

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

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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.¹ Typically, the answers to this problem revolve around two pairs of categories — power and norms, and history and structure. On the



one hand, power as the underlying constant of international relations is confronted with normative evolution; and, on the other, the structural explanation of international relations collides with historical contingency. Indeed, the debate about the double nexus between structure and history and power and norms now seems to be livelier than ever. Provoked by the 'return of culture, identity and norms' in the field of international relations (IR) (Onuf 1989; Katzenstein 1996), present-day realists feel compelled to respond to this question, posed anew by the ever more robust constructivist challenge. But a considerable movement from within the realist tradition is also visible, with many realists, most notably those labelled neoclassical, reconsidering their attitude to realism's structural variant and adopting a view more favourable to the historicity of international politics.²

This latest wave of modified realism explicitly acknowledges the inspiration drawn from classical realism, while professing its loyalty to neorealism as well. But since classical realism and neorealism give substantially different answers to the power–norms and history–structure puzzles, it is worth exploring where neoclassical realists' allegiance really lies. In other words, to what extent is their approach compatible with the classical realist system of thought.

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. Although Liska is not widely read today and his recent books are only rarely cited, his approach to the power–norms nexus and to the relation between history and structure can contribute to our understanding of current developments in the realist school of thought in at least the following two directions.

First, the evolution of Liska's work reveals that the tension between normativity³ and politics is an inseparable part of classical realist thinking. While on one plane, all classical realists believe that normative preoccupations frequently mask the underlying power relations, on another plane, they acknowledge that ultimately morality and normative visions cannot be reduced to power and hence excluded from political analysis. However, the neoclassical realists, who claim to follow in the footsteps of Carr and Morgenthau (cf. Walt 2002: 211), are largely ignorant of these claims regarding the importance of norms, and instead focus merely on power. Their mistake is partially caused by the fact that Morgenthau sometimes obscures the importance of norms and the related notion of political prudence by the seemingly unparalleled stress on power. George Liska, on the other hand, is quite explicit with regard to the role of normativity in international relations. His differentiation between the power politics school and political realism can be particularly helpful to show that neoclassical realists' ignorance of normativity is an undue limitation of classical realist thinking. Consequently, given Liska's insistence on the



influence of ideas and norms on power politics, taking him as a representative of classical realism instead of (or next to) Hans Morgenthau would prevent the unnecessary and indeed harmful confusion of the power politics school and political realism.

Second, 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. Surprisingly, this is exactly what the neoclassical realists are trying to achieve today: dissatisfied with neorealism's inability to cope with substantial change, they would like to retain the importance of structure but, following the 'historic turn in the human sciences' (McDonald 1999), they want to combine it with the more historically minded foreign policy analysis typical of classical realism. I argue, however, that the structural elements in Liska's approach and the related stress on their objectifying nature necessarily relegate historical narratives to a secondary place. Since neoclassical realists do not elaborate on the relation between structure and historical contingency and instead simply declare both as vital elements of their analyses, they end up repeating Liska's attempt merely a decade later.

Exploring the evolution of Liska's thinking is, however, also important for a third reason. 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. While Liska was able to put on the mask of a detached observer when writing about alliance theory or the Third World, his writing becomes much more involved and replete with policy recommendations whenever he tackles the region from where he had emigrated. In this sense, the evolution of Liska's work follows the general evolutionary pattern of the realist school of thought: starting from the historically grounded tradition of European diplomacy, it was gradually transformed into an American social science (cf. Guzzini 1998) which reached its climax with Waltz's structural realism, only to turn back to its historicist roots after the end of the Cold War. 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.

From the methodological point of view, the question of why the article focuses not on the whole realist paradigm but instead on one realist scholar may be raised (cf. the same problem tackled by Neumann and Wæver 1997: 1–12). The answer is twofold: first, given the conventional, extremely broad understanding of realism which includes approaches as different as classical realism, structural realism, and a number of its present variants (offensive,



defensive, neoclassical), the task of an in-depth engagement with the realist school of thought must necessarily only examine a narrowly defined portion of realist thinking; otherwise, we would end up with unacceptable generalizations which would not only ignore differences between the specific realist streams but also wipe out the distinctiveness of contributions made by individual adherents of realism.

Second, a scholar-centred approach can be instrumental in undermining the textbook wisdom of clearly defined boundaries of individual international relations theories. For instance, below I show how difficult it is to ascertain when Liska, in his search for a synthesis between norms and power, finally left the fold of realist theories. It is mainly by focusing on changes in a scholar's approach during his life that makes it next to impossible to slip into oversimplified conclusions about his theoretical framework or to make bold declarations that summarize his theory in a few sentences. In addition, although a simultaneous reading of Liska's work would probably come to the conclusion that most elements of Liska's system of thought were, in one form or another, already present in his books from his 'classical period', only a serial reading allows us to discover how some of these tenets receded while others came to the forefront.

The structure of the article is as follows: first the article analyses Liska's writing during his two 'splendid' decades of undisputed fame as a leading realist scholar, re-narrating the dominant interpretation of his realism and stressing the interpretation of politics as a continuous power struggle which is, however, mitigated by political prudence and international norms. Here, the article focuses on the two key elements in Liska's work of that time: his preoccupation with the tension between power and norms and his roots in German historicism.

Second, the article examines Liska's own reformulation of his theory in the 1980s and 1990s, which brought about two key changes. On one hand, Liska introduced some structural features into his historical realism, which he calls 'schisms' — timeless structural laws presented in a geopolitical guise — hence transforming his approach into 'geohistoricism' (Liska 1990b). On the other hand, after the end of the Cold War, Liska started to stress the normative and evolutionary nature of international relations even more, mainly when analysing Russia and Eastern Europe.

In the third part, I point to the elements of Liska's writing that shed new light on the current developments in neoclassical realism. I claim that both Liska's and the neoclassical realists' attempts at combining historical uniqueness with the eternalization of particular historical occurrences proved unsuccessful. Also, I maintain that while the problem of normativity is indeed part and parcel to realist thinking, it cannot be solved by ignoring the normative evolution (as neoclassical realists do) nor by overly prioritizing it as



the late Liska did. In both cases, history ceases to be seen as an endless series of political conflicts and is instead reinterpreted as unchanging in the former case, or as transcended in the latter.

Liska in the 1950s–1970s: A Classical Realist

Liska's early work revolves around two major questions. The first is how one can accept the predominance of power while at the same time acknowledging that normative considerations also play a vital role. The second asks to what extent is it possible to analyse politics without relying on law-like or even quantifiable generalizations. I start by showing that Liska started with power as the basic concept but incorporated norms into his system of thought. I go on to demonstrate that Liska combined his normativity with a stress on continuity which, as he believed, made his approach different from the liberals positing a radical break with the past. The analysis of continuity leads me to a discussion of Liska's version of historicism that borrows heavily from the early German Historical School and spells out the basic tenets of a historical analysis of politics while rejecting the notion of historical laws.

The continuing relevance of power and normative evolution as basic elements of IR

Liska's major works of the 1950s to 1970s, like *Nations in Alliance* (1962), *Imperial America* (1967), or *Career of Empire* (1978), confirm his place as a classical realist on both formal and substantial levels. Formally, the forewords of Liska's books from this period make almost ritual references to the help of a number of well-known realist scholars like Robert W. Tucker, Arnold Wolfers, Robert E. Osgood and, of course, Hans Morgenthau, and show the influence of the intellectual climate of *The Centre for the Study of American Foreign and Military Policy* at the University of Chicago (see, for a particularly conspicuous example, Liska 1962: vii; cf. Liska 1960, 1968b).

As for the substance of his early works, Liska reiterated very clearly that he also accepted the basic tenet of political realism; that is the continuous struggle for power as the basic yet variously manifested essence of international relations. At the same time, he was much more explicit than other realist scholars of that time about the need to pay sufficient attention to international norms and morality as well.

Both Carr and Morgenthau also acknowledge that norms are an important element of the study of international relations (for an insightful analysis of normative elements in classical realism see, for instance, Murray 1996). Although Carr maintains that 'morality is the product of power'



(Carr 2001: 63), he also insists that ‘the necessity, recognised by all politicians, both in domestic and in international affairs, for cloaking interests in a guise of moral principles is in itself a symptom of the inadequacy of realism’ (*ibid.*: 86). Morgenthau also tried to moderate his view of the international arena as a brutal ground for power struggles by stressing the constraints on international power (next to balance of power also through morality and international norms) (Morgenthau 2005: 224–26). In similar terms, Morgenthau’s ‘fourth principle of political realism’, although too often interpreted as a rejection of universal moral principles for guiding a state’s foreign policy, should also be seen as recognizing ‘the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action’ (Morgenthau 2005: 12). This tension does not lead Morgenthau to abandon norms in favour of a bare survivalist instinct in the international arena, but to argue that power must be exercised with restraint and to criticize political leaders who lacked such restraint (see Hoffmann 1987, also Liska’s own comments in 1998a: 72–74). But while some statements of Morgenthau regarding the relation of power and norms may relegate norms to a secondary status, his reliance on norms was very conspicuous in his political activism, often preferring prudence to straightforward power-maximization efforts.

Liska perceived Morgenthau’s ‘apotheosis of power on one level and aversion to its use on another’ as an inconsistency — stimulating, but still an inconsistency (Liska 1977/1984). His understanding of power was different: he believed that the normative limitation on the use of power should be openly acknowledged already at the theoretical level and not only as an addendum to a treatise on power politics. Thus already in his first book *International Equilibrium* (1957), he comes up with a more explicit conceptualization of a power-normative continuum where power is treated substantially differently than in Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations*.⁴ Liska believes that ‘if power is pervasive, it is not all-inclusive. With that reservation one can readily agree with the prevailing interpretation of power’ (Liska 1957: 3). Hence, while power remains the cornerstone for the analysis of international relations, its dynamics is countervailed ‘by means of the “oughts”, the community oriented rules and restraints, derived from sources other than the instrumental rationality of immediate power considerations’ (Liska 1957: 4).

To gain a better understanding of Liska’s argument, his binary categorization of the power-politics school and the realist school is quite illuminating. While the power-politics school, derived from Treitschke’s *Machtpolitik*, operates within the assumptions that national power can be directly controlled by the state and that international relations can be best understood as relations relying directly on (military) force, the realist school interprets power more broadly as encompassing different forms of social control (this distinction was later echoed by Hedley Bull 1972/1995). Social control can, however, be



exercised by various means which vary with the historical evolution of the international system (cf. Liska's treatment of these two categories in Liska 1957: 18–20, 195).

Liska was aware of the fact that classical realists like Carr or Morgenthau indeed perceived the omnipresent tension between power and normativity but, in their defence against liberal internationalism, they put considerably more weight on the importance of power and attacked the excessive stress on norms. Seeing these scholars' contributions as an integral part of the realist tradition yet at the same time rejecting realism which was equal to a defence of cynical use of power, Liska insists that genuine realism cannot be mistaken for pure power politics and must instead take into account normative aspects of international relations, such as international institutions and ideology.⁵

Positivist historicism as a source of knowledge in IR

Liska's belief that the normative evolution can lead 'away from the unmitigated politics of power' (Liska 1957: 5) could induce the wrong impression that Liska in fact advocates a position not dissimilar to Carr's utopians. However, unlike interwar idealists, Liska puts a stress on historical continuity rather than revolutionary change in world politics. This is all the more important since, while the definition of international relations as the arena of an ongoing power struggle was still generally accepted in the 1960s, a number of scholars (including realists) challenged the continuity of pre-war international affairs with the emerging Cold War environment (cf. Herz 1962). Liska was quite eloquent in explaining why the uninterrupted flow of events still is (and forever will be) the dominant characteristic of international relations. He noted four possible reasons why the prolongation of the centuries-old system could come to a radical halt, only to reject them all as insufficient to create a fundamental cleavage between the past and the future.

Starting with ideology (and of course having in mind Soviet Marxism), its revolutionary nature was first challenged by Liska when he cited the underlying power competition between the two superpowers, thus labelling the ideological tag as mere 'lore' (Liska 1962: 62). The ideological influence was further belittled by stressing the conflict's territorialized, that is traditional, character. Second, Liska also detracts the importance of new technologies, including nuclear weapons. Since each superpower soon acquired the capacity to destroy the other, the old equilibrium of power was preserved and conventional strategies of alliance-building and diplomatic strategies took the upper hand. Third, although they seem difficult for a defender of continuity to incorporate into his thinking, the increasing number of independent nations and the growing cultural differences among them were, perhaps unsurprisingly, deprecated by referring to the past again. Liska believes that in the same way



that it was possible to accommodate different cultures in an essentially European system of diplomatic relations, it must also be possible to achieve such an end under the 'new' conditions. Even more importantly, and notwithstanding cultural differences, Liska believed that all newborn political nations tended towards an acceptance of the Westphalian model of the nation state, which greatly decreases the importance of cultural factors in favour of security and welfare (*op. cit.*). As a result, the transformation of the nation state proved to be the only one of the four factors to which Liska concedes enough power to gradually transform, at least to some extent, substantial features of international relations.

All things considered, for Liska in the 1950s to the 1970s there was hardly a transformation deep enough to cause a break with the past. In Liska's eyes, continuity reached back to the dawn of humanity, and hence spans not only centuries, but millennia. This understanding enables Liska to apply comparative historical methods when exploring a number of themes, most notably the question of empire-building and the related issue of international order. Liska does not hesitate to allude to the Hatti or Egyptian Empires, ancient Persia or the Phoenicians, nor to make frequent references to the Greeks and Romans (for a lengthy analysis thereof, see Liska 1967: Chapter II).

In fact, for Liska, the Roman Empire is the best available analogy of the American preponderance. While this analogy was already introduced in *Imperial America* (Liska 1967), it is better known from one of Liska's most acclaimed books, *Career of Empire* (Liska 1978), in which virtually all of Liska's conclusions are made on the basis of a historical comparison of the US' position with that of imperial Rome and Britain. Interestingly enough, Liska again couples his analysis of empire with his normative orientation: he maintains that in the course of any empire's career, and most notably during the peak of its power and its following decline, the question of international order must be introduced. Next to the material basis of the international order Liska believes that other factors such as ideological orientation are also important for maintenance of the system (Liska 1978: 304). For instance, the elites of states, co-opted into the imperial international system, must be 'rewarded both materially and ideally' (*ibid.*).⁶

Yet again, Liska's interest in the comparative study of international systems also remains committed to a historical perspective. In his relatively critical review of Rosecrance's *Action and Reaction in World Politics* (Rosecrance 1963), Liska clearly states that the systems analysis should always be understood as an 'historical-systems approach' that is rooted in the analysis and comparison of continuity, rather than rupture between the individual systems, and has a number of advantages over a deductive, theory-driven approach (Liska 1963: 118). And again it is continuity which makes Liska's comparison of past and contemporary empires conspicuously different from



Rosecrance's and Hoffmann's (Hoffmann 1961). To sum up, continuity remains pervasive, as elsewhere, in the analysis of imperial systems. Although the five-centuries-old 'calculating rationality' of Machiavelli is different from the somewhat newer Hobbes's 'fear-centred' analysis and from the contemporary realism which has to deal with the increasing institutionalization of international relations, the basic struggle for hegemony and social control remains untouched (cf. Liska 1957: 5).

Thus, the insistence on historical context is, next to the essential conservatism of international relations, the other feature that singles out Liska's classical realism from competing approaches.⁷ This feature is connected with Liska's Central European background and stems from early German Historicism. Inspired by the founders of the German Historical School including Wilhelm Roscher, Bruno Hildebrand and Karl Knies, Liska was convinced that the study of history in its specific context is the ultimate source of knowledge which can by no means be translated into universal laws distinct from the historical institutional and social backgrounds (see, for instance, Backhaus 1995; Senn 2005). Hence, even though Liska often utilizes the concept of balance of power, particularly in his treatise on alliances (Liska 1962; cf. Liska 1968a), he always takes great pains to take into account the unique situation, including 'historic biases', cultural and ideological influences etc. (Liska 1962: 27).⁸

But a heightened historical awareness is not the only issue connecting Liska to this type of historicism. The second inspiration borrowed from Roscher (although not acknowledged explicitly by Liska) is the notion of history's evolutionary nature, which became more pervasive in the thinker's later works.⁹ Similarly, and unlike the younger and more radical generation of German Historicists led by Gustav Schmoller, the Liska of the three post-war decades can be seen as Roscher's heir in a third area, that of the historically inspired *positivist* science, understood as the opposite of normative approaches. In Roscher's understanding, being a positivist scientist permits one to explore norms and values provided that (s)he stays neutral *vis-à-vis* them (cf. Blaug 1986).

Liska's historicist roots are also reflected in his outright rejection of behavioural science. Liska's attitude to the scientific turn in the social sciences was largely identical to Morgenthau's. Echoing his dictum that 'politics is an art, not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer' (Morgenthau 1946/1965: 10), Liska maintained that political rationality is unpredictable and unreliable, and is therefore fundamentally different from technical rationality because its application to international relations is always warped by the international system (Liska 1964: 144).

This aversion to the use of mathematics in the social sciences is Liska's fourth and final inheritance from German historicism. As early as



1854, Wilhelm Roscher rejected the usefulness of mathematical and statistical methods for historical analyses: ‘The algebraic formulae would soon become so complicated as to make all further progress in the operation next to impossible’ (Roscher 1854: 103–4; quoted in Barkai 1996). Curiously enough, Liska frequently echoes Roscher’s words, warning against the ‘overburdening of the interpretative value’ and talking about an impermissible ‘measure of formalism’ (see, for instance, Liska 1998a: 61–62).

These two mutually reinforcing elements — historicism and power struggles modified by normative evolution — thus define Liska’s approach to international relations from the 1950s to the 1970s. Whereas we can generally say that power is considered the first principle by Liska, its understanding and interpretation must always, according to him, be grounded in the analysis of concrete historical situations. Historical ‘situatedness’ is of the utmost importance since evolution can make older realist concepts obsolete by changing conditions. Liska was convinced that the course of history shows some signs of institutionalization and, as a result, ‘*Realpolitik* in the cruder sense of the term has ceased to be realistic politics’ (Liska 1957: 5; italics in the original). But at this stage Liska still believed that the evolutionary nature of history implied neither the possibility for a revolutionary change of the utopian type nor the existence of eternal laws that behaviouralists or later neorealists searched for.

Liska in the 1980s–1990s: A Romantic Realist

Liska’s works from the 1980s to 1990s show two gradual, yet substantial shifts. The first, already apparent in Liska’s treatment of US–Soviet relations (including Liska 1980, 1982, 1987) was the shift towards an engaged position which no longer saw normativity as necessarily checked by power. The second was Liska’s attempt to supplement his realist historicism with additional, objectifying features. Liska himself depicts the changes in his approach as a mutation of realism ‘into its romantic variety’ (Liska 1998a: 2). The introduction of these two changes has had far reaching consequences for Liska’s writings. While he argued quite cogently for the modifications, they made Liska’s new approach substantially different from, and indeed incompatible with, his previous reliance on the historicist tradition.¹⁰

First of all, Liska substantially broadens his understanding of normativity present in his older books (those published up to the end of the 1970s). There, he maintains that norms can be seen as an important element of realist research, framed by an ‘activist type’ of theory (Liska 1998a: 11). In a Weberian manner, Liska believed that traditional realists were prime representatives of theoretical activists in their efforts to uncover the truth



behind utopian fallacies and to convince the world of the practical importance of their discoveries. Yet this activist theory, since it presents the world as it is, can still be normatively neutral (*ibid.*).

The new normativity Liska starts to profess in the 1980s also pertains to the aims of scholarly analysis. Not only should we carefully explore norms and ideas, but we should also acknowledge that our work as scholars is propelled by normative visions. In other words, the problems we deal with or questions we pose are inextricably linked to our views and wishes. Liska believes this kind of normativity is still perfectly compatible with realist thinking. He illustrates his point by referring to Machiavelli's Discourses, and their positive assessment of democratic republicanism (Machiavelli 1531/2004). Machiavelli advocated the republican system and explored ways by which his vision could be achieved in the future. But while he can be considered a normatively oriented idealist, substituting for 'what should operationally be done in the present that which ought to occur at some future time' (Liska 1998a: 10), the methods and strategies Machiavelli recommends are believed by Liska to have remained 'intrinsically realistic' (*ibid.*).

Liska's insistence on the method and means used as the defining feature of realism, or for that matter idealism, is essential for understanding the difference between how realism is generally perceived (the basic tenet being that power politics is unchangeable) and how he defines his new vision of 'romantic realism'. Liska thought normative goals are possible, even if they project a radically new vision of international relations; but a 'romantic' realist should not believe that these goals can be attained through any means other than power. Every attempt at making a radical break with the past both in the substance of international politics and in the method applied must therefore be understood as 'utopian idealism' (Liska 1998a: 21).

Hence, according to Liska, continuity is privileged over rupture, and continuity once again defines 'historicist idealism' as the opposite to the ill-conceived utopianism. Thus Machiavelli's Discourses, although discussing a normative topic (good governance in a republican system), also falls in the realist category since Machiavelli's analysis is replete with examples of realist strategies, that is those which rely on power-political methods and simultaneously have a long historical record.

While Liska's normatively tinged realism is still discussed in an abstruse manner in his works on theory (mainly Liska 1990b, 1998a, b, 1999), normative goals became much more important, if not the ultimate topic of his writing on Central Europe. Here Liska defends the view that after the fall of communism Central Europe is destined to become the key region of the world due to its position between Russia and Germany. 'Czechoslovakia forms with Poland the centre of the smallest circle bounded by Germany and Russia, Germany is at the centre of the next larger one comprising European West and East, and



classic Europe is poised to become again the focus of the largest sphere encompassing the Western and Eastern Hemispheres' (Liska 1990a: 55). Giving up common-sense realist proposals for the region (by either creating a belt of neutral states or allying the region with any neighbouring great powers), Liska believes that the East-Central European countries should promote such policies that would lead to a final reconciliation between Europe's East and West.

In this particular case, the goals and strategies Liska recommends could only be called realist with much difficulty. His recipe for a peaceful and durable solution in the 'eastern heartland' was to create a confederate entity comprising Czechoslovakia and Poland. While this new structure would be based on the voluntary choice of both parties, this choice would be propelled by fears of another *cordon sanitaire* in East-Central Europe and the region's final partition between neighbouring powers. The second, even bolder, step would be to tie, through an institutional superstructure, the confederation to both Germany and Russia (Liska 1994).

How far this proposal deviates from Liska's thinking in the 1960s can be seen by comparing *Fallen Dominions, Reviving Powers* (Liska 1990a) or *Return to the Heartland* (Liska 1994) with *Europe Ascendant* (Liska 1964). For instance, in challenging the long-term success of European integration Liska originally disputed the possibility of overcoming the conflict-proneness of the continent, while commending Charles de Gaulle as a heroic figure who balanced out the supranational features of the European Community with his concept of *L'Europe des patries*. This is clearly in direct contradiction with the abovementioned suggestions for two East-Central European countries to relinquish their sovereignty for even less-tangible benefits, and to largely rely on the two countries of which Czechoslovakia and Poland have traditionally been most mistrustful.

We could argue that Liska's theoretical defence of this broader understanding of normativity does not remove him from the fold of classical realists. Indeed, similar to Morgenthau's defence of prudence in international politics, Liska's romantic realism can be translated into 'power politics for noble ends'. Yet the empirical application of Liska's normative visions stretches the point too far for any of his classical realist counterparts. Also the previous historicist stress on continuity was replaced by a rupture: the shift from the centuries-old antagonism between Poland, Germany, and Russia within a single decade which Liska seems to propose must be interpreted as a radical break with the past.

But the second change in his system of thought introduced in the 1990s constitutes an even more significant step away from historicism towards the more abstract and general ways of reasoning about international politics. Liska gradually replaced his almost endlessly contextual analysis of history, in which



the only constant was man's ultimate desire for power, with a substantially more structural analysis of history, that is defined by a number of 'eternal' laws in the form of dualisms, or 'schisms' as Liska puts it.

According to Liska, these schisms are based upon 'very elementary givens of physical nature or human perceptions' (Liska 1990b: 43) and are thus seen as unchanging. Although there are all kinds of dualisms scattered across Liska's recent books, the three which are most outstanding are: *the sacred–secular divide*, *the land–sea cleavage*, and *the East–West 'schism'*.¹¹ Out of these, the distinction between maritime and continental powers comes closest to Mahan's and Mackinder's classical geopolitical writings (Mahan 1890/2004; Mackinder 1904), with the East–West divide following closely behind (cf. also the treatment of classical geopolitical dichotomies in Ó Tuathail 1999). Liska's analysis of the sacred–secular schism is, however, more reminiscent of 19th and early 20th century Russian writers such as Berdyaev (1962), who shifted the stress from geographical factors to the organization of society and noted the difference between rational pragmatic societies and those based on a sense of transcendence.

Although Liska presents his history-plus-schisms synthesis as expansion of 'geopolitical realism by investing it with a historicist dimension' (Liska 1998b: 15), given his previous preoccupation with history over geopolitics, this change should be seen as a move towards geopolitics rather than a move of realism towards history. The introduction of the schisms thus marks Liska's final farewell to the early German historicism, and moves to a more deductive reasoning based on the *a priori* existence of laws through which, and only through which, history can be understood.

Liska's Dilemma — History Frozen or Transcended?

In this section, I compare the two shifts in Liska's system of thought and try to show that they are both incompatible with his original historicist realism. Then I move on to explore the links between the modifications introduced by Liska and the claims of neoclassical realism. Here, I maintain that neoclassical realists diverge from the classical realist tradition in two fundamental directions: by ignoring normativity and by overemphasizing the structural features which suppress the essential historicity of international relations, they render their alleged synthesis incompatible with the writings of classical realists like Carr, Morgenthau and the early Liska.

History and structure

Although Liska presents the two modifications as his contribution to realism independently from the evolution in the field of IR which he developed



gradually over several decades, it is hard to ignore that both modifications are reactions to a mounting number of attacks on realist thinking (see, for example, points raised by Ernst Haas in his critical review of *Europe Ascendant* — Haas 1965). Elevating ‘schisms’ to the status of eternal laws, derived from the unchanging nature of the (natural and social) world is a typical realist defence against the admonition that realism is a circumstantial theory, flexible enough to incorporate any possible turn in historical evolution. More specifically, the main objection to Liska’s past theories was his quite arbitrary use of historical analogies, always cherry-picked to fit his argument. Thus the move to a more structural view of history can be seen as intended to limit the historical contingency in the analysis.

Liska’s modifications led him to introduce new law-like features into the field of international relations, especially in the 1990s, thus exhibiting the same pattern of evolution as other strands of classical realism transiting into more ‘social scientific’ variants.¹² The introduction of eternally valid laws, or ‘schisms’, however, represented an outright denial of the key historicist dogma that all understanding is history-dependent and that it can never be generalized to the level of an ahistorical truth. So Liska’s development is also an ‘escape from history’, albeit a different one from his neorealist counterparts.¹³

Here we should note that contemporary neoclassical realists reached the same point as Liska had done just a decade before. However, while Liska was concerned with the contingency of his older approach and introduced the schisms to discover some patterns in the historical evolution, and so reach a degree of predictability, here neoclassical realists reach a similar position because they tried to abandon their no longer justifiable neorealist position that argued for a purely structural approach. Although they come from different directions, both encountered the same problem: how to reconcile historical unpredictability with the absolutization of some historical features. Neither Liska nor the neoclassical realists have a satisfactory solution to this puzzle. Instead, both confine themselves to quite vague theoretical statements that are supplemented by empirical analysis that in the end always relies on structural conditions as the arbiter of a policy’s viability.

To start with Liska, he tries to avoid an either-or answer by maintaining that structural factors should be seen as ‘a mere conditioning of behavior’ and not as ‘a causation that implements the virtual tyranny of this or that factor’ (Liska 1990b: 310). But when he describes the structural features of his approach, he admits that it is always the structure that defines ‘the distinctive actor identity’ (*ibid.*: 75) and hence foreign policy, and indeed even the domestic organization, can be derived from where in the international structure the country is posited (*ibid.*). Liska summarized his view in the following way: ‘Neither differences nor changes in domestic makeups and ideological orientations do in themselves



determine pattern of strategic behavior' (Liska 1990b: 312), or even more succinctly: 'Major historical events confirm the primacy of system structure' (*ibid.*: 314).

Starting from the other extreme, neoclassical realists for whom 'Waltz's purely structural theory was too parsimonious, unable to account for a number of important issues, and prone to indeterminate (or incorrect) predictions' (Walt 2002: 204) are also reticent to specify exactly how systemic and domestic factors are related to each other. One of the foremost representatives of the stream, Randall L. Schweller, maintains that 'while not abandoning Waltz's insights about international structure and its consequences, neo-classical realists have added first and second image variables' (Schweller 2003: 317) without stating what 'adding' means in this context.

When, however, operationalization is needed there is not a shadow of doubt that, for neoclassical realists, systemic factors take precedence. For instance, Zakaria argues that 'a good theory of foreign policy should first ask what effect the international system has on national behavior, because the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system' (Zakaria 1992, quoted in Rose 1998: 151). In this context, domestic factors such as decision-makers' perceptions and misperceptions are mere intervening variables that can, in the short term, delude a country's foreign policy from the right course. Nevertheless in the end, that is in the medium or long term, it will always be the structure that decides about the appropriateness of a chosen course: 'Over time, shifts in the balance of power will constrain state behavior, and leaders or regimes whose strategic vision is clouded will pay a price for their lack of clear sight' (Walt 2002: 211).

In the same vein, William Wohlforth argues that it is structural motives in the first place that induce change in state's behaviour. In his discussion of alternative explanations for the end of the Cold War, he lists a number of non-realist explanations and not surprisingly all of these are related to domestic policy (emergence of civil society in East-Central Europe, legitimization crisis of communist parties, domestic fight between hawks and doves in the Soviet Union, etc.) (Wohlforth 1994/95: 106) and they are, therefore, all rejected in favour of the 'realist' explanation that the real cause was the systemic pressure, reflected in reduced Soviet capabilities.

To make a brief summary, although friendly scholars may call this approach 'open-minded eclecticism' (Walt 2002: 211), neoclassical realists follow in Liska's footsteps by deprecating pure historical narratives and preferring the structural constraints as the ultimate mover of agents in international relations. Simply 'adding' domestic features cannot but relegate them to a secondary place. Hence, in the long term both Liska and neoclassical realists end up with structure triumphing over history.



Morality and power

In his famous attack on scientism, Morgenthau argues that the perennial question regarding the relation of power and morality in international politics can be solved in three fundamentally different ways (Morgenthau 1946/1965: Chapter 'The moral blindness of scientific man'). The first option is to reduce morality to the status of a mere reflection of human utilitarianism, 'proclaiming the permanent exemption of political action from ethical limitations' (*ibid.*: 170). Consequently, in every case when the moral understanding deviates from this conception it can be dismissed 'as a psychological oddity, a queer deviation from the utilitarian norm' (*ibid.*).

The other extreme is, according to Morgenthau, epitomized in attempts to prioritize ethics and norms over power, while believing that the chasm between the social world dominated by continuous struggle for power and the moral obligation perceived can be overcome by introducing reason into politics. Here, the normative vision simply trumps all other considerations, hence 'subjecting political action permanently to particular ethical standards' (Morgenthau 1946/1965: 176).

As one could expect, Morgenthau advocates a third position, one that acknowledges the inextinguishable tension between power and morality. In attacking attempts at reducing morality to power, Morgenthau (1946/1965: 177) maintains that a politician's act 'cannot be beyond good and evil, even not from his own point of view, as long as he makes the apparent harmony of his act with the ethical standards part of the goal to be realized'. While there certainly are places in Morgenthau's other works which would at least partially contradict this view, there is no doubt that Liska's younger works defend norms in the analysis of international relations in a way not dissimilar to that taken by Morgenthau in *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*.

How difficult it is to walk on the razor's edge between giving up morality altogether and overemphasizing it can be illustrated both by the later evolution of Liska's works and by the approach of neoclassical realists. Both claim that they remain true and loyal adherents to classical realism, yet both deviate from the position propounded by Morgenthau in the above-sketched outline. But while neoclassical realists end up in the first position that Morgenthau warned against, that is dismissing normativity as negligible, Liska deviates to his belief that the power struggle (as expressed in his structural schisms) can eventually be overcome.

As I have demonstrated above, Liska attempted to show that realism, stressing the continuous relevance of power, can still accommodate normativity but only a normativity that is aimed at transforming the international system gradually with the help of largely 'realist' methods. However, Liska's



normative goals were definitely not modest — he strove to show that it is possible to overcome the long-standing division in international politics — whether it is the Cold War division of East and West or, in Central Europe, the conflict between the Slavs and Germans.

But while normativity could be accommodated in Liska's older system of thought, with the addition of timeless unchanging rules in the 1990s and with his broader understanding of normativity introduced at about the same time, the unfortunate result was a necessary clash between the two imported principles wherever they met.

That said the expectation would be that normative statements about historical evolution are first scrutinized against the eternal truths, and only if the two do not contradict should the normative goals be pursued. For example, one would expect the normative goal of uniting the Western and Eastern parts of Europe, repeated by Liska many times, to be rejected by him simply because the European East and West are divided by both maritime/continental and secular/sacred 'schisms'. Such a strategy would be consistent with Liska's own theoretical interpretation of normativity as seen in his discussion of normative elements in Machiavelli's works.

Surprisingly, however, Liska usually resolves the clash between 'eternal schisms' and normatively defined goals by cancelling the former and elevating the latter. So Liska's mixing of historical progression and norms leads him to envision a future in which the divisions 'subside', are 'moderated' or even 'neutralized' (Liska 1990a: 54). Liska's reliance on the constancy of the cleavages is even more shattered by his remarks about the world's evolution, starting with a universalist age and transiting through a statist second age to a third age in which the divisions of the previous ages are overcome (Liska 1990a: 54). Here Liska evidently limits the applicability of his originally timeless cleavages to just the second age (or the Westphalian system), which is now transiting into a third one in which these schisms will no longer be relevant.

Liska's tendency to perceive history in increasingly evolutionary terms, derogating the importance of both the struggle for power as the basic element of international relations and the 'schisms' as this struggle's key determinants, is particularly pertinent in his analysis of Russia and Eastern Europe. Liska's former idea of a condominium of the two superpowers, fully in-line with traditional realist thought and interpreted by Liska as an appeasement of the Soviet Union and its schismatic spheres of influence (Liska 1982), was transformed into a call for a profound and ahistorical unity at the end of the Cold War. The double East–West and maritime–continental schism, epitomized in Liska's previous books by the antagonism between the Soviet Union and the West, was suddenly converted into mere East–West polarity which could (and should) be overcome fairly easily (e.g. Liska 1990a: 27).



Liska's idealized union of Russia and its Western neighbours hence reaches its climax by suppressing the three schisms omnipresent in international relations. First, by incorporating Russia in the wider framework of the Western maritime powers, the land–sea schism ceases to play its central role in their relations. Second, the division between East and West is obviously removed by the same token. But perhaps most importantly, Liska believed that Russian and generally Slavic spirituality, without being exhausted by the rationalizing materialism of the (more narrowly defined) West, can contribute significantly to a transcendence of the last division, that between the sacred and secular. Hence, the closing of the rifts in Europe can be crowned by a 'more than material renaissance' (Liska 1990a: 42).

Attempting to shield his own view of the transformation of international relations from an anti-utopian critique, Liska defines utopian idealism as a revolutionary approach striving for a sudden break with the past. Yet if we look at idealism from a wider perspective, as an idea postulating transcendence from past historical experiences, then Liska's idealism is as idealistic and utopian as those he so fiercely criticizes. Liska himself confirms this when he elaborates on the two possible paths of historical transformation under current conditions: either due to the final triumph of the material West over the spiritual East (seen as linked to a reversion to the millennia-old dominance of politics over economics), or from a spiritual rebirth of the West, that is 're-emplacing community values on top of the institutions of society that have issued from merely political and economic revolutions' (Liska 1990a: 51). Undoubtedly the latter option — Liska's preferred course of events — is substantially more utopian than the often repeated Hegelian ideal of 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1989).

While Liska strayed by overemphasizing the norms, neoclassical realists belong to the other extreme described by Morgenthau. Schweller, for instance, is convinced that 'realists believe either that foreign policy takes place in a moral and legal vacuum, or that moral behavior in foreign policy resides in the state's self-assertion' (Schweller 2003: 232). This was an almost verbatim restatement of the position which Morgenthau was so vehemently warning against; that is the 'permanent exemption of political action from ethical limitations' (Morgenthau 1946/1965: 170).

But Schweller's position is a precise articulation of neoclassical realist thinking. Indeed, accounts of neoclassical realism usually name just one reason for the adjective '*neoclassical*' in its name. Gideon Rose, who coined the label, believed that what made this group of realists *neoclassical* was merely their attention to domestic policy (cf. Rose 1998: 146). Similarly, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, in his detailed analysis of the various streams in contemporary realism, also defines neoclassical realist theories as 'theories that seek to explain the external behavior of individual states — for example, military doctrine



force posture, alliance preferences, foreign economic policy, or the pursuit of accommodative or belligerent diplomacy' (Taliaferro 2000/2001: 135). Many of these would, in classical realist theories and particularly in Liska's analyses, require a substantial exploration of norms prevalent in the analysed societies. It would suffice to repeat that Morgenthau dedicates a substantial part of his *Politics Among Nations* to questions like 'balance of power as ideology' or 'restraining influence of a moral consensus' on the balance of power (Morgenthau 2005: 218–31) and a whole chapter to international morality (*ibid.*: 240–69).

In summary, the neoclassical realists are very eclectic in linking their approach to classical realism and eschew many elements of classical realism such as the stress on politics as practical wisdom or the relevance of international norms. By not assigning any place to norms in their theoretical framework whatsoever, neoclassical realists are prime examples of what Liska called the 'power politics school', which was—in Liska's eyes at least—fundamentally different from political realism.¹⁴ Put differently, while the position of neoclassical realists stressing the primacy of power is compatible with some of the basic tenets of classical realists, it does not correspond with Carr's, Morgenthau's and mainly Liska's insistence on the relevance of both power and norms.

Conclusion

There are two basic kinds of temptations for thinkers who defend the notion of the unchanging essence of international relations. The first is the slip into 'presentism', that is projecting the present (real or imaginary) state of the world onto the past and future without limits. This temptation renders realism unable to accommodate change since any substantial transformation challenges the basic dogma of international relations' timelessness. Those who succumb to this temptation, like Waltz and his disciples, often overemphasize the relevance of the current structure of international relations and end up with a 'frozen' understanding of history. Quite understandably, the price to pay for such a structural account of international politics also includes giving up any attention to norms or historical evolution since they too aim at change.

The second temptation is that of overemphasizing progress, understood as the gradual overcoming of the power struggle. This move can also destroy history as an unpredictable and indeterministic flow of events, and transform it into a progressive evolution, finally leading to its own abolition. Among classical realists, mainly those who turned towards behaviouralism, the first tendency was more pronounced and the evolution of realism led most of them



from history-fuelled analysis to structurally construed, often mechanical, eternal laws ruling over international politics.

Liska himself, while quite critical of realism's structural variants, attempted to avert the frequent criticisms of his historical realism (cf. Haas 1965) by going in the same direction. Abandoning the early German historicist inspiration, he introduced several structural features into his approach and thus tried to limit history's unpredictability. Yet Liska's writings simultaneously developed in another direction, towards envisioning a future free of the past cleavages. Since it coincided with the end of the Cold War, Liska's radical embrace of normativity could be interpreted as a renewed and mainly prescriptive interest in the development of Eastern and Central Europe, the region from which he had emigrated decades before.

But the theoretical implications of Liska's escape from history and the parallel eternalization of some of its basic characteristics are more relevant: Although Liska's attempt to reformulate classical realism bears a hallmark from each of the labels he used to refer to his approach — normativity implied by 'romantic realism' and structurally conceived geopolitics suggested by 'geohistoricism' — his final system of thought leaves open the problems faced by both classical realists and their neoclassical cousins, namely the incompatibility of structural and historicist accounts of international relations on one hand and the unresolved tension between power and morality on the other.

Seen from this perspective, the analysis of Liska's work sheds new light on the contentious elements in the currently thriving neoclassical realism. First, Liska underlined already in his first book the importance of norms for a realist approach to politics. Being even more explicit than Carr and Morgenthau about the link between power and normative aspects of international politics (or political prudence as Morgenthau would put it), he contrasted the power politics school and classical realism that grew out of the political practice and thus reflected the ever-present strain between power and ethics. Neoclassical realists, notwithstanding the allusion to 'classical', are rather followers of the former tradition since norms do not play any role whatsoever in their analyses.

Second, and even more importantly, neoclassical realists have followed Liska in his search for a synthesis of the structural and historicist version of realism. The import of structural schisms made Liska choose between structure and history; yet he gave up his historicism and instead reinterpreted historical occurrences as elements of the ever-present structural pattern. Neoclassical realists started from the opposite, Waltzian structural account and their efforts aimed at bringing in historical narratives. However, they have not been able to offer a coherent picture that would accommodate both their neorealist ancestry and the new allegiance to history. Almost identical as in Liska's case, the two elements of their theories remain incompatible. Although their empirical work resides mostly on the unit level, it is ultimately always the structure that decides



about history's course. Hence, a synthesis of structure and history remains as elusive for the newest wave of realists as it has ever been.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Vít Beneš, Petr Drulák, Stefano Guzzini, Jan Karlas, and the three anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Notes

- 1 The founding statement of classical realism, which also tackles this problem, is Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr 2001), but this article also draws on other realist scholars, most notably Hans Morgenthau and his *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau 1948, 2005) and the less famous but equally penetrating *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (Morgenthau 1946/1965). Other important works representing the classical realist tradition include those of Reinhold Niebuhr (1953), Inis Claude (1962), John Herz (1962), Arnold Wolfers (1962), Robert E. Osgood (1967), and Robert E. Osgood and Robert W. Tucker (1967). For critical assessments of realism see, for instance, Haas (1953), Ashley (1981, 1998), Keohane and Nye (1977), Raskin (1977/1984), Keohane (1984), Wendt (1992), and Sullivan (2005).
- 2 The term neoclassical realism was coined by Gideon Rose (1998). For an overview of neoclassical realism, see Taliaferro (2000/2001), Walt (2002), and Schweller (2003). The list of neoclassical realists commonly includes William C. Wohlforth (1993, 1994/1995), Randall L. Schweller (1998), Fareed Zakaria (1998), Thomas J. Christensen (1996), and Jonathan Mercer (1995, 2006).
- 3 Although classical realists like Morgenthau use terms 'morality', and 'normative preoccupations' as synonyms, I will stick here to the term 'normativity' alone.
- 4 I am indebted to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to this particular book by Liska.
- 5 However, we must always bear in mind that there are two different conceptions of normativity. The first is embedded in the acknowledgement that norms play an important role in international relations, whereas the other sees the scholarly analysis itself as necessarily normative and value-laden. While the Liska of the 1950s to 1970s was an adherent of the first, he strictly refused the second.
- 6 It should be noted that Liska recently wrote another piece on empire and international order entitled *Twilight of a Hegemony: The Late Career of Imperial America* (Liska 2003). However, in the book Liska already entertains both the idea of a structural approach to international relations (particularly the land–sea division) and normative aspects that are described below.
- 7 Of course, this is not to deny that Morgenthau and other classical realists were also inspired by various strands of historicism. For instance, Morgenthau himself acknowledged his academic debt to Max Weber (as mentioned in Walker 1993: 110). Yet, unlike Morgenthau, Liska was clearly an adherent to a distinct version of German historicism, represented by Roscher and his collaborators. See below for a more detailed discussion of this version of historicism.
- 8 In this context, it is notable that Liska never elaborates on the compatibility of his understanding of the need for the historical context in international relations and the realist 'truth out there', that is power as the underlying force of relations. So the greatest of all generalizations—political life as a struggle for power and glory—remains, forcing Liska to accept a broad definition of his approach, describing it as 'a winding middle path between the landmarks of history and the wider panorama of generalisation' (Liska 1962: 3).
- 9 Roscher, in his turn, relied heavily on Hegel's interpretation thereof.



- 10 Interestingly, Liska's newly discovered stress on normativity seems to follow the evolution of the Historical School in the last quarter of the 19th century which also laid a new stress on normativity, thus reinterpreting history as a mere instrument for supporting its normative arguments with concrete examples (cf. Senn 2005).
- 11 Instead of 'sacred', Liska consistently uses the rather awkward term 'sacral'.
- 12 This path was, at least to some extent, also trodden by other historically minded realists who were influenced by the behavioural turn in social science. For instance, even some works of Hans Morgenthau exhibit this pattern (cf. the analysis of Morgenthau's contribution to the 'scientification' of IR theory in Guzzini 1998: Chapter 3).
- 13 Importantly, in spite of some common traits, Liska's interpretation diverges in many respects from Waltz's neorealism (Waltz 1979, for a critique see Ashley 1998). For instance, Liska betrays no urge to defend the nation state as the ultimate mode of societal organization. Consequently, the differences organizing and dividing the political space in Liska's realism are not synonymous with the division between the hierarchy within states and the anarchy between them. Instead, Liska's schisms are located on a structurally higher level, thus they do not divide the world into states and an imaginary anarchical realm beyond, but the schisms are also defined as eternal and universally valid. Liska thus also talks about each pair (sacred–secular, maritime–continental, East–West) 'undergoing only inessential modifications' (Liska 1990b: 44) in the course of history, and even describes them as 'intrinsic to basic reality' (*ibid.*).
- 14 The only relevant exception in the literature on neoclassical realism dealing with norms I found is 'A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate' which criticizes Mearsheimer for not taking into account classical realism's interest in norms and institutions (Schweller and Priess 1997).

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