

# George Liska and political realism: on the tension between history and structure, and between norms and power

Petr Kratochvíl

Institute of International Relations, Nerudova 3, 118 50 Praha 1—Malá Strana, Czech Republic.  
E-mail: kratochvil@iir.cz

This article suggests that it is by exploring the work of George Liska, the once influential yet today almost forgotten realist scholar, that we can find answers to the question of the compatibility between classical realism and its purported neoclassical offspring. Firstly, although Liska is not widely read today and his recent books are only rarely cited, the evolution of his work reveals that the tension between normativity and politics is an inseparable part of classical realist thinking. Secondly, even though he started from a purely historicist version of realism, as demonstrated in his treatment of empire and international order, Liska came to be one of the first realist scholars to try to develop a theory combining historicism and a structural approach to international relations. To those general reasons one may add a particular third one, specifically interesting for *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Even though Liska spent most of his scholarly career in the United States, he belonged to the group of émigrés from Central Europe (in his case from Czechoslovakia); and this heritage leaves a special mark on all his works dedicated to the Soviet Union, and Eastern and Central Europe. His work is thus an interesting testimony to the rise and fall of realist hegemony over the field of international relations; hence, ironically reinforcing Liska's own notion of the historical contingency of all human cognition.

*Journal of International Relations and Development* (2007) **10**, 97–121.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800123

**Keywords:** Central and Eastern Europe; George Liska; international relations; realism; theory of international relations

---

## Introduction

Theories of political realism have always confronted one daunting problem: how to accommodate historical evolution in a system of thought which stresses the unchanging essence of international relations. This preoccupation is reflected in both the works of classical realist scholars and in the writings of their current followers.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the answers to this problem revolve around two pairs of categories — power and norms, and history and structure. On the