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Scientific Man vs. Power Politics: A Pamphlet and Its Author between Two Academic Cultures

Hartmut Behr

Hans Morgenthau's *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*¹ appeared in 1946, one year after he received tenure at the University of Chicago. Thus, the monograph demarcates the beginning of Morgenthau's career in the United States, to which he had emigrated nine years earlier. Three main aspects seem important for understanding this work. The first is Morgenthau's bewilderment about American political culture and, as he perceived it, its cheerful optimism about the betterment of politics, society, and humanity in general. The second aspect is the nature of the argument: *Scientific Man* is a dogmatic tract, an attempt to hammer home certain philosophical positions—positions that were largely unpopular in the U.S. social sciences in the 1940s (and later)—rather than a reflective scholarly elaboration of certain philosophical commitments. The third is Morgenthau's place between two academic cultures: Morgenthau's language in his American writings partly stems from, but also tries to leave behind, his European academic socialization. The monograph thus reflects the author's peculiar situation, as he inhabits two sometimes crucially different semantic and cultural contexts, but fails to bridge or broker them.

The American Experience

While *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* addresses many significant themes, such as political ethics and questions of reason, rationality, and science, the book is not a profound philosophical discussion of them. This is puzzling, especially for an author whose preceding writings had addressed

similar questions in much greater depth and who, in these writings, devoted much time to conceptual and terminological differentiations.² This raises questions about the purpose of the work and Morgenthau's intentions in writing it.

Morgenthau wrote *Scientific Man* between 1944 and 1946. We also know that he was fully aware of the explosive nature of many of his arguments, critical as they were of the positivist scholarship in International Relations (IR) that was then dominant in the United States. As he wrote in a letter in 1946, he was relieved that the book appeared after he received tenure because he assumed that it would have been impossible to obtain after its publication.³ To best understand the book, one must keep in mind that at the time of its writing Morgenthau was experiencing a deep cultural shock from his move from Europe to the United States and was still haunted by the trauma of his European experiences.⁴ In America, moreover, he found himself caught between the epistemologies of European humanities and their *geistesgeschichtliche* (historical-hermeneutic) traditions and American positivism—the latter strongly represented in his own department at the University of Chicago. This was the same kind of positivist political thinking and scholarship that Morgenthau had already heavily criticized in his *Habilitation* (1934) with regard to Hans Kelsen's "pure theory of law"⁵ and German *Staatsrecht* (State law) in the Weimar Republic, and that he was familiar with from his studies of law and philosophy at the universities of Munich and Frankfurt. Now he was encountering this positivist thinking again, but on a much larger scale—in a United States that had just emerged victorious from World War II, and was at the height of its political and military power. There are comprehensive studies of Morgenthau's intellectual European influences, particularly by the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. His stark opposition to Carl Schmitt and Hegelianism is also well-documented. More immediately, there was Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he met in Chicago in 1944 and

with whom he formed a life-long friendship. These, as well as the lack of influence of Max Weber (there is almost no mention of Weber in his entire oeuvre and none in *Scientific Man*), can be inferred from his published and unpublished writings, his references, and his private notes and correspondence.⁶

Having witnessed the fall of Weimar Germany, Morgenthau was convinced that positivism could not deal with, much less negotiate, *political* questions for which he regarded the individual human being as the ultimate ontological reference. It was exactly this “human factor” (as he called it some years later in his *Six Principles of Political Realism*⁷) that positivism ignored and, much worse, *deliberately deleted* from political science. Ultimately, Morgenthau believed, this would lead to depoliticization and political apathy of the sort deeply implicated in the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism.⁸ And now he observed similar tendencies in the country that would be responsible for securing a postwar settlement—a prospect that disquieted him profoundly,⁹ especially as he was personally relieved to have found a new home in the United States after fleeing the Holocaust.

One can compare, then, the disruption and inner conflict evident in *Scientific Man* with the unsettling experience of critical theorists coming from Frankfurt to Los Angeles and encountering American consumerism (of which Marcuse’s 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* may be the starkest expression).¹⁰ Similar to the Frankfurt theorists, Morgenthau argued against the political naïveté of idealism and liberalism¹¹ in that both would ignore or downplay the influence of interests and power in politics and would be blindly optimistic about the progressive betterment of political society and human beings. There are several other works by Morgenthau that make these arguments and that are more reflective and profound than *Scientific Man*.¹² However, *Scientific Man* most clearly, explicitly, and fiercely communicates his various fears about these issues.

The Pamphlet

Scientific Man was developed from a lecture that Morgenthau gave in 1940 at the New School of Social Research in New York City, delivered as part of a series on “Liberalism and Foreign Policy.”¹³ Morgenthau argues that the modern, positivist belief that the power of science and reason can solve all political problems of modern societies is irrational; and in contrast he posits a particular conception of rationality that emphasizes a human—and subsequently political—ambiguity between reason and passion (or “Love and Power,” as he termed it elsewhere), and thus a “tragic vision of politics.”¹⁴ Ambiguity and the tragedy of politics do not, however, mean unrestricted policies pursuing national power and interests. In *Scientific Man* he writes, “Politics is an art, not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer, but the wisdom and moral strength of the statesman.” Thus, the statesman might sometimes have to commit a lesser evil for the greater good.¹⁵

Despite its dogmatic nature, *Scientific Man* is significant as a review and critique of the political-philosophical landscape of the mid-twentieth century, as well as of the discipline of International Relations during this time. Classical realism—the tradition that Morgenthau belonged to and within which he was the most prominent voice—was arguably *opposed to* what became mainstream IR theory.¹⁶ Moreover, Morgenthau both anticipated and antedated many important commitments that became popular and that would be emphasized many years later in “poststructuralist” IR.¹⁷ Third, vital impulses for the foundation of American IR came about more in terms of how Morgenthau was perceived and (mis)read, rather than from what he actually said and

wrote.¹⁸ Thus, it appears indispensable to go back to the European roots of the writings of Morgenthau and other *scholars émigrés* to understand their thought, as well as to reconstruct the development of the discipline of IR.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there is one aspect of *Scientific Man* that seems crucial when considering its specific context and future significance: namely, that Morgenthau ultimately failed to deal with the disjuncture between two academic and political cultures, and to communicate the nature of that disjuncture. The following argument focuses on one profound misunderstanding in the IR reception of Morgenthau, for which he seems, however, partly self-responsible.

Two Notions of Power

Morgenthau's reception in the United States was particularly colored by his concept of power. Usually, the IR narrative holds that, as a "Realist," he would have conceptualized power as a bellicose, aggressive, and, if need be, canny domination (here, a certain reading of Machiavelli's *Prince* is often mistakenly associated with Morgenthau²⁰). As noted above, *Scientific Man*'s origins go back to a talk Morgenthau gave in 1940, just seven years after publication of his French book, *La Notion du "Politique"*.²¹ Why is this important? Because, simply and bafflingly, in *Scientific Man* and in *all* further English writings, published and unpublished, Morgenthau ignores the important distinction that he meticulously made in *La Notion du "Politique"* between "pouvoir" and "puissance"—that is, between an analytical, empirical concept of power as domination and a normative concept of power as the capability to act and to enact something politically.²² What were two cautiously distinguished concepts just a few years earlier became conflated into one term, the English "power," and this despite the possibility of expressing this distinction in English (as the word "puissance" exists in the English language). Even if not commonly used, the

word was available to Morgenthau, especially since he wrote using an English dictionary in the first years after his arrival in the United States.²³ Thus, the question arises: Why did Morgenthau in his English writings omit and ignore this terminologically and philosophically important distinction that he learned primarily through his reading of Nietzsche, who distinguished between *Macht* and *Kraft*? The reception and influence of *Scientific Man* itself might have been quite different had he contrasted these two types of power. And one can easily imagine very different trajectories in IR theory in general, and in the scholarship on Morgenthau's political thought more specifically, had he made this distinction—one which he admits in private correspondence he should have made.²⁴

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

² This terminological and conceptual thoroughness is most explicit in his German-written doctoral thesis and two unpublished manuscripts and his French-written postdoctoral (“Habilitation”) thesis. See *Die internationale Rechtspflege, ihr Wesen und ihre Grenzen* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1929); “Über die Herkunft des Politischen aus dem Wesen des Menschen” (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 151, 1930, unpublished); *La Réalité des Normes. En Particulier des Normes du Droit International. Fondement d’une Théorie des Normes* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); and “Über den Sinn der Wissenschaft in dieser Zeit und über die Bestimmung des Menschen” (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 151, 1934, unpublished).

³ “Postscript to the Transaction Edition: Bernard Johnson’s Interview with Hans J. Morgenthau,” in Kenneth W. Thompson and Robert J. Myers, eds., *Truth and Tragedy. A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), pp. 333–386, 371.

⁴ See also the paper by Felix Rösch in this roundtable, his analysis of Morgenthau’s “Erschuetterung der Seele” and Morgenthau’s odyssey through Europe to flee anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

⁵ Morgenthau, *La Réalité des Normes*; see also Oliver Jüterssonke, *Morgenthau, Law and Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶ There are comprehensive studies of Morgenthau's intellectual influences. The major influence of European intellectual thought on his work, particularly the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, is well known. His stark opposition to Carl Schmitt and Hegelianism is also well-documented. More immediately, there was Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he met in Chicago in 1944 and with whom he formed a life-long friendship. Max Weber, on the other hand, is prominently absent (there is almost no mention of Weber in his entire oeuvre and none in *Scientific Man*). Morgenthau was sometimes negligent of bibliographical precision in his references and careless when it came to historical details, as my co-editor, Felix Roesch, and I came to realize when editing his 1933 *La notion du politique* and preparing the book's first English edition (as *The Concept of the Political*; see endnote below for details). On the other hand, Morgenthau was a "paper saver" (Frei, 2001, p. 4), and his surviving private notes and correspondence are a valuable resource for those who seek to reconstruct his political thought.

⁷ See Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, "Introduction," in Behr and Rösch, eds., *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*, Maeva Vidal, trans., foreword by Michael C. Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), esp. pp. 38–42.

⁸ See Morgenthau's "Concept of the Political," in Behr and Rösch, *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*, where this is strongest; also Fritz Ringer and the problem of the Weimar Mandarins, in *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969). Morgenthau's argument about de-politicization of society and politics shows surprising similarities to the same argument in post-structuralist authors, see, e.g., Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations. Bringing the Political Back in* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

⁹ See most explicitly in *Scientific Man*, ch. 1, "The Challenge of Fascism," p. 6 onward.

¹⁰ Morgenthau's later oeuvre follows Marcuse with regard to consumerism, modernity, nuclear weapons (the "political-industrial-military complex" more widely), and mass society; see, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, "Macht und Ohnmacht des Menschen im Technologischen Zeitalter," in Oskar Schatz, ed., *Was wird aus dem Menschen? Der Fortschritt—Analysen und Warnungen bedeutender Denker* (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1973), pp. 47–60; Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Pathology

of American Power,” *International Security* 1, no. 3 (1977), pp. 3–20; also “Classical Realism Meets Critical Theory,” research.ncl.ac.uk/classicalrealism.

¹¹ Morgenthau is politically committed to the idea of liberal society and liberalism (see Ian Hall, “The Triumph of Anti-liberalism? Reconciling Radicalism to Realism in International Relations Theory,” *Political Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2011), pp. 42–52), but criticized liberal idealism as an *epistemological* position. For more on this, see Hartmut Behr, “‘Common Sense,’ Thomas Reid, and Realist Epistemology in Hans J. Morgenthau,” in *International Politics* 50, no. 6 (2013), and Behr and Rösch, “Introduction,” in *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*.

¹² For example, Hans J. Morgenthau, “Positivism, Functionalism, and International Law,” *American Journal of International Law* 34, no. 2 (1940); “The Limitations of Science and the Problem of Social Planning,” *Ethics* 54, no. 3 (1944); “The Scientific Solution of Social Conflicts,” in Lyman Bryson, Louis Finkelstein, and Robert M. MacIver, eds., *Approaches to National Unity: Fifth Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Harper, 1945); “Reflections on the State of Political Science,” *Review of Politics* 17, no. 4 (1955); and “Modern Science and Political Power,” *Columbia Law Review* 64, no. 8 (1964).

¹³ Morgenthau gave the lecture in a series called “Liberalism Today.” In the programme, available through the New School for Social Research online archive, Morgenthau is not listed, but one encounters the name of Professor Erich Hula from the New School itself. Since both Hula and Morgenthau were close to Hans Kelsen, and Morgenthau and Hula maintained correspondence and collaborated on various writings, one can assume that Morgenthau was suggested by Hula as a replacement after Hula cancelled his talk. In any case, Morgenthau certainly utilized this chance, as he did not have tenure at that time, being Assistant Professor at the University of Kansas.

¹⁴ This is most obvious in Morgenthau’s paper on “The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil,” *Ethics* 56, no. 1 (1945), and is elaborated on by Richard Ned Lebow in *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); see also Morgenthau, “Love and Power,” *Commentary* 33 (March 1962), published by the American Jewish Committee, pp. 247–51.

¹⁵ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, p. 14 as well as ch. VIII, “The Tragedy of Scientific Man”; for other writing from Morgenthau in this vein, see “The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil,” pp. 227–28; “The Twilight of International Morality,” *Ethics* 58, no. 2 (1948), pp. 79–99; “The Evil of Power. A Critical Study of de Jouvenel’s *On Power*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 3, no. 4 (1950),

pp. 507–17; and “Morgenthau to Gottfried-Karl Kindermann,” April 5, 1961 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Box 33). See also Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, “Hans J. Morgenthau and the Ethics of Anti-Hubris,” in Jodok Troy, ed., *Religion and the Realist Tradition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 111–28.

¹⁶ Here it appears that Morgenthau was celebrated (as well as critiqued) by many for the wrong reasons; see Behr and Rösch, “Introduction,” in *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*, p. 29–30.

¹⁷ See Richard Ashley, “Political Realism and Human Interests,” *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1981), pp. 204–36; Behr and Rösch, “Introduction,” in *Hans J. Morgenthau, The Concept of the Political*, p. 30–32. Daniel Levine, “Why Morgenthau Was Not a Critical Theorist,” *International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2013), pp. 95–118; we find the two notions of power, by many IR theorists rightly attributed to Michel Foucault, earlier in Morgenthau (and others) in a very similar manner.

¹⁸ With regard to this, see his letter to Michael Oakeshott of May 22, 1948 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Container 33), as well as Hartmut Behr and Amelia Heath, “Misreading in IR Theory and Ideology Critique: Morgenthau, Waltz and Neo-Realism,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009), pp. 327–49, and *A History of International Political Theory: Ontologies of the International* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁹ See the recently edited volume by Felix Rösch, *Émigré Scholars and the Genesis of International Relations: A European Discipline in America?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁰ Morgenthau’s reading of Machiavelli can indeed be seen in “The Machiavellian Utopia,” *Ethics* 55, no. 2 (1945), pp. 145–47; on Machiavelli, see, among others, Behr, *A History of International Political Theory*, ch. II.2.1.

²¹ English as *The Concept of the Political* (see note 8).

²² Morgenthau utilizes the distinction in his German writings, foremost his PhD thesis, where he writes about “Macht” (in the meaning of “pouvoir”) and “Kraft” (as “puissance”). For an excellent discussion of both concepts of “power,” see Felix Rösch, “Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics: Hans Morgenthau’s Dualistic Concept of Power?” *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014), pp. 349–65; also Morgenthau, “Love and Power.”

²³ Correspondence between the author and Morgenthau’s daughter, Susanna, and son, Mathew, in 2010 and 2011 during the preparation of *The Concept of the Political*.

²⁴ Letter to Michael Oakeshott, May 22, 1948 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Container 33).