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Classical Realism is not '*Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*'

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Abstract: In their assessments of *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics*, two distinguished scholars of World Politics engage in a spirited contestation about the role of classical realism in International Relations (IR) theory. Richard Ned Lebow aspires to defend the paradigm from what he suggests are barbarians at the gate. In this response I offer rejoinders to his treatment of E. H. Carr and Robert Gilpin, and his characterization of the ways in which we each engage Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* as an inspirational text. Stephen Krasner raises a number of thoughtful and savvy constructive criticisms of *An Unwritten Future*, some of which ring true. Yet he and I continue to markedly disagree about the importance of analytical uncertainty for understanding IR, and also with regard to the role of history in explaining behavior in world politics. And in an otherwise sophisticated critique, Krasner ultimately reduces classical realism to a caricature. In my response I clarify why in fact it is his preferred approach, structural realism, which, on its own, is irretrievably indeterminate and leaves scholars needing much more that its minimalist disposition can possibly hope to provide. I conclude with a short elaboration of why classical realism offers a more productive way forward.

Keywords: realism; classical realism; structural realism; Thucydides; uncertainty

Let me begin by thanking the editors of *Analyse & Kritik* for arranging this forum, which was no small undertaking, and which has provided a generous opportunity to seriously and critically engage my book, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Kirshner 2022). In addition, although his criticisms are at times sharp, I am also most appreciative of the thoughtful attention and commentary offered by Stephen Krasner, a scholar whose seminal contributions to realism I have studied with profit over the course of my entire career. In this essay I will first respond to Lebow's commentary – to the extent that it is possible given his limited engagement with *An Unwritten Future* – and explicate why his brief, handwaving critiques are either undermined by basic errors or raise false controversies. I will

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then turn to a somewhat more sustained engagement with Krasner's commentary. As with all productive criticism, my response to his challenges should help further clarify what I consider to be some of the key contributions of classical realism.

1 Lebow: A Peculiar Gatekeeper

It is not easy to respond to Lebow. As he states, he "will offer a short review" of *An Unwritten Future* before shifting to his own discussion of aspects of classical realism (Lebow 2024, 215). The 'short review' (and it is generous to label it as such) is less than nine hundred words, and barely skates upon the surface of the analysis, pausing occasionally for undeveloped, ad-homonym dismissals. The bulk of his essay, which does not address the book at all, clocks in at about 5000 words. This is, of course, a curious choice for a symposium about a book. I will nevertheless stick with tradition and try to stay with the material in Lebow's essay that engages (or is directly associated with) arguments in *An Unwritten Future* rather than diverting to a discussion of Lebow's theoretical musings. Those assertions often do invite constructive criticism, but that is not the purpose of this symposium. One comment I will share, however, regarding Lebow's own take on classical realism, is to note his comment (presumably referring to his 2003 book *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, listed in his references): "I believe I coined the term at the turn of the century" (Lebow 2024, 217). This might come as a surprise to the very many scholars who deployed the term in the 1980s and 1990s – and who typically assumed that their readers understood what it referred to.[1]

In his sliver of a review, Lebow engages in some passing commentary regarding a few of the points I make in chapter 1. It is deeply regrettable, and a missed opportunity for this author, that left unengaged by Lebow are chapter 2 (especially its critiques of structural realism and the bargaining model), chapter 3 (and its discussions of appeasement, and of Gilpin, and the Vietnam and Iraq wars), chapter 4 (which would seem especially important to Lebow, on the limits of realism), chapter 5 (realist political economy), chapter 6 (regarding the rise of China, with critiques of John Mearsheimer and Graham Allison, the latter of which re-engages Thucydides), and chapter 7 (implications and contemporary international politics). On all of these topics Lebow is strangely silent; perhaps he saw nothing in those chapters to take issue with – one simply does not know.

1 For a few examples among many see Adeney 1988, Ashley 1984, Cox 1985, Doyle 1997, Frankel 1996, Forde 1995, Guzzani 1998, Higgott 1988, Hixson 1989, Keohane 1986, Lepgold 1987, Loriaux 1992, Vasquez 1999, Williams 1996, and Wohlforth 1993.

Lebow does take specific aim at three elements of *An Unwritten Future* – but unfortunately, they all widely miss the mark. Twice in the first three paragraphs Lebow laments that Kirshner "never tells us" what classical realism is. But this is simply not the case, from start to finish; most notably with my discussion of "ten foundational tenets of the paradigm," and, crucially, the ten-page section in Chapter 2, "situating classical realism" (Kirshner 2022, 70–80) – though it is possible that Lebow simply did not read that far. The only page in the book cited in Lebow's review beyond page 23 is this sentence: "When applying Thucydides or his understanding of classical realism to the modern world he makes such observations as "raw power is not a determinant source of influence in the modern world (Kirshner 2022, 238)." And that did not quite sound like me – and it turns out it is not me (I could not find that sentence on page 238 – I also checked pages 138, 38 and 23, in case it was a typo). What I do say on page 238, in a sentence designed to bring home a core classical realist claim of *An Unwritten Future*, is that both power and purpose matter (with purpose sharped by domestic social and political factors), and looking only at contemporary American power without attending to (significant shifts in) American purpose will fail to understand the foreign policy choices and international political influence of the U.S. in the coming years. ("All of these prospects and outcomes will prove less attributable to its raw power, and more a function of its purpose." (Kirshner 2022, 238))

Lebow also, inexplicably, takes me to task for whom I might recognize as an important figure within the paradigm. It is of course perfectly legitimate that there would be variation in the personal pantheons of different classical realists, but I am astonished that a scholar as accomplished as Lebow would not just exclude, but rule ineligible, E. H. Carr and Robert Gilpin – a summary dismissal marred by basic errors in his understanding of each of those two major thinkers. (Kirshner "embraces E. H. Carr, who was a Marxist, a set of beliefs that might be considered the antithesis of classical realism. Even stranger is his inclusion of Robert Gilpin, a fellow traveler of neorealism." (Lebow 2024, 216))

Regarding Gilpin, although, as I discuss at length in chapter 3, his landmark book *War and Change in World Politics* (1981) does have a structuralist spine, it is hard to assert that Gilpin – there and across his oeuvre – was anything but a quintessential classical realist. And regarding Carr's heterodox economics, which I clearly acknowledge as important to his thinking, *contra* Lebow that in no way disqualifies him from making important contributions to classical realism in his work. (Indeed, it was Bob Gilpin who taught me of the notable affinities, with regard to their dispositional instincts about the nature of world politics, between realism and Marxism.) It is certainly the case that Carr wrote extensively on a broad range of topics (and also made his share of blunders, and perhaps more) – but among them, indisputably, were seminal contributions to classical realism.

Finally, Lebow suggests that my understanding of Thucydides is shallow. This, again, wildly misses the mark. Certainly I do not present myself as a world-class expert on Thucydides, and, especially if Lebow reads ancient Greek, he might surely stake a strong claim to being the more learned scholar of Thucydides than I could ever hope to be. But I have read with care Thucydides in multiple translations, taught semester-long seminars entirely dedicated to a close reading of *The Peloponnesian War*, have pored over vast amounts of the enormous secondary literature, and benefited from the guidance and comments of several leading specialists who have been generous with their time and attention.

It is certainly the case that a dedicated focus on Thucydides (who does reappear at times and generally informs the classical realist sensibilities expressed in *An Unwritten Future*) takes up but a dozen pages of my book. But there is, of course, so much to Thucydides, and *An Unwritten Future* is not about him – the book covers an expansive range of topics, and I make no claim to advancing our understanding of this seminal figure, something better left in the hands of others. Consider, to take a few examples, the essential Simon Hornblower commentary, which runs well over two thousand pages (and there are many other distinguished commentaries), the influential four volume Donald Kagan study, which clocks in at over sixteen hundred pages (and there are scores of other such studies – many of which reach very different conclusions than does Kagan), and important compendiums, such as the recent Oxford Handbook, which features contributions from forty experts over its seven hundred pages.

Whereas *An Unwritten Future* is simply focused on what Thucydides has to contribute to a better understanding of realism – and especially for distinguishing classical realism, and rejecting common oversimplified tropes distilled by structural realists from *The Peloponnesian War* – while recognizing, as I do plainly, that Thucydides would not recognize himself as a 'realist' nor even have a conception of the academic discipline of International Relations. Nevertheless, Thucydides and other thinkers I engage in chapter 1 can help us understand why classical realism can be so analytically rewarding, while at the same time exposing the limits of structural realism and hyper-rationalism.

It is also important to note that classicists who have devoted their entire careers to the study of Thucydides commonly disagree with each other; it therefore surely is not surprising that Lebow and I would disagree on aspects of Thucydides. But, if at odds with his general tenor, it is notable that Lebow also, if unwittingly, calls attention to key points where our views of Thucydides are in virtual harmony. We share the view that *The Peloponnesian War* is all too frequently misread (and underread) in the IR community, and that contemporary IR scholars would be well served to read (and teach) Thucydides with great care and deliberation, rather than leaning on decontextualized snippets from this vast, rich work. Moreover, despite his

suggestion that my take on Thucydides is not very insightful, Lebow notes in his essay that "Classical realists understand that great powers are successful powers and that success engenders hubris" and "For Thucydides, this was the most fundamental cause of Athens' decline." (Lebow 2024, 218) On this essential attribute we are in complete agreement; in *An Unwritten Future* I describe this as "the greatest lesson of all," that Thucydides has to offer (Kirshner 2022, 29).

In sum, despite the fact that all possible interpretations of Thucydides are not equally valid, given the ongoing, spirited debates and active controversies among the most esteemed experts, for any scholar to assert an interpretation of Thucydides as definitive is an undisciplined overreach. Thus, although my treatment of Thucydides is eminently *contestable* – as well it should be – it is certainly not shallow. More regrettable still is that Lebow did not have more to say about the balance of my book. One suspects those criticisms might have been withering, but I (and the readers of this journal) would have profited from having them properly rehearsed.

2 Krasner: Knocking Down a Straw Man

In responding to one's serious critics, it is most productive to first note areas of agreement, and then, perhaps most important, to acknowledge those criticisms that ring true, and then finally to elucidate where and why author and commentator disagree. In that spirit, although Krasner emphasizes his criticisms, I note some key areas of agreement. As he writes, "I am in agreement with most of what Kirshner has to say" (Krasner 2024, 229); and it is gratifying to see that he holds the view that my "critique of Mearsheimer is devastating" – that is no small accomplishment. We also share the realist emphasis on the importance of the fact that, especially down the road, "states cannot be sure of what other states, or leaders will do," and that power is very important in explaining what happens in world politics. As I wrote, one of those ten core tenets of classical realism is that "the balance of power profoundly shapes decisions" (Kirshner 2022, 23).

Krasner is right to note that *An Unwritten Future* is thin in its analysis of nuclear weapons (aside from elaborating that the robust nuclear deterrents of the U.S. and China still further undermine the logic of Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism). As he correctly observes, this is a 'big question' and one that affects the ways in which we can understand power in the contemporary era, and as such should be important to realism of any stripe – and yet I do not engage in the issue in any systematic way. Krasner also shares the frustration of many critics of classical realism, observing, with fine illustrative examples, that the approach is incapable of speaking with absolute confidence to events, even those that occurred on the past where the outcomes are known. Given classical realism's emphasis on uncertainty

and contingency, this is of course undeniable. But not being able to speak with certainty – what classical realism would call a (potentially catastrophic) false sense of certainty – does not prevent the approach for offering important insights, as the discussion that follows will show. Finally, Krasner's most important criticism is that *An Unwritten Future* in some key cases emphasizes the role of 'national cohesion' – but it offers no theoretical apparatus for us to understand when and how national cohesion matters. This critique is smart, and exactly right, and that gap informs my current research agenda.

Yet we still have some basic disagreements. As I noted, Krasner, with whom I have had several modest but invariably stimulating encounters over the years, is a scholar whose work I admire enormously (two shouting matches in restaurants notwithstanding). But there are several moments in his essay where we do not see eye to eye – although from my perspective the most important differences between us reflect the fact that at times we seem to be talking past each other, especially on the concept of uncertainty and regarding what structural realism can tell us, two key themes of my book that I wish Krasner would have engaged more explicitly.

The first disagreement I would note is more of a curiosity. It is odd, if I follow the argument correctly, that Krasner would support his defense of the progress that has been made in the discipline in the wake the structuralist revolution, which renounces the appeal to domestic political variables, with an example of what we have learned by noting the differences between democracies and autocracies.

Much more important (and informative of what classical realism can tell us), however, is that Krasner and I continue to fundamentally disagree about the Iraq War (the subject of one of our vigorous dinner exchanges, which took place before the war started). As Krasner notes, after the fact the war was obviously a disaster, and one that can be associated with hubris, but, he insists, "at the time, it was not so clear." (Krasner 2024, 232) From a classical realist perspective, however, it was. At the time (indeed at the height of the success of the early military phase of the operation, after the swift fall of Baghdad and weeks before the U.S. announced its 'Mission Accomplished') – and when support for the war in America touched its all-time high of 80 % – I wrote the following: The war "was very unlikely to achieve, and in fact would probably undermine, the broader political objectives for which it was fought," and that eventually "a fatigued and impatient America," would finally distance itself from "the chaos that ensues" (quoted in Kirshner 2022, 121). Notably, classical realist Robert Gilpin, a bitter opponent of the war from before its inception, would subsequently blame the catastrophe on 'hubris' and the misguided 'ambitions' of those who executed it – and he observed, with a now painful prescience, that it "significantly exacerbated dangerous social, cultural and regional fissures in U.S. society" (Gilpin 2005, 5).

Were, as Krasner argues, other outcomes possible? Of course. Just as Thucydides suggests that the Sicilian campaign could actually have been successful, it did not change his view that to embark on that enterprise was a cataclysmically misguided blunder, for reasons that his great work elucidated. Similarly, as the future is unwritten, it is surely possible to imagine a world in which the Iraq war went better. Nevertheless, like Sicily, to embark on the Iraq war was obviously foolish and an invitation to catastrophe. Clearly I could have been wrong about the outcome – but not about the invitation. And that is indeed the craft of Classical Realism: not to make predictions certain to come true, but to offer important insights into the likely plausible range of consequences that will follow from one choice or another.

For a debate about classical realism, however, more important than our continuing disagreement about the Iraq war are the different ways in which Krasner and I understand the importance of uncertainty, and assess the merits of structural realism. With regard to the former, although there are attributes about the concept that we share, ultimately, we deploy the term ‘uncertainty’ somewhat differently. Certainly, I agree with Krasner that “Uncertainty is always present” (Krasner 2024, 229) – classical realism of course shares the view that we don’t know what will happen in the future, and, with all realists, is wary of the potential future behavior of states even if their current disposition appears benign. (The Japan of the 1920s was very different from the Japan of the 1930s, for example.)

But uncertainty is also an *analytical setting*. And in many ways, this aspect of uncertainty is even more consequential for the study of IR than a general lack of knowledge about the future. To return to the Iraq War, analytical uncertainty falls under the category of then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s ‘unknown unknowns’ – a concept which changes the way in which we can understand the world, as it is impossible to assign probabilities to prospects we can’t even well-conceptualize. At the root of this is the distinction – one associated with the economic philosophies of economists as generally divergent in their views as John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek – between risk and uncertainty. Under risk, although we can’t know for sure what will happen next, we do know with certainty the underlying probability distribution of all possible outcomes. (The classic example is rolling two dice – we don’t know what number will come up, but we know exactly the probability of every possible outcome.) Under uncertainty, we do not have access to that underlying probability distribution.

It is hard to overstate the consequences of a setting of uncertainty, because under uncertainty, experts and analysts will not share the same, singular, underlying model of politics. And so with regard to ‘what will happen next’ in international relations – and what will be the consequences of various foreign policy posture and policies – scholars and statesmen will reach different conclusions, because they walk around with varied, commonly implicit, often competing theoretical models

of world politics in their heads. And as such, when confronted with the same information, even complete information – that is, everything that can possibly be known at a given point in time – they will make different guesses, often wildly divergent guesses, about what will happen next and why, 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). And 'bad' or 'inferior' theories will not be selected out, because of the enormous complexity of the assessments involved, the small number of cases to draw on, and the heterogeneity of the relevant referents. As I elaborate extensively in *An Unwritten Future*, this why the influential bargaining model/rationalist explanations for war perspective, however elegant in theory and sophisticated in appearance, simply collapses when applied to real world problems. Those approaches require a world of risk, not uncertainty, so that all actors and experts might share a single unified theory of international politics and of war. But we don't have such a theory, and we never will.

We live in a world of uncertainty, not risk. Actors, drawing on different models, will disagree on the causal consequences of different choices, and what will be the best policies to advance the national interest. It needs to be emphasized that world politics takes place in the context of both anarchy and analytical uncertainty. The academic discipline of IR has done a good job processing the implications of anarchy. But leading schools of thought have stumbled on the crucial context of uncertainty – the implications of which not only void hyper-rationalist models, but also expose the analytical poverty of structural realism, by vacating its explanatory power.

3 Do We Learn Anything from Structural Realism?

A basic point of disagreement between us is that Krasner suggests that although classical realism gets most things more or less right, it is extremely limited in what it can tell us. Better instead, he argues, is to stick with structural realism, and its focus on power. As he writes, despite the fact that "in the end I agree with Kirshner," the core problem with *An Unwritten Future* is that "while Kirshner may be right, he does not help us." (Krasner 2024, 231) Here is where I think we are to some extent talking past each other. Krasner defends the Waltzian tradition, which he experienced upon its arrival as 'a revelation' – one which guided lost and confused IR scholars out of the baffling forest into which realists before him had stranded the discipline.

Classical realism argues that the inverse is true. It agrees, fully, that power matters, formatively, but holds that power alone (or more specifically, the distribution of power and changes to that distribution, the only variables permitted by Waltz

in *Theory of International Politics*) is inherently and irretrievably indeterminant. Thus while Krasner is skeptical that classical realism, however correct in its claims, can tell us anything of practical significance, a key point of *An Unwritten Future* is that one reason it is essential to embrace classical realism is because it is structural realism – looking at power while renouncing any attention to purpose – that ultimately has nothing to say.

In his landmark book, Waltz insists on limiting the analysis to the systemic level, modeling states as like units, dwelling in anarchy, distinguished only by their relative capabilities – with no need to bother about history or content or purpose (beyond a desire to survive). But what does *Theory of International Politics* explain? Rather than scrounging around, with dirty hands, mired in a murky swamp of slippery explanatory variables, Waltz boasts that systemic theory tells us instead "a small number of big and important things" (Waltz 1986, 329). But what are those big and important things? After reading his book, exactly what do we understand that we did not already know?

To this reader, Waltz's book has four 'big and important' things to say. But two of them realists already embraced, and the other two are asserted, and, upon reflection, do not hold up as general claims but are functions of the specific circumstances of the era in which Waltz was writing. The first two, which we knew, are that states that fail to attend to their own security do so at great peril to their survival; and that states, eager to preserve their physical security and domestic policy autonomy, tend to balance against potential threats when that option is available. (Again, we didn't need *Theory of International Politics* to tell us that.) The latter two are that bipolar systems are less prone to great power war than multipolar systems, and that part of the reason for that is that under bipolarity, interdependence is irrelevant. But each of these claims, presented deductively, seem in retrospect to have been backwardly induced from the particular circumstances of the Cold War – and in fact neither need generally hold. (Waltz dramatically overstated the endurance of the bipolar order, which survived barely a decade after the publication of his book, and today the U.S. and China are deeply enmeshed economically.)

So what can systemic theory, on its own, tell us? By the logic of the building blocks of the theory itself – nothing. Waltz draws on a microeconomic analogy, with systemic pressures on states akin to market pressure on firms. But he also insists that "a general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers." (Waltz 1979, 73) This is enormously problematic for systemic theory because great powers look not like tiny firms that are "price takers" inexorably subject to the whims of the market under perfect competition, but are more akin to oligopolists, whose behavior actually shapes the nature of the market. Thus, great powers make choices, and those choices are consequential. But can we tell what basic choices they will make, by considering only systemic forces? No. Because there

are two insurmountable problems. First, in general, changes in systemic pressures (market or political) can yield insights into the average behavioral response of a random actor drawn from large set of actors facing similar constraints – but it tells us very little about the choices made by any one specific actor, which can, and will, vary broadly. This is especially true for great powers, who enjoy the most discretion, and can decide which sacrifices they are willing to make, and which goals they will pursue, in the face of the constraints presented by the system. Second, and catastrophically (for structural realism) is that these choices take place not only under anarchy – but under the condition of analytical uncertainty. And, as noted, in a world of analytical uncertainty there will endure multiple, often competing causal theories, which means that systemic pressures will yield indeterminate outcomes, due to the fact that different experts and actors will come up with very distinct policies and postures designed to ensure state security – even when faced with exactly the same external pressure, and even when seeking to achieve precisely the same goals.

One might be tempted to put up a warning sign for intellectual travelers approaching the systemic level of analysis, quoting Bob Dylan: 'beyond here lies nothing.' But that would be hyperbole. The real lesson is that systemic theory, alone, tells us nothing (or, at the very least, nothing that classical realists did not already know). We need more. In particular, among other things but crucially, we need history.

Perhaps the single most important distinction between classical realism and structural realism is that, for the former, history matters, momentously, whereas for the latter, it is impermissible. But this is to insist, for example, that the behavior of states in the inter-war years can be understood without reference to how their conceptions of the world – what they wanted, what they wanted to avoid, and so much more – were profoundly shaped by the epochal trauma of the First World War. (The structural realist counterfactual must be that if the Great War had never taken place, except for the ways in which its absence changed relative capabilities, international politics in the 1920s and 1930s would have looked exactly the same. From a classical realist perspective this is patently implausible.)

In his defense of structural realism, Krasner suggests that to deploy history we must have a singular understanding of it ("can we really interpret history?") But this rhetoric knocks down an especially reedy straw man. From a classical realist perceptive, history is indeed essential for understanding the behavior of states. As Gilpin has argued, the "perceived interests" of states are determined "foremost … [by] the historical experience of society" and the "lessons [that] the nation learned" from those particular experiences." (Gilpin 1981, 51). Yet that does not mean they learn the right (or only possible) lessons. Henry Kissinger argued that a state "achieves identity only through the consciousness of common history.

This is the only 'experience' nations have, their only possibility of learning from themselves. History is the memory of states." But, again, that does not mean they draw the correct conclusions from it. "For the lessons of historical experience, as of personal experience, are contingent." (Kissinger 1957, 331) And as Raymond Aron makes clear, it is essential to recognize the "plurality of the possible interpretations." (Aron [1990] 1983, 39; see also Aron [1948] 1938). Thus, contra Krasner's suggestion, classical realism needs not (indeed it is aware it cannot) derive a singular, correct interpretation of historical events. Nevertheless classical realism understands that (varied) perceptions of past events primordially shape behavior. To understand how states will act we surely must appeal to power – but we also need to know what they want, and why.

Ultimately, Krasner's defense of structural realism boils down to an appeal to parsimony. Here he is in accord with leading contemporary approaches to world politics, which 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, indeed, parsimony and generalizability are most welcome. But note always that parsimony is about *explaining more* with less. Structural Realism has the 'with less' in spades – but it has turned a blind eye as to whether it is 'explaining more' – or even explaining much.

The common rejoinder to this, implicitly by Krasner and more generally by critics of classical realism, is that the alternative is to insist that 'everything matters,' and saying that everything matters is another way of telling us nothing. But again, this rhetoric fails to take seriously the alterative path forward that classical realism suggests. In particular, classical realism urges that we draw on medical analogies rather than physical ones in our discipline. International politics will never be well understood if it is envisioned as social physics. Instead, like doctors assessing patients, it is not that 'everything matters' (although every vital organ surely does matter, and each can be the source of acute distress), but that one needs to know what to look for in each particular case, by drawing on a well deployed (analytical) tool kit, and by understanding which tools are most appropriate for a given setting, in the context of specific observations to be made about a particular patient.

Studying world politics is not easy, and, as a realist might say, wishing that something were so will not make it so. It is a complex, contingent, and often confusing enterprise. And in aspiring to analytical minimalism and the appearance of rigor, letting our reach exceed our grasp will ultimately leave us with empty hands. Better to get them dirty, and recognize that to have any explanatory power, we have to know more than structural realism would allow.

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