

**Pashakhanlou, Arash Heydarian, 2017.
Realism and Fear in International Relations:
Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer
Reconsidered. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,
174 pp. \$93 (Hardback).**

International Relations textbooks usually devote a lot of attention to realist theory in their introductory chapters. In contemporary academic debates about world politics, especially in relation to topics such as international security, American foreign policy, the rise of China, or purely theoretical assessments of the discipline, it seems that realism still plays a crucial role – occasionally challenged by criticisms from liberal and constructivist parts of the spectrum. Whether as proponents or critics, scholars tend to refer to realist theory in various contexts; it is a paradigm that everyone loves or, at least, loves to hate.

Within the new generation of IR scholars, there are several names that stand out in regard to their successful grasp and ‘new readings’ of realist theory: Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou of Sheffield Hallam University, UK, is one of them. His book *Realism and Fear in International Relations: Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer Reconsidered* is an attempt to explore the meaning and roles of fear in the development of the three scholars’ general theories of international politics.

His research intentions come from the claim that “Despite the fact that different schools of thought in International Relations (IR) evidently use fear in their narratives, it is realism that has become synonymous with this emotion in the discipline” (p. 2). It would, thus, be particularly useful to try and map the exact role of fear as a variable in three of realism’s most prominent theories: the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau, the defensive neo-realism of Kenneth Waltz and the offensive neorealism of John Mearsheimer.

The criteria upon which these academics and their theories have been selected are three-fold: 1) the chosen scholar has to be the most influential representative of his/her branch of realism; 2) the chosen scholar must have formulated a general theory of international politics; and 3) fear must be considered significant for the chosen scholar’s thinking on international politics by the secondary literature (p. 7). And while the first and second criteria are easily met in the case of scholars in question, the situation is somewhat different with the third criterion. As will be demonstrated, this fact contributes to the somewhat ambiguous findings of Pashakhanlou’s study.

Regarding research methodology, the author states that “investigation makes use of quantitative, qualitative, manual and computer-assisted content analysis and is the first study to incorporate all these aspects of the methods within a single research project in IR – in other words, this is the premier example of fully integrated content analysis” (p. 12). A multitude of formulations that might be used interchangeably with fear (*e.g.* distrust/mistrust, insecurity or uncertainty) are mapped within over 400 bibliographic units authored by Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer. In the next phase, these are conceptually explored by thorough deliberation about four key roles of fear: on conceptual, theoretical, empirical and logical levels. Such a complex theoretical apparatus should provide significant plausibility to the conclusions drawn, but this is not quite the case. The main issue that hampers the solidity of Pashakhanlou’s research is too extensive understating of fear, which causes it to be spotted in places within the theory where it doesn’t belong (or, for that matter, exist), only to be criticized as a redundant variable from the view of the theory’s validity.

Realists are described by Pashakhanlou as “united by the belief that power is essential in international politics and that nation-states that pursue their own interests are currently the most important actors in the international system. Great powers are deemed particularly significant as they have the biggest influence in shaping international affairs due to their exalted position. Realists are also pessimistic regarding the possibilities of a universal escape from power politics manifested in the form of competition” (p. 5). At the same time, fear is understood as “a spontaneous reaction to a perceived threat or danger which creates an intense urge to defend oneself from that threat or danger” (p. 11).

Action-wise, the sense of fear is embodied either as aggression or, preferably, as restraint (the actor will only engage in aggression if it is necessary as a means of defending one’s own security: the phenomenon of “status quo actors acting like revisionists”). Necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of fear in international politics, thus, are capabilities and security.

So, in the light of such a carefully constructed research design, and the fact that fear is immediately and intuitively associated with realism in IR, is it not surprising that Pashakhanlou has to conclude that this emotion does not represent a logically necessary element of these three theories, or even goes against the theories’ fundamental assumptions? Not exactly, and the reason for this is the very issue of defining and understanding fear in Pashakhanlou’s research. Morgenthau’s concept of *animus dominandi*, Pashakhanlou acknowledges, can hardly be compatible with fear as a crucial variable. The same goes for Waltz’s and Mearsheimer’s structural theories – fear, as an emotion, cannot be but a peripheral part of a structural theory of international politics: it cannot be mechanically transposed from the first to the second to the third “image” of international relations.

Pashakhanlou refers to Aron’s claim that there is no need for fear to be explicitly defined (p. 13), ascribing such a belief to the three realists’ opuses. Then he goes on to give an explicit definition, which we have already cited and, in conducting his research, he further extends the scope of the notion by mapping all of its more or less adequate synonyms.

Realism does seem a particularly suitable candidate to be understood in the context of fear, given its notorious, explicit or implicit, roots in anthropological pessimism and the focus on a state's survival, based primarily on the lack of trust in other actors' good faith and uncertainty regarding their intentions. However, these elements (taken as synonyms: uncertainty/mistrust/insecurity) need not be understood in the context of fear as an emotion, but rather in the context of traditional realist concepts of survival, relative gains, or security dilemma. Perhaps we do speak of fear when we discuss IR realism, but does the actor's fear for their own security/survival, permanently and inherently present within states as international units – which, understood in this manner – provide the necessary ontological foundation for all the branches and schools within realist theory? In other words, fear is already incorporated in the key concepts of realist theory, and there is no logical justification for it to be reassessed once again, this time in the capacity of an emotion – only to conclude that it is conceptually and logically redundant.

It can be stated, in this regard, that it is exactly the indisputable importance of fear that, paradoxically, somewhat diminishes the value of this research: there is a logically sound way of connecting any political decision/action to its fear-related foundations. These could include (but are not limited to) fear of physical insecurity, fear of poverty, fear of one's collective identity being endangered by means of immigration or cultural hegemony. So to speak, there is no need to look for the ways to introduce fear to the realist theory of IR – it is already there.

All of this does not mean that there is no value to Pashakhanlou's study – far from it. It is astonishingly well informed, based on serious in-depth research. In addition, it is clear, systematic and without unnecessary artificial complexity. Most importantly, it is a harsh but benevolent inquiry into the realms of three key forms of realist theory in IR; as such, it is a kind of study from which new generations of realists, as well as the wider academic community interested in issues of international politics, can greatly benefit.

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