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http://issforum.org

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H-**Diplo | ISSF Article Review 36**

Konstantinos Kostagiannis. "Hans Morgenthau and the Tragedy of the Nation-State."
International History Review 36:3 (2014): 513-529. DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2013.828639.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2013.828639

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Originally Published by ISSF on **7 April 2015**
Reissued on 4 October 2015
https://issforum.org/articlereviews/36-hans-morgenthau
http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR36.pdf

The Tragedy of Realism

Since the turn of the millennium, International Relations has been experiencing a revival of realist scholarship. As Konstantinos Kostagiannis writes in his thought-provoking paper on the classical realist Hans J. Morgenthau, part of this revival is due to the establishment of "tragedy as an analytical category and [the discussion of] its contemporary relevance for modern normative international-relations theory" (513). And Kostagiannis makes a significant contribution in further unearthing the prospects of tragedy by interpreting it as a metaphor, used by Morgenthau in his critique of the nation-state.

In his paper, Kostagiannis demonstrates that for Morgenthau, tragedy infiltrated nation-states in the form of *hubris* (arrogance), potentially leading to *harmatia* (the protagonist's error in Greek tragedies) (520); hence, to a series of errors and misinterpretations by nation-states. The tragedy in nation-states lies in the inability of their leaders to produce 'good' political decisions and – even more – to realize this inability. By contrast, politics is for Morgenthau always a choice between evils, and it is the task of wise politicians to choose those policies which produce the least evil outcomes. However, as Kostagiannis writes, partly due to democratic accountability and partly due to the limited imagination of their leaders, nation-states mistake their national

moral code for universalistic ones and, consequently, face the danger of *hubris*, followed by *harmatia*. (517) Kostagiannis primarily refers to Germany in his piece, stressing that Morgenthau used the fate of Germany to demonstrate the dangers of *hubris* to his fellow American citizens. However, he also attacked in many of his works American (foreign) policy making directly, referring to it as either promoting 'isolationism' or 'Wilsonianism.' This depended on the type of foreign policy, which, following Morgenthau, was characterized, respectively, by retreat or a moralistic, universal zeal. As Kostagiannis rightfully stresses, the danger of *hubris*, however, lay not so much in the misperceptions and misjudgments, but in the potential downfall of nation-states. Morgenthau experienced this *nemesis* first-hand with the fall of the Weimar Republic.

However, in his final verdict that Morgenthau's tragedy contributed to a pessimistic world view, Kostagiannis goes too far. (523-24) To be fair, many Morgenthau-interpreters promoted such a reading because of Morgenthau's diction in his English writings or, as it is the case with Kostagiannis's paper, because of a narrow perspective. Certainly, Aristotle and other thinkers of Greek antiquity had a great intellectual influence on Morgenthau. Seán Molloy, Christoph Frei, Richard Ned Lebow, and Anthony Lang have stressed this connection before;[1] also, Morgenthau considered Aristotle's *The Politics* as one of the books that influenced him the most. Why else, would he have given lectures on it since at least 1947 until the late 1970s? But Morgenthau was a child of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* and as much as Aristotle was part of its curriculum, so too was the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and others.[2] It is as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl mentioned with respect tothe circle around the political theorist Hannah Arendt: these were people "who could respond to a quotation from Goethe with a quotation from Heine, who knew German fairy tales."[3] If we bring, therefore, this German *Bildungsbürgertum* life-world into the equation, we get a much more positive picture about Morgenthau's worldview.

Certainly, he was critical about the nation-state, this "blind and potent monster." [4] Not only was nationalism the source for many conflicts (and the Shoah put it on a completely different level), but the nation-state could no longer even satisfy the reason for which Morgenthau had conceded it a right to exist: security. Ever since, Hiroshima and Nagaski were completely destroyed by of atomic bombs, Morgenthau, like many of his fellow

[1] Seán Molloy, "Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the Political Ethics of the Lesser Evil," *Journal of International Political Theory* 5 (1) (2009): 94-112; Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau. An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics. Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and in Duncan Bell, ed., *Political Thought and international Relations. Variations on a Realist Theme*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26-40; Anthony F. Lang, Jr., "Morgenthau, Agency, and Aristotle," in Michael C. Williams, ed., *Realism Reconsidered. The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18-41.

[2] For a discussion of the intellectual kaleidoscope of realist scholars, see Hartmut Behr and Xander Kirke (2014), "The Tale of A Realism in International Relations", *E-International Relations* (2014), http://ow.ly/BO9ej (accessed 16 January 2015).

[3] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xiv.

[4] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics in the Twentieth Century. Volume I. The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 61.

émigré scholars and realist scholars, knew that the nation-state had ceased to be any useful form of human association. Rather, and this is very well demonstrated in William Scheuerman's *The Realist Case for Global Reform*, Morgenthau pledged for a world state, knowing that this would be impossible to achieve in the near future.[5] However, he considered potential ways to achieve it and argued, amongst others, for the creation of a world community. As difficult as this is to achieve, Morgenthau knew that loyalties had to be shifted away from the nation-state and this required the establishment of a world community. That Morgenthau did not perceive this as being altogether impossible becomes obvious when we look closer at his concept of power. As I have elaborated elsewhere,[6] Morgenthau not only conceptualized power in the form of the *animus dominandi* (lust for power), but also pursued a normative concept of power. In reference to Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud and in close agreement with Arendt, Morgenthau understood power as accepting the fate of humans – the fate that Nietzsche identified as eternal recurrence, hence a life-world that in itself is meaningless, unless people give meaning to it – and then start constructing life-worlds together through cooperating with others in order to achieve a common good. To be fair, this is not that obvious in his English writings, but it is in his European writings, where he distinguished between *Macht* and *Kraft* as well as *pouvoir* and *puissance*.

To conclude, Kostagiannis has provided a very thoughtful elaboration of the tragedy of the nation-state. But focusing on Morgenthau's use of tragedy – as important as it is because it helps us to understand some of the problems we still face in the twenty-first century – should not obstruct us from drawing from the impressive *amor mundi* that we find in Morgenthau's work. It is particularly this side of his work that can rejuvenate discussions in International Relations theories because it is one thing to criticize and deconstruct the current political status quo, but it is another thing to actually provide channels to think, imagine, and eventually construct a different reality.

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[5] William E. Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for a Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[6] Felix Rösch, "Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics: Hans Morgenthau's Dualistic Concept of Power?," *Review of International Studies* 40 (2) (2014), 349-365; see also Rösch *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau's Worldview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan forthcoming 2015).