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## Classical Realism in World Politics. Précis to a Symposium

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces some of the major themes of *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics*, and provides a short illustration of how the analytical apparatus elaborated there can offer fruitful insights into understanding enduring puzzles in international relations. *An Unwritten Future* explores, illuminates and interrogates Classical Realism, an approach to the study of world politics that is contrasted with Structural Realism and with the ‘hyper-rationalist’ perspective associated with the ‘Rationalist Explanations for War’ school of thought. It elucidates the fundamental flaws of those two highly influential paradigms, and explains why Classical Realism, with its emphasis on what Structural Realism and Hyper-rationalism forbid—content, purpose, history, and irreducible uncertainty—provides a more promising and productive point of departure for students of international relations.

**Keywords:** realism, classical realism, structural realism, rationalist explanations for war, appeasement, uncertainty

In this paper, I introduce some of the major themes of *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics*, and provide a short illustration of how the analytical apparatus elaborated there can provide productive insights into understanding enduring puzzles in international relations. It should go without saying that this brief overview can only touch on some aspects of the book, and even there selectively so—nevertheless, it is designed to provide a clear sense of the broad themes of the work and to stimulate debate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For much more on all the theoretical concepts and empirical illustrations discussed here, see Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Kirshner 2022).

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The Symposium on J. Kirshner’s book will include three articles and a Reply by the author. This issue of *Analyse & Kritik* prepones the précis, leaving the rest for the next issue.

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The purpose of *An Unwritten Future* is to elucidate an approach to the study of world politics—Classical Realism—and to demonstrate why that paradigm is a productive and valuable one for describing, explaining and understanding events in world politics.<sup>2</sup> The realist community, to the extent that it exists, is overwhelmingly dominated by the influence of structuralism, that is, by an approach that models states as identical units distinguished only by their relative capabilities. This school of realist thought has been so predominant for so long that both champions and critics of realism routinely conflate the two (realism and structural realism). Much of the larger field of IR is in the thrall of a similarly abstract bargaining model of politics, a paradigm rooted in the building blocks of individualism, materialism, and exceedingly narrow assumptions regarding the rationality of actors—a perspective so extreme (and ruinously unproductive) that it is best described as hyper-rationality. Structural realism and hyper-rationalism perform poorly when applied to the real world, due to basic errors that are hard-wired into the core of their analytical apparatus. Each purports to (and boasts of) a more ‘scientific’ approach to the study of world politics, superseding previous, allegedly less rigorous perspectives, such as classical realism. But structural realism and hyper-rationalism, grasping for an illusion of scientific precision evident in style but empty in substance, have failed. *An Unwritten Future* seeks to reclaim realism, and rearticulate classical realism as a worthwhile and even vital point of departure for the study of world politics.

## 1 Realism and Classical Realism

All realist perspectives share common roots. Realism takes as its point of departure the consequences of anarchy—that is, in world politics there is no ultimate authority to adjudicate disputes, and in particular, that there is no guarantee that the behavior of others will be restrained. Autonomous political units (typically but not necessarily states) must look out for their own survival—because no one else will. And the stakes could not be higher, as human history is littered, from the ancient past to the present day, with countless episodes of horrifying barbarism. This in turn means that states must be alert to the power and military capabilities of others, since the distribution of power will inform the nature of the threats and challenges that all states face. Observing anarchy is not distinct to realism—placing the ominous consequences of anarchy as the fundamental point of departure for

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<sup>2</sup> As well as to explore its own limitations (see for example chapter four ‘The Limits of Classical Realism’). The book also considers a wide ranging set of issues, including realist political economy, the rise of China, and the erosion of the U.S.-led international order.

understanding international relations is. Realists need not insist that war is imminent, or even likely, but they believe that states must condition their behavior to acknowledge war as a real possibility. And it is not simply the prospect of ‘war’ that states must understand as a possibility—in anarchy, there are no assurances that the behavior of others will be restrained. Conquest, savagery, subjugation, and even annihilation are possibilities, and have been, and remain, features of human relations for time immemorial. As with the prospect for war, it is not that behaviors will necessarily be unconstrained, it is that they *may* be unconstrained, and there are simply no guarantees that the worst might not occur. Again, in this context, states must be attentive to potential capabilities of others, the balance of power, and to changes to the relative distribution of power over time, which is a primal engine of conflict.

Structural realism stops there: with states, dwelling in anarchy, as ‘like units’ differentiated only by their relative capabilities. The analysis is therefore limited to the effects of systemic forces generated by the interaction of states, that is, from the distribution of power and changes to relative capabilities. Classical realism includes much more than that. It considers both power *and* purpose—and insists that world politics can only be understood by attending to both. Power may be the ultimate arbiter of disputes between states, but purpose—what states want—will define the nature, pattern, and intensity of the disputes between them. (Structural Realists, of course, renounce purpose.)

From this follow a number of basic divergences from structural realism. The first, and crucially, is that history matters. From a classical perspective, you cannot understand how states will behave without knowing what received lessons loom large in their historical memories. In contrast, ‘like units’ dwelling in anarchy (and hyper-rationalists at the bargaining table) act as if they have no past—they see only what is placed in front of them and make their calculations accordingly. Another basic classical realist divergence from both neo-realism and hyper-rationalism is its assumption that states dwell not simply in an environment of anarchy, but also one of uncertainty—they do not know what will happen next. This is not because the intentions of others are opaque (though they often are), or because the world is probabilistic. Rather, actors simply do not know exactly how the world works—and because of that they are forced to make guesses (commonly disparate guesses) about the causal consequences of policy choices and unfolding events. A world of uncertainty is also a world of contingency—one thing leads to another, in ways that cannot be predicted.

Relatedly, classical realism also diverges sharply from structural realism with its view that *politics matters*. That is, states, and especially great powers (which structural realism in general, and its most prominent practitioners, including Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, explicitly identify as the focus of their attention),

are not simply subject to the forces generated by the structure of the international system. Rather, their behavior—that is, the choices they make—in turn shapes the incentive structures presented by the international system. Another crucial divergence: Structural realism focuses on the imperatives imposed by the pressing need for security. Classical realism, although also urgently attentive to security, nevertheless emphasizes the fact that states, and especially great powers, can choose from a menu of distinct policy postures and dispositions, each of which would plausibly ensure security. Thus otherwise similarly situated states will respond to external stimuli differently, because they will have different preferences, and also because they will make disparate guesses about the consequences of those possible choices. And, again, the choices they make will in turn shape the choices made by others. Thus the pathways along which international politics will unfold will be indiscernible in the abstract.<sup>3</sup>

Complicating matters still further is that most great powers most of the time are not faced with threats to their survival, and instead have the luxury of pursuing a range of interests and ambitions. Classical realism thus envisions the practical stuffing of great power politics to be the pursuit of goals well beyond the physical integrity of their borders. In addition to a variety of material interests, states will also seek status, comparing their station not simply to satisfy endogenous desires but in reference to what others have, and they crave respect.<sup>4</sup> Thus classical realism anticipates serial contestations between states, even among those—perhaps especially among those—which (like most great powers, most of the time) are not motivated by fears that their survival is at stake, but by a desire to advance their particular goals. World politics is characterized by active, varied political contestation between actors with opposing interests.

## 2 Structural Realism—Misunderstanding the Implications of Oligopoly

Classical realists have an acute sensitivity to the balance of power, which must be recognized and attended to, since it establishes the constellation of potential security threats. But unlike Waltzian neo-realism, a classical perspective understands that insisting analysis be limited to the ‘systemic’ level (modeling states as like units differentiated only by their relative capabilities) is to invite indeterminacy. Waltz

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<sup>3</sup> Morgenthau 1944; see also Aron 1990/1983.

<sup>4</sup> As Niebuhr observes, “Man, being more than a natural creature, is not interested merely in physical survival but in prestige and social approval” (Niebuhr 1944/2015, 367).

is dismissive of any appeal to variables at other levels of analysis: “it is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states,” he insists, “The behavior of states and statesmen ... is indeterminate” (Waltz 1979, 65, 68). This may be true. But, it need be emphasized, this is also true for the system (see also Jervis 1977, 19–21). Thus, as noted, Classical Realism is very alert to the structure of the system—the balance of power matters. Nevertheless, classical realism also holds that it is *impossible* to understand world politics simply by looking outside of states. The implications of systemic forces are inherently and irretrievably indeterminate.

Ultimately, structural realism is upended by its misreading of the very theoretical analogy at the heart of its enterprise. Waltz offers a microeconomic analogy: states comprise the system, but the system then generates forces that are imposed upon them (just like ‘price-takers’ in microeconomic theory). But, as noted, he also holds that “a general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers” (Waltz 1979, 73). But most states generally, and great powers in particular, look *much* more like large oligopolists regarding the behavior of each other than tiny firms facing disembodied constraints under perfect competition.

It is profoundly problematic for neo-realism that in fact oligopolists are *not* price takers, and instead have discretion over what course of action they choose—or, put more plainly, they are not simply presented with market pressures, *their choices also contribute to the shape and definition of those pressures*. Even worse (for neo-realism) is the fact that once oligopoly (or duopoly) enters the picture, analysts cannot even make the most basic predictions, or even derive expectations about, that most elemental aspect of neo-realism: balancing behavior. Great powers certainly may tend to balance against each other, but this does *not* necessarily follow from the relevant economic theory that structural realism embraces. In fact, microeconomic theory is suggestive of the opposite: oligopolists and duopolists have *more* to gain by colluding with each other than they do by competing with each other (Bishop 1960, Stigler 1964).

Classical realists understand that the observation of oligopoly fundamentally changes the metaphor, and it demands attention, indeed it *requires* attention, to more than structure. As Raymond Aron observed, “the structure of the international system is always *oligopolistic*. In each period the principal actors have determined the system more than they have been determined by it.” Oligopolistic competition implies indeterminate outcomes, and also means that agents’ choices shape the systemic environment. Thus not only do states have choices, but those choices shape the pressures that in turn affect other states. What choices will they make? Purpose and content matter, crucially and inescapably (Gilpin 1981, 29 citing Aron).

### 3 Hyper-Rationalism and The Bargaining Model: Flawed Theory, Poorly Applied

The ‘Rationalist Explanations of War’ (REW) perspective, and the bargaining model that follows from it, is one of the predominant approaches to the study of IR. It is also irretrievably flawed in its conception. The central premise of this approach is that “given identical information, truly rational agents should reason to the same conclusions about the probability of one uncertain outcome or another. Conflicting estimates should occur only if the agents have different (and so necessarily) private information” (Fearon 1995, 392). Classical Realism rejects this misguided and utterly implausible proposition. Thoughtful, dispassionate experts looking at an identical, rich information set, *routinely* come to markedly different expectations about the probability of various possible outcomes (Kirshner 2000, 143–150). The fundamental flaw of the REW approach (and of the ‘hyper-rationalist’ turn in more generally), can be found in its uncritical and intimate embrace of the Rational Expectations revolution in macroeconomic theory. A central tenet of Rational Expectations Theory is that actors process information efficiently, correctly—and, crucially, that they share knowledge of the (essentially) correct underlying model of the economy.

But Rational Expectations Theory is deeply flawed and empirically dubious. Numerous studies have found Rational Expectations models “to be grossly inconsistent with actual behavior in real world markets” (Frydman and Goldberg 2007, 54). Worse still, although an assumption of ‘rational expectations’ might be productive for addressing a subset of particular economic questions, it is nevertheless inherently inappropriate for addressing questions of war and peace.

Why is this approach wrong, and so singularly ill-suited for application to the most important questions in world politics? First, Rational Expectations Theory requires a setting of risk. But international politics invariably takes place in the context of uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> Second, and eviscerating of the entire approach, is the assumption that all actors share the same causal model.

REW’s hyper-rationalist approach, grafted from Rational Expectations Theory, holds the view that rational actors must know and share the same, (more or less) correct model of international politics (and so if they have the same information, they must reach the same conclusions<sup>6</sup>). As Thomas Sargent explains, “you simply

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5 Risk is the setting where the underlying probabilities of all possible outcomes are known, such as the chances of rolling a ‘five’ when tossing two dice (11.111 %). Uncertainty holds when such probabilities are not known. Many economists have emphasized this crucial distinction. See Keynes 1937, Hayek 1945, and Knight 1921.

6 With variations representing random errors distributed around the correct underlying model.

cannot talk about” differences among people’s models in the context of rational expectations. “All agents inside the model, the econometrician, and God share the same model” (Evans and Honkapohja 2005, 566). This can’t be emphasized enough. If there exist competing, enduring models, Rational Expectations Theory does not work, and REW simply cannot not work.

And it is a plain fact (and borne out by history), that in international relations, leaders, statesmen, and experts walk around with different, and competing (and typically implicit) theoretical models of world politics in their heads. And when confronted with the same information, even complete information—that is, all of the information that can be known at a given point in time—they will thus make different guesses, based on those disparate implicit models and theories. Actors will *not* have converged around the same, essentially correct models of war (what will cause them, how they will unfold).

Classical realism has always emphasized uncertainty and contingency in recognizing the wide and unpredictable range of the possible. International Relations takes place in the context of uncertainty; to choose war (even when wise), is to plunge headlong into radical uncertainty. For these reasons, although classical realism models its actors as rational—that is, they have a good sense of what they want, can order their preferences, and, within the context of what they know, reach for any number of strategies that are internally consistent (even if others, similarly situated and motivated, might make other choices)—they are nevertheless rational muddlers, making guesses while invariably swimming in unfamiliar waters. Thus the range of choices they might make can be plausibly anticipated, but, shaped as they are by varying, implicit theoretical models of how the world works and informed by distinct historical experiences, those choices (and their follow-on implications) are impossible to predict.

In sum, From the perspective of structural realism and hyper-rationalism, history, politics, content, ideology, and purpose can be dispensed with, because states are a homogeneous band of similarly-striving materialists, who must respond to the uniform imperatives of anarchy (or be selected out of the system). Classical realism reaches virtually the opposite conclusions, and from the same economic analogies, sees the central roles of fundamental uncertainty, consequential contingency and inherent unpredictability.

## 4 An Illustration: Explaining British Appeasement of Nazi Germany

The differences between structural realism and classical realism can be illustrated with a brief exploration of a monumentally important choice that still puzzles: why

did Britain appease Nazi Germany, placing itself within a hair's breadth of conquest, subjugation and even annihilation?

Two explanations are closely associated with a structural realist perspective. Both suggest that the enigmatic behavior is well explained exclusively by logics of power politics: buck-passing and buying time. The former attributes the sluggish pace of British rearmament to a strategy designed to force their ally France to bear more of the burden of countering Germany, and spend more on defense (little matter that the French nevertheless did not do so). The latter holds that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the principal architect of British appeasement, was no fool, rather, he was cleverly buying time to confront Hitler when the country would be in a better position to do so.

The buck-passing argument is well-argued and plausible in the abstract. Even in the late 1930s, Britain had incentives to buck-pass—surely it hoped that France would bear brunt of any land war on the European continent. In World War I, Britain committed sixty divisions to the western front. For the next war, should it come, it now pledged two, with the suggestion that perhaps as many as two or three more might forthcoming if circumstances dictated. And of course France wanted desperately to ensure that Britain would participate in any future European war, and so any measures which incentivized British rearmament were in the French interest (Christensen and Snyder 1990; see also Christensen 1997).

But the balance of the evidence does not support the contention that Britain, although certainly eager for France to do more, was motivated primarily, or even much at all, by buck-passing. Neither the timid diplomacy practiced, nor, crucially, the sluggish pace of rearmament by Britain and France can be attributed to buck-passing ('let's spend less to force the other to spend more'). Britain's motivations for restraining defense spending were rooted in (largely misguided and politically motivated) concerns for financial stability, not hopes that France could be nudged into bearing a larger share of an implicitly joint concern.<sup>7</sup>

As for buying time, Chamberlain was perhaps no fool, but he wasn't buying time—he was trying, long past the time when the failures of his policies should have been obvious, to buy peace—his goal was to avoid war at almost any conceivable cost (save the loss of the British Empire). Chamberlain's revisionist defenders and apologists argue the Prime Minister and his supporters were not naïve; rather, they were clever. The Munich accord, especially, in this revisionist assessment is reinterpreted from the shortsighted, foolish humiliation that it was, and reimaged

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7 Shay 1977. Note also that buck-passing was simply not a plausible strategy for France. A front line state, it did not have the luxuries that its ally (apparently) enjoyed: between Britain and Germany stood a very large European Army (France's), and beyond that the protection afforded by the English Channel.

as a savvy far-sighted strategy: Chamberlain recognized that Britain was not well equipped to fight Hitler in 1938, and so he used the Munich accords instrumentally to buy time for rearmament, and thus confront the Nazis militarily at a time when the country would be better prepared and the odds more in its favor. One influential study holds that “British appeasement was not based on a naïve understanding of Hitler’s intentions or on wishful thinking about the possibility of establishing a lasting peace with Germany.” Rather, appeasement was “a means of buying time for rearmament, thus delaying the likely confrontation until Britain was adequately prepared for war” (Ripsman and Levy 2008, 150, 151). But this argument simply does not stand up to scrutiny, undermined by two essential flaws. First, the breathing space between September 1938 and September 1939 did not shift the balance of power in the allies’ favor. If war it was going to be, better to have fought in 1938. Second, and fundamentally, the policy of appeasement was not designed to buy time for a future war. It was designed to make sure that war would never occur. This is plainly illustrated by the actions and words of Chamberlain and his affiliates—over Munich, after Hitler’s shredding of the accord with Germany’s absorption of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, in final build up to war that summer, and in the immediate aftermath of Germany’s invasion of Poland. A careful look at the evidence makes clear that appeasement indeed was based on a fundamental misreading of Hitler, and the desire to come to understanding with the Nazi regime and forge a lasting peace between Britain and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately it is not possible to understand the behavior of Britain (and European powers in the 1930s more generally) without appealing to two variables forbidden by structural approaches—history and ideology. The relevant history is World War I, and its effect, not on power, but on preferences—no understanding of the behavior of Britain and France in the interwar years is possible without accounting for the influence of that mass slaughter on those still traumatized societies. And no explanation of appeasement can fail to acknowledge the important role of ideology in shaping that strategy—in particular, the fact that most of the elites directing British foreign policy in the 1930s were influenced both by their vehement anti-communism, and, more appallingly, their relative comfort with the notion of a fascist Germany dominating the continent.

British conservatives were able to sell appeasement to a mass public desperate to avoid another horrifying, ruinous war. But they pursued that strategy well past

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8 Ripsman and Levy 2008, 179; Murray 1984: “The fact was—as both British and French intelligence were well aware—the Germans were not ready for a major war in 1938,” (294); see also Christensen and Snyder 1990, who note the puzzle of “France’s refusal to fight on extremely favorable terms in September 1938” (159–60). Crippling Czechoslovakia also permitted Germany to redeploy the twenty-five divisions that had been dedicated to the Czech front.

the point when its failures were obvious due to this more shameful attribute. Chamberlain and his cohort fundamentally misread Hitler, but part of the reason for that was that they were quite unperturbed by the notion (and contrary to the touchstone of British grand strategy for centuries) that a fascist German state would dominate the continent of Europe. Thus the strategy of appeasement was not designed to pass the buck, or buy time, it was an effort to accommodate Germany—a strategy rooted in an affinity with fascism abroad, a skepticism of France, ambivalence about America, and, in particular, an implacable abhorrence for the Soviet Union.

Chamberlain had a profound suspicion of Russia, as his private correspondence at the time reflects. In late April 1939, he would write, astonishingly, “Our chief trouble is with Russia. I confess to being deeply suspicious of her.” Curiously, among his doubts were that the two countries had any common interests; more curiously still, he counted among the reasons for his suspicions the Soviet “lack of any sympathy with Democracy as such.” His “suspicions” and “deep suspicions” about Russia were a recurring theme of his missives. Of course, it was certainly reasonable to be suspicious of Stalin’s Soviet Union. But consider who Chamberlain was not suspicious of—Hitler and Mussolini—and it becomes clear that ideology is driving British behavior—at the clear expense of British security. Hitler was, famously, in Chamberlain’s eyes “a man who could be relied upon,” and his endless attempts to woo Mussolini—even after the latter’s invasion, conquest, and absorption of Albania in the weeks before Chamberlain wrote those letters—was foolish, and little short of humiliating. But by the Prime Minister’s assessment the Italian fascist was worth eagerly courting, and ideally counting on to check German power, with little concern for Il Duce’s lack “sympathy with democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

In sum, structural realism can’t explain British appeasement—a catastrophic blunder only explicable by appealing to two variables that approach rules out—the weight of history and content of preferences. That is, by the bread and butter of classical realism.

## 5 The Craft of Classical Realism

Leading contemporary approaches to world politics claim to have led IR from the wilderness of imprecision and complication, touting their apparent scientific rigor, and welcome parsimoniousness—the ability to explain more with less. And to the extent this can be achieved, it is a quality to be welcomed and embraced. However, it must be understood that parsimony is about ‘*explaining more with less.*’

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<sup>9</sup> Self 2005, 412, 416, 417, 418; Parker 1993, 219, 246.

All too often, especially since the rise and dominance of structuralism and hyper-rationalism, scholarship has chased the big brass ring of ‘with less’—turning a blind eye to whether or not the analysis is, in fact, ‘explaining more.’

It is not obvious what real world event REW tells us much about—at least, anything we did not already know. And what does structural realism actually explain? Advocates of the approach invariably admonish that it has no “theory of foreign policy”; Waltz himself states that systemic theory only tells us “a small number of big and important things.” But it is hard to see what those big and important things are—that is, the “more” being explained by less (Waltz 1986, 329). Of those few big things, an old adage applies too well: ‘what’s true isn’t new, and what’s new isn’t true.’

Classical realism can do better. Inspired by many of the insights to be found in Thucydides’ magisterial *History of The Peloponnesian War*, and forged by the seminal contributions of mid-twentieth century thinkers—Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron prominent among them—it is a discipline tempered by understanding that international relations takes place in an environment of uncertainty, and that students of world politics, striving, appropriately, to understand patterns of behavior, and to reach, to the extent that it is possible, generalizable conclusions, are nevertheless confronted with vexing problems.<sup>10</sup> Those challenges include the instability of behavioral relationships between variables over time, and the fact that the unpredictable choices made by states—choices that are surely influenced by material constraints, but which are fundamentally shaped by their understood domestic political-social context, and filtered through perceived lessons of history—in turn influence and elicit a range of plausible responses from others. And then finally and always there are the inescapable consequences of the fact actors will respond differently—even with regard to the most basic behavioral choices—when presented with the same stimuli, because they will have different tastes, preferences, and values.<sup>11</sup> Nor will those choices and reactions be obvious in advance. As Hans Morgenthau put it, definitively, “since man is largely ignorant of his own future reactions, how can he know more about the reactions of his fellow-men?” Similarly, interpretations of historical events, which have a formative influence on behavior, will also vary. Following Raymond Aron, it is “incontestable” that there are many different possible interpretations of history, and as such, specific knowledge of the distinct attributes of the actor is necessary to grasp the “intelligibility of a historical act.” In sum, most questions of international politics, most of the time—and invariably the most important ones—are concerned with the particular behavior

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<sup>10</sup> Morgenthau 1946, Frei 2001, Aron 1990/1983, Aron 1983, Strassler 1998, and Kirshner 2019.

<sup>11</sup> In *An Unwritten Future*, I elaborate this with what I call ‘the ketchup allegory,’ 72–73.

of a specific actor at a critical time, not the average reaction of an imagined median actor in under everyday circumstances. For students of world politics, there is little value in being able to make an informed guess about the color of a ball drawn randomly from a vast urn of known contents.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, classical realists approach problems of international relations armed with a set of analytical tools, which are applied judiciously on a case-by-case basis (what economists would call a partial equilibrium, rather than a general equilibrium perspective). It is an approach both informed and illuminated by its affinities with (the economist and non-realist) Charles Kindleberger. As Kindleberger argued, in international politics, “it is futile to spend time at the over-all level,” because “the total system is infinitely complex with everything interacting. One can discuss it intelligently, therefore, only bit by bit” (Kindleberger 1958, 86). Kindleberger, in his own work as an economic historian, articulated a methodology that is consistent with the approach of classical realism. Kindleberger argued that “there is not one all-purpose economic theory or model that illuminates economic history,” and emphasized instead economics as a ‘toolbox’ in which the practical economist is armed with a large set of theories applicable to and provide insights into a variety of settings. And despite the search for general tendencies, *Historical Economics* “looks for patterns of uniformity but is wary of insisting on identity” (Kindleberger 1989, ix, x, 127, 193; Kindleberger 1990, 4, 7, 9).

Classical realism similarly reaches for a trusty tool kit—full of analytical devices capable of widespread application but introduced as appropriate for the demands of each specific, idiosyncratic and unique situation. Deploying these tools judiciously to better describe, understand, explain and anticipate events international relations is the craft of classical realism—a practice tempered, always, by George F. Kennan’s admonition that “We must be gardeners and not mechanics in our approach to world affairs.” Which is a tidy summary of the differences between classical realism and its would be, deeply flawed, pseudo-scientific successors.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Morgenthau 1944, 175; see also Aron 1981, 131. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, “The radical freedom of the self and the consequent dramatic realities of history are naturally embarrassing to any scientific effort, either to understand or master history” (Niebuhr 1955, 49).

<sup>13</sup> Kennan 1951, 88; see also Kennan 1966/1954.

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