What Way Forward for Contemporary Realism?

Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James

Conversations about the merits and weaknesses, the strengths and perils of realism as a family of theories of international relations have shaped our discipline since most of us can remember. Arguably, most of these conversations have delivered no obviously useful results. Inasmuch as what are argued to be quintessential features of realism—its shared core assumptions or policy priorities—are contrasted to those of starkly opposed approaches—such as idealism, some forms of liberalism, or (other) explicitly normative theories—debates about the merits of realism have tended at best to clarify the fault lines dividing the debaters and their respective positions. At worst such debates have produced defensive posturing on both sides, usually with damaging results for the theories at stake. Contrast, after all, easily serves the purpose of caricature.

These debates have tended not to lead to agreement across theoretical divisions regarding what might be useful ways to theorize, or to improve our theorizing, about international affairs. Too deep are the ontological conflicts that divide us, to the point where one theorist’s experimental laboratory for creative problem solving is another theorist’s real-world pit of hell. Too deep also are the epistemological conflicts that run discussions aground even before we can agree on how to possibly judge the value of what we do as scholars and students of international politics. Too deep, perhaps, are the normative divisions that shape our ontological and epistemological preferences—or at least those of those of us who admit the existence of such policy-related views that exert influence on virtually all our other positions.

Why then keep trying? Exasperated with abstract theoretical debates that never seem to lead anywhere, one might be tempted to give up talking to each other and advocate the splitting up of our discipline into separate paradigmatic camps. Jour-
nals and publishers might then decide to "go" realist, constructivist, or liberal. The work and progress within our separate research communities could begin to resemble Kuhn's vision of "normal science," with all of its inherent limitations. And the only places where we would have to fight off the obstinately incommensurable views of rival paradigms would be in front of the doors of policymakers and in the mass media—for access to "the real world" and the ears of those who make its decisions. What should our governments do about the rise of China? What about the United States as the "rogue elephant" of unilaterialism? What is the path toward international cooperation to save the planet from the ravages of human usage? These are some of the questions that policymakers and citizens want answered, and while rival international relations (IR) paradigms tend to do so in radically contradictory ways, most are united by the desire to inform the world of international politics.

To be sure, the scenario of paradigmatic segregation in the world of academia and publishing is to some extent reality already. The authors who have written the present volume together, however, believe that theoretical encounters inviting direct disagreement are vital for theoretical progress, however defined. Defending one's own viewpoint against criticism is a way to refine one's own views, to make them stronger, as it is simultaneously the way to learn to understand rival positions for the sake of maximizing insight. We may not be able to escape partialities created by perspective, but by collecting multiple perspectives we may at least become aware of our own partialities and, in principle, capable of reflecting critically upon them.

In this spirit, most authors represented in this volume came together for a workshop at the 2006 International Studies Association conference in San Diego, California, which was devoted to examining the future of realism.1 "What way forward for the realist paradigm?" was the question we posed ourselves. We treated it genuinely as an open question, and some of us responded with a spontaneous "hopefully none at all," yet continued to listen while proponents of various realist approaches reflected on the merits of their preferred theoretical variants. The question was deliberately phrased to provoke disagreement even among self-identified realists, as it inspired discussion on the relative merits of different realist approaches. There was no easy way out in the form of a simple commitment to intra-paradigmatic pluralism. Surely, we thought, something can be gained by pondering which sorts of realism are, by some specified criteria, better than others. Following earlier debates that remained internal to the realist paradigm (Vasquez and Elman 2003), we deliberately phrased our question broadly to allow for contributions from outside the paradigm.

The workshop turned out a greater success than we had anticipated. We had not dared to hope for more than spirited debate and a civilized agreement, in the end, to continue to disagree, but a rather more solid and encompassing consensus inductively emerged from our conversations. This consensus was essentially that the future of realism was unlikely to reside in the extremes of either orthodox Waltzian neorealism or the muddy waters of pre-Waltzian classical realist thinking. Contemporary realist IR theory, we agreed, necessarily had to seek to move beyond Waltzian neorealism, either by elaborating upon Waltz's notion of system structure or by acknowledging the relevant contexts and perceptions of decision makers by incorporating explanatory variables at the unit levels (of both the first and the second image). In essence therefore, two ways forward for realism emerged from the workshop: the elaborated structural realist route and the neoclassical realist route.

Before considering these different theoretical variants, we should first briefly sketch out the general parameters of the realist paradigm in international relations theory. It is generally recognized that partly due to its long pedigree, often traced back to Thucydides' ancient analysis of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, the generic features of realism are difficult to identify precisely, and it is to be acknowledged at the outset that "standard" accounts frequently differ in scope and emphasis. Keohane (1986) offers an influential reference point in the literature, however, when he argues that political realism rests on three common assumptions: first, that states are the most important actors in international relations; second, that states seek power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends; and third, that states act as rational egotists that calculate the utility of alternative policies to maximize the benefits accrued to themselves by their actions (Keohane 1986, 7, 11). While it is by no means all encompassing or universally accepted in the field, this definition is widely used and provides a useful reference point for this book. The authors make explicit in their chapters where their views of realism differ significantly from Keohane's definition. In this way, the diversity of metatheoretical, theoretical, and empirical debates contained within this volume is framed by parameters that are at least acknowledged, if not shared, by all the contributors.

Two Ways Forward: Elaborated Structural and Neoclassical Realist Approaches

Contemporary debates within realist IR theory have developed very much in response to Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979). Waltz argued that the international system can be thought of as having a structural unity that transcends the sum of the individual states that constitute it. The most important structural features of the international system are its anarchic ordering principle, which imposes a survival imperative upon all states and generates a security dilemma be-
between them, and its distribution of capabilities (or polarity). The distribution of capabilities within the international system acts as an external constraint upon states and forces them to balance against stronger rivals in order to ensure their survival. By this reasoning, the properties of individual states can be set aside when seeking to explain major international conflicts and the recurrent formations of the balance of power in international relations.

Waltz’s “structural” or “neo”-realist account of international relations was distinctive. Unlike earlier realist theories, it explained the major features of world politics in systemic terms rather than reducing the properties of the international system to its constituent units, as Morgenthau and other classical realists had tended to do. It is difficult to overestimate the importance that Waltz’s systemic mode of thinking has had for theoretical debates within both realism and IR theory more generally. Since the late 1970s, of course, there has been a whole series of critiques of and attempts to move beyond Waltz’s account of international relations. As mentioned above, the 2006 International Studies Association workshop identified two main routes forward since taken by contemporary realist IR theory. The first route forward is associated with so-called neoclassical realist theory, while the second is associated with what we here term elaborated structural realism.

Elaborated structural realism (ESR) is a theoretical label that has emerged within the field only relatively recently and is associated closely with the work of Patrick James (2002). James employed a broad philosophy of science framework to make the claim that neorealism had spurned a progressive research enterprise (Vasquez 1997). This research enterprise was comprised of a succession of theories showing expanding problem-solving capability unfolding cumulatively from a series of core realist assumptions. Using criteria for theory evaluation derived from Imre Lakatos, Larry Laudan, and others, James traced the evolution of Waltzian neorealism to include a broad continuum of capabilities-based elements. Initial attempts by Gilpin (1983) and Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993) to incorporate uneven growth and interaction capacity as systemic variables that had been neglected by neorealist theory were supplemented by a wide variety of accounts of state behavior that retain neorealism’s structuralist and materialist logic but nevertheless expand its explanatory power.

We believe that the term elaborated structural realism deserves greater prominence in the current discipline because, as James makes clear, further developing neorealism’s structural and systemic logic has in practice usually meant elaborating on Waltz’s relatively crude structural framework. Waltz argued that it was possible to understand the dynamics of the international system with reference simply to primary elements of structure. James notes, however, that a wide variety of research in the field has identified secondary, tertiary, and higher order elements of structure including complex calculations (e.g., the concentration of capabilities within the system) and coalitions (e.g., the number and tightness of alliances within the system) (James 2002, 195–200). From the elaborated structural realist’s point of view, refining Waltz’s neorealism to include these or other carefully justified elements of system structure promises to expand the problem-solving capabilities of realist theory while nevertheless retaining the parsimony and elegance associated with structural models. In addition, as James points out in chapter 2 of this book, while not retreating to the unit level, realism must try harder to produce a truly systemic account of micro-macro linkages to confront the explanatory puzzles and anomalies it continues to face.

The major alternative to elaborated structural realism, we believe, has been created by the emergence of neoclassical realist IR theory. The neoclassical turn predated the explicit articulation of elaborated structural realism; the genesis of the term itself is usually credited to Gideon Rose (1998). Rose used the label for a wide range of studies that sought to integrate Waltzian insights about system structure within a broader range of explanatory variables, such as perceptions of power, the role of political leaders, and the domestic political characteristics of states (such as democratic vs. authoritarian or revisionist vs. status quo–oriented). As with elaborated structural realism, the intention was to improve upon orthodox neorealism’s explanatory power, this time by purposely sacrificing a degree of parsimony for the sake of more nuanced explanations of state behavior.

Waltz’s own view, of course, may well be that there is no way to improve upon his original neorealist model without sacrificing the parsimony of systemic analysis, and, along with some followers, he has stuck to his theoretical guns over the years. Notably, Robert Kagan’s (2003) influential analysis of the crisis in transatlantic relations that followed from the debates surrounding U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 echoes strongly the basic logic of Waltz’s structural realist theory. While Kagan’s analysis was directed at a broader policy-making community rather than at an academic audience, it fits very well with neorealist predictions. Like Waltz, Kagan argues that the shift from a bi- to a unipolar system with the end of the Cold War has generated structural conflicts of interest between the United States and other major powers in the international system.

Nevertheless, given that Kagan’s analysis seems to strongly echo the logic of Waltz’s theoretical claims, it seems rather odd that Kagan’s policy recommendations diverge so radically from those favored by Waltz. While Waltz (like Christopher Layne, in chapter 5) supports the pursuit of offshore balancing by the United States, Kagan is a strong and fairly unapologetic advocate of the United States pursuing a
hegemonic strategy. Moreover, Waltz’s purist theoretical standpoint certainly does not seem to have satisfied the many realist scholars who have attempted to modify his initial framework in order to expand its explanatory capacity in the face of continued explanatory and predictive difficulties. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that very few realist articles and books have been published in the last two to three decades that have simply vindicated the logic of Waltz’s original theoretical model. If Waltz’s approach had been unproblematically accepted by other realists, then major contributions to realist IR theory over the last two or three decades simply would not have been made.2

It is therefore not surprising that the contributors to our workshop on contemporary realism could agree that realism’s way forward (if there is any) lies in either its elaborated structural or neoclassical variants. Elaborated structural realist versions were broadly seen as the way forward by those wedded to essentially structuralist approaches. On the other hand, neoclassical realists acknowledged that it is no good seeking to turn the clocks back to a bygone pre-Waltzian era. The search for patterns, context transcendence, and predictability in international affairs makes us wary of an uncontrolled proliferation of explanatory factors at least when and if the ambition is to generalize beyond the specificities of particular times and places. The neo in neoclassical then signifies most definitely not a return at a later date to pre-neorealist thinking but rather an attempt to integrate some of the epistemological insights developed in our and other social science disciplines in recent decades with the actor-centric ontology so typical of classical realist thought.

When comparing specific contributions to the two theoretical camps of elaborated structural and neoclassical realism, it is notable that the two approaches seem to be moving toward each other from opposite directions. In some emanations they may well become indistinguishable. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that most of the realist contributors to this volume resist classification into either theoretical camp, preferring to avoid situating themselves precisely within near schools of thought. This difficulty of placement may perhaps be read as vindicating Waltz’s own argument that it simply is not possible to elaborate on his structural-systemic model. According to this strict Waltzian account, elaborated structural realism is itself a form of neoclassical realism because any explanatory variable below the (systemic) distribution of power should be considered unit level. Consider, for example, William Wohlforth’s (1999) argument that the concentration of capabilities in today’s unipolar international system is so great that it forecloses the possibility of balancing against the United States. Wohlforth’s argument represents what James (2002) identifies as an elaborated structural realist explanation. Wohlforth retains neorealism’s structuralist and determinist orientation while taking into account the degree of concentration of capabilities as an under-theorized element in a continuum of capabilities-based variables that may be integrated into Waltz’s original neorealism model. Yet Waltz would have no doubt respond to Wohlforth that a high concentration of capabilities should merely increase the incentives for secondary states to balance against hegemonic power. According to this line of reasoning, the concentration of capabilities in the system, as opposed to the distribution of capabilities between states, is merely a unit-level property.

Alternatively, the difficulty of drawing a dividing line between elaborated structural and neoclassical realist approaches, and of classifying some theoretical endeavors on either side, may not so much be vindicating Waltz as reflecting the inherent artificiality of metatheoretical dichotomies such as, notably, structure vs. agency, system vs. unit, or universality vs. historical (temporal and spatial) contextuality. The impracticality of such dichotomies becomes more obvious the more concrete and the more applied (or applicable) the suggested theory. Some authors in this book, notably Hans Mouritzen, Balkan Devlen and Özgür Özdemir, and Christopher Layne, are engaged in theorizing about international affairs with the express purpose of delivering explanations for and aiding in the understanding of particular types of foreign policy challenges. It is arguably the aim to develop such contextually useful insights, which can be used to inform policy making, that reveals the difficulty of, indeed, counterproductivity of remaining within the boundaries of deductively derived, more general theoretical approaches. We are thus adamant in maintaining that easy classifiability is not a criterion for the usefulness of the suggested theory (and that our authors must not be blamed for being difficult to pigeonhole). Moreover, there is much to be gained by questioning the ways in which we here in this volume, and the IR literature more generally, have drawn dividing lines in the first place between theoretical approaches such as elaborated vs. neoclassical realism, as well as those structuring surrounding ontological and epistemological debates.

We do hold, nevertheless, that the distinction between elaborated structural and neoclassical realism is a potentially useful structuring device for debates about the future of realism and that it is analytically tenable. Certainly, the two approaches at times approximate each other and may be difficult to distinguish in practice, but the theoretical and even ontological predilections that separate them are clear enough and essentially revolve around preferred levels of analysis. To predict foreign policy choices, the neoclassical realist asks: “What relevant constraints and opportunities are perceived by the decision maker as presented by his or her environment?” In answering this question, he draws not only on systemic but also on domestic and individual features, acknowledging, for example, that the same systemic environment
might suggest different courses of action to the democratic foreign minister than to the military dictator. The elaborated structural realist asks instead: "How do systemic constraints and opportunities shape foreign policy choices?" While answering this question will probably involve engagement with domestic and even individual factors (although neorealists are often loathe to admit that), the vantage point certainly favors a greater degree of determinism and, for the same reason, tends to give the approach an edge when it comes to the parsimony of its suggested models.

Given the recent history of our field, it is notable, although not altogether surprising, that the diverse contributors to this volume basically agree that the debate between the elaborated structural and neoclassical variants of realism is likely to define the future of realist IR theory. Whether this is a stroke of editorial luck or the result of academic socialization processes, it has usefully provided us with a platform on which to lead the three essential debates that comprise this book: an epistemological one, an ontological one, and a theoretical one (Figure I.1).

Three Debates about Realism

This book represents a meta-conversation about how to judge the quality of theoretical approaches (epistemology), a discussion about the relevant factors and actors to incorporate into realist theorizing about international relations (ontology), and an assessment of the relative quality of particular theoretical approaches.

First, the epistemological disagreements that animate the contributions to this book revolve around the basic question of how we can judge the rigor, viability, progressiveness, promise, usefulness, or any other sort of "goodness" of theory. What are the relevant criteria for theoretical competition, and why? The epistemological debate as waged in this book has a particular structure, one that allows us to compare and contrast the views of our individual contributors along a relatively straightforward continuum. At one end, we have approaches that are firmly anchored in positivist criteria for the scientific progressiveness and more general defensibility of theoretical approaches. The chapter by Patrick James (chap. 2) is probably the clearest example of such a stance. At the other end, we have approaches that draw on constructivist ideas and insights from sociology of knowledge to reject the idea of criteria for theorizing that are external to the endeavor of theorizing itself. On this account, the realist tradition in international relations itself should not be considered as having objective content. Instead, it has coevolved with and (been) mutually determined (by) dominant state practices within world politics. Jennifer Sterling-Folker's chapter (chap. 8) exemplifies this latter view. In between lies a variety of approaches that attempt to balance the extremes or that perhaps dodge the question.

The ontological debate among the volume contributors also heavily reflects the imprint of constructivist insights about international relations. Its locus is the relevant actors to be incorporated into realist theorizing, and the questions are essentially: To what extent do we need to be able to view situations from these actors' perspectives to be able to understand their choices (and the consequences of these choices at the systemic level)? And how do we do so? The chapters by Moiritten (chap. 7) and Devlen and Özdamar (chap. 6), for example, show how realist insights might be enriched by integrating the roles of actors' social identities, historical lessons learned, and perceptions of potential allies and adversaries into a power-based analysis. James reveals how even offensive structural realism implicitly relies on micro-level assumptions about the rational self-positioning of the state within the international system. The levels of analysis issue that lies at the core of the theoretical distinction between neoclassical and elaborated structural realism can be observed most acutely within the ontological debate regarding how much we need to understand about actors and their perspectives.

Finally, there is a debate, waged at the theoretical level, about the best way forward for contemporary realism. This third debate seems to be able to happily unfold even as the larger epistemological and ontological debates remain unresolved. Just as in the discipline at large, in this volume each contribution defends a particular set of theoretical choices, even while, to a greater or lesser extent, engaging in debate about what such choices might be based on. We are proud that this book pushes forward both key meta-debates regarding the evolution of the realist paradigm, while simultaneously presenting a range of original theoretical developments by important authors in our field. It is not merely a work of reflection and evaluation, although it is that as well. It presents original material derived from the authors' continuing theory development and resulting from their engagement with each other, within and beyond the framework of this book. By making such a contribution, we hope to take stock of the debate around the current and future viability of realism, but even more
importantly we hope to provide a key impetus for the future evolution of this debate. We welcome our readers into this conversation—indeed, these three conversations, which together weave the core fabric of our discipline.

Overview of the Book’s Contents

Part 1

The first part of this book consists of contributions that seek explicitly to further develop realist theorizing about international relations. The contributing authors examine how various strands of realist theory may be refined (Little, James, and Elman) or consider the necessity of refining Waltzian realism in light of the apparent explanatory anomalies it faces (Harrison). Taken together, this section offers a vision for the future of realist theorizing which includes a spectrum of possible positions between neoclassical and elaborated structural variants. In addition, it considers the argument that whichever of the two routes forward realism takes, fundamental problems remain for realist IR theory.

Richard Little, known as a representative of the English School of international relations theory, provides a contribution that bridges English School, neoclassical, and structural approaches. Chapter 1 examines the concept of the balance of power, one of the key concepts in IR theory in general and realism in particular, by tracing its development and usage across three schools of thought, each represented by one paramount IR theorist. Contrasting Morgenthau’s classical realist conceptualization of the balance of power with the neorealist conceptualization of Kenneth Waltz, he shows how the conceptualization of Hedley Bull, pioneer of the English School, while connecting with some neorealist ideas also recovers some of Morgenthau’s essential insights. Particularly crucial is the ability to distinguish between two qualitatively different dynamics of power balancing, which he labels adversarial and associational, and the resulting outcomes of systemic and societal balances of power, respectively. By conceptualizing this distinction, English School theorizing becomes able to overcome the status quo bias of structural realism and to show how balancing can be facilitated—not least in multipolar systems, in which adversarial balancing is notoriously difficult.

Little sees two problems with how the debate among contemporary realists is developing. These relate, first, to the essentially ahistorical orientation of realist theory. Due to this orientation, there is no suggestion that theoretical assumptions might need to be changed as the historical context evolves. Instead, there seems to be a determination to derive theoretical assumptions that are considered universally valid across time and space. Second, there is no recognition by contemporary realists that structure can be a multidimensional phenomenon. Instead, the need for parsimony and a one-dimensional approach to structure is seen to trump all other considerations. Challenging both these positions, Little proposes that the English School’s more complex conceptualization of power balancing makes it more suitable for explaining historical circumstances, such as the stability of the European state system since the nineteenth century, which (other) realist schools are forced to consider anomalies. By the same token, English School theorizing emerges as a better source for developing policy-relevant understandings of system maintenance for a complex international environment with shifting power distributions and polarity.

The criteria for theoretical usefulness that Little suggests have thus to do with maximizing explanatory depth as well as flexibility and with opening deliberative spaces for actors whose behavior, when viewed from more structuralist perspectives, appears predetermined by structural circumstances. He takes the position that IR scholars have no alternative but to conduct their research on the basis of ontological and epistemological wagers (Jackson, forthcoming), which also extend to their theoretical assumptions. The resulting diversity, even fragmentation, is perhaps inevitable and certainly cannot be reduced by the application of logic, positivist or otherwise.

Patrick James (chap. 2), in contrast, explicitly advocates elaborating structural or systemic realism as the most promising avenue for future theory development within the realist paradigm. To show why such elaboration is needed and how it can be accomplished parsimoniously, he presents a critique of offensive realism—a systemic form of realist theorizing pioneered by John Mearsheimer—and reveals three core weaknesses, all of which relate to an underspecification of the theory’s micro-foundations. Appropriate microfoundations for systemic theorizing can, according to James, be drawn from rational choice theory, whose assumptions are, albeit in partial and inconsistent ways, already present in much of realist theorizing. Combining systemic realism’s emphasis on parsimony and generality with the theoretical specification of micro-macro linkages based on a consistent application of rational choice can allow us to formulate concrete propositions and expectations regarding foreign policy behavior and outcomes. Doing so renders the theory both determinate and refutable and, thereby, progressive. In making this argument, James’s chapter provides the clearest illustration of how a set of intersubjectively derived a priori criteria for the judgment of theoretical viability can be applied in theoretical comparison and critique, a move that is arguably essential to enable us to lead a pandisciplinary conversation at the level of the theory.

In chapter 3, Colin Elman begins with a restatement of Randall Schweller’s critique of neorealism, which pointed out that neorealism fails to explain the emer-
gence of revisionist powers in the international system and thus leaves open the question of what states, expected to balance power in the system, would ever need to balance against. Schweller’s suggested solution was to include two sources of revisionism in structural realist theory: domestically motivated and structurally (that is, externally) induced revisionism. Elman focuses on the applicability of Schweller’s suggested solution to the two dominant contemporary successor theories to neorealism: defensive and offensive structural realism.

Elman finds that defensive structural realism is unable to employ Schweller’s suggestion. Unlike neorealism, defensive structural realism relies on the assumption of rational state behavior. As long as states can distinguish revisionist from status-quo oriented states, they will successfully balance against revisionists and maintain peace among status-quo powers. Even if such distinction becomes difficult, states will perceive the risk of revisionism to be emerging from domestic pathologies as opposed to systemic dynamics, which will lead them to adopt a wait-and-see attitude vis-à-vis potential revisionists. Ultimately, then defensive structural realism can provide no structuralist explanation for why revisionist states continue to emerge and act as driving forces of violent conflict in the system. Both the emergence of revisionist powers and the manner in which other states react to it are, if at all, explained with recourse to domestic-level variables. Defensive structural realism in this manner opens the door to neoclassical realist arguments and loses its structuralist character.

Offensive structural realism, on the other hand, can make use of Schweller’s solution to establish a logic of dynamic mutual reinforcement between domestically and structurally generated revisionism. Offensive structural realism expects revisionist states to be given within the system and to fundamentally bias the system’s dynamics in favor of relative power maximization. The notion of domestically generated revisionism can in this context fill an explanatory gap (making clear why revisionist states continue to “pop up”), while remaining compatible with the prevalence of structurally generated revisionism as the main explanatory factor for state behavior and systemic outcomes.

Chapters 2 and 3 together illustrate how theoretical debate (in this case regarding the merits of offensive realism, on which they fundamentally disagree) can rage even if authors share an epistemological common ground in positivist criteria for theory evaluation. At the same time, Elman’s arguments represent the strongest prostructuralist stance taken in this volume.

Ewan Harrison examines in chapter 4 the debate between neoclassical and elaborated structural realists over the nature and consequences of unipolarity, while adopting a more critical position toward realism in general than the first three chapters. He outlines four polar positions that have emerged in the debates within con-


temporary realism: hegemonic decline (Kennedy and Gilpin), balancing (Waltz, Layne, and Mearsheimer), bandwagoning (Kapstein and Mastanduno), and unipolar dominance (Wohlfirth). Each model offers a different assessment of the trajectory displayed by the emerging international system. Harrison shows how, since the end of the Cold War, realism has swung violently among these four often radically opposed and contradictory worldviews, with the consequence that the internal coherence and predictive capability of the central paradigm have been called into question. The underlying and unresolved issue that realism has to address, he argues, is its chronic indeterminacy with respect to the nature and consequences of unipolarity.

Harrison thus exposes what is arguably a problem for the realist paradigm as a whole. This is not the fact that there is diversity within realism, that is, the fact that there are different approaches per se. Instead, the problem his exegesis raises is that there are “fashions” within realist theorizing; different views dominate at different times. These shifts in fashion and theoretical orthodoxy can well be called degenerative, as he shows them to be linked to post hoc reactions to theoretical anomalies. In other words, the problem is not the diversity and competition among theories in the realist theory family but rather that we tend to judge the “way forward” depending on the fleeting empirical impressions of the moment.

Harrison’s argument can be viewed as a response to attempts by Little, James, Elman, and other authors in this book to develop and refine realist theory. However, it can also be understood as countering the stance taken by Jennifer Sterling-Folkers in chapter 8 that “realism is as realism does”—a sociology of knowledge perspective that would give up the idea of an independent vantage point for the judgment of theory quality. While Sterling-Folkers encourages us to accept theoretical pluralism and flux as unavoidable and even desirable, Harrison’s implicit critique is that, by accepting such a view, we can easily fall prey to disciplinary fashions. While he also draws on insights from the sociology of knowledge, he focuses on showing how the way (realist) research communities work can be viewed as problematic. Harrison’s critical discussion of theoretical viability in the end remains wedded to a priori criteria for judgment, while Sterling-Folkers’s less positivistic epistemological perspective problematizes judgment as such.

Part 2

The chapters in this part combine theory development with a strong focus on empirical application. While the empirical applications presented can be viewed as drawing on a spectrum of theories that runs from elaborated structural (Layne, chapter 5) to neoclassical (Devlen and Özdamar, chapter 6; Mouritzen, chapter 7)
realism, each chapter reaches theoretical and empirical conclusions that occupy something of a middle ground between these two theoretical extremes.

Christopher Layne focuses on the grand strategy regarding U.S. dominance in East Asia and the appropriate response to the rise of China. Layne argues that current U.S. strategy fuses elements of offensive and defensive realist logic in a manner that invites imperial overstretch and risks a military confrontation between the United States and China. Instead, he counsels for a policy of offshore balancing in Asia, which would see U.S. ambitions scaled down in favor of accepting multipolarity and relying on rivals to balance each other offshore, as the U.S. becomes able to prioritize other concerns. His arguments are based on neorealist insights complemented by an understanding of the domestic sources of hegemonic policy that is derived from neoclassical realism. In this sense, his position represents a fusion of neorealist and neoclassical realist elements that aims to reestablish realism as an international politics of prudence. His arguments, together with Devlen and Özdamar’s, thus occupy an ontological middle ground that appears to be particularly fruitful for policy-relevant theorizing.

Balkan Devlen and Özgür Özdamar present a theory of foreign policy decision making during crisis which draws on core neoclassical realist insights regarding the centrality of individual agency and domestic constraints on leaders’ foreign policy choices. They specifically argue that leaders’ beliefs about the international system, as captured by operational code analysis, and their concern with political survival and maintenance of large-group identity are the determining factors in shaping the foreign policy of states during international crises. The logic of this theory is illustrated by explaining the decision making of Slobodan Milosevic during the 1999 Kosovo crisis. The aim is to show how realist theorizing can systematically incorporate variables representing individual characteristics of decision makers as well as contextual constraints on their behavior to help develop better understandings, explanations, and predictions of foreign policy behavior.

Devlen and Özdamar suggest neoclassical realism as the most promising route for the future of realist theorizing, especially with regards to foreign policy analysis, because the approach recognizes the importance of agency in the formulation of foreign policies while taking states’ relative power and domestic factors into account as well. Its eclecticism and multilevel theorizing are cited as the primary strengths of neoclassical realism. Even while incorporating a strong concern with theoretical microfoundations, however, with its almost equal emphasis on the relevance of structural constellation, Devlen and Özdamar’s own framework introduces a subtle shift in the direction of elaborated structural realist approaches. It can, like Layne’s chapter, serve as an illustration of a yet to be labeled ontological middle ground between actor-centric and systemic perspectives, which appears particularly attractive for in-depth contextual analysis.

Hans Mouritzen makes an original contribution to the development of foreign policy theory within the broader theoretical framework of geopolitics, conceived as falling within the paradigm of neoclassical realism. His theory explains how current geopolitical considerations usually trump lessons drawn from past geopolitical experiences in elite decision making. The primacy of present geopolitics is claimed to increase with the danger perceived to emanate from the current situation, so that influences from the past come to be seen as “luxury” inputs into the decision-making process, which play large roles only in times of relative security and large action space. The primacy of present geopolitics is moreover argued to be generally beneficial, as over-reliance on geopolitical lessons from the past is seen as a common source of bad judgment. Mouritzen’s theory, illustrated with reference to diverse empirical cases, provides a specific example of how neoclassical approaches can theorize “forward” by systematically introducing real-world complexity into parsimonious starting models—aiming at explanation, prediction, and prescription at intermediate levels of abstraction useful for scholars and policymakers alike. The criteria for theoretical usefulness advocated here are thus very similar to those put forward by English School theorist Richard Little in part 1.

Part 3

Part 3 considers the broader sociology of knowledge that underpins realist theorizing about international relations, and it directly engages with and critiques the chapters in parts 1 and 2. It reflects upon the ontological and the epistemological bases of realist theorizing, and considers how these deeper metatheoretical issues condition and affect the theoretical evolution of realism discussed in part 1 and the empirical applications of realism emphasized in part 2.

Jennifer Sterling-Folker, whom we can characterize as a constructivist neoclassical realist, opens part 3 with a serious challenge to the attempts at epistemological justification for theoretical preferences made by most of the contributors to parts 1 and 2. In chapter 8, Sterling-Folker points out that, to date, most attempts to evaluate IR theories or entire paradigms along epistemological lines have employed positivist standards derived from the likes of Popper, Lakatos, or Kuhn. She criticizes such attempts as essentially outdated and instead pleads for a perspective informed by postpositivist insights in the field of the sociology of knowledge. Her own “traditions” perspective holds basically that realism (or any other theory family, for that matter) is viable not if it complies with some supposedly objective scientific stan-
dards (as advocated by positivists) but if it is perceived as valuable and useful by enough who are willing to practice it. “Forward is as forward does,” her argument goes, in the sense that practitioners vigorously debating and producing ideas within a particular tradition are what keeps the tradition dynamic and alive over time.

Neoclassical realism is then presented and defended as an example of such a vibrant tradition. Sterling-Folker shows how difficult this particular tradition is to pigeonhole (as she also shows how difficult realism more generally is to define), arguing that this must, however, be viewed not as a sign of degeneration or lack of viability but, on the contrary, as a sign of intellectually relevant activity engaging the paradigm's core concepts and insights. Sterling-Folker thus challenges the authors of the preceding chapters, first, to make explicit their criteria for making judgments regarding the relative viability of competing ways forward for realist theorizing and, second, to develop criteria for evaluation that respond to sociology of knowledge insights regarding how research communities and traditions function, rather than remaining anchored to abstract and impracticable epistemological criteria.

Jacqui True contributes a rarely heard feminist voice to our debates over the future of realism. True insists that the time is ripe for an overdue dialogue between feminism and realism. She argues that the obvious diversity of voices within realism suggest a necessity to move beyond what she refers to as the “realist-rationalist-positivist triad” by which all realists are assumed to share rationalist and positivist proclivities. She notes that it is crucial to recognize that not all realists are rationalists, nor positivists, and that feminists as well must be careful to acknowledge this in their critiques. Notwithstanding the many tensions existing between realism and feminism, she argues that certain strands within realist theorizing are more amenable to feminist insights than others. In particular, there are considerable affinities between neoclassical realism and important strands within feminist IR theory.

These arise from neoclassical realism’s theoretical heterodoxy and its acknowledgement of historical specificity, which accord with the constructivist and pluralist strands within feminist theorizing.

True argues that feminism might have much to learn from realism, and vice versa. Despite the many differences and tensions between them, both realism and feminism have developed and thrived because of the complexity of their various strands. Supporting Sterling-Folker’s argument, True holds that, rather than attempting to hide this diversity, realists and feminists should celebrate and rejoice in the debates and divergences among their various proponents. Only in this way will their paradigms thrive as theoretical traditions. Paradoxically, given that as schools of thought they are often at arms’ length from one another, realism and feminism may have been developing in parallel fashion within the discipline at large.

Stephen Rosow takes yet a further step back, to provide a political theorist’s critical outsider’s view on realism as IR theory, taking his cue from Albert Hirschman’s critique of the “tyranny of paradigms” in social science. He reads the realist chapters in this book as exhibiting two general cognitive styles, a “paradigm” style and a “traditions” style. While being generally critical of several quintessentially realist assumptions shared by these approaches, he argues that these stylistic differences matter inasmuch as the “traditions” style seems inherently more pluralistic (a judgment shared with Sterling-Folker and True) and open to theoretical adaptation in the face of empirical change. Nonetheless, Rosow then proceeds to develop a more general critique regarding the future of realism through a double reading of Martin Wight’s classic essay on the distinctness of political theory and international relations. This double reading reveals IR as a political theory that functions to legitimate and reinforce the modern territorial state by obscuring the ways in which this state deploys violence and promotes insecurity in order to constitute itself as a security-producing machine. Inasmuch as realist theorizing has been deeply implicated in these processes, it ultimately seems unlikely to Rosow that either the paradigm or the traditions style will be able to develop the critical reflexivity required to adapt realist theorizing to the challenges of contemporary world politics.

It might be suggested that among the realist authors thus challenged in this volume, Christopher Layne comes closest to problematizing the mutual construction of IR theory and the state. While certainly not out to debunk realism, Layne usefully draws attention to how theorizing on U.S. hegemonic strategies is conditioned by the state’s (the U.S.’s) needs, at the same time as certain kinds of IR theory dominate the definition of those needs. While perhaps not fully living up to the critical theorist’s challenge, there is reason to believe that the realist authors writing in this volume are quite aware of some of the core challenges raised by their internal disagreements as well as by external critiques. This awareness is of course important to enable this project to live up to its core ambition: to facilitate disciplinary learning by means of open conversation among diverse views. We now invite the reader to delve into the following conversations among realists of various stripes and their critics. In the concluding chapter, we return to provide a general assessment of what they have been able to accomplish.

NOTES

1. The participants at the workshop were Amy Below, Colin Elman, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Stefano Guzzini, Ewan Harrison, Carolyn C. James, Patrick James, Richard Little, Hans Mouritzen, Jennifer Sterling-Folker, and John Vasquez. Balkan Devlen and Özgür