

Authority, community and the rise of power – Robert Nisbet and the American realist school.

Wojciech Przybylski

Introduction

In this paper I will look into the foundations of the American foreign policy in the 20th century, which in much part has led the World to where we are now, and I will critically examine the dominant intellectual current – the so called American realist school – confronting it with an insight on the American society by Robert Nisbet. I comment on the works of four authors in principle: Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Robert Nisbet, the last representing a counterbalance to the realist school. A virtual debate that is reconstructed on the basis of their work is in fact a debate between state-oriented thinkers and society-oriented thinker. Although, both realist and Nisbet acknowledge arguments of the other side, in principle they hold to their views and criticize each other. Before, I proceed from here to identification of their positions, let me first set framework for this paper to show limitations of this analysis.

First, I deal with the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective mixing two approaches to the state. First is the international relation theory, or thought, the second is called history of ideas or more broadly sociology and history approach. From an interdisciplinary perspective it is easier to show multitude of aspects of the problem, however it is far more easier to dissolve the topic at all. Therefore, I limit the scope of the paper to two aspects of the above mentioned comparison: a postulate of state behavior on international level and a postulate of inner organization of the state and society. To have a common ground for analysis I will examine mainly three issues dealt with by both sides i.e.: a concept of human nature, that of human freedom and of revolutions and war. A generalization and a shortening of these topics to present highlights will be my performance here.

Context

First, to examine two opposite positions in the debate it is necessary to present shortly a context in which both “stances” are situated. Political thought concerning international relations is not as well grounded in philosophy as every other aspect of the one. Attempts made by Aristotle, then Thomas Aquinas, later Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hugo Grotius, also Dane Alighieri (with his utopist Monarchy) or Kant have mainly limited to ways of conducting wars which were considered inevitable or moral principles on which any war is forbidden. However, all of them have lived in a different world, where a possibility of seconds-away human destruction didn't come to anyone's mind, maybe except for the great Kant. A fervent

debate and thrive of political philosophy is connected to breaking moments in history – such was in this case: the foundations of the realist school were a milestone signing a new chapter of international politics coming with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and a so called revolutionary period in the World. Since first works of Christian realist i.e. Reinhold Niebuhr up to analysis and actions of Henry Kissinger, at least, we can see a remarkable impact on US Administration foreign policy in dealing with international relations after 2nd World War – mainly building up it's military might to balance out the USSR.

Robert Nisbet came from a different position – that of a historian and sociologist, or historian of ideas as some say. If one was asked what sociology is the answer could basically very much resemble the principle of economics. In economics the main principle is "TANSTAAFL – There ain't no such thing as a free lunch." The first law of sociology is this: "Some do; some don't." He was a representative of a classical liberal view, which, I dare to say, is extinct substituted by now by libertarian and communitarian currents. In this sense, classical liberal was very much attached to the principles of the US Constitution and to typical for majority of Americans isolationist position expressed first by George Washington and later by Thomas Jefferson defining US foreign policy - „peace, commerce, and honest friendship, with all nations--entangling alliances with none.”¹ His standpoint was conservative, though, a conservative sociologist sounds like an oxymoron. However, his favorite protagonists of political and social thought are essentially conservative: Aristotle, Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville or to some extent Lord Acton and Hayek, and his examples were coming from all known Western history beginning from ancient Rome. His knowledge and analysis of American foreign and domestic policy was, nonetheless, impressive and his synthesis definitely like *The History of the Idea of Progress* worth reading even for every advanced student of social thought. In this paper, these are rather less known books e.g. *Quest for Community* (1953), *Twilight of Authority* (1975) and *The Present Age* (1988), from which his arguments will be taken.

Nisbet's main concern was with authority and with community, while realists' a concern was the one with power and politics. Here is where the biggest clash is marked. American school of “realpolitik”, and even before the idealism of president Wilson, have set path for the rise of a central power in the USA. Out of pre-modern the USA has entered modernity with its dominant political image: a nation-state. A question to be asked is not about how this has affected the international world order. This is quite obvious. The USA has built up its military might to balance out the so-called later “Evil Empire”, which led to its non-questionable

¹ Thomas Jefferson, inaugural speech, yr. 1801

position of the world's single and the largest empire in the post-Cold War period. The problem arising throughout the 20th century and beyond is how this affects a society of an empire, and especially how this process influences notions of an authority and a community within an imperial state.

Hans Morgenthau observed that there are in principle two ways of providing security to your own state – to balance powers of other or to become an imperial power. Thus, none of political thinkers have sound arguments to rebut American foreign policy during the Cold War and after the collapse of the USSR. In fact, what is indeed to be criticized is the effect of state centralization on the society.

Based on analysis of authority, community and power correlations in a society throughout the centuries Robert Nisbet has noticed that an ongoing process in the USA of the 20th century has been a shift from a state based on community to a war-state resembling much the Republic described by Plato. Rise of a central power for the sake of protection from outside is not neutral for the state inside. Mobilization of resources and generating a rhetoric of war and a notion of a nation gradually takes an individual away from his community obligations and ties, and binds him directly with the central state power – the government – creating a “loose individual”. An authority of community, the cornerstone of a polity, as seen by the Aristotle, is getting a rivalry from the raw power entering the scene of societal relations. Political power exchanges kinship in the role of organization of a society. But as much as a power is effective, and a war-state more functional, such a country is more likely to disintegrate due to an accidental lack of its main driving force. Therefore, a threat to an imperial state is not as much a potential opponent but a lack of internal long-lasting societal bonds.

Clash of ideas

Although the most well known among American realists was Hans Morgenthau, it is Reinhold Niebuhr – a protestant theologian – who should be regarded as the founder of political realism on the American grounds. It is also due to a fact that Morgenthau and Niebuhr were friends and frequent collaborators that their thought is in many ways similar on the grounds of assumptions as well as postulates. An intellectual descendant of both is Henry Kissinger Both Morgenthau and Kissinger were German citizens who emigrated escaping before the Nazi came to power². Their experience with fascism was no doubt stimulating. As for Niebuhr, an

² see Christoph Frei Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography, Louisiana State University, 2001 and PBS: Think Tank by Ben Wattenberg Henry Kissinger at Large http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/show_1138.html

interesting fact from his biography is that before he became arguing for power politics, he was deeply involved in Christian socialist movements in the period preceding Second World War, and the war experience, although he or any other of the realists never took part in one, was a turning point in his views.³ However, the only author who had actually experienced war personally was Nisbet who was a soldier during the 2nd World War in the Pacific theatre.

The most profound problem that realists have dealt with was the lack of sound foreign policy in the US, in times when it required such. As Morgenthau wrote in a chapter The Moral Dilemma of Political Action in a book Dilemmas of Politics:

“How was it possible for our culture to misunderstand this moral dilemma of foreign policy and, turning its gaze from it, try to smooth and gloss over the conflict, thus doing justice neither to the responsibilities of foreign policy nor to the majesty of the moral law? This escape from both power politics and true morality stems in the main from three factors: man’s ambivalent relationship to power and morality, the illusions of nineteenth-century liberalism, and the misunderstanding of the American experience.”⁴

Lack of sound leadership was a stimulus for realists to search for a new concept of American foreign policy in times of crisis, which they saw as exogenous. A perpetual conflict and its roots is, therefore, an assumption in a realists’ quest for moral political actions on the international arena.

On the other hand, a quest for community and authority was the one of Nisbet’s.

„An external power, especially political power, comes to reveal itself to many minds as a fortress of security against not only institutional conflicts but conflicts of belief and value that are internal to the individual. A peculiar form of political mysticism is often the result.

The image of community may be seen behind certain types of political action in present Western society. It is hard to overlook the fact that the State and politics have become suffused by qualities formerly inherent only in the family or the church. In an age of real or supposed disintegration, men will abandon all truths and values that do not contain the promise of communal belonging and secure moral status. Where there is widespread conviction that community has been lost, there will be a conscious quest for community in the form of association that seems to promise the greatest moral refuge.”⁵

Nisbet has therefore become a critics of what realists have postulated. He has given his criticism to the rising central power, even if it was for the sake of state protection on the international scene. For Nisbet has argued that there has been a non-stopping series of wars

³ see Ruurd Veldhuis, *Realism versus Utopianism? Reinhold Niebuhr Christian Realism and the Relevance of Utopian Thought for Social Ethics*, Assen 1975

⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau *Dilemmas of Politics* The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 247

⁵ Robert Nisbet, *Community and Power*, Oxford University Press, NY 1962, pp. 32-33

since 1914 until present, which was accompanied by constant militarization and hence gradual centralization of a society. At the same time he admits that there is little prospectus for change in the general situation on the international scene. Therefore, he became a sort of a malcontent writer analyzing the inevitable from a standpoint of a fatalist. Yet, a picture of determinist would be truly unfair, for he has also demonstrated his belief in individual capabilities of making one's own history: „Man is what he thinks!”⁶ Nisbet wrote. With that declaration it is perhaps the right moment to investigate first assumptions on human nature.

Human nature, freedom and foundations of realist school

Human nature, as a concept, is present in every major Western political thought writing. Starting with Plato to early Christians and later to major 19th century ideologies of socialism and communism human nature is an essential foundation of every social and political thought. In fact every man bears in himself an assumption of human nature – consciously or not. The concept is primary an issue of interest in every analysis of political thought, since it is like a cornerstone to every thought system. It implies among others the concept of freedom and justice, which are essential in every state. To illustrate this it is best to show two radical opposite concepts: one of good human nature, and one bad. If human nature is good, like Rousseau wanted, there is no point in punishing people for their deeds, but just to help them to remember what is essentially good. In such a case state would not punish criminals but give them a form of psychotherapy. In case it is bad nature a state could, depending also on structure of religion, punish criminals even for their own good.

Reinhold Niebuhr, and Morgenthau's consecutively, made the following assumption on human nature:

“In principle, the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter. This assumption is the basis of Christian realism.”⁷

Niebuhr assumption was essentially a reference to St. Augustine and a concept of two cities, one on the hill was God's ruled by God's love (gr. agape) and one down was Man's ruled by earthly, animal love (gr. eros). Protestants coming to America have regarded the New World as the “City Upon the Hill” – which is one of the most important themes in American discourse. Niebuhr's belief was that although human, in his earthly life, is sinful – meaning

⁶ Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority*, Heinemann, London 1976, p. 233

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Essays on the dynamics and enigmas of man's personal and social existence, Scribner, NY 1965, p. 39

possessed by self love and lust for power – he can overcome these faults by experience of God’s love and grace. However, no matter how a man would try to be better for the sake of others, he will inevitably fall into self-love and lust for power. Hans Morgenthau, has concentrated later only on the material part of the assumption, laying it as a foundation of his theory of politics, which he called himself realist finding its roots in Tukidydes, Machiavelli and Hobbes. Nonetheless, his concept is distinguished from the previous in the fact that it deals primarily with international politics only and has definitely moral, not material foundations. The realist conception is indeed moral and not power obsessed or amoral, which many accused. It only limits understanding of politics to the sphere of group morality which distinguishes from individual morality. In other words, an individual may say „Fiat justitia, pereat mundus”, but a statesman cannot. While, in realist terms an individual may and should follow universal moral principles (that of Christianity especially), a state must act in a best possible way to guarantee community existence on international scene and therefore its actions might misleadingly seem immoral. This is the difference between state and individual morality.

Nisbet has found the concept of human nature a metaphor, hence he approached the problem from a pluralistic side and not ethical standpoint. His favorite model of social philosophy was by Aristotle, thus his concept of nature resembled a process-like form – for physis has been in ancient greek “a way of growth”, not latin “state of things”. It is hard, therefore, to explore the essence of what Nisbet thought of nature in such a short paper, maybe except for that to mention that he was convinced of human freedom to think and choose. Another feature of Nisbet assumption is then his belief of human need for community and authority, which are generally of Aristotle's origin. It is possible instead to present his critique of realist standpoint. For Nisbet, a realist conception has been burdened with a fatalistic, linear in structure shape of metaphor of human nature, deliberately putting man into a condition he cannot actually change or live with. This would imply, existence of a metaphor prophesying that there is no escape from the state of things the way they appear to people at certain moment. Inevitability of sinfulness, forces man to be taken after by lager societal actors and so to be a subject and not an object of societal life. This view, as Nisbet would have put it, stands in opposition to what the principles of liberal democracy are, with its views on man shaping his destiny and making free decisions. Realists’ were not therefore able to hold to liberal democracy in times of international crisis. As Niebuhr has once pointed out: “It may be that democracy is too

intimately bound up with these liberal prejudices to survive their destruction. This is a pity. For if democracy dies it must be born again. There is no way to justice without it.”⁸

On the other hand there were common enemies to both sides of realist-classical liberal debate, like Jean Rousseau, who is an object of criticism from both sides. However, for each side criticism comes for something else. For realists Rousseau expressed more or less anarchical position. For Nisbet, it was too much obsessed with power. They did not obviously agree on what was to be criticized.

First, as all know, the thought of Rousseau has been a stir during times of the French Revolution claiming that man is born free but lives in chains of political domination and that since, there is no come back to the state of nature, people must organize forming a political community which will express general will instead of individual, particular interests. It is worth stressing, that political community, stands in direct opposition with Aristotle assumption of division between community and political sphere and goes well along with an image of Platonic ideal Republic. A concept of political community assumes that community is organized solely around ideas and thought. A concept of community inherited from Aristotle says that it is rooted in kinship and tradition.

Realists criticize Rousseau for his initial assumptions mostly, but come to similar solutions in the end. „Any realistic conception of politics must start with an assumption which is the exact opposite of Rousseau’s.” Morgenthau wrote - “It must assume that man is born and lives in chains (...)In other words (...) it is an all permeating fact which is of essence of human existence (...) that man lives in chains but everywhere he wants to be a master.”⁹ The most important aspect of freedom, as understood by realists, was possible only as political freedom. Man therefore, could attain most freedom by engaging in power oriented actions and later by using this for the benefit of his “political community” (sic!) ruled on the international scene by rationality of national interest. The concept of national interest was to be, according to Morgenthau, found by rationality in a debate (discursive method – also inherited from Plato) in a state and was further to be negotiated between states. Hence, it is often said that the American realist school has reformulated US diplomacy from a mixture of isolationism and Enlightenment ideals to a hybrid of idealism and hard and soft power arguments.

Nisbet, as traditionally conservative following Edmund Burke’s reaction to the Revolution, has fervently criticized mostly Rousseau’s conclusions. In his view, the best out of the worst

⁸ Reihold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, NY 1946, p. 93

⁹ Hans Morgenthau, *ibidem*, pp. 239-240

forms of freedom is the negative freedom.¹⁰ Hence, any political community is in fact restraining freedom by attaching him directly to the soul of power in a state directly with no intermediate bodies. The advantage of modern democracy, seen by Nisbet, was among other precisely pluralism of associations and legally guaranteed freedom of individual. By destroying other traditional forms of communities such as family, church, and associations of profession an individual is deprived of any roots and desperately seeks some degree of certitude and form of belonging, which are (after Aristotle) inscribed in human nature. Therefore he enters a form of Leviathan subjecting to its will and suffering his power. Hence, it generates a totalitarian-like regime. In Nisbet's view, realists' concept ends up with what Rousseau proposes – a totalitarian state – a nightmare of every liberal mind.

War and revolution vs. authority and community

History tells us that a totalitarian state has its origin in revolution. A question raised in a debate between Nisbet and realists should be, therefore: what is a source of revolution? Realist see revolution as a response to anarchy „...revolutions owed their success to the determination and ability of their leaders to seize power, to hold it, and to use it to govern perhaps badly but firmly” - wrote Morgenthau - “The modern masses have risen in despair and fury not against some particular policy but against the weakness of government, reflected in spectacular failures.”¹¹ Hence, the quality that is required from politician is that of leadership. What is generally perceived as immoral – coming to power over other equal people, in the morality of political theory becomes a virtue. It is after all true – anarchic state – a moment of revolution costs lives and freedoms of many. Therefore, in a moment of revolutionary period, such as in the times of communism, America had to take up leadership with its resources to defend its political freedom.

Nisbet optics on community and authority preservation determines his views on the revolution and communism. For him there is a direct link between a state of war and a revolution i.e. a war state structure is a precondition in a longer run for a revolution. “War, sufficiently large, encompassing, and persisting, is one of the most powerful media of social and cultural – and also material, physical, and mechanical – change known to man” – Nisbet wrote – “War tends to brake up the cake of custom, the net of tradition.”¹² Indeed, for a national war effort Woodrow Wilson has addressed the whole nation out of nowhere, since the concept of nation

¹⁰ using distinction between negative and positive freedom by Isaiah Berlin

¹¹ Hans Morgenthau, *ibidem*, p. 290

¹² Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age*, Harper and Row, NY 1988, p. 7

was still to modern to American minds of beginning of 20th century, offering not only rhetoric but also economy control, which wouldn't be that bad if it was limited to a short period.¹³ Then Franklin Delano Roosevelt has addressed a national New Deal project unifying again the whole nation, already constructed in political language of Wilson and stressing the national bond, while traditional ties of kinship and tradition were gradually loosened. The process has not stopped since then, Nisbet argued, and indeed it is hard to find a space in time since 1914 when US would not have been at war and its leaders would have not generated a national address. Gradually, with this situation the society got loosened from, no matter how unjust or unfair, but stable customs and begin an age of perpetual revolutions. As Hannah Arendt observed the America has been founded on a revolution and a revolution has been its perpetual driving force since the beginning. However, Nisbet in his argument is stressing that a revolution has never been fueled up so as in the period of 20th century wars.

Therefore, a clash between classical American liberal – a whig - and American realists exhibits on the stage of their understanding of conservation. As Nisbet sees it, war and war effort is a motor force for change and its radical form – a revolution. Realists say, that in times when „the dividing line between domestic and foreign policy begins to disappear”¹⁴ foreign revolutionary regime is threatening the security of the country, the only possible way to avoid direct war is a balance of powers and minor-scaled wars. However, war preparations and war effort itself has all impact on the whole society. In result the state is binding all individuals more and more (either for or against the war) in a national spirit – a form of political community.

Conclusions

Nisbet in his critique of American realists, which he never did literally could supposedly use words of one of Stephen Walt that “Realism dominated in the Cold War years because it provided simple but powerful explanations for war, alliances, imperialism, obstacles to cooperation, and other international phenomena, and because its emphasis on competition was consistent with the central features of the American-Soviet rivalry.”¹⁵ As realists boldly admitted in their assumptions there is no escape from power and a man is inherently obsessed with it. Be it true or not in general it is definitely a justification for power concentration and a war effort in times of crisis. It also serves as a good explanation for why, after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the America did not cease from military and economic expansion in the

¹³ Although, realists criticized the idealism of Woodrow Wilson in his motives for war, they did not obviously criticize engagement itself.

¹⁴ Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy. Three Essays*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1969, p. 55

¹⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *International relations: one world, many theories*, in: *Foreign Policy*, Spring, 1998

World. However, it bears also a stigma, that realists put on every power-holder that rules in a revolutionary way:

„A ruler legitimized by charisma or by force cannot easily accept the fact that henceforth he must seek his safety in self-limitation, that events are no longer subject to his will, that peace depends not on his strength but on his recognition of the power of others. A revolutionary who remembers his opponents when they were still restrained by what they then considered “legitimate”, finds it difficult to take seriously their resolution when they have understood the extent of their danger. Because his opponents surrendered easily when they were still conducting wars for limited objectives, the revolutionary is conceived that another successful battle will once more reveal their cravenness. And he cannot believe in the loss of his allies, because he cannot admit the reduction of his power.”¹⁶

Imperialism is a natural law of politics in times when there is no power to counterbalance except for the strongest. It is like a natural force of entropy, Morgenthau would observe. However, a society stirred by a continuous war effort and heated up by moral ends rhetoric is falling into an antithesis of what it is defending – a liberal societal order. Definitely, there exists a schizma between democratic order and power in international politics

Another, more practical consequence, is that European states indeed were benefiting from military protection of the USA, and therefore they did not need to sustain such a big cost as America does being present all around the world. As Europeans, we indeed live in a democratic Eden. Imperialism in a militaristic version, such as observed earlier in history with the Roman empire leads eventually to a corruption of the republican state. Nisbet wrote that „Nothing about us at the moment offers much encouragement. We live, after all, in a world that becomes constantly more militarized, more power-oriented, and hence more dangerous to America and other Western countries.”¹⁷ He saw therefore, just like realists, that war efforts made by USA are indeed protecting its existence. What is to be troubled upon, is that in the war effort an American republican spirit over time is lost and revolution with inevitable form of despotism takes its turn.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored*, Peter Smith, Gloucester 1973, p. 63

¹⁷ Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority*, op. cit., p. 230