The Role of Ideas in International Relations: Classical Realism, Disraeli and the Eastern Crisis

Lennard Pater
4160959
28 – 10 – 2018
3299 Words
The Modern World and States System (GKMV16010)
Dr. L. de Vita
MA International Relations in Historical Perspective
1.1: Introduction

In order to ascertain whether a theory of international relations is correct, one must, according to Hans J. Morgenthau, subject it to an empirical test.¹ The degree to which Morgenthau’s own political realism, as advocated in his Politics Among Nations, can be called true depends, apart from logical considerations, upon the correspondence of that theory to the available empirical facts, both historical and actual. Morgenthau hence denies, in accordance with the creed of realism to which he adheres, that theories in international relations could possess any a priori truth.² E.H. Carr explains that a realist denies ‘any a priory correctness to political theories³, implying that the only means through which one can assess the correctness of a theory of international relations is empirical. This is, as far as realists are concerned, as true of realism itself as it is of any other theory in the field.

It is the aim of this essay to confront classical realism in international relations with precisely such an empirical test. The test in this case pertains to realism’s sceptical stance towards the role of ideas in international politics. Realists believe ‘that relations between states are governed solely by power⁴, which means that in actual foreign policy power – in Morgenthau’s terms: ‘interest defined as power⁵ – is at the core of everything. No special place is reserved in this realm for ideas that may guide politicians through the maze of international politics.⁶ The ideas they may apply in their actions are simply disguises of their inclination to sustain and to increase power.

To discover whether realism’s assessment of ideas is in point of fact correct, we shall endeavour to answer the following research question: do ideas in international relations masquerade the desire for power, or could ideas be prior to that desire for power and as such be a force to reckon with in international relations? This question is concerned with either the priority of ideas or of power. Whereas in realism power reigns supreme and ideas are of minor, not to say inferior, importance – for instance in converting voters to a particular foreign policy⁷ – the conception of international relations this essay defends considers them to be amidst the primary motives behind the actions of politicians on the world stage. This conception of the importance of ideas shall here be substantiated by using one historical example, namely that of Benjamin Disraeli’s actions in the Eastern Crisis of 1875 – 1878.

² Ibidem.
⁴ Ibidem, 140.
⁵ Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 5.
⁷ Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 86.
This historical example can with justification be used, because the realism with which we are here dealing, namely the classical realism, such as represented by Morgenthau, holds that the ancient character of its theory, viz. the fact that the foundations of realism were developed long ago, is no argument against the theory, given the stability of human nature and the similarities which history provides. We need therefore not take a recent event in international relations in order to see whether the realist’s views can be upheld in the face of an empirical test. That said, one could object to employing such an empirical test by arguing that no such test is necessary. However, the relevance of testing classical realism’s view of ideas is revealed by the discussion over the past decade, within the field of international relations, on the role of ideas in international politics.

1.2: Realism: Ideas Masquerading as the Desire for Power

Before we, however, come to our test case and plunge into Disraeli’s foreign policy during the Eastern Crisis, it is necessary to look further into classical realism in international relations and its rejection of the importance of ideas in international politics. At the heart of this realism is the conviction that man is a creature desiring power and that this longing for power dominates international relations. Thomas Hobbes declared: “I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death.” This desire for power is naturally not limited to the domestic scene. On the contrary, Morgenthau maintains that ‘most people are unable to satisfy their desire for power within the national community’. Consequently, the international stage becomes a place where people can – as a nation, a group – still their need for power.

Abstract things, such as ideas, principles and ideologies, are hence merely masks to hide the real motivating force behind all actions on the international stage, viz. the desire for power. This striving for power stands in need of a disguise in order to be considered justified. Morgenthau explains: “Power disguised by ideologies and pursued in the name and for the sake of the nation becomes a good for which all citizens must strive.” E.H. Carr sees this tendency to hide the desire for power behind ideas in many historical events. In a wide range of historical examples, Carr asserts, “the principles were deduced from the policies, not the policies from the principles.”

---

12 Ibidem.
14 Carr, *Twenty Years’ Crisis*, 69.
And accordingly: the ideas are deduced from the need for power, not the reverse, i.e. the need for power is not derived from certain ideas. The world we inhabit is ‘a world where power reigns not only supreme, but without rival’\textsuperscript{15}. This means that states in the realm of international politics are ‘inherently competitive’\textsuperscript{16}. Their relations are determined by power and their political representatives are, on the world stage, determined by the pursuit of power, i.e. by safeguarding the interests of the state they happen to represent. It is, in Morgenthau’s view, no argument against realism that politicians are often acting rather from prejudice or ideology.\textsuperscript{17} The gap between the normative and the empirical does for him neither undermine the force of the normative, nor the truth of realism.

Moreover, in classical realism the way in which foreign policy is conducted is close to the way in which it should, according to classical realists, be conducted. There is no considerable divergence between the actual practice of the world – in which the striving for power is omnipotent – and the desired practice, as realists see it. Any minor difference between the empirical and the normative can be explained by saying that here politicians have altered the natural and best course of things, which consists of protecting one’s interests and of seeking for power. The strength of realism hence consists in its ability to be in harmony with the ways of the world: the most rational foreign policy, namely a foreign policy in which power considerations are primary, is often the most natural one.\textsuperscript{18}

This is evidence for the impotence of ideas in international relations. Daniel Philpott states that for the realist in international relations ideas ‘seem able only to provide course adjustments in the struggle for Realist power.’\textsuperscript{19} Philpott is of the opinion that a dismissive attitude towards the role of ideas in international relations is a feature of all realists: “What all Realists insist upon are the strong limitations upon the influence of ideas.”\textsuperscript{20} Philpott is not the only scholar who has insisted that realism, as advocated by Morgenthau, neglects ideas. Michael C. Williams points out, with reference to Philpott also, that ‘Morgenthau is often accused of initiating a Realist tradition that marginalised, or even excluded, the role of ideas in international politics.’\textsuperscript{21} Power in this view wholly precedes ideas. The products of our intellect are very weak in a world where power holds sway.

\textsuperscript{15} Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among Nations}, 221.
\textsuperscript{17} Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among Nations}, 7.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibidem, 25.
\textsuperscript{19} Philpott, \textit{Revolutions in Sovereignty}, 62.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{21} Michael C. Williams, \textit{The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.
However, Williams insists that this portrayal of realist thought, especially Morgenthau’s thought, lacks nuance. According to Williams, ‘Morgenthau in fact develops a subtle and powerfully critical understanding of the relationship between ideas, power, and politics’\textsuperscript{22}. Williams here relies upon the assertion that Morgenthau possesses a rather sophisticated idea of what politics involves.\textsuperscript{23} ‘True as that may be, it does not alter the fact that for Morgenthau ideas have no major role to play in the relations between states. Naturally, Morgenthau’s realism, being a theory of international relations, itself involves ideas, but that does not imply that he attaches great weight to ideas within international relations. In Morgenthau ultimately all ideas in international politics are subordinate to power considerations.

**1.3: Disraeli and the Eastern Crisis of 1875 – 1878**

When one thinks of a politician who may have practiced the principles of the realism Morgenthau envisages, one quite naturally thinks of Benjamin Disraeli, the prime minister of Great Britain in 1868 and from 1874 until 1880.\textsuperscript{24} Disraeli was, in the words of Kissinger, ‘one of the strongest and most extraordinary figures ever to head a British government’\textsuperscript{25}. This extraordinary figure was to a considerable degree involved in foreign policy during his second period as prime minister, in which the Eastern Crisis troubled international politics. In dealing with issues of foreign policy, Disraeli was, at first sight, mostly occupied with protecting British interests.

As Philip Magnus, the biographer of Disraeli’s rival Gladstone, declares about him: “To his mind, British interests were the sole test of policy.”\textsuperscript{26} Disraeli hence seems the ‘Realpolitiker’ par excellence: a realist if there ever was one. This is for instance visible in his dealing with the Eastern Crisis. The Eastern Crisis evolved around the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire. That empire had for a long time been in a state of decay. Already in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ‘Ottoman Empire had long ceased to be the powerful state which had kept Central Europe in a state of terror as late as the seventeenth century’\textsuperscript{27}. In Disraeli’s days, the downfall instigated the desire for independence among several peoples belonging to the Ottoman Empire. A.J.P. Taylor explains what happened: “In July 1875 the Slav peasants of Hercegovina revolted against Turkish rule; those of Bosnia soon followed. This opened the great Eastern crisis which everyone had been expecting since the end of the Crimean War.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{22} Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limit of International Relations*, 84.
\textsuperscript{23} Williams, “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations”, 633 – 665.
These Slav peasants were not the only citizens of the Ottoman Empire to revolt against Ottoman rule from 1875 onwards. Gradually the desire for independence among especially Christians within the Ottoman Empire grew. After the revolt in Hercegovina, another uprising occurred in Bulgaria\(^{29}\), and Serbia and Montenegro, which has formerly belonged to the empire and had now gained a sort of semi-independence, declared war on the Ottomans.\(^{30}\)

The European provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which were for the most part Christian\(^{31}\), seemingly no longer accepted the Ottoman government under which joke they were suffering and saw the decay of the empire as an opportunity to gain independence from the Ottoman rulers they despised.

Disraeli proved himself a fierce opponent of independence for these provinces. At first sight, his opposition seems mainly to stem from a calculation of British interests. The fear among British politicians was that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire would lead to Russia advancing in the East, particularly also in India. Disraeli said in a conversation that ‘Constantinople is the Key of India’\(^{32}\). The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe would affect, Disraeli thought, the British interests in the East and would strengthen the Russians there. In a letter to his Foreign Secretary, Disraeli stated that it would be humiliating if to see ‘Constantinople occupied by the Russians’\(^{33}\). This seems a clear example of what Morgenthau deems a ‘policy of prestige’\(^{34}\): Disraeli wanted to safeguard the interests and the prestige of England by sustaining the Ottoman Empire.

This had to do with England’s possession of India, but also with the fact that Disraeli considered England to be ‘a Mediterranean Power; a great Mediterranean Power’\(^{35}\). That power would diminish if Russia got hold of provinces of the Ottoman Empire. If the Balkan Slavs were to gain independence, the position of the British Empire in that region could deteriorate. Hence R.W. Seton-Watson asserts that Disraeli’s conduct in the Eastern Question was determined by considerations of power: Disraeli ‘had no fixed principles or scruples in the Eastern Question, and that to him it was simply and solely a ‘Machtfrage’ [...] from which to extract a maximum of profit for England’\(^{36}\).

---


\(^{32}\) Blake, *Disraeli*, 577.


\(^{34}\) Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 37.

\(^{35}\) Benjamin Disraeli, “In answer to her majesty’s most gracious speech: 8 February 1876", [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1876/feb/08/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most#S3V0227P0_18760208_HOC_18](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1876/feb/08/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most#S3V0227P0_18760208_HOC_18), 27 – 10 – 2018.

\(^{36}\) Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question*, 410.
There was, however, a further motivation behind Disraeli’s actions. Disraeli did not believe in the principle of sovereignty as self-determination. In this he was of one mind with that other great statesman of the nineteenth century, namely Bismarck: “Neither Bismarck nor Disraeli had any sympathy for the Balkan Slavs, whom they viewed as chronic and violent troublemakers.”37 This lack of sympathy was not solely related to these Balkans Slavs allegedly being troublemakers. In Disraeli’s case this rather dismissive attitude to small peoples wanting to gain independence was also determined by domestic factors, particularly by Ireland. Taylor concludes: “Any attempt to improve the condition of the Balkan Slavs made him fear the example nearer home.”38 But Disraeli’s disavowal of striving for independence was more than a pragmatic domestic consideration: it revealed his deep-rooted conservative outlook, which motivated his foreign policy.

That he was eventually willing, at the Congress of Berlin, to concede some independence to these regions39 had to do with another idea, viz. that of the British Empire. He sacrificed his principle that no independence should be given to these regions in order to strengthen the position of the empire he cherished. In Disraeli’s mind the interests of the British Empire would ultimately prevail: “His mind was permanently occupied by the task of defending the prestige of Britain among the Great Powers rather than preserving and defending the Ottoman Empire.”40 In all his actions, ‘his main goal was to preserve the prestige and power of the British Empire’41. But the idea of the British Empire preceded the notion of prestige and power.

Disraeli was attached to the idea of Empire in such a manner that it could be called, as Kissinger in fact does, a spiritual necessity for him, which means that Disraeli’s foreign policy was rooted in deep spiritual convictions: “For Disraeli, the Empire was not an economic necessity but a spiritual one, and a prerequisite to his country’s greatness.”42 A realist interpretation of Disraeli’s actions during the Eastern Crisis would hold that Disraeli was guided by interest defined as power during the whole of the affair. Disraeli was aware of the, what E.H. Carr calls, ‘reality of conflict’43 on the world stage – in this case that between Britain and Russia – and acted accordingly. Power is then primary and ideas are merely secondary. However, in conducting a foreign policy politicians often do not make a calculation of power first, before letting their ideas enter into their foreign policy. The spiritual necessity of empire for Disraeli shows the primacy of ideas.

37 Kissinger, Diplomacy, 155/156.
38 Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 234.
39 Ibidem, 252.
41 Ibidem, 110.
42 Kissinger, Diplomacy, 151.
43 Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, 207.
Be that as it may, the way in which the Eastern Crisis was eventually resolved at the Congress of Berlin – in which Disraeli took centre stage\textsuperscript{44} – still appears to be an example of power politics, of ‘Realpolitik’. Disraeli no longer defended the Ottoman Empire and seemed, at least in practice, willing to endorse the idea of sovereignty as self-determination: Robert Blake notes ‘that the Berlin settlement deprived the Sultan of far more territory than the British government would have considered tolerable when the crisis began’\textsuperscript{45}. Disraeli seems, as is also suggested by Milos Kovic\textsuperscript{46}, to have come round to the nationalism of the Balkan Slavs in order to protect the British interests. And therefore he was willing to do many concessions during the Congress of Berlin, although he explicitly denied in the House of Lords the charge that he had willingly ‘betrayed the Ottoman Empire and agreed to its division’\textsuperscript{47}.

When speaking in the House of Lords after the Congress of Berlin, Disraeli said that ‘the threatened injury to the British Empire has been averted’\textsuperscript{48}. That threat had partly been averted by keeping the Ottoman Empire on its feet and partly by forcing it to accept the autonomy of certain regions. The speech Disraeli provided here is filled with expressions of his desire to provide protection for the British Empire. He described the policy of his government therefore in the following manner: “We shrink from the responsibility of handing to our successors a diminished or weakened Empire.”\textsuperscript{49} The interests of the British Empire had been his guide throughout the Eastern Crisis. Disraeli had seen ‘the persistent and unscrupulous advance of Russia both in Europe and in Asia over a longer period of years’\textsuperscript{50} and felt that the Congress of Berlin had put a stop to it.

In opposition to such a realist understanding of Disraeli’s behaviour, one could object by arguing that ideas, in international relations, often precede interests, instead of the other way around. The calculation of interests is often a disguise for particular ideas or philosophical convictions. That is true of Disraeli’s foreign policy in the Eastern Crisis. The ideas which determined Disraeli’s foreign policy, viz. the idea of empire and the idea which rejected sovereignty as self-determination, were prior to calculation of interests: the interests of Britain were established from these ideas. This is supported by the fact that it became clear after the Eastern Crisis – and it had been clear to some even during that issue\textsuperscript{51} – that the British did not necessarily benefit from obstructing the Balkan Slavs’ independence.

\textsuperscript{44} Buckle, \textit{The Life of Benjamin Disraeli: Earl of Beaconsfield}: VI, 312.
\textsuperscript{45} Blake, \textit{Disraeli}, 650.
\textsuperscript{46} Kovic, “The Eastern Question Again!”, 110.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibidem, 282.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{50} Buckle, \textit{The Life of Benjamin Disraeli: Earl of Beaconsfield}: VI, 132.
Furthermore, it required an idea, namely that of sovereignty as self-determination, in order to change the inclination of the statesmen of the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Disraeli, to dismiss the desire of independence as unjustified. We here perceive the truth of Philpott’s claim that ideas bring about revolutions in sovereignty.\textsuperscript{52} Sovereignty as Disraeli saw it was not concerned with the wishes of e.g. the Bulgarian people to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire. Ideas therefore do precede power considerations: from the perspective of power considerations alone, it cannot be considered necessary that Disraeli would oppose any form of independence for regions from the Ottoman Empire. The idea that such independence was inconceivable\textsuperscript{53} prevented the correct power calculation, being that Britain need not fear the Balkan Slavs’ independence.

In considering a foreign policy certain ideas were thus prior to the calculation of interests. The latter occurred on the basis of ideas. Had Disraeli e.g. embraced the idea of sovereignty as self-determination, he would have behaved differently in the Eastern Crisis, which would not have been less advantageous to the interest of the British Empire. The idea of the importance of empire is another idea which is prior to the desire for power. Before power is to be sought, one has to determine for whom or for what one is seeking power. Here ideas come into play: Disraeli sought power for the idea of the British Empire. The spiritual necessity of having an empire was what motivated his quest for power. Here the roles of ideas and power are reversed, compared to classical realism: there is no calculation of interests prior to ideas. Ideas can be prior to considerations of power.

1.4: Conclusion

This essay asked: do ideas in international relations masquerade the desire for power, or could ideas be prior to that desire for power and as such be a force to reckon with in international relations? We have learned from the example of Disraeli that even politicians for whom power and prestige are of primary importance are led in their foreign policy by ideas, or the absence of a certain idea, in this case the idea of sovereignty as self-determination. Disraeli cherished the idea of empire and from that idea his calculation of British interest followed, combined with his assessment that giving independence to certain provinces within the Ottoman Empire would ultimately undermine the British Empire. When Disraeli later did to a degree concede the further collapsing of the Ottoman Empire, he did so by referring to the British Empire. The idea of empire, as a spiritual necessity, was his guide in the Eastern Crisis. Ideas can consequently, contrary to Morgenthau and classical realism, be a force to reckon with in international relations.

\textsuperscript{52} Philpott, \textit{Revolutions in Sovereignty}, 3 – 10.
Bibliography


Disraeli, Benjamin. “In answer to her majesty’s most gracious speech: 8 February 1876”, [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1876/feb/08/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most#S3V0227P0_18760208_HOC_18](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1876/feb/08/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most#S3V0227P0_18760208_HOC_18), 27 – 10 – 2018.


