

What is a Realist?

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Political leaders are often accused of cynicism in their handling of international relations. Others see such behavior as no more than “realism.” But what exactly does this term mean? Two recent works reconsider the origins of the concepts of *Realpolitik* and geopolitics and challenge the dichotomy between values and interests.

Reviewed:

- John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Olivier Zajec, *Nicholas John Spykman. L’invention de la géopolitique américaine* [Nicholas John Spykman: The Invention of American Geopolitics]. Paris, Presses de l’Université Paris Sorbonne, 2016.

If former French Prime Minister François Fillon is to be believed, one effect of the tragic civil war afflicting Syria since 2011 has been to shed light on the radical discrepancy between Vladimir Putin’s conception of international relations, on the one hand, and views prevailing among Western diplomats, on the other. Whereas “America and its European allies,” by refusing to intervene militarily against jihadists on the grounds that doing so would strengthen Bashar al-Assad’s dictatorial regime, “wrapped themselves in a moral posture that was both irreproachable and ineffective,” “only one power displayed realism: Russia.” The Russians did not hesitate to send fighter jets to pound Islamist rebels, even if the result was numerous civilian casualties. For Fillon, the reference to Russian “realism” clearly has a positive connotation, in contrast to his disdain for the Western “posture” which, while “irreproachable” on paper, is nevertheless “ineffective” on the ground.¹

By contrasting Russia’s sense of “reality” to the West’s supposed penchant for “morality,” Fillon replays a dialectic that is as old as the study of international relations itself. This field, which emerged as an autonomous discipline in the English-speaking world in the second half of the twentieth century, remains to this day shaped by several competing paradigms, the most prominent of which is indeed the so-called “realist” approach. This paradigm, which was long dominant, is typically described as rooted in a vision of international relations as ontologically conflictual and as the natural outcome of power relations between states. Inspired by Machiavelli and Hobbes, realism emphasizes the concept of power and the egotistical character of state actors defending their national interests without regard for those of others. In this way, it stands in radical opposition to the competing paradigm, which critics call “idealist” and advocates described as “liberal,” which holds that

¹ François Fillon, “Face à Daesh, une seule puissance a fait preuve de réalisme: la Russie,” *Marianne*, April 1, 2016.

the international stage, rather than being condemned to anarchy and governed by the principle that might makes right, is a space of potentially peaceful cooperation between actors motivated by shared values and structured by effective international laws.

Yet the fact remains that such Manichean descriptions, the pedagogical value of which is undeniable, have the pernicious effect of erasing the subtleties and ambiguities inherent in any theory, in a way that ultimately obscures their meaning. This is true of the realist paradigm, the complexity and diversity of which are illuminated by two recent studies, breaking with a tendency to neglect these qualities. The first, by John Bew, who teaches in the department of War Studies at King's College London, retraces the poorly known history of the concept of *Realpolitik*, the German term that gradually came to be used by the rest of the world to refer to a cynical foreign policy founded on the cold calculation of interest, independent of moral considerations.² The second, by Olivier Zajec, who teaches political science at the University of Lyon III, follows the trajectory of Nicholas John Spykman (1893-1943), a sociologist by training who, in the first half of the twentieth century, became a founder of the realist school when he introduced the United States to the geopolitical method.³ Both books emphasize the fact that the origins of the realist approach are more diverse than it would seem and ask us to consider this paradigm in a new light.

To What Does *Realpolitik* Refer?

Bew's study of the genesis of the concept of *Realpolitik* is all the more necessary given that, though the word has entered common usage, rare are those who know from whence it came and the unusual paths through which it has spread across the world, though at the price of a significant modification of its meaning. Assessments of the term have also fluctuated: long regarded with fear and reprobation, *Realpolitik* tends in our day to enjoy an increasingly positive connotation. Indeed, it is even seen as synonymous with "good sense," in contrast to the purported "naiveté" of which "idealists" of all confessions render themselves guilty when, in the name of lofty principles, they become responsible for any number of disasters. As foils, one could invoke, in this context, the American neoconservatives who were responsible for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which was supposed to bring democracy to the Middle East or, in a narrowly French context, the example of the philosopher and media celebrity Bernard Henri-Lévy who, in 2011, campaigned to overthrow the Libyan dictator Muammar Kaddafi.

The history of the concept of *Realpolitik* further testifies to the way in which a term, as it passes from one author to another, acquires new meanings and, as it moves forward in time, becomes wrapped in different and contradictory connotations, until it has little in common with its original definition. Studying this history thus leads to many surprises. The first is that the concept of *Realpolitik*, which is now seen as radically opposed to the "idealist" or "liberal" paradigm in the study of international relations, was paradoxically forged in the mid-nineteenth century by an avowedly liberal revolutionary propagandist who maintained that ideals were crucial to politics. It was, in fact, in 1853 that the term first appeared in the writings of the journalist and Saxon activist August Ludwig von Rochau (1810-1873), who used it in his book, *Foundations of Realpolitik*, the second volume of which appeared in

² John Bew, *Realpolitik. A History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

³ Olivier Zajec, *Nicholas John Spykman. L'invention de la géopolitique américaine*, Paris, Presses de l'Université Paris Sorbonne, 2016

1868.⁴ Reconsidering the failure of the “Springtime of the Peoples” of 1848, in which he had participated, and particularly the inability of German liberal nationalists to unify successfully the various German states, he called upon his allies to abandon a “policy of feelings” (*Gefühlspolitik*) or “principles” (*Prinzipienpolitik*) and to convert themselves to what he dubbed—using a neologism—*Realpolitik*. Yet in his mind, this did not imply that one should abandon feelings and principles; it meant, rather, that these were insufficient for building an effective politics. *Realpolitik*, as Rochau theorized it, which Bew calls the “real *Realpolitik*” and which he would like to see rehabilitated, is, in this way, less about foreign than domestic policy.

Rochau notes that *Realpolitik* is founded, for better or for worse, on the principle that might makes right, which “dominates the inner life of a state in the same way that the law of gravity dominates the physical world.” While he remained convinced of the importance of ideas to politics, he nevertheless emphasized the fact that it is not to their correctness that ideas owe their force—the proof being that a simplistic and fallacious ideology is often more powerful and effective than sensible and coherent discourses. Thus for Rochau, the point is not to abandon one’s ideals, but rather to understand that their nobility and rightness are no guarantee of their success. If ideas are to triumph, many other factors must be taken into consideration. These are less exalted, but every bit as important as the balance of political, economic, and social power. *Realpolitik*, according to Rochau, is thus the art of the possible and of compromise. To make their dream a reality, it was not enough for the partisans of German unification to theorize the benefits of such an endeavor. It was also imperative that they meticulously analyze the social, economic, intellectual, and geographic contexts in which action was pursued to ensure that it successfully achieved its goal.⁵

The Americanization of *Realpolitik*

It did not take long, however, for the concept of *Realpolitik* to escape its inventor. The term, which was appropriated by the German nationalist and anti-Semitic theorist Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896), who transposed it into the analysis of international relations, provided fertile terrain for elaborating his idea of “power politics” (*Machtpolitik*) and “world politics”/“global policy” (*Weltpolitik*), which were fashionable in the finally unified Germany of Wilhelm II. In Treitschke’s hands, the term’s nationalist dimension came to prevail over the liberal dimension, which Rochau had forced to cohabit. Gradually, notably in the writings of the historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954), *Realpolitik* would become synonymous with reason of state (*Staatsräson*), offering a cheap justification of German imperialism in the name of higher imperatives that no moral order could challenge.

It is not surprising that, at the same time, a contrary dynamic was underway in the English-speaking as well as the French-speaking world,⁶ where, by the end of the nineteenth century, there emerged a radical critique of *Realpolitik*, which was conflated with Prussian

⁴ August Ludwig von Rochau, *Grundsätze der Realpolitik. Angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands*, vol. I, Stuttgart, Karl Göpel, 1859; vol. II, Heidelberg, J. C. B. Mohr, 1868.

⁵ On the nature of Rochau’s *Realpolitik*, see Natascha Doll, *Recht, Politik und “Realpolitik” bei August Ludwig von Rochau (1810-1873): Ein wissenschaftsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Politik und Recht im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 2005; and Federico Trocini, *L’invenzione della “Realpolitik” e la scoperta della “legge del potere.” August Ludwig von Rochau tra radicalismo et nazional-liberalismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

⁶ One of the most regrettable features of Bew’s study is precisely the fact that it does not consider the French-speaking world, which would have undoubtedly enriched its analysis.

militarism, of which Otto von Bismarck soon was considered the perfect embodiment. In London and Washington, *Realpolitik* became synonymous with amorality and the idea that the end justified the means, even if this meant violating universally recognized rules, such as the respect for national sovereignty and free trade.

Yet Bew shows that the term, while it long maintained its pejorative connotations in the United Kingdom, would gradually be appropriated by Americans who, cautiously and prudently at first, then with greater deliberateness and frequency, would ultimately identify explicitly with the concept, though at the price of some misunderstandings concerning the term itself. Thus during the First World War, the journalist Walter Lippman (1889-1974), who later coined the term “Cold War,” appealed to his fellow citizens to display “a bit more *realpolitik*,” specifically by breaking with an outdated isolationism that had become counterproductive. But it was during the Cold War that the “Americanization” of *Realpolitik* reached its apogee, thanks to figures such as Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980), the tireless critic of the “four demons of American foreign policy” that were, in his eyes, “utopianism, sentimentalism, legalism, and neo-isolationism”; George F. Kennan (1904-2005), who theorized “containment” with the Soviet Union; and Henry Kissinger (1923-present), a self-proclaimed disciple of Metternich, with whom the concept would come to be almost automatically associated, even if it was only rarely that he explicitly invoked it. Inevitably, much ink has been spilled over the German origins of many of these American apostles of *Realpolitik*, beginning with Morgenthau and Kissinger, both of whom found refuge in the United States after fleeing the Nazis’ anti-Semitic persecutions; some accused them of transposing, perhaps unconsciously, dangerously Germanic habits of thought into American academic discourse. The same reproach was leveled at the sociologist Nicholas John Spykman, despite the fact that he was of Dutch origin.

The Origins of Geopolitics

The biographical study that Olivier Zajec devotes to him offers a stimulating counterpoint to Bew’s. By reconsidering the genesis of American geopolitics, it sheds light on another source of the realist paradigm. Geopolitics, while often associated with *Realpolitik*, cannot be totally conflated with it. The two concepts are, however, similar in a number of respects, starting with the fact that their origins can be traced back to nineteenth-century Germany. They were then exported into other western languages, with the notable difference that *Realpolitik*, which refers to a state of mind, continued to be spelled in German, unlike *Geopolitik*, which refers to an academic discipline and which was soon transposed into the primary languages of scholarly research (*géopolitique*, geopolitics, *geopolitica*, etc.). But whereas *Realpolitik* first appeared in mid-nineteenth-century liberal circles, geopolitics, which traces its roots back to the very imperialistic *Politische Geographie* of the geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), who invented the concept of “living space” (*Lebensraum*), did not really develop until the 1930s, thanks to the Nazi general-geographer Karl Haushofer (1869-1946)⁷. Needless to say, the prospect of this concept acclimatizing itself to the United States was never particularly auspicious. It owes much to the work of Nicholas John Spykman who, despite being only marginally identified with this discipline, was soon regarded as one of its primary American practitioners. Far from being positive, the label of “geopolitician” resulted in considerable criticism and misunderstandings in his adoptive country where, even

⁷ On the geopolitical thought of Karl Haushofer, see the recent study by Holger H. Herwig, *The Demon of Geopolitics, How Karl Haushofer “Educated” Hitler and Hess*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.

to this day, he is often described as at best a Machiavellian—hardly a laudatory term on that side of the Atlantic—and, at worst, as a scandalous imitator of the European geographers who were coopted by Nazism. This is because geopolitics, which tends to subordinate political decision-making to the constraints of geographical milieu, and thus to value a form of determinism at the expense of idealism of any kind, is the perfect incarnation of the worst of the realist paradigm, namely a vision of a world bereft of any scruples and rejecting the ability of human beings to become actors in their own history.

What is striking about Spykman's academic trajectory is the evolution of his main interests, which at first glance appear very far-flung: after writing a dissertation on Georg Simmel's sociology, which he defended at Berkeley in 1923, he became an East coast specialist of international relations, a field he helped to establish as the driving force behind the creation in 1935 of the *Yale Institute of International Studies* (YIIS). The latter foreshadowed the emergence of think tanks, which, in the United States, far more than elsewhere, contribute to the formation of the nation's foreign policy. By emphasizing the role of geography in international relations, he became, particularly in his final work, the pioneer of American geopolitics. The first quality of Zajec's work is that it shows the coherence and continuity between these different phases in Spykman's intellectual life, of which only the latter is truly well known: far from having abandoned sociology for international relations and then for geopolitics, Spykman, according to his biographer, effectuated a "*translatio studii*," which consisted in applying the methods of the former to the latter. Where Simmelian sociology focused on individual interactions in order to understand civil society, Spykman studied interactions between states, which he compared to individuals in order to shed light on international dynamics: "one must consider Spykman's geopolitical quadriptych as an esoterically Simmelian macroscope, in which political units, instead of individuals, are analyzed in an international society conceived as a projection of the totality of state-based human groups" (p. 535). By connecting in this way the Spykman of the 1930s and 40s, who is better known, to the Spykman who was still infatuated with sociology of the 1950s—and who has been forgotten—Zajec has achieved a veritable Copernican revolution in our understanding of his oeuvre.

Prussian or Simmelian?

Until now, Spykman has been considered primarily from the standpoint of his last two books, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, published in 1942, and *The Geography of the Peace*, which appeared posthumously in 1944.⁸ Yet given the importance that Spykman attached to the concepts of power and conflict, they have often been reduced to the manifestation of a cynical and amoral form of *Realpolitik*, as the works' sociological background has been ignored. Thus Edward Mead Earle (1894-1954) went so far as to characterize Spykman's thought as "American Prussianism" and maintained that were America to follow its aggressive prescriptions, the country would "lose not only its shirt, but its soul." Yet Zajec shows that these unabashedly bellicose texts from the 1940s, take on, when viewed from the perspective of the Simmelian background elaborated in the 1920s, a very different hue: the centrality of conflict to Spykman's geopolitical theory is merely the counterpart to its centrality to Simmel's sociology, in which conflict is considered as a fundamental form of sociability, which is neither necessarily violent nor nefarious. Zajec concludes that all things considered, "Spykman is more neo-Kantian than neo-Prussian." In

⁸ Zajec has recently completed a richly annotated French translation of this classic geopolitical work: *La Géographie de la paix*, in *Res Militaris, Revue européenne d'études militaires*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014.

this respect, Bew's readers can only be struck by the similarity between Spykman's apology of power, upon which "all civilized life rests in the last resort," and Rochau's observation that the law of the strongest "dominates the inner life of the state in the same way that the law of gravity dominates the physical world." In both instances, we are dealing with a realistic but in no way cynical perspective on the essential social role of power relationships. Yet recognizing this fact, far from precluding an idealist perspective, is, to the contrary, the indispensable precondition to one. Spykman's own example attests to this: though a committed realist, he was also, during the interwar years, a fellow traveler of the League of Nations: "never seeing the hiatus between these two dimensions as insurmountable, the Yale professor advanced along the crest separating two equally deep chasms: legal idealism and realist determinism, a hallucinatory fascination with the future and a morbid stupefaction with the past" (p. 540).

To grasp the ambiguity and complexity of Spykman's thought, it is thus necessary to return to its origins. But—and this is Zajec's second contribution—a more astute reading is required of his final works which, despite their fame, are nevertheless highly problematic. Thus the concept of *Rimland*, to which Spykman's geopolitical thought is often reduced, appears only in *The Geography of Peace*, which was published in 1944, a year after the author's death. Carefully retracing the way that the dead professor's colleagues assembled this work out of notes he had left behind, Zajec explains its problematic character, namely the fact that it was largely rewritten, and not without distorting certain features of the nominal author's thought. Indeed, the aim of Spykman's colleagues was to erase his negative image as a "geopolitician," resulting from his previous book, lest it taint the Institute's image and to ensure its financial viability and influence by safeguarding its respectability. This is why the image of Spykman and his thought, which for the most part is founded on a single posthumous work, required serious cleaning up—a task of which Zajec has successfully acquitted himself.

Reading Bew's and Zajec's books side by side provides a powerful incentive to rethink the often simplistic categories that still structure the study of international relations. They contribute notably to blurring—but not effacing—the traditional opposition between "realist" and "idealist" or "liberal" paradigms by showing how the concepts (such as *Realpolitik and Geopolitik*) and the men (Rochau and Spykman) who elaborated them were often navigated from one shore to the other rather than establishing themselves immovably on one or the other.⁹ These authors also encourage us to be wary of radical dichotomies and hasty analyses which, by overemphasizing the differences between these paradigms, overlook their compatibility and the frequent need to reconcile them if one seeks to draw out the best qualities of each. This need is all the more pressing in international relations since ideals, as immaterial as they may be, are nevertheless as much a part of reality as the individuals who promote them. It is thus incumbent upon any serious realist to take ideals into account and, rather than opposing them to material reality, to show how they interact with it.

⁹ On the moral and ethical dimension of American realism, see, notably, the pioneering study by Joe H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists. Political Realism, Responsible Power and American Culture in the Nuclear Age*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1991.

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