

Review – An Unwritten Future

Written by Jing-Syuan Wong

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JING-SYUAN WONG, OCT 8 2023

An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics

By Jonathan Kirshner

Princeton University Press, 2022

Liberalism, realism, and constructivism form the main theories in international relations. Since the paradigm wars of the 1990s, these approaches are considered both ontologically and epistemologically irreconcilable. With the introduction of structural realism or neorealism in parallel with the advent of globalization, realism has been dismissed by some contemporary scholarships as outdated and unhelpful in explaining current world affairs. However, critics of realism often confuse it with structural realism, which is only one among many schools of thought within realism. Significant criticism targeted at structural realism does not apply to classical realism, as the latter brings both material and ideational factors into analysis. Some contemporary IR scholars have attempted to reclaim the relevance of classical realism. The latest book by Jonathan Kirshner is one of the most prominent in this endeavor. In short, Kirshner's main aim in writing this book is to reclaim the importance of classical realism as some of its influential "descendants" – structural realism and hyper-rationalism – are unproductive in accounting for the political and contingent nature of international relations.

To better explain his reasons for refuting structural realism and hyper-rationalism, Kirshner lays out the developments of realism in chronological order. He begins with the dawn of classical realism that took place with the writing of *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. Despite its dated nature and some potential errors in historical facts, Thucydides' analysis on the political nature of human societies, path-dependency and historical contingency of the political life still holds true for contemporary societies and has inspired many intellectual giants in later epochs. His notion of *anarchy* influenced the writings of Thomas Hobbes (although the units of analysis are different—the former being on a systematic level, and the latter on a state-level). The notions of *hubris* and *desire for power* have shaped the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. The *uncertainties* in political life and military combat have left their intellectual traces in the writings of Carl von Clausewitz. The essence of *prudence* has shaped the scholarship of Edmund Burke and John Maynard Keynes.

Kirshner portrays the perspectives of contemporary classical realists on international relations – E. H. Carr, George F. Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and Robert Gilpin – as the endless and inevitable conflict of interests, seeing the world as it is, the primacy of politics and inescapable uncertainty, the struggle for objectivity, and dynamics over statics. According to Kirshner, these rich analytical perspectives stand in sharp contrast with the narrow focus of structural realism that follows.

With Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), Kirshner explains, the structural and rationalist turns of realism overwhelmingly grasped the attention of a wide readership, given their *proclaimed* scientific rigor, mathematical parsimony, and predictive models. With the structural and rationalist turns, parsimony trumps analytical accuracy in explaining world affairs. However, the uncertainties in how actors employ their agency make the future utterly unpredictable. As such, any attempt of mechanistic, mathematic, and technical solutions for the unwritten future is likely to be reductionist, if not utterly futile. Kirshner emphatically argues that the obsession with "scientific methods" does not and cannot make the unwritten future determinate.

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By providing arguments and examples to refute the structural and hyper-rationalist turns in realism, Kirshner aims to *bring politics back in* by prompting a reevaluation of the lessons that can be learned from classical realism. To illustrate the limits of both structural realism and hyper-rationalism in accounting for the choices made by actors in the history of international relations, Kirshner takes Appeasement and the Vietnam War as examples.

On Appeasement, to address why “Britain, one of the world’s most powerful states,” pursues “policies that threatened its very survival” (p.104), Kirshner argues that it is essential to examine the roles of history and ideology. The structural realist explanation which centered around *buck-passing* between the British and the French and *buying time* are criticized by Kirshner as unsatisfactory: the former being only partially true and the latter being counterfactual.

On the Vietnam War, Kirshner raised the question of why “the US, the world’s greatest power,” engaged “into two acts of foolish geopolitical self-mutilation: its war in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973, and its preventive war against Iraq that began in 2003” (p.104). The Power Cycle Theory is often claimed by structural realists as the principal explanation for US engagement in the Vietnam War and subsequent invasion of Iraq under the Bush doctrine of preventive war. However mathematically elegant, Kirshner argues, this explanation falls short of considering the role of *arrogance of power* that has been foreshadowed by Thucydides. “The most grievous wounds suffered by the United States as a hegemonic power” explains Kirshner “were not the result of external checks on American power due to tectonic shifts in the underlying balance of power but from, if anything, exactly the opposite: a preponderance of power and the temptations such lack of constraints can invite” (p.82). In other words, it is the endogenous factor – the US government has misunderstood the limits of American hegemony in world politics or *hubris* – rather than external factors that led to its demise.

My own analysis following reading this book on the fundamental issues with structural realism and hyper-rationalist approaches is that they are narrowly *material-focused*, deeply *depoliticized* and *technocratic* accounts of international relations and foreign policies, whereas *politics* lies at the hearts of these dynamics. Political development is so contingent that the predictive model is almost always doomed to failure as there are developments that simply could not be known before they manifest themselves concretely. In an era obsessed with neoliberal quantification with easy access to data, while mathematic formula may appear to be “scientific”, parsimonious, clear and neat, they often fail to capture the untamable human emotions, desire, and fear that drive their actions, and are thus deeply unrealistic.

This book is not the first, nor the only one, that proposes to complement realism with constructivist insights and to reconcile structural conditions with domestic political dynamics. Nevertheless, Kirshner’s piece is one of the most comprehensive attempts to articulate the comparable importance of structural conditions and political contingency by drawing on representative literature in realism. In relation to similar works, whereas *neoclassical realism* has been both praised and criticized by Kirshner in the book as dogmatically adhering to scientism and the predominance of structural factors over domestic ones, it is curious that Barkin’s work on *realist constructivism* (2010) was not mentioned at all. This is striking as it comes closest to Kirshner’s own interpretation on the relations between realism and constructivism, as well as between material conditions and ideational factors. *Neoclassical realism*, systematized by Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2016), while criticized by Kirshner to be “over-crediting” structural systemic conditions as independent variables, specifies conditions under which international and domestic factors come into play in the making and implementation of foreign policies. With clear factors such as state-society relations and domestic institutions, it provides a more operationalizable model for empirical analysis than classical realism. There is no better or worse approach *per se*. As always, scholars learn from and employ these frameworks in adaptation to their own research projects.

In conclusion, Jonathan Kirshner’s book offers timeless insights into the nature of world politics with a mature assessment of both tangible and intangible factors. It has, to a large extent, successfully refuted the structural realist and hyper-rationalist schools with clear arguments and historical examples. However, cases employed to illustrate the points may at times seem arbitrary and cherry-picked. They are also predominantly US-centric. While Kirshner convincingly highlights the reductionist approaches of structural realism and hyper-rationalism, his treatment of these schools of thought may at times appear to be unidimensional in the effort to make his points explicit. This then runs

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the risks of oversimplifying the nuances and diverse approaches in structural realism and hyper-rationalism. Kirshner's criticisms on structural realism also overwhelmingly focus on John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2014). The dismissal of the roles of historical legacy, national character, political economy, and domestic politics are at times exaggerated, since criticized approaches may refer to these factors using different language, or only lightly consider their influence. The limited consideration of such factors does not necessarily make them irrelevant in realist approaches other than classical realism.

Despite the shortcomings, this book provides convincing arguments for scholars to revisit the wisdom of classical realism. Finally, in a world still governed by neoliberal modernism, where parsimony predominantly counts more than analytical precision, Kirshner's reminder on the relevance of triangulating structural and material conditions with domestic and constructivist factors is timely for both academic research and a general understanding of the world.

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