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Classical Realism

The first version of realist thought in IR that emerged in the twentieth century is commonly referred to as classical realism because it drew insights from a range of classic authors or philosophers in the history of ideas. Some have argued that this 'classical tradition' is something of an artificial construct, since those whose works have been selected to constitute the tradition did not regard themselves as belonging to a particular line of thinkers presenting a unified view on the human condition (see Forde, 1992, p. 62). As this chapter shows, however, they do share certain distinctive perspectives on the 'realities' of politics and power and the implications for morality. This includes a pessimistic and indeed despairing assessment of the human condition and more specifically of human nature, and it is this that determines, for classical realists at least, the tragic aspects of human existence in the struggle for survival.

Another commentator remarks that there has been a tendency among critics of realism to line up an 'identity parade' of historical figures with some connection to the tradition and to draw together a selective composite of fragments of

their ideas in order to construct a 'grand narrative' which can then be attacked, and that this tends to undermine our ability to consider the realist tradition in any meaningful way (Murray, 1997, p. 3). The approach taken in this chapter is one that introduces, in more or less chronological order, the principal figures associated with classical realism from the time of the ancient Greeks through to the twentieth century. This may be an 'identity parade', but it is not one devised simply to pick out a few aspects of their thought for condemnation – or praise, for that matter. Rather, it is designed to highlight those aspects of their thought which best illustrate their realist credentials and which have therefore led them to be placed in the classical tradition. This must form the basis of any meaningful analysis.

Thucydides and Machiavelli

The earliest figure claimed for the classical tradition is the ancient Greek historian Thucydides (*c.*460–395 BC), who articulates views on power politics, the tendency to violence and the implications for morality that underscore the central tenets of realism in virtually all its forms. But he also emphasizes the role of human nature, and it is this that makes the classical tradition distinctive. In introducing his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which details a prolonged period of warfare between Athens and Sparta

commencing in 431 BC, Thucydides expresses the hope that his words will be 'judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future' (Thucydides, I, p. 48).

Thucydides goes on to provide one of the most frequently cited case studies of realist ideas in action. He describes one particular episode of the war in which the Athenians show their utter determination to sub-jugate the island of Melos, which had hitherto been neutral, but which the Athenians believed must be brought under their control. It is this passage that has led Thucydides to be cast in the role of an amoral realist by IR theorists. But if we extend our study of Thucydides to include his account of and commentary on another episode in the war, sparked by the outbreak of civil war in Corcyra (present day Corfu) between a democratic faction supporting Athens and an oligarchic faction supporting Sparta, we find a rather different approach. Case study 2.1 therefore compares the two episodes to give a fuller account of Thucydides' thought.

The next most prominent figure in the classical tradition is Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) of Florence, who lived through a time of incessant political instability and whose political thought was directed largely to the establishment of

order. His realism is evident in his pragmatic advice to 'the Prince' (by which he means any given ruler) that, when faced with a choice between acting morally and acting to preserve the vital interests of the state, the latter must always prevail. This doctrine of necessity by no means endorses gratuitous cruelty, and the Prince is advised to tread a cautious path, 'in a temperate manner ... with prudence and humility' (Machiavelli, 2010, p. 68). Sheer cruelty leads to hatred and contempt which may place the Prince in a dangerous position.

But on the question of whether it is better to be loved or feared,

Case Study 2.1 Thucydides, The Melian Dialogue and the Civil War in Corcyra

The Melian Dialogue consists of an exchange between the generals of the powerful Athenian forces, sent to negotiate a peaceful surrender under which Melos would survive intact but become subject to the Athenian Empire, and the spokesmen for the citizens of the island, who were determined to remain independent. The Athenians clearly possessed a preponderance of force, but the Melians insisted that justice was on their side.

Athenians: [Y]ou know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept… . This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you… .

Melians: It is difficult … for us to oppose your power and fortune … Nevertheless we trust that the gods will give fortune as good as yours, because we are standing for what is right against what is wrong… .

Athenians: Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act on it when it was made. We found it already in existence … [and] are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.

Melians: We are not prepared to give up in a short moment the liberty our city has enjoyed from its foundation …

Athenians: [Y]ou seem to us quite unique in your ability to consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes, and to see uncertainties as realities, simply because you would like them to be so. (Thucydides, V, 84–116)

Thucydides further records that the Melians refused to submit, following which the Athenians laid siege to the city and eventually forced surrender. All males of military age were put to death and the women and children enslaved.

The passage is generally taken to illustrate certain fundamental principles of political realism: first, that, in the final analysis, power trumps morality in terms of right and wrong and will always be used to the advantage of those who hold it; second, that pragmatism in the calculation of interests should prevail over perceptions of honour and justice which may lead to pointless sacrifice; and, third, what one wishes for in terms of outcomes should not be confused with the reality of what one is likely to get in any given set of circumstances. Above all, the position articulated by the Athenians rests on

an assumption that this is simply the way the world is and always will be, reflecting a universal law of nature embedded in the human condition and, by implication, not subject to historical or cultural particularities.

An equally compelling passage appears in Thucydides' account of revolution and civil war sparked by the Athenian–Spartan conflict, which spread throughout much of the region. Here, however, the interpretation is Thucydides' own rather than a record of another's speech. And here we see a lament for the loss of humanity, reasonableness and all other virtue as the breakdown of law and order descends into political violence. Human nature is depicted in unremittingly grim terms as the driving force behind the mindless cruelty and violence, but Thucydides shows himself to be a thoroughgoing moralist, valuing justice and humanity as superior virtues.

> Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils. To this must be added the violent fanaticism which came into play once the struggle had broken out… . terrible indeed were the actions to which they committed themselves, and in taking revenge they went farther still.

> Here they were deterred neither by the claims of justice nor by the interests of the state ... the savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried [were] not so much for the sake of gain as because they were swept away into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions. Then, with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where laws persist, showed itself ... as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice ... in these acts of revenge on others men take it upon themselves to begin the process of repealing those general laws of humanity that are there to give a hope of salvation to all who are in distress, instead of leaving those laws in existence, remembering that there may come a time when they, too, will be in danger and need their protection. (Thucydides, III, 82–4).

Most scholars of international relations cite only the Melian Dialogue as an illustration of Thucydides the realist, but the quotation above shows Thucydides is much more the moralist than the amoral realist, for, even as he highlights the wickedness of unrestrained

human nature under conditions of anarchy produced by civil war, he refers at the same time to the 'ordinary laws of civilized life' and the 'general laws of humanity' as setting the standards for right action. Looking at both passages, it is the Athenian generals rather than Thucydides himself who stand out as the archetypal realists.

Machiavelli says that, if either must be dispensed with, it is safer to maintain fear. Machiavelli's reasoning on this point is based on his general assessment of the very nature of humankind.

> [T]hey are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children ... when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you... . and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails. (Machiavelli, 2010, p.68)

Machiavelli further suggests that, if his advice is to be at all useful, it is far preferable to take

heed of the realities of politics than the imagination of them.

Key Quote Machiavelli on Reality versus Imagination

... for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation; for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil.

Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity (Machiavelli, 2010, pp. 61–2).

Machiavelli also adopted an approach to the study of politics whereby the lessons of history, focusing in particular on the ways in which humans actually behave in politics – rather than on how they ought to behave in terms of Christian morality – become key to understanding human nature. Machiavelli held a deeply pessimistic view of the latter, emphasizing the propensity for great cruelty among people. This drives him to a

hard-headed pragmatism, urging recognition of the realities of politics among very imperfect humans. This will achieve, not an impossible ideal, but a workable and secure state.

Does Machiavelli have an ethic at all? Certainly, the preservation of an orderly state is seen as a prime good and the foremost duty of the ruler. Machiavelli himself never used the exact term *raison d'état* (reason of state), but this is the paramount consideration for Machiavelli's Prince – and one that remains at the heart of modern conceptions of political realism, where it is more commonly expressed as 'national interest'. Machiavelli is also a strong supporter of what we might now call 'good governance', in the sense that he disapproved very deeply of corruption in government while supporting rule of law principles, both of which are necessary to a durable, resilient state. What Machiavelli does not consider, however, are the ends for which the state exists – to secure justice, freedom, good order, and so on. The purpose of power is to preserve the state, an end that justifies whatever means are taken to preserve it. Thus Machiavelli's *a*morality asserts 'not the denial of moral values in all situations, but the affirmation that ... the rules of power have priority over those of ethics and morality' (Ebenstein and Ebenstein, 1991, p. 318).