SOME REFLECTIONS ON REALISM AND TRUTH
IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Suggested by an article by Professor Ross and a book by Dr Schwarzenberger

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In the last issue of this Review, Professor Ross published an article entitled »Power Politics and the Ideology of the United Nations« 1) This article, which takes as a starting point certain reflections on Schwarzenberger’s monumental work »Power Politics«,2) in its second half turns into a polemic of remarkable violence on the part of a learned Professor against the Secretary-General of the United Nations and against the tendencies which are expressed to be reflected in his »Statement on the World Situation« (as Introduction to the Sixth Annual Report to the General Assembly of the United Nations) (1951) 3)

There is in itself nothing wrong with controversy, and the article cannot fail to retain the attention, in spite of its extravagancies, emanating as it does from a brilliant jurist whose work »Constitution of the United Nations«, a pithy and sharp analysis of the function and structure of the United Nations, earned a well-deserved success.

But what is more serious is that Professor Ross, in the above-mentioned paper, purports to be acting in the name of truth and of science. Following in the footsteps of Dr Schwarzenberger, he would appear to be undertaking some sort of crusade.

Whether it be in fact a crusade, or a tilting at windmills will presently be seen. For when a writer claims to speak in the name of truth and science, we are entitled to check his statements and to require him to substantiate the serious accusations he makes, for he goes so far as to accuse the Secretary-General of the United Nations of having been guilty of a pure »falsification of history«.


1) Acta Scandinavica Juris Gentium, 22 (1952) pp 33—48
3) U N General Assembly Official Records Sixth Session (1951) Supplement No 1 A (A/1844/Add 1)
It is desirable in the first place briefly to recall the contentions put forward by Professor Ross. He begins with enthusiastic praise for Dr Schwarzenberger's book and stresses the importance and the difficulty of confining oneself to strict truth in any scientific study of international politics or present day international organisation. Perhaps the author exaggerates from the very beginning the difficulties and dangers of a presentation which he describes as an »honest and unadorned statement of the facts« in the arena of international politics. In fact, there is no shortage at the present time of realists, of cynics or of pessimists, and Professor Ross's remarks, however discouraging, are less revolutionary than he believes. But he defends himself against any charge that he is a cynic on the ground that »respect for the facts cannot be called cynicism« (p. 33). We shall further consider what are the facts. Dr Schwarzenberger's main argument — which appears to be endorsed by Professor Ross — is that, in international politics, in relations between States, the line of conduct is radically different from what it is in the life, private or public, of man as a social being. In relations between States »unlimited self-interest« is the dominant factor. A State will employ »without restraint any means to gain its end«. Power being the ability »to force one's will upon others by the imposition of sanctions (war, economic blockade, etc)«, the dispassionate and objective student of international relations — according to Professors Schwarzenberger and Ross — »must be prepared to think without any sense of moral feeling in regard to political questions« (p. 36)

Much could be said on this, these assertions being questionable as both too sweeping and one-sided. But let us continue. The part accorded by the two learned writers to public international law is extremely slight: »the claims of general international law are so modest that these constitute no significant hindrance to the nations' Power Politics«. As to institutional international law, Professor Ross again adopts the views of Dr. Schwarzenberger: »the sum total of the United Nations' policy is nothing but Power Politics in Disguise«, a curiously formal and superficial view of reality, which reality is infinitely more complex and subtle, as will shortly be seen. Criticising as fanciful, romantic stargazers those who see in the United Nations »the world's only«, Dr Schwarzenberger states, in a culinary metaphor quoted with approval by Professor Ross:

»We are warned against plausible pessimistic interpretations of current international relations and admonished to join the bandwagon of naive optimism. Yet do those who tender such sage advice remember how often in the past they have proved wrong?