have appealed to Reagan.

The major failure of Europe in the Balkans in the 1990s and the inability—and lack of willingness—to create a reliable European foreign policy would have disconcerted Morgenthau. Presumably, the arrogance and neo-imperialist rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration would have irritated him as much as the moralizing new German arrogance of powerlessness that became popular during the Iraq crisis. This and similar debates in the wake of September 11, 2001 prove that tyranny, war, and new global security challenges are at least as much a reality as peace, democracy, and international cooperation—the anarchy problem in international relations remains vital.

⁴ See Christian Hacke, *Die Ära Nixon – Kissinger 1969-1974: Konservative Reform der Weltpolitik*, Verlag Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1983.

⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, Quoted in: Christoph Rohde, *Hans J. Morgenthau und der weltpolitische Realismus*, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2004, p. 300.

Morgenthau's stand for restraint and balance and his courage to speak unpopular truths put him in the Judeo-Christian tradition. To him, the Atlantic civilization—a term coined by his friend and intellectual companion, Hannah Arendt—was the central spiritual and political place that he wanted to preserve. Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin embodied evil because they wanted to destroy this tradition. In turn, Morgenthau saw Winston Churchill as the epitome of the democratic statesman who was able and willing to put up a fight in order to defend the principles of the Atlantic civilization against the totalitarian challenge of his time.

Morgenthau did not develop an explicit theory of morality, but he formulated a practically relevant situational morality: In every distinct political constellation, the statesman has to take into account realist ethics as well as the national interest. Thus, Morgenthau advocates the ideal of the wise and pragmatic statesman of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Interestingly, this means that Friedrich Meinecke's concept of *raison d'état* becomes an integral part of realism—*raison d'état*, national interest, and balance of power form the essential triangle of this model.

Until today, Morgenthau's influence on theory and practice of international relations is immense. As a science, realism has continually developed, spawning a wide and lively array of variations. One of the first major contributions was made by Morgenthau's contemporary, John Herz, who created a "realistic liberalism."⁷ In the 1970s, Kenneth Waltz established "neorealism,"⁸ while the "English School" of realism explored its historical dimensions.⁹ Chicago's John Mearsheimer founded "offensive,"¹⁰ Harvard's Stephen Walt "defensive realism."¹¹ In Princeton,

⁶ *Ibde.*

⁷ John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1951.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1979.

⁹ Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1998.

¹⁰ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Norton, New York, London 2001.

¹¹ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1987.

Robert Gilpin developed "economic realism,"¹² thus making up for one of realism's main weaknesses, the neglect of economic forces. At Germany's Munich University, Gottfried-Karl Kindermann, a former student of Morgenthau's, set up the "Munich school of realism,"¹³ that focuses primarily on political and historical constellations. As this enumeration illustrates, realism today is no intellectual monolith, but rather a varied and rich edifice of ideas, resting on the shared convictions of diverse proponents. This constructive variation explains the power of realism and its progressive appeal.

In Germany, however, the discipline of international relations developed in opposition to realism. The lamentable German "Machtvergessenheit"¹⁴ ("ignorance of power" – Hans-Peter Schwarz) and the inhibition to face the often discomfiting realities of world politics have led to provincialism in foreign affairs. German politicians and many scholars abhor terms such as power politics and the national interest and the concepts behind them. Instead, a peculiar extensive moralism, altruism, and self-denial characterize German foreign policy.

Against this background, Morgenthau's realism is of utmost relevance today. Hubris, neglect of historic experience, and a need for "new ideas" have driven science and practice of international affairs into crisis. A reconsideration of realism and its further development could help to overcome this crisis. Especially today, Morgenthau would call for a deepened understanding of history—or as Golo Mann put it, "Realism requires the wisdom of all ages, and we have no reason to ignore the wisdom of those who mastered the challenges of their time better than we have mastered ours."¹⁵

¹² Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1987.

¹³ Gottfried-Karl Kindermann, *Grundelemente der Weltpolitik*, Verlag Pieper, München 1986.

¹⁴ Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Die Gezähmten Deutschen. Von der Machtbesessenheit zur Machtvergessenheit*, Stuttgart 1985.

¹⁵ Golo Mann, *Geschichte und Geschichten*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt/Main 1961, p. 154.

Hans J. Morgenthau's realism is unsurpassed in recognizing the tension between the state-centred principles of the European tradition and the necessity to recognize the new American foreign policy tradition. By paying tribute to Morgenthau, the understanding of international politics gains in historical perspective, contemporary depth, and academic usefulness.¹⁶ For this is the most important character trait of a realist: humility and the ability to learn and to adjust to new things. After all, the true realist is not as naïve to believe that only realism can show the way.

¹⁶ Christian Hacke, Im Spannungsfeld von Macht und Moral, in: NZZ 17.2.2004, p. 5.