

[Jo on Troy, 'Desire and Imitation in International Politics'](#)

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It is a truism that the realist tradition in international relations has focused on the study of power and assumes that displays of human behavior in the pursuit and conduct of power are inherently rational. Yet the attractiveness of engaging in interdisciplinary and diverse perspectives in studying international relations has invited doubts about the feasibility of realism's lack of flexibility and validity. The tradition has recently met skepticism and criticism, ranging from a critique about the disjuncture between theoretical assumptions and actual practices of realism to a general critique about deficiencies within realism as a paradigm.[1] However, perhaps all of these criticisms are missing the mark by disregarding the importance of desire and imitation within human nature, which classical realism has always fully grasped. According to Jodok Troy, the fundamental question concerning the origins of such rationality has largely remained unanswered and even ignored because scholars of international relations have either forgotten or dismissed mimetic theory's foundational observation that a desire for power in international politics stems from a desire to imitate policies or the diplomacy of other states.

In *Desire and Imitation in International Politics*, Troy argues that a desire to imitate is the source of many international conflicts. A rivalry informed by such a desire often leads to a scarcity of resources and a desire for power by other states. A desire to resemble rather than to differentiate from a powerful state is a prime source of trouble in the international arena. Mimetic theory also allows for an appreciation of the role of religion in influencing international politics, which Troy believes is an important difference between realism and liberalism, for while the former allows for a study of politics based on human behavior and ideas, the latter strives to portray politics as a secular art and does not do enough justice to the agency of religion in international relations. In short, Troy's central aim in writing this book is to establish desire and imitation as important sources of rationality implied in the realist tradition, thereby illustrating the roots of realism's concentration on power to lie in mimetic theory.

Troy divides his argument into five parts. In the first chapter, he argues that classical realism is "an intersubjective and sociological approach to study politics which strives beyond the mainstream assumption of a primacy of structure over agency" (p. 6). Moreover, Troy argues that realists are "problem solvers," since, despite rejecting rationalism, they still seek to present an answer to the question of how to think about international politics (p. 8). Troy then proceeds to illustrate in chapter 2 that a desire for power in realism and the power of desire, as emphasized by mimetic theory, are

compatible with one another. Chapters 3 and 4 aim to apply realism to such topics as reconciliation and Dag Hammarskjöld's invocation of a Christian "other" in his vision of the United Nations as a principal stabilizer in international politics. And finally, chapter 5 reiterates the central thesis that international politics is an outgrowth of a desire for power, and insofar as the appeal of imitating other states as models for realizing that particular purpose is concerned, Troy argues that a combination of mimetic theory and realism in the study of power and politics is inevitable.

The principal strength of this book is the clarity of its central message. The reader is able to fully appreciate the fact that desire and imitation are influential causes for states to pursue power. Furthermore, in establishing such clarity, Troy's invocation of mimetic theory in the study of international relations is a novel attempt to connect philosophy and political science, which is a clear reflection of contemporary social science's emphasis on interdisciplinary research. Troy's understanding of mimetic theory is especially strongly informed by a close reading of Rene Girard's central work (*Violence and the Sacred* [1979]), and he skillfully demonstrates his familiarity with the realist literature by considering not only classic realists, such as Hans Morgenthau (*Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* [1948]), but also contemporary scholars, such as Marc Trachtenberg and Alexander Wendt. The book displays a balanced and nuanced grasp of realism and successfully demonstrates the importance of focusing on human psychology and motivation in understanding international politics as an outcome of human behavior.

However, the means employed to execute the delivery of the central message are not qualitatively consummate with the message's importance for two main reasons. First, although Troy showcases a diverse array of examples from twentieth-century international relations to support his main thesis, he unfortunately lacks a coherent paradigm.^[2] His main argument is that classical realism can trace its roots to mimetic theory, especially through the latter's emphasis on imitation and desire, which, if applied to international politics, helps explain why there is intense competition among states in pursuit of hegemony and national interests, which, in turn, describes the essence behind classical realism's preoccupation with studying power. The main problem is that while there is enough clarity with the central argument, there is no explanation about why subsequent chapters had to be presented in the particular order that Troy conceived. The lack of a paradigm is evident from the first chapter. Troy argues that he considers other political scientists besides Morgenthau in the preface, but chapter 1 shows that Troy considers Morgenthau as a metonym; there is no consideration of other branches of realist thought, such as neorealism (Kenneth Waltz) and offensive realism (John Mearsheimer), but a reflection of Troy's belief that classical realism's emphasis on human nature can summarize the essence of realism itself.

Chapter 2 is a well-written chapter that discusses how a desire for power and the power of desire are compatible for realism and mimetic theory and sets forth Troy's main central thesis, but chapter 3 suddenly transitions to political reconciliation without providing a clear rationale for why the transition is logically necessary and even possible. The principal example Troy uses to illustrate realism's concerns about reconciliation also seems misplaced, for during his discussion about Tutsi-Hutu violence in Rwanda, he makes the curious observation that "it is not because people are poor that they revolt. Rather they revolt after experiencing an improvement in living conditions" (p. 35). While this particular observation may be true for some communities, the Rwandan civil war was not about resentments that poverty created; rather, it was based on ethnic strife that had its origins in Belgium's colonial policies in Rwanda which divided the political and economic privileges between

the two groups. Poverty was an outgrowth of ethnic conflict stemming from the colonial period, not a prime cause for the genocide itself. Furthermore, after just two pages following his discussion of the Rwandan genocide, Troy briefly engages in a discussion of Frantz Fanon's analysis of the Algerian Revolution, from which Troy concludes that humiliation might be a source of conflict.

The main problem is that the examples seem abruptly juxtaposed, and if the specificities of the examples are ignored to just consider the conclusions alone, then the two conclusions are contradictory, for although the two conclusions seem to point out that poverty is not a principal factor in civil wars, improvement in living conditions and humiliation do not seem to relate in any way, and Troy himself does not offer a connection. Historians might simply point out that the contextual differences apparent in the Rwandan genocide and the Algerian War for Independence, especially regarding the fact that the genocide was a postcolonial local conflict and that the Algerian War for Independence was an anti-imperialist struggle, might not warrant a clear comparison. Chronological difference in itself creates contextual difference, and once the latter is apparent, then generalizations may be difficult to make simply because two events occurred under very different circumstances.

Second, since there is no overarching paradigm with which Troy explains how his chapters are connected, the latter half of his book discusses topics that frankly do not relate to each other, and, in the case of his discussion of Dag Hammarskjöld, invokes a sense of "other," which is radically different from the original conception of the "other" adapted in Troy's usage to mean "other states." Troy examines how Hammarskjöld's Christian beliefs reflected his vision of the United Nations as an international organization devoted to the advancement of a peaceful world, and he carefully examines Hammarskjöld's writings to identify Christian precepts that influenced his thinking about international politics and the United Nations as a new organization. Yet the main problem with Troy's approach in chapter 4 is that it reads as a separate and disjointed chapter that does not address his original concept of "other" as it relates to imitation and desire. Although it could be argued that the model for imitation in this chapter can be summarized as "God," this conception of "other" is not precisely the kind that realism has in mind.

Considering that Troy is well aware of this fact in the first chapter, chapter 4 is a curious deviance from the original assumption of the identity of the "other." Perhaps this problem arose from the core issue, which is a lack of an overarching paradigm that could justify or at least help the reader anticipate Troy's application of "other" in the direction he pursues in chapter 4. There is no hint or direct declaration in the introduction suggesting that invoking Christianity will be part of Troy's conceptualization, and the relationship between Hammarskjöld's personal philosophy and his vision for the United Nations comes across as abrupt and awkward because the preceding chapters are topically not related to what Troy wants to argue. Troy does argue that the religious nature of mimetic theory allows him to explore chapter 4's subject matter, but that nature alone, in light of what is discussed in previous chapters, does not imply that Hammarskjöld has to be closely examined.

The final chapter offers a nice and concise summary of the book, and Troy clearly remains committed to his central thesis. However, the chapter's title is misleading; "Toward Competition without Violence" is not the precise objective for which Troy originally offered imitation and desire and mimetic theory but a suggestion that these elements could be alternative tools to better appreciate the value of classical realism. A better title, which could reflect the overall purpose of the book,

would have been "Mimetic Theory and the Functions of Imitation and Desire in Classical Realism." Furthermore, while a discussion of many different types of conflict that had occurred in the world can be understood as an attempt to demonstrate the international relevance and importance of his thesis, Troy perhaps attempted to do too much in too few pages. Some of the examples he discusses in the final chapter make their first appearances, and many of them are not implied from the previous chapter or any of the earlier chapters, making it difficult to access their precise contributions in relation to the thesis statement.

Overall, while the book showcases a clear thesis statement and makes an original contribution to understanding realism in international relations by showing how desire and imitation are at the core of a state's quest for maximum power, the specific execution and demonstration of the thesis's logical appeal remains qualitatively desirable. The book would have benefited from having a clear paradigm, which, in turn, could have helped readers anticipate the kinds of examples and the exact trajectory of thought that Troy wished to pursue. The novelty of the book's central thesis statement is commendable, but its rhetorical appeal is cut short by a lack of paradigm, which makes the order of the chapters logically difficult to follow, and Troy's presentation of various examples seem distant in terms of the examples' direct relevance to the main argument of the book.

Notes

[1]. Ida Oren, "The Unrealism of Contemporary Realism: The Tension between Realist Theory and Realists' Practice," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 283-301; Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 5-51; and Seán Molloy, "Realism: A Problematic Paradigm," *Security Dialogue* 34, no. 1 (March 2003): 71-85.

[2]. For a specific discussion on the functions and uses of paradigms, see S. B. Barnes, "Paradigms—Scientific and Social," *Man* 4, no. 1 (March 1969): 94-102.

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