

**READING SUGGESTIONS:**  
**Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations***

Hans Morgenthau's most known book is not a classic for chronological reasons: published for the first time in 1948, and substantially revised until the author's death, this essay cannot be understood if not in the context of the Cold War. Indeed, a deep investigation of Morgenthau's thought should force us to the reading of several other works, most of all *Scientific Man Vs Power Politics* (1946), but this task would exceed the limits of space at our disposal.

However, *Politics Among Nations* is worth in itself, because it touches upon a series of themes and concepts that reasonably make of it a classic. More, it is possible to dig out of it a comprehensive view of international politics - i.e. one that aims at accounting for the overall functioning of the international system. It should be stated clearly that Morgenthau's ambition does not lead him to a complete success: to tell the truth, his main (self-acknowledged) accomplishment - to come up with a theory of international relations - does not stand to a close scrutiny. Nonetheless, even admitting the limits of his theoretical contribution, most of Morgenthau's work is definitely outstanding and enlightening.

As it has been sharply stated (Hoffmann, 1987), it is not easy to distinguish in his works between the political analyst and the sincere believer:

a clever and polite way to point out one of the most evident fallacies in his methodological approach, namely the intermingling of normative and explicative attempt. A second challenging critique is the pre-scientific use of key concepts such as interest and power (Claude, 1962), which make it really difficult to talk of a theory, at least in neo-positivists terms.

Nevertheless, some of the main statements in *Politics Among Nations* are worth investigating, as they can serve as a caveat for political scientists and, broadly speaking, every observer of global affairs. Such warnings look pretty relevant even in the current days, and this may happen not by chance:

Morgenthau wrote his book in the second half of the 40s, just when a brand new bipolar system was replacing the century-old multipolarity; nowadays, the dual confrontation on which the Cold War rested for more than forty years has been supplanted by a more obscure unipolar moment (for an early and fortunate attempt to define the current international system, see Krauthammer, 1990/91). Arguably, some of the puzzles we are called to solve at present resemble in a sense the same dilemmas that the early strategists of the Cold War had to face more than half a century ago.



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Hans Morgenthau

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Admittedly, it would be untenable to address contemporary problems as Morgenthau had done, but it is nonetheless fascinating to try to explore the issue of the day keeping in mind his teaching. Or, in other (more explicit) words, to investigate about the problem of an unrivalled and unconstrained America from a classic realist perspective. This issue has been debated

thoroughly in the last years (see for instance Ikenberry, 2002), from several perspectives. It would be impossible to point out here all the shades of the debate, but we can perhaps summarize the main point at stake in a single theoretical question: how will the current global environment evolve - admitting that it will?

Thus, if the value of a book is to be assessed by its relevance to the present, *Politics Among Nations* will prove a significant success, as the following argument hopefully will make clear.

This point has been analysed and discussed in depth, giving rise to a huge literature on the future of international order. Shrinking the terms of a multifaceted and uneasy debate, two main positions can be laid out: the first one can be labelled the “optimist” view, whose supporters claim that since the end of the Cold War we have been enjoying the benefits of a pax Americana that spread peace, democracy and free trade in most of the world and, as no credible challengers lie ahead, we should not worry about the future, because the foundation on which this system rests is still unquestioned. Probably, the one who paved the way for this thread was Francis Fukuyama (1989), with his well known article on the end of history.

Of course, several critiques can be raised against this vision: are the benefits equally distributed among the States in the system? Where are the challengers supposed to come from? From exiting States or non-State actors? Is not terrorism a threat to American primacy? Is the link between hegemony and order so straightforward - i.e., is America’s hegemony a guarantee of common benefits for other States? Some of these objections have been strongly

refused, others proved more penetrating. By virtue of the answers to these criticisms, now slightly different positions can be found in this camp; nonetheless the core argument can be summarized as follows: despite superficial signs of tension, there appear to be a remarkable stability in the international system, particularly as relations among developed countries are concerned. The contemporary order, based on an American dominance, seems poised to last for a long time (Nye, 1990).

Quite the opposite, other thinkers have expressed a more gloomy view: according to this vision, that we can therefore label as “pessimistic”, the contemporary order is inherently unstable, conducive to warfare and short-lived. This camp too, of course, is much more fragmented than it appears on surface. As for the rival approach, it is not possible to discuss in depth every single contribution to this thread, but a common set of observations can be pointed out: pessimists agree with optimists that the current international system is based on America’s hegemony (usually stressing the not so benign aspects of it), but far from finding this order sustainable, they see it as shaken by an underlying tension that will ultimately lead to the American fall and the return to multipolarity.

Different sources of tension have been considered, from the effect of structural pressure – that will give rise to counter-balancing coalitions eventually terminating US dominance (Waltz, 1993, 2000) – to the hegemonic power’s increasing costs of maintaining its position (Gilpin, 1981, Kennedy, 1987). But so far this hypothesis has not found strong evidence: as no counter-coalition has not taken place yet, nor U.S. power seems weakened since the

end of the Cold War, the only way out for this thesis is indeterminacy: America's fall will happen, sooner or later the unipolar moment will be replaced by multipolarity, but we still do not know when.

Such a theoretical landscape is not comforting at all: on the one hand, we have those who believe that we have entered in a new era of stable peace (assured by the American influence), but are nonetheless unable to explain why, how, and how long it will last; on the other hand, there are those who claim that the American era is going to come to an end, but cannot say when.

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*Morgenthau's  
contribution to  
the study of IR is  
still relevant*

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Admittedly, only futurologists may profess to have a solution; nor we could hope to find a handy way out in the pages of *Politics among Nations*. But Morgenthau's key assumption on the nature of international relations can prove useful: life among States is a perennial, day-by-day struggle for power, which means that States, even when nurturing peaceful relations, have an overwhelming target – to take care of their own capabilities, particularly vis-à-vis the partners. As a result, two patterns characterize the realm of international politics – the rise of power and a condition of general conflict – both posing a pressing question: how can we limit the first one, and how can we manage the second one? Morgenthau's answers are well known: through the balance of power and a wise diplomatic policy, respectively.

Does this approach help us in the investigation of the contemporary order? I think so. Morgenthau will not grant any of the camps a final say in the dispute, but he can help the pessimists by redressing their concerns and

striking a tough blow to the optimists.

The argument against the optimistic view is straightforward: the idea of a benign hegemony, dispensing benefits here and there is just a mask to a more self-interested behaviour. One of the sources of contemporary stability – the positive incentives provided by the U.S. to keep the system as it is – is then brittle and dependent on volatile contingencies. So far, what made the American conduct in foreign affairs apparently so benign has been a far-sighted policy of self-restraint. But in truth one must not wonder about that: after the Cold War, the United States had no incentive in pursuing an “imperialistic” policy (as Morgenthau would have called it): rather, it chose a more suitable “status quo” policy – one, therefore, aimed at avoiding any kind of threat. What really make this order stable, in conclusion, is the huge superiority of the American power compared with any of the other States in the world.

So, Morgenthau would have been sceptical about the possibility of a long-lasting hegemony. Since international relations have always been marked by conflict, the contemporary period of peace should be considered as an exception more than a rule. Admittedly, we cannot charge Morgenthau with the task of amending the latest realist approach, as he probably could not solve the indeterminacy fallacy. Nonetheless, his thought could help solving not just a theoretical, but a normative problem: whereas contemporary realists focused their attention on how to implement a power-bounding policy, they should have paid more attention on how to guarantee a peaceful management of their relationships. And this task is far more important if you assume that the order

informing the system is in the midst of a radical change. In a world, rather than invoking the rise of a peer competitor to the U.S., they should have to consider how to make this eventual confrontation as peaceful as possible. And, as stated, Morgenthau wrote pages and pages on the problem of how to manage the underlying conflict in the system. Maybe, pessimists could be better policy-advisors if they read the chapter in *Politics among Nations* devoted to the role of diplomacy.

To conclude, Morgenthau's contribution to the study of International Relations is in many respects replete of oversimplifications and flaws, but his approach to the realm, even when dismissed, should always be kept under consideration.

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