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# E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On<sup>\*†</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is an almost verbatim version of the E.H. Carr Memorial Lecture delivered at Aberystwyth on 14 October 2004. I argue that Carr's central claims in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* are still relevant today. He maintained in that classic realist work that states are the main actors in world politics and that they are deeply committed to pursuing power at each other's expense. He also argued that British intellectual life in his day was dominated by idealists who largely ignored power politics. Despite the great changes that have taken place in the world since 1939, when *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was published, states still dominate the international system and they still pay careful attention to the balance of power. Furthermore, idealists now dominate international relations scholarship in Britain, more so than they did in the late 1930s. Indeed, it is hard to find a realist theorist in the contemporary British academy, a situation that would almost surely shock Carr were he alive today. This powerful bias against realism, I argue, is intellectually foolhardy and hurts not only students but the idealist scholars who so dislike realism.

Keywords: *British Committee on International Relations Theory, E.H. Carr, hegemonic discourse, idealism, realism*

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be invited to Aberystwyth to give the E.H. Carr Memorial Lecture. Indeed, it is a special honor for me, a card-carrying realist, to pay tribute to one of the most important realist thinkers of all time. It is even more special to be able to do this at an institution that has a rich history of producing international relations scholars and theories.

It was actually 68 years ago to the day – on 14 October 1936 – that Carr gave his inaugural lecture at Aberystwyth as he assumed the Woodrow Wilson Chair of International Politics. That was three years before the publication of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, his classic realist tract. It was also three years before the start of World War II.

The world has changed a lot since then, and I am happy to say that most of these changes have been for the better. Nevertheless, the core arguments that Carr laid out in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* are as relevant today as they were in the dark decade of the 1930s. He made two main points in that path-breaking book. First, he argued that states, the principal actors in international politics, care greatly, although not exclusively, about power. This perspective, of course, is what makes Carr a realist. Second, he maintained that British academics and intellectuals were idealists who neglected the crucial role of power when thinking about international politics.

I will argue in the spirit of Carr that, globalization and al Qaeda notwithstanding, states are still the main actors on the world stage and are likely to remain so for the



foreseeable future. Those states will also continue to worry a great deal about the balance of power, and this concern will shape much of what they do. In short, power politics are alive and well in the world around us.

Furthermore, I will argue that idealism is now more firmly entrenched among British international relations scholars than it was in the late 1930s. Carr, I think, would be appalled by the almost complete absence of realists and the near total dominance of idealists in the contemporary British academy. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any British university hiring a young scholar today who makes arguments like those found in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. The great paradox is that this book has lost none of its intellectual luster over time, and it is still widely read and debated by students and professors at Aberystwyth and other British universities. If that is so, then why are there no heirs to Carr within British academic life? It is as if people continued to read and discuss Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall, while universally rejecting laissez-faire economics. Finally, I will argue that it is unwise for good intellectual reasons to have just idealists teaching international politics. Even idealists, not to mention their students, would benefit from having realists as colleagues.

I will proceed by first describing Carr's main arguments in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. I will concentrate on showing that Carr is a realist and elaborating his ideas about the relationship between power and morality. I will then describe the thinking of the post-Cold War idealists who now dominate British universities, paying attention to how they resemble and how they differ from the interwar idealists whom Carr wrote about. Finally, I will assess the post-Cold War idealists' efforts to crush realism by monopolizing the discourse about international politics, and explain why I think this is a misguided course.

### Carr's realism

When Carr set out to write *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in July 1938, his goal was not to articulate a theory of realism, but instead to criticize British (and American) intellectuals for largely ignoring the role of power in international politics. He made this point clear in November 1945 in the preface to the second edition: '*The Twenty Years' Crisis* was written with the deliberate aim of counteracting the glaring and dangerous defect of nearly all thinking, both academic and popular, about international politics in English-speaking countries from 1919 to 1939 – the almost total neglect of power.'<sup>1</sup>

The problem with British thinkers, according to Carr, was not just that they ignored power, but that they were utopians as well. He thought they held a hopelessly idealistic view of international politics. In particular, they had a normative agenda which led them to pay little attention to the world around them and to focus instead on changing how states relate to each other. Indeed, they were determined to radically transform world politics and create a peaceful international order where statesmen no longer cared about the balance of power.

The idealists, Carr believed, saw themselves as the key agents for accomplishing this revolution. 'The utopian', he wrote, 'believes in the possibility of more or less radically rejecting reality, and substituting his utopia for it by an act of will.'<sup>2</sup> He later expanded on this point, noting that 'intellectuals are particularly reluctant to recognize their thought as conditioned by forces external to themselves, and like to think of themselves as leaders whose theories provide the motive force for so-called men of action'.<sup>3</sup>

Carr surely would have been happy to transcend the world of the late 1930s and move to the utopia that the idealists hoped to create. Who in Britain at the time would not have welcomed such a development? However, Carr did not think it was possible to escape the existing world, a world where 'power is an essential element of politics'.<sup>4</sup> The fact is that Carr was a determinist at heart who did not think that individuals could purposely re-order the international system in fundamental ways. Consequently, he took out his cudgel and hammered away at the idealists' worldview. When he was done, little of that enterprise was still standing.

But *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was more than just a wrecking operation. Carr also forcefully made the case that power is an essential ingredient in politics. 'International politics', he wrote, 'are always power politics; for it is impossible to eliminate power from them.'<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he asserted that 'the *ultima ratio* of power in international relations is war', which led him to conclude that of all the instruments of statecraft the military is of 'supreme importance'.<sup>6</sup> These claims about power in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* earned Carr his realist spurs.

However, as I have pointed out elsewhere, Carr did not directly address the two key questions that motivate most realist thinkers.<sup>7</sup> First, why do states want power? What is the underlying logic that explains why great powers compete for it? Carr insists that they do, and offers plenty of evidence for his position, but he never explains why. Second, how much power do states want? How much is enough? On this second question, he hints at one point that states have an insatiable appetite for power. 'The exercise of power', he writes, 'always appears to beget the appetite for more power.'<sup>8</sup> But he does not elaborate this point to any significant extent. The explanation for these omissions, I think, is that Carr's main goal in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was not to elaborate a theory of realism, but instead to criticize and undermine interwar idealism, which he considered delusional as well as dangerous.

Carr's arguments about the centrality of power notwithstanding, he emphasized that international politics is not only about the pursuit of power. 'Pure realism', he argued, 'can offer nothing but a naked struggle for power.'<sup>9</sup> Instead he maintained that serious policymakers and intellectuals pay attention to ideals as well as power. 'Utopia and reality', he wrote, are 'the two facets of political science', and therefore, 'any sound political thought must be based on elements of both utopia and reality'.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, it is abundantly clear that Carr thought power politics 'is only part of the story'. Specifically, he wrote, 'The fact that national propaganda everywhere so eagerly cloaks itself in ideologies of a professedly international character proves the existence of an international stock of common ideas, however limited and however

weakly held, to which appeal can be made, and of a belief that these common ideas stand somehow in the scale of values above national interests. This stock of common ideas is what we mean by international morality.<sup>11</sup>

Carr is certainly correct when he says that states are not motivated by power calculations alone. Virtually all of us, realists included, recognize that there is a well-developed and widely accepted body of idealist or liberal norms in international politics. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior in peacetime as well as wartime and they also proscribe unacceptable kinds of behavior. These norms are inextricably bound up with just war theory and liberal ideology, and many of them are codified in international law. Moreover, we recognize that most leaders and most of their followers want their state to behave according to those ideals and norms, and that state behavior often conforms to these general principles.

Thus, Carr's claim that states care about both power and liberal ideals is not terribly controversial. The critical task is to explain how power and utopia relate to each other. In Carr's words, the key is to find the proper 'combination of utopia and reality'.<sup>12</sup> However, he is not especially helpful in this regard, because he also argues at different points that utopia and reality are incompatible with each other. He writes, for example, 'Politics are made up of two elements – utopia and reality – belonging to two different planes which can never meet.'<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say, 'This constant interaction of irreconcilable forces is the stuff of politics. Every political situation contains mutually incompatible elements of utopia and reality, of morality and power.'<sup>14</sup>

For what it is worth, I believe that Carr overstates the conflict between the pursuit of power and ideals. After all, states sometimes can pursue these two goals simultaneously, as the United States did when it fought Nazi Germany in World War II, and when it opposed the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In both cases, the United States was engaged in a just conflict that also made eminently good strategic sense, and so it did not have to choose between its ideals and its concerns about power.

There are also cases where the pursuit of idealist goals has no effect on the balance of power, and thus once again there is no conflict between realism and idealism. Human rights interventions in the developing world usually fit this description, because they tend to be small-scale operations that cost little and do not detract from a great power's prospects for survival. The American intervention in Somalia between 1992 and 1993 is a case in point. Furthermore, the United States could have intervened to stop the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which certainly would have been the morally correct thing to do, without having jeopardized American security.

There are, however, many instances where the pursuit of power conflicts with liberal ideals: where there is, in Carr's words, an 'antithesis of utopia and reality'.<sup>15</sup> These cases are where the rubber meets the road, because they force national leaders to choose between two starkly different sets of calculations. Realists argue that states will privilege power over ideals in such instances, and the historical record supports that view quite strongly. Carr is no exception in this regard; he

believes that power ultimately trumps all other considerations in the nasty and dangerous world of international politics. And that is why Carr is a realist.

Carr's realism comes shining through when he notes that although states almost always use idealistic rhetoric to justify their actions, this cannot disguise the fact that their motives are usually selfish and usually based on calculations about the balance of power. He writes, for example,

The exposure of the real basis of the professedly abstract principles commonly invoked in international politics is the *most damning* and *most convincing* part of the realist indictment of utopianism . . . What matters is that these supposedly absolute and universal principles were not principles at all, but the unconscious reflections of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time.<sup>16</sup>

In short, 'Morality is the product of power'.<sup>17</sup>

Carr's realism is also manifest in his discussion of international law, where he makes it clear that he does not see it 'primarily as a branch of ethics', but instead considers it 'primarily as a vehicle of power'.<sup>18</sup> And on the matter of 'international society', a concept dear to the hearts of idealists, Carr wrote to Stanley Hoffmann in 1977: 'We tried to conjure into existence an international society' but 'no international society exists'.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, there is no question that Carr rejects pure realism; he recognizes that there is an idealist dimension to international politics that bears serious consideration. Nevertheless, he maintains that in the crunch, power calculations matter the most to policymakers. 'In the international order', he wrote in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 'the role of power is greater and that of morality less.'<sup>20</sup> Idealists, on the other hand, privilege liberal ideals over power. Indeed, Carr accused them of ignoring power almost completely, which is why he was so hostile to idealism.

### Carr's worst nightmare

Carr's indictment of idealism, coupled with the onset of World War II and then the Cold War, dealt it a devastating blow. It was not until the late 1950s, when the British Committee on International Relations Theory was established, that idealism began to get back on its feet. Since then it has made an amazing comeback. Today, almost every British international relations theorist is an idealist. I cannot identify a single realist theorist in Albion.

If Carr were alive today, I think that he would be mortified by the almost complete triumph of idealism over realism in British universities and intellectual life. One could argue, in fact, that idealism is more influential today than it was in the late 1930s. If nothing else, at least Carr was teaching then! More seriously, it is now clear from the work of scholars like Brian Schmidt and Peter Wilson that Carr exaggerated the influence of idealism in his day, while I am not exaggerating its influence today.<sup>21</sup>

It also seems clear that, if Carr were with us, there would be little interest in offering him a professorship, at least not on the basis of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Some idealists might argue that he would be hired because he is not a realist but a closet idealist. This is not a serious argument; Carr is a realist.<sup>22</sup> The only plausible reason some department might hire him is that he would be a famous name on the masthead and would boost its standing in the competition for resources from the Higher Education Funding Council. But otherwise, why would a community of idealist scholars who loathe realism hire or promote someone who is not only a legendary realist, but is also a sharp critic of idealism? Those idealists certainly have not been inclined to hire anyone of that persuasion for a long time, which is how Britain became a realist-free zone.

For those who doubt that Carr, or someone like him, would face hostility from British scholars today, consider Carr's experience with the British Committee on International Relations Theory. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight established that committee in 1959. They felt that it had a 'corporate purpose': to develop an idealist alternative to realism, which was then the most influential paradigm in the Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>23</sup> Carr was not invited to join that endeavor, even though he was Britain's most famous international relations theorist at the time. According to Wight, there was a danger that Carr, who was '*so much a Great Power in this region . . .* might deflect our discussions into channels opened up by his own work'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Carr's ideas were potentially dangerous to this nascent idealist project; therefore he had to be kept away from it. F.H. Hinsley was also excluded from the committee because he was too much of a realist.<sup>25</sup>

While Cold War idealists like Butterfield and Wight, and later Hedley Bull, were hostile to realism, they nevertheless believed that the balance of power played a role in international politics.<sup>26</sup> Their goal was to minimize its importance, while, in Bull's words, 'maintaining and extending' international society, which was clearly a non-realist concept.<sup>27</sup> However, British idealism has evolved over the past two decades in ways that make it much more hostile to realism than it was in the heyday of the British Committee on International Relations Theory and more akin to inter-war idealism. This antipathy toward power-based theories among post-Cold War idealists explains in large part why realists are not welcome in British universities today. Let us consider this latest manifestation of idealism in more detail.

### Post-Cold War idealism

First off, let me acknowledge that it is obviously an oversimplification to portray British theorists of international relations as an intellectual community comprised solely of idealists. I realize that there are important differences between these scholars: some are critical theorists, while others are feminists or postmodernists. There are various sorts of constructivists as well as scholars who self-identify as members of the 'English School'. In one sense, in short, it is a heterogeneous and lively group of thinkers. Nonetheless, there are also important common elements in

the various theories that this group of scholars advance, which make all of them idealists.

I might add that there are important differences among realists, but they too share common perspectives which make it possible to locate them together in a single category. Still, one must be careful not to caricature the target group when lumping rather than splitting.

Today's idealists share the same basic goal as the interwar idealists whom Carr wrote about in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. They still abhor the way states behave towards each other, and they still have, in the words of Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler, 'an imperative to change the world'.<sup>28</sup> Of course, their radical agenda aims to change things for the better. Indeed, they want to transform international politics so that states no longer care about power and no longer engage in security competition, but instead are content to live together in harmony. There is much talk about 'emancipation' among post-Cold War idealists, which means breaking away from realist thinking, which the idealists fear has great staying power.<sup>29</sup>

In essence, contemporary idealists would like to make the planet one giant 'security community', to use Karl Deutsch's famous phrase, where states worry about the welfare of all people, not just their own citizens, and where states act ethically and respect not only international law, but each other as well. The idealist enterprise remains normative and dovish at its core.

Where post-Cold War idealists differ from interwar idealists is over how to achieve utopia. Those earlier idealists were children of the Enlightenment who believed that reason could be employed to get beyond realism. People had to think hard about international politics, so the argument went, and they would recognize the imperative for fundamental change in how states deal with each other. Once large numbers of people saw the light of day, public opinion would become a powerful force for change in countries around the world. Carr captured this perspective when he wrote that the interwar idealists believed that, 'Reason could demonstrate the absurdity of the international anarchy; and with increasing knowledge, enough people would be rationally convinced of its absurdity to put an end to it.'<sup>30</sup>

Post-Cold War idealists have a different strategy for changing the world. They believe that the master causal variable is discourse, not reason itself. It is not enough to have the better argument; rather, one wins the day by having the only argument. Specifically, they maintain that how we talk and think about the world largely shapes practice. In other words, the ideas that are in peoples' heads matter greatly for determining how states deal with each other. Behavior follows from beliefs. The material world, which realists tend to privilege, is greatly overrated according to contemporary idealists. Discourse is what gives meaning to the world around us. In Alexander Wendt's famous words, 'Anarchy is what states make of it.'<sup>31</sup>

The problem up to now, say the idealists, is that realists have dominated the discourse in international politics. Indeed, realism has long been a hegemonic discourse, which not only puts the state up in bright lights, but also emphasizes that states should care about military security. As Steve Smith notes in his recent

presidential address to the International Studies Association, 'It is the security of the state that matters in International Relations.'<sup>32</sup> British idealists, according to their own logic, must therefore radically alter the language of international politics by creating a new hegemonic discourse. To put it in Smith's words, they must 'sing into existence' a new world.

Not surprisingly, the post-Cold War idealists have taken dead aim at the concept of security, which they say needs to be broadened and deepened. Security, they argue, involves much more than just military threats and the balance of power; it also involves dangers like AIDS, environmental degradation, and poverty, just to name a few. Therefore, it is a fundamental mistake to define that critically important concept so narrowly.

Now there is no question that humankind faces many non-military dangers that we should worry about and seek to defeat quickly and decisively. Moreover, there is no reason that they could not be called security threats. Definitions are just definitions; they are never right or wrong. But what is the purpose of this relabeling? It is hard to imagine that calling AIDS or poverty a security threat is going to change how we think about those problems, or make them any easier to solve.

I suspect that the idealists' real goal is not to broaden the meaning of security, but to transform its meaning so completely that it has little if anything to do with military threats.<sup>33</sup> This approach would certainly be consistent with the idealists' agenda. Moreover, it seems to be reflected in their writings. How else is one to understand Dunne and Wheeler's assertion that their 'theory provides a radically different theoretical account of the meaning and production of security'?<sup>34</sup>

Idealists are also determined to get us to stop thinking of the state as the main unit of analysis in world politics, and instead to focus our attention on 'either humanity as a whole or the individual'.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that they argue for replacing the state with some new political organization. On the contrary, most idealists appear to recognize that the state is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Instead, their argument is that our moral referent point should not be the state, but the individual or all of humanity. Ken Booth puts the point succinctly: 'The litmus test concerns the primary referent object: is it states, or is it people? Whose security comes first? I want to argue . . . that individual humans are the ultimate referent.'<sup>36</sup>

In short, for the idealist enterprise to work, it is necessary to radically alter how we think and talk about security, while simultaneously shifting our focus away from the state itself and onto the people around the globe who live in those states. This discussion raises an important question: who are going to be the principal agents of change? Who is going to lead the way forward in transforming the existing discourse about international politics?

The answer: idealist academics. They believe that they can take us to the promised land because they have significant influence over how large numbers of influential people think about world politics. Academics, after all, are responsible for educating the future elites, which means that international relations theorists are well positioned to change the way tomorrow's leaders think about security and the state. The guest editor of a recent special issue of *International Relations* put the



point well when he wrote, 'In late modernity the university is an important site for knowledge construction about international relations . . . The university looms large in the development and distribution of such knowledge, if for no other reason than that most practitioners get their conceptual and intellectual bearings there.'<sup>37</sup>

However, for the post-Cold War idealists to make this truly ambitious social engineering project work, they must completely control the commanding heights of the discipline. They cannot tolerate realists in the ranks, because they are trying to demolish realism and replace it with a more peaceful hegemonic discourse. The idealist enterprise is all about domination, not peaceful coexistence, and certainly not about an open debate designed to advance our understanding of contemporary policy problems or enduring historical tendencies. The problem with having realists competing in the marketplace of ideas is that they might convince some impressionable young students – maybe even a lot of them – that there is no such thing as international society or a security community, and states should therefore worry about their position in the global balance of power. If that happens, however, idealism would never become a hegemonic discourse, which is the idealists' ultimate goal.

Interwar idealists could afford to be more tolerant of realists in their midst, because they believed that reason was on their side and that they could wield that formidable weapon to move the world away from realism. The post-Cold War idealists, however, focus mainly on controlling what people think and say, and doing everything possible to make sure that their discourse, and not realism, is dominant. The idealists' emphasis on creating hegemonic ideas is coercive in nature and thus cannot help but foster intolerance towards competing worldviews, especially realism. This is why realist theorists are absent from British universities today.

### The prospects of a new international order

In keeping with the tradition established by Carr, I would like to offer an assessment of post-Cold War idealism. I have three main points.

First, while the contemporary idealists have produced a rich body of scholarship, it is not going to transform international politics or how we study the subject in any meaningful way. The best evidence that realism is not headed down the road to oblivion is the remarkable staying power of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. That book – which is a realist tract – is still considered the most important work on international relations theory ever written in Britain. Moreover, it continues to attract widespread attention among idealists. Indeed, over the past 15 years, they have produced a veritable cottage industry of articles and books about Carr and his ideas.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps no work better illustrates the continuing relevance of Carr's ideas than *The Eighty Years' Crisis: International Relations, 1919–1999*, a book of essays published in 1998 by Cambridge University Press. The editors – Tim Dunne, Michael Cox, and Ken Booth – a distinguished group of idealists for sure, wrote in the introduction:

To underline the point that E.H. Carr provides the inspiration behind the volume, we have not only exploited the title of his best-known book in international relations, we have also borrowed his chapter titles and section headings in what follows. The fact that this was easily possible, offers clear testimony to the continuing relevance of Carr's questions – and indeed some of the answers.<sup>39</sup>

They go on to say, 'In our judgment, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is one of the few books in 80 years of the discipline which leave us nowhere to hide.'<sup>40</sup>

The reason that *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is still relevant is that there are enduring features of world politics about which realism has a lot to say. For example, the state remains the main actor in the international system and people around the globe remain deeply loyal to their own state. And people without a state, like the Palestinians, the Kurds, and the Chechens, are determined to create one. The main reason that most people privilege the state over both the individual and the whole of humanity is nationalism, which remains the most powerful political ideology on the planet and shows few signs of disappearing anytime soon. I might add that many peoples want states because they are in fact interested in human security, and they realize that peoples who do not have their own state are often vulnerable to the predations of others. After all, why did the Zionists want to create the state of Israel?

Carr hinted in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, and then clearly stated after World War II, that nationalism was a spent force and that the nation-state was rapidly becoming an anachronism.<sup>41</sup> But he was wrong. Nationalism remains a potent force, as the American and British militaries have discovered in Iraq, and as the Israelis are reminded every day in the occupied territories.

Furthermore, states still care greatly about security in the traditional military sense of the term. The United States, after all, has fought five wars since the Cold War ended, and Britain has fought alongside its close ally in all of them. Moreover, it is possible, although unlikely, that China and the United States could end up in a shooting war over Taiwan within the next few years. Most importantly, we live in a world where there are thousands of nuclear weapons and where the number of states with nuclear arsenals seems sure to grow in the years ahead. Nuclear war is not likely, but one would be foolish to argue that it cannot happen. It is not difficult, for example, to posit plausible scenarios where India and Pakistan end up using nuclear weapons against each other. All of this is to say that states still worry about their survival, and military power still counts a lot for them. In such a world, Carr is sure to remain not just a great power in Britain, to use Wight's words, but the greatest power.

Second, it is unwise, if not dangerous, for idealists to try to marginalize the study of traditional security issues in British universities. Military questions are of the utmost importance, not simply because states still fight wars with each other, but also because of the danger that a conflict might escalate to the nuclear level. Plus there is the ever-present danger of terrorists with nuclear weapons.

Given these daunting security problems, which involve the survival of real people, not just the survival of an intellectual paradigm, it is imperative that the best

minds in the academy address them. That includes leading international relations theorists in Britain. Moreover, it is essential that their students be pushed to think long and hard about traditional military issues as well as new ones. To rule them out of court, as some idealists would like to do, is irresponsible.

Third, it is unwise from an intellectual perspective for any group of international relations scholars, be they idealists or realists, to promote a hegemonic discourse. Scholarship is best advanced in any discipline when there are contending schools of thought that are free to compete with each other in the marketplace of ideas. Pluralism, not monopoly, is what we should all foster in our departments and in the broader field of international relations.

Those who pursue hegemony for their theory are essentially saying that they have found the magic formula for thinking about international politics. In essence, they believe that they have discovered truth, and those who disagree with them are wrong and should therefore be silenced. John Stuart Mill was spot on when he wrote, 'All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.'<sup>42</sup> In this case, of course, realism must be quashed, because the idealists think that they have erected an incontrovertible body of theory and realism stands in its way.

One obvious problem with this kind of thinking is that the idealists might be wrong about important issues. Is there anyone here who has not at some point in his or her life abandoned an idea or theory that they once thought was a powerful tool for understanding how the world works? If I have learned anything about developing social science theories, it is to be humble, because the real world often deals harshly with our most cherished ideas. It is for good reason that Albert Einstein said, 'Whoever undertakes to set himself up as judge in the field of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the Gods.'<sup>43</sup>

But even if one has an impressive theory or perspective, it cannot tell us all we need to know about international politics. The reason is simple: the world is remarkably complicated and all of our theories – including the best ones – have limited explanatory power. To make sense of the world, we need to have a variety of perspectives at our disposal.

Another reason for fostering pluralism is that we learn from engaging scholars who look at the world in ways that are fundamentally different from our own. I certainly benefited from having Alexander Wendt as a colleague at the University of Chicago, and I would hope that he benefited from interacting with me, even though we thought about international politics in profoundly different ways. I would presume, by the way, that idealists in Britain continue to read *The Twenty Years' Crisis* because they benefit from engaging Carr's ideas, even if they do not agree with most or all of them. In short, Mill was right again when he said, 'The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion.'<sup>44</sup>

I want to emphasize that I am not arguing that idealists should stop criticizing realism. On the contrary, I think it is an unalloyed good for the discipline when rival schools of thought engage in intellectual combat. My argument is that the interwar

idealists had the smart strategy for waging war, which is to rely on reason to show the inadequacies of power politics. It is a far superior strategy to excluding realists from the academy and outlawing realist language and thinking. Or to put this matter another way, if contemporary idealists really do have powerful theories to offer, they do not need to be afraid of realism.

One might argue that this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, since realism has long been the hegemonic discourse, and what the idealists are doing is trying to beat the realists at their own game. For sure, realism has been the most important discourse in international relations for most of that discipline's history. Still, it has never been a hegemonic discourse. There have always been idealists and other non-realist scholars in the discipline, which is exactly as it should be.

I might add that I do not know a single realist who thinks that our field should be populated only by realists. I certainly do not think that way, and all the realists I know favor a discipline that houses a variety of perspectives, not one controlled by any single-minded group of scholars. This catholicism, I believe, is due in part to the fact that realists, like the interwar idealists, are confident that their theories will do well against the competition in the marketplace of ideas.

In conclusion, I think that the effort to make idealism a hegemonic discourse is a mistake. It would have been smarter for the British international relations community to promote diversity in its ranks, by hiring realists as well as idealists, and plenty of other types of thinkers besides. Intellectual diversity is one of the great virtues of democracy, and it should be encouraged, not curtailed.

I believe it is a thoroughly admirable irony that E.H. Carr, a realist, was hired to fill a chair named after Woodrow Wilson, a liberal whose ideas Carr deeply disliked, and that Ken Booth, a dedicated idealist, was hired to fill a chair named after Carr. I hope that when it comes time to fill a chair named after Professor Booth, a realist will be chosen to occupy it. That would not only be good for realism, but also good for idealism and for the field of international relations more generally. And perhaps most important of all, it would be good for our ability to understand the world as it is, and thus to nudge it, however slowly and painfully, in a more humane direction. I am a realist, and believe there are limits to how good the world can become, but we are more likely to move in the right direction if we do not narrow our vision or silence different voices. Thank you.

## Notes

\* *Editor's note.* Professor Mearsheimer delivered the Carr Memorial Lecture at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, on 14 October 2004. This series of annual lectures was inaugurated to honor the contribution to the field of E.H. Carr (1890–1982), who was the fourth Woodrow Wilson Professor in Aberystwyth. During his time in the department, between 1936 and 1947, Carr wrote, among other works, his landmark book, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939; second edition 1946). The first Memorial Lecture was given in 1984 by Professor William T.R. Fox, Bryce professor emeritus of the history of international relations at Columbia University. A set of responses to Professor Mearsheimer's lecture will be published in the next issue of *International Relations*.

† I much appreciate the comments of Michael Desch, Stephen Van Evera, and Stephen Walt on earlier drafts of this lecture, as well as the comments I received at a seminar at the Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

- 1 E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.cv. All references to this book, hereafter cited as *TTYC*, are from this edition.
- 2 *TTYC*, p.12. For a good discussion of idealist thinking in the interwar years, see Michael J. Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), Chapter 3.
- 3 *TTYC*, p.14.
- 4 *TTYC*, p.100.
- 5 *TTYC*, p.130.
- 6 *TTYC*, p.102.
- 7 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp.12, 18–19.
- 8 *TTYC*, pp.104–5.
- 9 *TTYC*, p.87.
- 10 *TTYC*, pp.10, 87.
- 11 *TTYC*, p.130.
- 12 *TTYC*, p.14.
- 13 *TTYC*, p.87.
- 14 *TTYC*, p.88.
- 15 *TTYC*, p.12; and more generally pp.12–19.
- 16 *TTYC*, p.80 (emphasis added).
- 17 *TTYC*, pp.63, 75.
- 18 *TTYC*, p.161. Carr's bottom line about international law is on p.166. His views about international law are reinforced in the subsequent two chapters (11 and 12), which deal with 'The Sanctity of Treaties' and 'The Judicial Settlement of International Disputes', respectively.
- 19 Quoted in Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), p.xii.
- 20 *TTYC*, p.151.
- 21 Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); and Peter Wilson, 'The Myth of the "First Great Debate"', *Review of International Studies* 24(5) 1998, pp.1–15. Also see the various articles in *International Relations* 16(1), 2002.
- 22 It should be emphasized that when I define Carr as a realist, I am describing him as such on the basis of the arguments he made in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, not his subsequent writings. Carr himself recognized that he had written a hard-hitting realist treatise. For example, he notes in an autobiographical sketch that he 'began to be a bit ashamed of the harsh "realism" of *The 20 Years Crisis*' shortly after its publication. E.H. Carr, 'An Autobiography', in Michael Cox (ed.), *E.H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p.xix. Also, he wrote in the preface to the second edition (1945) that 'some passages of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* state their argument with a rather one-sided emphasis which no longer seems as necessary or appropriate to-day as it did in 1939'. *TTYC*, p.cv.
- 23 Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, p.93. That the committee was determined to develop a clear alternative to realism is a central theme in Dunne. Also see Joao Marques de Almeida, 'Challenging Realism by Returning to History: The British Committee's Contribution to IR 40 Years On', *International Relations* 17(3), 2003, pp.273–302.
- 24 Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, p.93.
- 25 Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, pp.13, 93.
- 26 Butterfield and Wight were actually well-established realists who embraced idealism rather late in life. See Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, Chapters 3–4. This transformation probably explains in part why they did not dismiss the balance of power altogether in their idealist phase. Also, it would have been difficult to ignore military power in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Soviet Union and the United States were involved in serious crises over Berlin and Cuba.
- 27 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p.315. Also see Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

- 28 Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘“We the Peoples”: Contending Discourses of Security in Human Rights Theory and Practice’, *International Relations* 18(1), 2004, p.9. Also see Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, p.xi.
- 29 See Ken Booth, ‘Security and Emancipation’, *Review of International Studies* 17(4), 1991, pp.313–26; Andrew Linklater, ‘Dialogue, Dialectic and Emancipation in International Relations at the End of the Post-War Age’, *Millennium* 23(1), 1994, pp.119–31; Roger D. Spegele, ‘Emancipatory International Relations: Good News, Bad News or No News at All’, *International Relations* 16(3), 2002, pp.381–401.
- 30 *TTYC*, p.28.
- 31 Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46(2), 1992, pp.391–425.
- 32 Steve Smith, ‘Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11: Presidential Address to the International Studies Association (February 27, 2003, Portland, Oregon)’, *International Studies Quarterly* 48(3), 2004, p.504.
- 33 I would not be surprised if Britain’s idealists eventually put their gun-sights on the concept of realism and attempted to broaden and deepen its meaning. The idealists could then call themselves realists and argue that there is no discrimination against realism. In fact, they would probably claim that realism was making great advances, because sophisticated realists like them were overtaking crude realists like me.
- 34 Dunne and Wheeler, ‘We the Peoples’, p.504.
- 35 Smith, ‘Singing Our World into Existence’, p.504.
- 36 Booth, ‘Security and Emancipation’, p.319. Also see Dunne and Wheeler, ‘We the Peoples’.
- 37 Stephen J. Rosow, ‘Introduction’, to special issue on ‘Teaching IR: Critical Knowledge in the Corporate University’, *International Relations* 18(2), 2004, p.147.
- 38 See Michael Cox, ‘Introduction’ in *TTYC*, pp.xlvii–liv; Michael Cox, ‘A Guide to the Secondary Literature on E.H. Carr’, in *TTYC*, pp.lxiv–lxxi; and Cox, *E.H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal*.
- 39 Tim Dunne, Michael Cox, and Ken Booth (eds), *The Eighty Years’ Crisis: International Relations 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.xiii.
- 40 Dunne et al., *Eighty Years’ Crisis*, p.xiv.
- 41 See Carr, *TTYC*, pp.cvi, 209–13; E.H. Carr, *Nationalism and After* (New York: Macmillan, 1945).
- 42 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (ed.), John Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.22.
- 43 From the *Proverbial.net* website.
- 44 Mill, *On Liberty*, p.25.