Chapter Two
Power Politics and (Neo-)Realism within the Field of International Relations

After 1919, analysis of international relations developed into an independent, scientific discipline within the academy. In the first decades of its development, two tendencies shaped the main theories of international relations: so-called ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’. Idealism represents a theory based on assumptions of progress, according to which the deficiencies in the international system can be eradicated by consciously addressing their causes. In economic terms, this approach to international relations supports a liberal, free-market model. The assumption is that a world economy based on a division of labour and free trade can form the basis for an enduring system of peace.

Idealism considers individual ‘societies’ to be central actors represented in the international system by states. The fundamental norms and values within societies influence statehood – thereby making it possible to overcome anarchic structures. For realism, by contrast, the central

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2. See Angell 1910.
3. In this study, I do not go into further detail about idealism, liberal traditions or analyses of integration and interdependence. Liberal and neo-institutionalist approaches typically assume that institutionalised or codified inter- and supra-national relations make possible the cooperative regulation of the world’s problems. The notion of international institutionalisation is supplemented by the proposition that new and reciprocal ‘complex interdependencies’ place important constraints on the ability of states to act (Keohane and Nye 1989). The various strands of this neo-institutionalist approach (for example, régime theory) serve as a corrective to the neorealist school within IR. To be sure, including the ‘economic plane’ in the analysis and an historical perspective do seem to represent a broadening of the field. However, neo-institutionalism gets caught up in its own contradictions, because it derives political cooperation too directly from economic interdependence. While Marxist considerations often prematurely derive the need to use military violence from their analysis of the tendency to economic crisis, for neo-institutionalists economic
focus of analysis is on the state, its rational actions, and its monopoly over violence. International politics or ‘foreign policy’ must be differentiated fundamentally from ‘domestic policy’, because the former is embedded in anarchic and not hierarchical structures. There exists no central authority over the central actors at the international level, as there is within a given state. By contrast, each state must ensure its own security on its own. On the basis of this anarchic, international structure, states are forced to pursue power politics, thereby flouting basic intra-societal norms and values as well. In the tradition of a Machiavelli or a Hobbes, but also of a thinker such as Nietzsche who rejects beliefs in progress, realists highlight the cold reality of international relations. They accuse idealists, or ‘utopians’, of spreading illusions about reality. According to them, science cannot be based on noble intentions alone, instead we must learn to differentiate between what is and what should be.

Hans J. Morgenthau would become one of the most important proponents of classical realism. ‘International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim’. Power interests should be distinguished from economic interests. ‘What the precapitalist imperialist, the capitalist imperialist, and the “imperialistic” capitalist want is power, not economic gain… Thus, historic evidence points to the primacy of politics over economics’. Morgenthau describes realism as oriented on ‘the concept of interest defined in terms of power’, because politics is dominated by objective laws, whose origins are to be found in human nature. The ‘struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience’ – ultimately, it is ‘elemental bio-psychological drives’ that are responsible for this –, even if the motive for power among statesmen is often distorted beyond all recognition by their emotions.

After 1945, in addition to the analysis of the East-West conflict, economic internationalisation was the main starting point for theoretical considerations within IR. In contrast to the assumption of a systemic antagonism between capitalism and communism, realism – as the dominant tendency within IR – developed a theory of the similarity of the main agents of the Cold War. John H. Herz played an important role in further developing classical realism into neorealism. He located the competition for power within the framework of a societal problem, namely the security dilemma: ‘the dilemma stems from a fundamental social constellation, one where a plurality of otherwise interconnected interdependencies lead – to a certain extent as a mirror opposite from the Marxist approach – to political harmony.

4. See Carr 1946.