

Queries for Contemporary Political Theorists

Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics by Kenneth W. Thompson. Princeton University Press. \$5.

by William T. R. Fox

A coda, as defined by Webster, is a "concluding passage, the function of which is to bring a composition or division to a proper close." With *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics* we have now come to such a coda in the symphony of what Hans J. Morgenthau has called a "Great Debate" and Kenneth Thompson a "continuing dialogue." Whether the book is a coda to the concluding movement or only to one of its main parts depends upon the terms in which the debate or dialogue—or perhaps still better, the colloquy, for the participants are not neatly arranged on the two sides of a clearly defined battle-line—is conceived.

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Political realism is not a school of theorizing about international politics in the sense of the nineteenth century Manchester school of writing about economics. The four men whose writing Mr. Thompson carefully analyzes—Reinhold Niebuhr, E. H. Carr, Nicholas J. Spykman and Hans J. Morgenthau, to list them in the order in which their writings about international politics captured the attention of American scholars—had intellectual antecedents too varied and have worked too independently of each other to be properly defined as a school. A theologian with concern for social ethics, a Russian historian who was also writing about contemporary international relations for the *London Times*, a student of political geography whose views about politics were shaped by an earlier interest in Georg

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Simmel's sociology of conflict and a vigorous participant in an earlier great debate about the jurisprudence of Hans Kelsen have nevertheless produced books which demonstrate a convergence of intellectual concerns. In spite of George Kennan's assertion that Reinhold Niebuhr "is the father of all of us"—"us" in this case presumably being those of the State Department's policy planning group of the Truman era who have subsequently written about world politics—the men of practice were stimulated by the whole body of realist writing of preceding years. Kenneth Thompson has performed a very useful task in summing up and synthesizing a generation of realist political writings. It is indeed an indispensable preliminary to asking "Where do we go from here?"

Mr. Thompson has enabled this reviewer to see more clearly than he has seen before two ambiguities to the clarification of which further writing might address itself. I should emphasize that these two ambiguities are not of Mr. Thompson's own making but are inherent in the whole body of writing.

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The first may be described as ambiguity about the essential elements of the realist syndrome. How do we know a realist when we see one? Must he belong to that select band of men "who pierced the veil of the future"? Does every realist share with Alexander Hamilton a particular (rapacious) view of human nature? Can one be a realist unless he has gained the maturity to know that progress is not inevitable and man is not completely perfectible? Must he also have a sense of history and like Herbert Butterfield understand the necessity of cooperating with the Historical Process? Has he in every case, like Hans Morgenthau,

purged himself of an irrational faith in rationality? Is it the realist alone who understands that peace and stability depend on moderation, tolerance, the saving grace of reciprocity, compromise and patterns of shared power?

Peter Thorneycroft is quoted approvingly as saying that "the Russians are nothing if not realists." The British approach to foreign relations has characteristically been at odds with the American and is presumably the more realistic. On the other hand, E. H. Carr, though a protagonist of Munich, is portrayed as a realist, while Neville Chamberlain, the artificer of Munich, is said to have "displayed the same miscalculations in international politics that middle-class liberals showed in the United States."

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Query: Are all liberals automatically unrealistic? Query: How perfect does one's record in guessing right about the future have to be to qualify as a realist? Query: Are Russians realists in the sense that they have "the saving grace of reciprocity"? Query: What are the essential and discriminating elements in separating the sheep of realism from the goats of non-realism? This reviewer would suggest two criteria: an understanding that in the political process wants can only be imperfectly satisfied and an understanding that other groups than one's own have interests which must be satisfied if the intensity of the political struggle is to be moderated. So defined, some conscientious objectors in the Great Debate may turn out to be realists, while the Russians may have to be stricken from the list.

The second ambiguity has two aspects. I am not always clear as to just whom the realists are trying to save from what error. Is it a lay public with a naive faith

in simplistic prescriptions for an end to war and for a beginning of universal and perpetual harmony? If so, it is enough that these unwarranted hopes and expectations be deflated so that the policy-makers can get on with their job.

If it is not the lay public, the second aspect of the ambiguity must concern us. There are two other possible target audiences, fellow-students of international politics whose error may be an unreasonable faith in their own powers of reason and policy-making elites to guide their day-to-day choices. Neither the academic political scientist nor the policy-maker will find it news that politics is a struggle for scarce values in which unlimited satisfaction is quite clearly be-

yond the reach of everyone.

Granted that realists have shown that *perfect* rationality in one's own analysis and *total* implementation of one's own value preferences are not for this world, have the realists been equally unambiguous in showing how we can maximize what opportunities there are? Exactly how does an acceptance of the main theses of the realist position clarify the perplexing choices of today's statesmen? Once we have steered clear of the Scylla of excessive voluntarism, how shall we as moral men avoid being shipwrecked on the Charybdis of excessive involuntarism? How far do the strictures against salvational utopianism develop criteria by which we can judge a pragmatic meliorism? How, para-

phrasing Reinhold Niebuhr, can we as realists save ourselves from cynicism?

Kenneth Thompson writes: "I would agree with some of Carr's critics that he is sometimes blind to the . . . truth that there are occasions where reality must be brought into line with purpose." Thompson thus agrees that man can and moral man should *in some measure* be a master of his own destiny, but just what are those occasions? If we cannot identify those occasions with perfect rationality, can we not be a little more rational than we have been? If we are to reconcile the desirable and the possible on the most favorable terms, we need to devote as much effort to developing criteria to determine what can be done as what cannot.

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