Felix Rösch, *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau’s Worldview*


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Political Realism is enjoying a resurgence of interest today, as thinkers inspired by the work of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss take up the question of what the nature of “politics” is exactly, whether it is autonomous, and how it relates to other disciplines. In response, others have argued that today’s realists would do well to reconsider earlier thinkers from within the realist tradition. In particular, Scheuerman has recently argued that the thought of Hans J. Morgenthau still has much to offer us today. Within this context, Felix Rösch’s recently published *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau’s Worldview* will be useful for enriching our understanding of Morgenthau as well as instructive in how to become better practitioners of international politics.

Rösch argues that Morgenthau’s particular understanding of political realism will help international relations to regain its normative qualities as a discipline (10, 11). But in order to make sense of Morgenthau’s realism, Rösch contends that one must properly and comprehensively understand Morgenthau’s worldview. To do so requires showing how that worldview was not only shaped by Morgenthau’s early intellectual experiences in Weimar Germany but, more strongly, how that worldview “never went much beyond what [Morgenthau] had basically said and formulated during his time in Central Europe” (5, 11, 15). Rösch summarises the key ideas of Morgenthau’s worldview as a criticism of modernity and a commitment to *humanitas* (10), meaning a commitment to the humanities such that one becomes aware of oneself as a personality and experiences oneself as a human being (9).

Rösch organises his analysis of Morgenthau’s worldview according to three Bourdieuan “schemes” (17): Perception (Ontology), Thought (Epistemology), and Action (Agency), each of which receives a chapter-length treatment and in which Rösch reinterprets some core concepts of Morgenthau’s political realism. Bookending these chapters is a detailed introductory chapter that contextualises Morgenthau’s childhood and intellectual development in Germany and an epilogue that serves as a coda to Rösch’s project. That contextualisation, obviously necessary for Rösch to make his case that Morgenthau never really went beyond his origins as a Central European intellectual, is impressive. Rösch demonstrates thorough and deep research into the young Morgenthau as he traces Morgenthau’s debts to various intellectual centres of gravity from fin-de-siècle Europe and Weimar Germany,
including Nietzsche (34), Freud (36–37), Weber (30), Simmel (28–30, 35, 38–39), Mannheim (28, 31, 35–36), Sinzheimer (31–32), Kelsen (33), and Schmitt (32–33). Rösch uses his research into the Morgenthau Nachlass to enrich our understanding of Morgenthau’s early intellectual genealogy. Rösch also rightly situates Morgenthau as a representative of the German educated middle class or Bildungsbürgertum, an overlooked recognition that provides important background to his early intellectual identity (22). Rösch synthesises his original and significant research into Morgenthau’s early intellectual formation with existing recent secondary literature and sets himself up well to deliver on his promise to show us that Morgenthau was a distinctively Central European thinker.

The second chapter, “perception,” focuses on reinterpreting the concepts of power and politics. Although Morgenthau is typically thought to have conceived power and politics in terms of domination, selfishness, and desire, Rösch argues that Morgenthau actually complemented this better-known “empirical” concept of power, “pouvoir” (54), with a second “normative” concept, “puissance” (57). This latter concept is unmistakably Arendtian and Rösch is explicit about this, using Arendt’s definition of power as “the ability to act in concert” (61) to bring Morgenthau’s own ideas into sharper relief: Morgenthau too, Rösch argues, urged that human relations ought to be cooperative rather competitive and domineering. Rösch then uses this distinction to shed new light on the already well-documented dialogue Morgenthau had with Carl Schmitt over the nature of the political, arguing that Morgenthau’s concept of puissance was intended to reestablish the political as a dialogical rather than an antagonistic sphere (72).

The third chapter, “thought,” takes up Morgenthau’s criticism of legal positivism (77) and behaviourism or “scientism” (83). The substance of Rösch’s arguments will be familiar, as they cover similar ground as Bain, Williams, Scheuerman, and others have. Morgenthau worried that statutory positivism and behaviourism were “unable to depict the scope of human affairs” accurately (79). To rely exclusively on these modes would be hubris: political acts, calculated on a misrepresentation of reality and a false causal certitude, would breed immoderate overreach by political actors and, as a result, their acts would likely backfire against their motivating intentions, no matter how noble those intentions might have been in the first place (83, 116, 141). What Rösch adds to these existing accounts is a level of depth. Rösch traces the early emergence and evolution of Morgenthau’s concerns about scientism using his research into Morgenthau’s early intellectual formation. Rösch concludes from Morgenthau’s concerns about scientism that for Morgenthau knowledge is always contextual, that “absolute truth was for Morgenthau neither possible nor did he aspire to achieve it” (95-96, also 79, 93). Morgenthau appears to be a sort of cultural relativist and his views end up sounding similar at times to Isaiah Berlin’s form of pluralism.

The fourth chapter “focuses on the actual political agency of Morgenthau” (108) as he “became a national figure” (140). It demonstrates the practical impact of the preceding two chapters’ reflections on perception and thought. In this chapter too, Rösch employs Arendt to elucidate what Morgenthau intended because “both were educated in the same intellectual tradition” (108). Rösch analyses how Morgenthau attempted to counteract the illegitimate use of power (pouvoir) and the immoderation resulting from the Western scientistic belief in the universal validity and realisability of its political values (109, 116, 141). Rösch shows how Morgenthau became
a political activist and public dissident by – among other things – arguing on
television with William F. Buckley about the folly of Vietnam (122), anticipating in
correspondence German student unrest in the late 60s (124), and insisting in an open
letter to The New York Times that politicians seek greater concrete knowledge before
taking action (136). Rösch convincingly shows how deeply committed Morgenthau
was to free public dissent and that such dissent was imperative to the preservation of
the common good (133). Morgenthau believed that this public freedom was vital to
protect liberal democracy from degenerating into totalitarianism (129).

In his epilogue, Rösch takes up again his argument that Morgenthau remained
an interwar Central European thinker, marginalised by his “alienated” life in the
United States (143–144). He concludes with a call on the discipline of international
relations to recognize the normative nature of their vocation and to take action as
public figures, as Morgenthau once had (159).

In his analysis, Rösch focuses on Morgenthau’s European-era writings and
his more theoretical American writings, such as La notion du “politique” and
Science: Servant or Master. Politics among Nations, which Morgenthau revised
continuously throughout his American life (significantly revised editions appeared
With this focus, Rösch gives the impression that Morgenthau saw Politics among
Nations and its famous Six Principles of Realism as a mistake (e.g. 56–57, 143). Yet
biographically this diminished focus on Politics among Nations is hard to reconcile
with Morgenthau’s pride in its “unprecedented success” (148). The argument that
Morgenthau was marginalised and alienated as a scholar in America (17–19, 36ff.
144ff.) is similarly hard to reconcile with Morgenthau’s “brilliant academic career”
spanning many of America’s best universities and that Politics among Nations “had
more adoptions than all other textbooks taken together and more than twice as many
as its nearest competitor” (148).

Beyond this biographical tension, Politics among Nations and its Six Principles
must also have reflected the substance of Morgenthau’s worldview. It is important
to determine how Rösch’s interpretation of Morgenthau’s worldview fits with what
Morgenthau argued in Politics among Nations. Two points stand out. The first deals
with the central conceptual opposition of chapter two: pouvoir versus puissance.
There, Rösch argues that Morgenthau “distinguished between power and violence”
(61) and that “only when people congregated to pursue their interests in the form
of dialogue did Morgenthau speak of politics (144, cf. 155). Yet this interpretation
seems to stand in tension with Morgenthau’s definition in Politics among Nations
that realism’s “signpost” to navigate international politics is “the concept of interest
defined in terms of power” (his Second Principle of Realism) and that “power may
comprise anything that establishes and maintains control of man over man…from
physical violence to the most subtle of psychological ties…” (his Third Principle
of Realism) – not to mention his remark that politics must be complemented by the
principles of other value spheres because “a man who was nothing but ‘political man’
would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints” (his Sixth
Principle of Realism). In Politics among Nations at least, both power and politics
seem to be linked to violence and opposed to an Arendtian cooperative enterprise.

Second, Rösch argues that Morgenthau was a sort of relativist (92ff.) and
that Politics among Nations “cannot be read as a theory of international politics”
(56–57). Yet Morgenthau’s First Principle of Realism seems to affirm, first, the
immutability and universality of human nature, that “Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece...” and, second, the possibility of an objective theory of international politics, that “Realism [believes] in the objectivity of laws of politics” and it “must also believe in developing a rational theory that reflects these laws.” It is one thing to raise the limits of rationalism and scientific method to know everything relevant for planning successful and moral political action. It is another to deny the existence of truth and to abandon its pursuit altogether (95–96). In making the above arguments in Politics among Nations, Morgenthau seems to have affirmed at least some eternal and universal truths of politics as well as the possibility of developing them into a rational theory of international politics. Another open question is how Morgenthau’s cultural relativism – and the existence of repressive authoritarian and totalitarian states – cohered with his insistence on the linked values of dissent and liberal democracy.

Rösch has clearly made a significant contribution to Morgenthau scholarship and has drawn our attention to an important yet underappreciated facet of Morgenthau’s worldview. But the above tensions raise questions. Were there two Morgenthau when it came to power; if so, did Morgenthau somehow revise his original Central European beliefs about power and, if not, then why does he appear to drop discussion of puissance later in his life? How do we understand a thinker who insisted on “speaking truth to power” and on developing objective laws of politics as also a sort of relativist? These questions can be resolved. More direct engagement with Politics among Nations and its Six Principles, demonstrating how Rösch’s reinterpretation affects or alters the received understanding of political realism, would more strongly underscore the significance of the new ideas that Rösch brings to light.

Morgenthau’s intellectual development in Weimar Germany has also at times gone underappreciated and Rösch is right to emphasize its importance. But Rösch seems to overcompensate for this when he argues that Morgenthau “never went much beyond” his origins as a distinctively Central European thinker. At times, it feels like the later Morgenthau is used to determine the views of the earlier Morgenthau, as to make his case Rösch relies on writings, ideas, and intellectual relationships from Morgenthau’s American life – such as his relationship with Arendt (57ff., 108ff., 130ff. – another later influence is Koselleck, 98ff.). To argue that, because both were educated in the same intellectual tradition, Arendt’s conceptual distinctions in America in the 1960s can fill in the gaps and refine Morgenthau’s Weimar thought seems overstated. Moreover, it also flattens the complexities and distinctions of the diverse intellectual currents in Weimar. There were substantial differences among Weimar thinkers despite similarities in their backgrounds. Morgenthau, Neumann, and Fraenkel all trained as jurists, interned together under Sinzheimer, and were influenced by Schmitt. Surely they had more in common than Morgenthau and Arendt. Yet, besides their already distinctive approaches to law in Weimar, these three thinkers diverged in ideas and interests even more after the 1930s as American emigres. There are other reasons to think that Morgenthau developed beyond his Central European intellectual origins. In America, Morgenthau confronted genuinely novel phenomena. For example, the atomic bomb and the possibility of Mutually Assured Destruction totally defied the categories Morgenthau had conceived before the war. As others have argued, these phenomena led Morgenthau to reconsider
the possibility of world government – a possibility he originally ruled out after the interwar failures of liberal universalism and the League of Nations.

Overall, Rösch’s analysis of Morgenthau’s worldview, with its division into the three Bourdieuan schemes, offers theorists of international relations a fascinating and original picture of Morgenthau as a thinker and, with its new insights, challenges the received interpretation we have of him. It brings to light a side of Morgenthau that has been largely overlooked and deserves serious consideration. Finally, Rösch’s analysis of Morgenthau’s worldview offers a foundation for reinterpreting political realism, which will no doubt be useful as contemporary realists seek to understand themselves better in light of what their intellectual forefathers accomplished.