

## The Promises and Pitfalls of Realist Explanations of Power Politics in Europe

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This article critically examines the promises and pitfalls of realist explanations of power politics in Europe. Starting with the pitfalls and drawing on a previous paper about the end of the realist tradition in Europe, Jørgensen argues that realism is a theoretical tradition (among several others) and that as such realism's utility as an explanatory tool is close to zero. By contrast, realist *theories* might have some utility in explaining power politics, not least in applications of balance of power theory, balance of threat theory, theories of alliance politics, power transition theory or theories of foreign policy. Subsequently, the *explanandum*, 'power politics', is characterised as an attractive yet slippery concept that is in severe need of specification. Moreover, the article points out the obvious, specifically that the region in question – Europe – is part of the world and that, when explaining power politics in Europe, several (neo-)realist approaches would highlight the importance of systemic structural factors. Concerning the *promises* of realist explanations, it seems useful to examine the conditions under which the utility of realism in explaining power politics in Europe would increase: i) further gains of the European right and far right; ii) further advances of revisionist Russia; iii) the EU disintegrating, cf. challenges to the euro, Schengen, and exit strategies such as Grexit and Brexit; iv) intra-realist tradition developments include a thorough reconsideration of the realist research agenda, for instance: by means of entering the experience of problem-oriented eclectic approaches, specifically giving up claims about realist supremacy, forgetting the bold claim that only realist theories describe the world as it is, specifying when or where realist theory is relevant and where it is not. The article has three *recommendations*: realists should give up Europe as a region in which realist approaches are relevant (with a few notable exceptions); instead realists could choose global power shifts or regional balances of power in the Far East or the Middle East. The engagement of the US/Russia/Iran/Turkey/Saudi Arabia in the Middle East could be seen as a soft case for realist analysts.

*Keywords*: realism, Europe, power politics

Power politics constantly makes headlines in newspapers and academic journals and, therefore, is a form of politics that seems ubiquitous. Observers of contemporary European (international) politics claim that after being absent for decades, power politics has now returned to Europe. The indicators employed often include Russia's

occupation of parts of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as well as NATO's return to one of the classic objectives of the alliance: 'keeping the Russians out'. In terms of theoretical reflection, power politics is a concept that has always been at the heart of the realist theoretical tradition and, also, among the most contested concepts in the discipline of International Relations.<sup>1</sup>

This article has deliberately fairly modest aims. It is limited to examining the promises and pitfalls of realist explanations of power politics in Europe. Hence, the article does not examine the general qualities of realism or the relevance of realist theories in explaining power politics in the rest of the world or at the systemic level. It does also not engage in a critical review of realist explanations of historical examples of power politics in Europe. The article is informed by my general approach to theoretical orientations, i.e. an approach that is more utilitarian/instrumental than personal identity or belief based. It follows that assessments of all theoretical traditions, not only realism, should be examined for both promises and pitfalls, and the same applies to distinct theories that belong to a given tradition. When we analyse the merits of realism in the context of power politics and Europe, it seems to me we are dealing with three phenomena in decline. The realist tradition seems to come to an end, at least in Europe; power politics has been largely absent in relations among the larger states within the European Union for decades; and Europe has experienced relative decline during the last 100 years.

The article is organised in three main sections. In the first section, I examine the four main pitfalls of realist explanations. One pitfall has to do with the pronounced lack of specification of realism, i.e. the tendency to consider realism a form of timeless wisdom. A second pitfall follows from the widespread reluctance to explicate or specify the notion of power politics. The almost complete lack of acknowledgement that Europe is a hard case for realist explanations is also considered a pitfall. The final pitfall has to do with numbers. There are very few realist scholars in Europe, so explanations of power politics have to be produced elsewhere, and the few realist scholars in Europe have been very reluctant to critically review what has been produced elsewhere. In the second section, I examine the three main promises of realist theories. One of the promises

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<sup>1</sup> M. Wight, *Power Politics*, London: Chatham House, 1946; G. Schwarzenberger, *Power Politics: A Study of World Society*, New York: Praeger, 1941; H.J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, New York: Knopf, 1948; H. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957, pp. 1812–1822; E. B. Haas, 'The balance of power: prescription, concept, or propaganda?', *World Politics*, 1953, Vol. 5, No. 04, pp. 442–447; A. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 1992, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 391–425; S. Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1998; S. Guzzini, 'The different worlds of realism in International Relations', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 2001, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 111–121; S. Guzzini, 'The enduring dilemmas of realism in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 533–568; M. Barnett and R. Duvall, 'Power in international politics', *International Organization*, 2005, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 39–75.

follows from the fact that Europe is not and has not at any time been a power politics free zone. A related promise is derived from the historical dimension, specifically that European politics is changing and especially that the emerging political trends seem to insist on cultivating Hobbesian power politics more than the centrist political trends that for decades have defined Europe and the European Union. Yet another promise is connected with the preparedness of realist scholars to seek alignments with scholars representing other theoretical traditions. The third section includes an outline of four recommendations. Two recommendations suggest that realist scholars should engage more in specification of the scope conditions for realist explanations, specifically concerning the realist research agenda on Europe and the European Union. The third recommendation is to focus on regions in the world that seem more relevant for studies informed by a realist theoretical orientation. The fourth recommendation might be the most difficult to accept, namely to explore the merits of problem oriented analytical eclectic approaches.

## 1. The pitfalls of realist explanations of power politics in Europe

### 1.1. Traditions do not explain

The first pitfall concerns the level of aggregation and explanatory power. Realism is a theoretical tradition (among several other traditions) that consists of several strands of thought and theorising (classical realism, neorealism, neoclassical realism). As such, it seems to me that realism's utility as an explanatory tool of power politics is close to zero. Theoretical traditions and strands of thinking do not explain much if anything. By contrast, sometimes some theories are capable of explaining something.<sup>2</sup> It follows that realist mid-range theories might have some utility in explaining power politics, for instance: balance of power theory, balance of threat theory, theories of alliance politics, theories of foreign policy or theories of power transition. All these theories are very different from each other and built on the basis of different assumptions, concepts, levels of analysis and propositions. Moreover, whatever their differences they are all characterised by the capacity to spin off questions that can be empirically analysed, they have relatively precise propositions and they can be proven wrong and are therefore different from timeless wisdom. In short, references to a broad and vaguely defined 'realism' and to realism as timeless wisdom make a very significant pitfall that invites criticism from analysts with an intellectual 'home' within other theoretical traditions.<sup>3</sup>

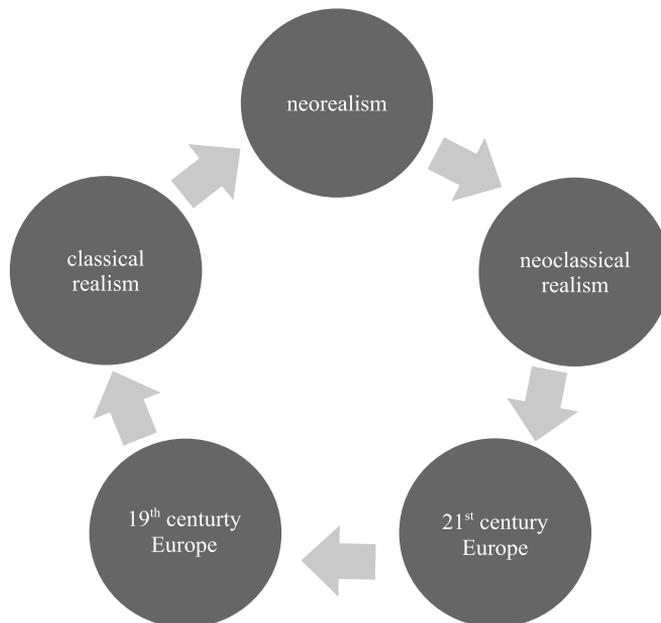
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<sup>2</sup> J. Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Legro and A. Moravcsik, 'Is anybody still a realist?', *International Security*, 1999, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 5–55; R. H. Jackson, *The Global covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

## 1.2. The explanandum is not self-evident

The second pitfall concerns the *explanandum* and especially suggested conceptualisations or explanations of it. Power politics is a state of international affairs but also an attractive, seductive multi-faceted yet slippery concept. It means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Therefore, if we do not explicate the term with some care, we will not be able to properly explain power politics in Europe (or elsewhere) and even more disturbingly, we will not know what exactly we aim at explaining. Moreover, it is well-known that realism has been modelled on 19<sup>th</sup>-century power politics (*Realpolitik*) in Europe, so in a sense we discuss the degree to which realism can explain what it has been derived from. There is a certain circular relationship at play between reality and theoretical reflection, cf. Figure 1.



One part of the problem is that the frequent references to ‘realist foreign policy’ indicate a relatively widespread confusion of the *explanandum* and the *explanans*. While the two are intertwined, realism simply cannot be both *explanandum* and *explanans*, be what it seeks to explain, be power politics, and explain the dynamics of power politics. A second part of the conceptual problem is the widespread casual employment of the concept, i.e. its severe under-specification. A few examples of analysts analysing ‘power politics’ suffice as illustrative examples that help us understand what power politics in Europe might or might not be.

The first example is the good-intended yet casual journalist who, covering European politics, sometimes is tempted to label tough negotiations in the European Union's Council of Ministers 'power politics'. Cases could include the United Kingdom using its veto to block deployments of military forces under EU command; Germany (and others) forcing Greece to adopt taxation measures the Greek government would not otherwise adopt; or Cyprus blocking the EU's opening of the acquis chapter negotiations with Turkey. Even if the employment of 'power politics' spices up reporting on bland negotiations, it hardly amounts to the kind of power politics the notion is usually meant to connote. In the second example, a distinction is being made between the EU and the rest of the world, essentially saying that while power politics is very much present in the world, it is absent in the EU.

'Whereas Western Europe's states have renounced "power politics" among themselves, the rest of the world has done no such thing. The basis of inter-state relations remains remarkably similar to Rousseau's description as the "constant action and reaction of powers in continued agitation". Failure to recognise the persistence of power politics is now among the principal obstacles to Europe's future. It is as if recovery from the nemesis of mid-century has produced hubris towards its end. Europe finds it hard to accept that it must co-exist with the outside world on terms increasingly set not by its own virtuous example of reconciliation among old enemies and the creation of political union, but by states who see little reason to follow it. More fundamental than blueprints and policies for EMU and the EU's enlargement, Europe needs a trustworthy grasp of the world's foreign affairs to which its diplomacy must apply and its statecraft contribute.'<sup>4</sup>

In the third example, analysts play with words analysing not power politics *per se* but 'great power politics' or 'middle power politics'.<sup>5</sup> In the latter case Poland is seen as a middle power. In both cases power politics is associated with a given type of entity, either 'great' or 'middle', and foreign relations among these entities.

In the fourth example, analysts associate humanitarian interventions with power politics, claiming that '[t]he concept of humanitarian intervention is nothing new – it has long been part of the inventory of *European power politics*'.<sup>6</sup> This understanding is very far from English School conceptualisation of humanitarian interventions that are often presented as a means to provide human security and 'save strangers' or as an unwarranted policy that might undermine international order.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> M. Keens-Soper, *Europe in the World: The Persistence of Power Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton, 2003; Joshua B. Spero, *Bridging the European Divide, Middle Power Politics and Regional Security Dilemmas*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Köchler, H., 'Humanitarian intervention in the context of modern power politics', *Studies in International Relations*, 2001, Vol. 26, pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> In the context of the English School, one interesting article examines 'The power politics of European Integration: The EU as a great power manager' (McCourt and Glencross 2011). However, they do not present

With the fifth and final example we get to the case of Russia and those who see Russian behaviour as the comeback of power politics. Perhaps *the Economist* was first, ‘Power politics. Russia will flex its energy muscles’ (November 16, 2006). More recently, the annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine have been presented as ‘Great Power Politics’.<sup>8</sup>

Given these and many more examples, it is clear that the concept of ‘power politics’ has great seductive qualities. It is a concept that is characterised by a certain pull of attraction, especially among realism oriented scholars, journalists and in the world of think-tanks and governmental policy-making. However, the pull of attraction should not substitute the task of specifying what exactly realists aim at explaining. Such a task of explication could begin (but not end) with standard definitions, for instance:

- ‘politics based on the use of military or economic power to influence the actions and decisions of other governments’ (Merriam Webster);
- ‘politics based primarily on the use of power (as military and economic strength) as a coercive force rather than on ethical precepts’ (Merriam Webster);
- Power politics (or, in German, *Machtpolitik*) is a form of international relations in which sovereign entities protect their own interests by threatening one another with military, economic or political aggression (Wiki);
- The international relations theories of realism and neorealism, sometimes called *realpolitik*, advice politicians to explicitly ban absolute moral and ethical considerations from international politics, and to focus on self-interest, political survival, and power politics, which they hold to be more accurate in explaining a world they view as explicitly amoral and dangerous. (Wiki).

The bold claim of realists of various strands of theorising is that there is a power politics to be explained, also in Europe. One would therefore expect a careful explication of the key concept.<sup>9</sup> Without such explication, the critical review of realist explanations is bound to conclude that a second pitfall has been identified.

### 1.3. In Europe

The third pitfall concerns not the status of realism, the notion of power politics but the area where realist theories are applied to or intended to be applied, specifically Europe.

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a realist analysis, so the paper merely documents that realists do not have a monopoly on analysing power politics. On relations between the English School and realism, see: Wight 1991; N. J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; R. H. Jackson, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> H. B. L. Larsen, *Great Power Politics and the Ukrainian Crisis: NATO, EU and Russia after 2014*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Sean Molloy and Alastair Murray thoroughly examine the connections between realism and power politics, the former by employing a genealogical method, the latter by reconstructing realism as an international political theory; S. Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; A. J. Murray, *Reconstructing Realism: Between Power Politics and Cosmopolitan Ethics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Above we saw how Maurice Keens-Soper hinted at the possibility of differentiation and there might be some merit to his approach. However, realists tend to dismiss the option and instead claim that power politics is ubiquitously present across time and space and thus the key characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as well as the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe.

Even if we accept the assumption about Europe being a continent with its international relations determined by a balance of power, problems line up. I will begin with the obvious fact that Europe is part of the world. However, this fact has consequences not least if we want to apply structural realism in studies of power politics in Europe. We would then be bound to begin by examining the structure of the international system which, since 1991, seems not to have changed in any fundamental way. The United States remains the sole superpower. The only potential challengers seem to be China and the European Union, but both are potential challengers only – and in most realist studies the EU drops out because formally it is not a state.<sup>10</sup> Russia seems keen to be a wannabe challenger and requests both the attention and recognition of other great powers.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, except for nuclear capabilities, Russia does not have global reach in terms of force projection. In short, the distribution of power at the systemic level has been a constant for 25 years, so at least analysts of a neorealist orientation should be able to predict the likely power politics behaviour of the European (sub-systemic) great powers.

The states in Europe that historically were called great powers include the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and, occasionally, Italy and the Ottoman Empire. Two of these disappeared about a century ago and four are members of the EU and NATO. While realists do not have radars that can detect the significance of EU membership, they should be able to handle alliance politics. However, while internal alliance politics does not qualify as a tea party, it does also not amount to power politics understood as great power rivalry politics.

In summary, it is difficult to identify a realist consensus understanding of both the global and the sub-systemic (European) configuration of power. It seems that describing the world as it is – a frequent realist call to fame – leads to too many different conclusions.

#### 1.4. Realists lack a critical mass

The fourth pitfall is that in Europe the realist tradition does not have that many divisions (to use one of Stalin's expressions). In a previous paper I analysed how the

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<sup>10</sup> J. M. Grieco, 'The Maastricht Treaty, Economic and Monetary Union and the neo-realist research programme', *Review of International Studies*, 1995, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 21–40; J. Howorth and A. Menon, 'Still not pushing back: why the European Union is not balancing the United States', *Journal of conflict resolution*, 2009; B. R. Posen, ESDP and the Structure of World Power. *The International Spectator*, 2004, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 5–17.

<sup>11</sup> H. B. L. Larsen, op.cit.

realist tradition has come to an end in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Four key indicators prompted me to conclude this:

- There are very few contemporary realists in Europe (documented in TRIPS surveys);
- There are very few realist studies and a declining research agenda. Moreover, the published studies are not widely cited, indicating limited traction in the wider community of IR scholars;
- There is very limited conceptual innovation or generation of theory. 25 years ago Barry Buzan outlined in a creative fashion a reconstructed neorealism.<sup>13</sup> Since then, only a limited number of advances have been made;
- Realist studies have turned meta, i.e. they focus on realism rather than on the dynamics of power politics. Hence, there is an increasingly rich literature on Morgenthau and on other classical realists but henceforth very few focused, structured studies on contemporary politics in Europe or elsewhere;<sup>14</sup>

While there are probably several causes for this state of affairs – which seems to be a constant – one key reason realism has come to an end in Europe is that it has been reduced to a few axioms:

- Make a bold claim that everything that is worthwhile knowing can be explained with reference to balance of power;
- If there is no balance of power detectable on the radar, make an even bolder claim that there is a balance of power anyway;
- Rely on realism as timeless wisdom. The demand for such timeless wisdom is relatively limited;
- The few remaining realists predominantly rely on the import of realist ideas, specifically made in the United States. In short, the import and application of theoretical positions of, for instance, Gideon Rose, Randall Schweller, John Mearsheimer or Jack Snyder, does not suggest much aspiration to leadership or dominance in theorising but does suggest a kind of academic bandwagoning.

A second main reason for the decline of the realist tradition in Europe is that the symbiotic relationship between, on the one hand, theory/analysis and, on the other hand, political/diplomatic practice is largely absent. There is a relative absence of power politics and the associated relative absence of realists and realist studies is

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<sup>12</sup> K. E. Jørgensen, *The end of the realist tradition in Europe*, paper presented at EISA's 9<sup>th</sup> Pan-European Conference on International Relations, Giardini-Naxos, 23–26 September 2015.

<sup>13</sup> B. Buzan, C. A. Jones and R. Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> C. Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001; H. Behr and F. Roesch, *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*, translated from the French by Maeva Vidal, edited and with an Introduction by Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave, 2012; C. Hacke and J. Puglierin, 'John H. Herz: balancing utopia and reality', *International Relations*, 2007, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 367–382; A. Siedschlag (ed.), *Realistische Perspektiven internationaler Politik: Festschrift für Gottfried-Karl Kindermann zum 75. Geburtstag*, Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 2001.

hardly surprising. Of course, European realists could have chosen wider horizons and conducted research on power politics beyond Europe.

## 2. Promises of realist explanations of power politics in Europe

Having critically reviewed the pitfalls of realist explanations of power politics, this section is devoted to the promises, and three seem to be particularly important.

### 2.1. Power politics did not wither away

First, there seem to be some instances of power politics to explain, i.e. politics based primarily on the use of or threat of use of power (military and economic strength) as a coercive means to achieve foreign policy objectives. Europe is not a continent that is entirely free from this form of politics and perhaps has never been.

- Historically, until WW2 the European states system provided the power politics reality that is reflected in the notion of power politics;
- The Cold War, i.e. power politics par excellence;
- Colonial wars, instances of security dilemmas such as the Aegean security dilemmas, invasions, e.g. Cyprus 1974;
- The dissolution of Yugoslavia, especially the international dimension of the wars;
- The wars in the Falkland Islands, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine were/are fought to achieve foreign policy objectives;<sup>15</sup>
- NATO drills in Portugal, signalling internally and externally the alliance's solidarity; daily practices of Russia–NATO dog fights in airspace;
- In terms of defence spending, the combined EU-28 is a clear global no. 2 and thus in principle capable of engaging in power politics.

Examples of Europe conducting power politics include the EU economic sanctions vis-à-vis Iran, Belarus and Russia as well as Russian sanctions against Turkey. Actually, the incident at Pristina International Airport of 12 June 1999 might have been the first example of Russian employment of more traditional power politics military instruments to achieve political objectives. The proxy war in Syria has demonstrated instances of European engagement. Russia is in alignment with the Assad government, Iran and Iraq, whereas the United States has initiated an international coalition that includes European states and a number of states in the Middle East.

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<sup>15</sup> M. E. Becker, *et al.*, 'Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens', *European Security*, 2015, Vol. 25 (1), pp. 1–22.

## 2.2. Power politics is what states make of it; states are what voters and governments make of them

The second promise is very different and actually only a potential promise. It should be discussed in terms of the conditions under which realist approaches would gain utility in explaining power politics in Europe. Some of these conditions have to do with the changing politics in Europe. Developments that would increase the utility of realist theories include:

- Further gains of the European right and far right. Hence, realists could decide to keep their analytical gun powder dry and be patient. In about five years, realism might be relevant again (or it might not). The objectives of the far right are clear: destruction of the European Union, brewing politics on borders or border disputes, (temporary) alignments with Russia in order to roll back what exists of liberal advances (cf. Hungary, Turkey, Poland).
- The EU falling apart (challenges include the euro, Schengen, various exit strategies: Grexit, Brexit). While these challenges are very real and should not be underestimated, we should not forget that the EU has been challenged before: de Gaulle in the 1960s, German unification in 1989 and very sizeable Moscow-loyal Communist parties during most of the Cold War. It is somewhat ironic that it is now the Right that is fond of Moscow, even if other parties also have a fair share of Putin-verstehers, e.g. Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) and Horst Seehofer (CSU).

## 2.3. Can Realists practice what they study: alignments

The third promise has to do with how realists choose to navigate in the landscape of the discipline of International Relations, specifically the degree to which realists seek alignment with scholars who represent other theoretical orientations. Promising developments within or around the realist tradition include a number of composite approaches. Thus, Samuel Barkin demonstrates how constructivist commitments and realist theories are not competitive but compatible or complementary.<sup>16</sup> He is thereby in line with others who argue that constructivism provides a distinct take on issues of ontology and epistemology yet can shape most if not all substantive theoretical traditions. Previously we have witnessed how both positivism and rational choice were capable of shaping a broad range of substantive traditions. In this context it is worthwhile noting that classical realism had very little to do with the positivist or rationalist underpinnings that characterise most conceptions of neorealism and the mainstream of neoclassical realism. Henry Nau provides a second example, showing the value of combining factors of identity and power, specifically in a study

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<sup>16</sup> J. S. Barkin, 'Realist constructivism', *International Studies Review*, 2003, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 325–342.

of American foreign policy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> The third example of alignment is Alexander Wendt, who in his main book, especially in the inclusion of the Hobbesian culture of anarchy, is quite close to the very heart of the realist tradition and whose best-known article carries the telling title ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’ (1992).<sup>18</sup> In short, power politics is one state of affairs but only one among several possible states of affairs. This is very far from the monotone repetition of timeless wisdom à la realism: ‘there is one and only one state of affairs’. The two final examples of composite approaches concern theorists who make a plea for more nuance than axiomatic approaches allow. Barry Buzan extended the number of dimensions of systemic structure from three to five, thereby increasing the relevance and fruitful applicability of neorealism in empirical research.<sup>19</sup> Glenn Snyder draws also on neorealism yet uses the perspective to underpin his middle-range theory of alliance politics (both alliance and adversary games), thereby enabling fruitful connections between a strand of realism (neorealism), mid-range theory and theory-informed empirical research.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Recommendations

Given the state of affairs within the realist tradition in Europe, it seems appropriate to suggest four recommendations. First, realists should in many ways give up Europe as a region that is relevant for the realist research agenda on power politics. Most European states have renounced ‘power politics’ among themselves, and realists imitating a situation where states have not renounced it does not contribute to the credibility or relevance of theories within the realist tradition. Exceptions to renouncement of power politics exist, yes, but even the Greek–Turkish security dilemma is no longer what it used to be.<sup>21</sup> What remains on the agenda is to identify the factors that explain this exception to renouncement. Realists, who generally are dismissive of the significance of international institutions often make an exception and point to the role of NATO, often, however, with the important addition that it is not NATO per se but the role of the United States within NATO that causes the renouncement of power politics. Realists tend to agree that the causes of renouncement do not include liberal factors such as the European Union, dense interdependence, democratic governance across

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<sup>17</sup> H. R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> B. Buzan, C. A. Jones and R. Little, op.cit.

<sup>20</sup> G. H. Snyder, ‘Alliance theory: A neorealist first cut’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1990, pp. 103–123.

<sup>21</sup> T. Couloumbis and K. Ifantis, ‘Altering the security dilemma in the Aegean: Greek strategic options and structural constraints, A realist approach’, *The Review of International Affairs*, 2002, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 1–25; M. Aydin and K. Ifantis (eds), *Turkish-Greek Relations: The Security Dilemma in the Aegean*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.

the continent, or the European institutions. In summary, the renouncement of power politics is usually rejected and therefore not explained.

Second, concerning the process of European integration and the EU generally, realists have missed the boat, time and again. They have spent time on explaining why not more has been achieved, and for more than five decades they have been hopelessly behind in terms of understanding European dynamics. The driving factors of integration have been consistently underestimated. Prominent examples include Joseph Grieco, Robert Gilpin, Alfred Pijpers and others.<sup>22</sup> Of course, realists can join the various commentators who do business in forecasting the dissolution of the European Union or the decline of Europe, but apart from the fame that is hardly an attractive option for scholars with an interest in scientific analytical research.<sup>23</sup> The recommendation is therefore that realists would benefit from acknowledging that realist theories are relevant only under certain conditions and that such conditions do not exist within security communities or highly integrated areas such as the EU. Instead, realists could contemplate if they want to follow the lead of the few realists who consider the EU's engagement in world power politics, for instance, analysing if the EU balances the US (Posen 2003), the EU's increased employment of coercive economic means (sanctions), the EU's (fairly efficient) use of the UNSC to coerce countries, cf. cases such as Serbia, Iran and Russia.<sup>24</sup> If the theoretical point of departure is classical realism, it would even be possible to analyse the morality of Europe's employment of power. In summary, it seems that realist theories are potentially capable of generating relevant questions thereby contributing a profoundly updated research agenda.

Third, rather than spend too much time on the European case, choose other cases! Realists in Europe could engage in analysing global power shifts. It is about time to produce some realist studies with a critical edge, for instance, of the (so-called) global multipolar system that scholars, impressed by BRICS or TIMSK, are keen to highlight.<sup>25</sup> The BRICS and TIMSK include regional great powers but hardly any great powers with a global reach. Concerning military power, realist would, as an automatic reflex, look for force projection capabilities with a global reach and find very few. In terms of military spending the United States is a clear no. 1 and the EU-28 is a clear global no. 2. Moreover, regional balances of power also cry for comprehensive realist

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<sup>22</sup> J. M. Grieco, 'The Maastricht Treaty, Economic and Monetary Union and the neo-realist research programme', *Review of International Studies*, 1995, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 21–40; R. G. Gilpin, 'No one loves a political realist', *Security Studies*, 1996, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 3–26; A. Pijpers, *European Political Cooperation and the Realist Paradigm. The Future of European Political Cooperation. Essays on Theory and Practice*, London: Macmillan, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> B. S. Thornton, *Decline & Fall: Europe's Slow Motion Suicide*, New York: Encounter Books, 2013; S. M. Walt, *The coming erosion of the European Union*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/18/the-coming-erosion-of-the-european-union> (accessed on 22 March 2016).

<sup>24</sup> B. R. Posen, op.cit. Given the assigned veto power, coercing Russia via the UNSC is a no go option.

<sup>25</sup> TIMSK is a kind of second league global emerging economies: Turkey, Indonesia, Mexico and South Korea.

studies. The Far East appears as a region characterised by significantly increased insecurities. Similarly, the Middle East seems to be shorthand for a configuration of powers, including the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel. It is almost 30 years ago that Stephen Walt published his analysis of the balance of threat in the Middle East, and an update seems long overdue.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth recommendation is to enter the experience of cultivating problem-oriented analytical eclectic approaches, even if this implies the three following retreats.<sup>27</sup>

- Give up claims about realist analytical supremacy, perhaps considering it a tactical withdrawal. These days it is only outdated textbooks that present realism as a dominant theoretical tradition.
- Forget the bold claim that only realist theories describe the world as it is, not least because realist studies show too much variation in the identification of ‘the world as it is’. Hence, credibility is exceptionally low.
- Specify when and where realist theories are relevant for guiding empirical research – but also when and where they are irrelevant. This would help avoid cases where only very thin lines of communication exist between a given realist proposition and a given empirical observation.

It seems to me that the costs of abandoning these unsustainable positions are easily balanced by the strategic benefits of increased relevance, potential for conceptual or theoretical innovation and thereby, possibly, the very survival of the realist theoretical tradition.

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<sup>26</sup> S. M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> R. Sil and P. J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

