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Stullerova, Kamila

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

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The Germans and the Frenchmen: Hoffmann's and Aron's Critiques of Morgenthau

Kamila Stullerova, Aberystwyth University

Introduction

The last fifteen or so years have witnessed renewed interest in Realism in IR, which is understood in the wider sense and mostly studied by focusing on the work of mid-century Realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, John Herz or Reinhold Niebuhr. As is understandable, after more than fifty years since these thinkers' major works were written, what is most attractive about their legacies is shaped by present-day emphases and interests. There is a plethora of works inquiring about the ethical aspects in Classical Realism, as this theoretical approach is most often called. This chapter is not different. Its underlying starting point is that contemporary IR needs to focus more on ethics – this both the ethic of doing international politics and the ethic of thinking about international relations. Its next premise is that we cannot study Realist ethics as divorced from Realist IR theorizing as such – these two are intertwined.

The chapter argues that our understanding of Classical Realist ethics can be strengthened by engaging more closely two distinctive critics of Morgenthau *et al.*, Stanley Hoffmann and Raymond Aron. With their help, it will be shown, we can better appreciate the strengths of Classical Realist contribution as well as think more clearly about the downsides of this approach. While the following have to be taken as simplifying generalizations, the chapter identifies the problem in Morgenthau's theorizing as associated with a German tradition of juristic thinking about power and politics and locates its critique in the French tradition of sociologically informed theorizing about politics and power. These two competing traditions, obviously, precede Morgenthau, Aron and Hoffmann, and form the building blocks of European intellectual history. Looking at Realism from the perspective of these two helps us to come to terms with the challenging decisions we as scholars have to make when we think about international relations, especially nowadays.

1. Hoffmann's Morgenthau

The Second IR Debate, whatever we mean by it, produced structural Realism as the dominant approach in IR. While almost everyone started ignoring the Debate's losers, the traditionalists among which were prominent American Classical Realists, one young Harvard IR scholar did not follow suit. Stanley Hoffmann was ready to publicly defend the merits of Realism without identifying himself as a realist. In doing so, he helped us to appreciate the complexity of the Realist take on ethics in international affairs and recognise its multifaceted roots in European intellectual history. To grasp the nature of Hoffmann's position towards mid-century Realism, it needs to be pointed out that the chief henchman of Classical Realism, Kenneth Waltz, did not repudiate it on ethical grounds. All Waltz claimed was that Classical Realists were not scientific enough. Within his typology they were the 'first image' theorists who produced 'a philosophy of politics' but not a science of IR (Waltz 1959: 37). Hoffmann disagreed. Unlike Waltz and other IR post-Second Debate positivists – whether identifying themselves as realists or liberals – Hoffmann sought to strengthen the ethical dimension of IR *while* remaining scientifically grounded. Strong social sciences, however, were not for him to be modelled after natural sciences. Hoffmann wrote that he was 'appalled' by the 'methodological fallacies of attempts at blurring the differences between natural and social sciences' (Hoffmann 1989: 263 cited in Boyle 1999: viii).

Stanley Hoffman was an eclectic scholar (Feldmann and Pelopidas 2018: 77). This allowed him to take mid-century Realism seriously and approach it as a social science rather than summarily categorising it as political philosophy, which was the preferred position in mainstream IR throughout most of his career and which effectively pushed Classical Realism out of the realm of 'proper' IR theory. Commenting at length on especially Morgenthau's work for almost four decades, Hoffmann was never dismissive of it. While one will also find acerbic phrases in his comments, he was much more than a critic. What he wrote about Morgenthau gives away Hoffmann wishing that Morgenthau succeeded where he saw him failing. It is puzzling why this would be the case. Disciplinary memory records the two men as generally admiring each other (Keohane 2009), but doing so from a distance. There is an account of Morgenthau's respect for his relentless critic, referring to him as 'the brightest person in the field today' and sending his students to study with him (Boyle 1999: ix). The record is quiet about Hoffmann's respect for Morgenthau. They were not close and met only at a few occasions during their long, partly overlapping careers.¹ It was not friendship that bound Harvard-based Hoffmann to closely follow the work of Morgenthau, who was based in Chicago and New York.

From his earliest commentaries on Realism, and on Morgenthau's work in particular, Hoffmann singled out three crucial problem areas. First, it was its 'master key ... defined in terms of power'; second it was the quest to give us 'a reliable map of the landscape of world affairs, to catch the essence of world politics'; and third, it was its focus on the 'principal actors in world affairs: the states and ... the factors that account for the autonomy of international relations: the differences between domestic and world politics' (Hoffmann 1959: 349). Hoffmann was most concerned about Morgenthau's conceptualization of power, asking whether this power was 'a means, an objective, or the necessary goal for the actors' (Hoffmann 1987: 72) and wondering whether 'any scheme can put so much methodological weight upon one concept, even a crucial one' (Hoffmann 1960: 32). He found the idea of the essence of politics problematic, because it did not give any world politics guidance on the Realist ethic of self-restraint, which Hoffmann generally appreciated. Thus, for Hoffmann, Realist theory of politics, at least in Morgenthau's iteration, did not have a direct link to Realist ethic.

This ethic did not seem to stretch beyond the confines of one's own state and was tied to the concept of the nation-state. The figure of the statesman, in whom Morgenthau invested the ethic of responsibility, was to be concerned 'exclusively with ethical goals for his nation' (Hoffmann 1987: 22). Realism reiterated the ethically particularistic notion of the nation-state and the equally problematic concept of national interest. Importantly, Hoffmann challenged the notion of the national interest not only on ethical grounds, but also from the perspective of social science, pointing out that it assumes that all domestic participants agree on what the national interest is vis-à-vis the international players. As a result, Hoffmann wrote:

'a scholar attempting to use [Realism] as a key to the understanding of ... contemporary realities risks being in the unhappy position ... [of] recogniz[ing] interests which the parties concerned refuse to see ... whose ex post facto omniscience is both irritating and irrelevant' (1960: 33).

Renewed interest in Morgenthau's work in the last fifteen or so years produced new insights into his social science and especially into his use of the concepts of power and national interest. As Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch demonstrated, neither the concept of power nor that of the national interest are to be understood as 'ontological statements' (Behr and Rösch 2012: 39). Morgenthau did not mean to validate them by the virtue of using them. He considered them epistemologically significant, as a way of accessing the most important properties of international politics in his day and age. Behr and Rösch showed how in his German and French writings Morgenthau distinguished

two forms of power, separating them both conceptually and lexically. Power as *Macht* or *pouvoir* is an empirical concept, power as *Kraft* or *puissance* is a normative concept. 'Morgenthau understood empirical power as the ability to dominate others, whereas the normative power implied the intention to wilfully act together to contribute to the creation of a life-world' (Behr and Rösch 2012: 48). The new English translation of Morgenthau's *La notion du "politique" et la théorie des différends internationaux* (2012) illustrates the nuance of Morgenthau's thinking about power which is lost in his subsequent, American writings. Rösch argued that Morgenthau censored himself after he landed in the United States as he thought that his view of reality as complex and ambiguous did not fit well with American post-War optimism. It looks like Hoffmann based his view of Morgenthau's work on the American writings.

Hoffmann's engaged interest in mid-century American Classical Realism can be explained by his allegiance to and admiration for Raymond Aron. Like Morgenthau, the Frenchman Aron was a generation older than Hoffmann². But while Hoffmann's relationship with Morgenthau was limited, he admired Aron and considered him a teacher of his, without having been formally one of his students. Even as an octogenarian, Hoffmann vividly told the present author how he and Aron met and then kept their friendship over the decades, each living on a different side of the Atlantic. Aron was an idiosyncratic scholar who, according to Hoffmann, established French IR. He was keen to develop links with American Classical Realists and travelled to the US to attend their conferences and symposia. His affinity to Classical Realists is nowadays recognised (Hassner 2007). Hoffmann, too, referred to him as 'realist' (Hoffmann 2002: 107). There is a rather persuasive case made to call his position 'sociological liberalism' (Meszaros and Dabila, 2018: 143), as there is an argument that Aron's own approach to IR 'was ultimately intended to be an alternative to Morgenthau's deductive theory of political realism' (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2018: 67). Iain Stewart narrows realism to mean 'challenging ideological dogmatism' while viewing politics 'as something irreducible to morality that must be analysed from the statesman's perspective' (Stewart 2018: 19, 15) to specify the kind of IR theory realism with which Aron self-identified (24).

By seeking to locate the fine but crucial differences between Aron and Morgenthau, Hoffmann tried to distil a Realist position which would upset neither his scientific aspirations nor his ethical sensibilities. He as if used Aron to correct Morgenthau. Like his American counterparts, Aron, aspired to produce a complex, general theory of international relations. This theory, too, encompassed a typology of international systems and a theoretical account of systems' interactions. And like Morgenthau, Aron saw politics as tragic. His relentless emphases on the distinctiveness of international relations, on the importance of historical analysis and on the relevance of power politics also disclose fundamental affinity with the US-based Classical Realists. The differences between him and Morgenthau lie elsewhere.

For Hoffmann four things distinguished Aron from the American Realists. Firstly, he found Morgenthau's engagement with the concepts of power and national interest as reductionist while Aron's was much more nuanced (Hoffmann 1987: 55). As shown above, this verdict is mistaken, if Morgenthau's pre-American writings are taken into account. But Morgenthau's conscious decision to reduce the nuance in his theory of power should not prevent us from asking about the intellectual origins of this decision. After all, he could have chosen other means of making his thinking, built upon the German intellectual tradition, accessible to the American audience. He did not have to invest in the controversial concepts of national interest and flattened-out power, especially when he did not want to validate them. The nature of this theoretical move discloses certain degree of acceptance, which might have had deeper intellectual roots than Hoffmann was ready to acknowledge.

Current scholarship also challenges Hoffmann's second point. Hoffmann praised in Aron the fact that he 'plunge[d] into history in order to prevent theory from even going beyond the teachings of history and from becoming more rigid and more prescriptive than history allows' (Hoffmann 1987: 55). But the same was said, multiple times, about Morgenthau (Lebow 2003; Behr and Heath 2009; Scheuerman 2009). This leaves us with two remaining differences between Aron and Morgenthau, as Hoffmann saw them. Aron's signature focus on the relations between the interstate system and the world economic system as well as on the nature of domestic regimes and prevalent domestic ideologies are, undoubtedly, far less prominent in American realism, the latter being almost non-existent. (Interestingly, Hoffmann further developed both in his own work, as if to develop on his venerated teacher while complementing what he found missing in Morgenthau *et al.*)

Nonetheless, as will be shown below, Hoffmann's puzzlement about the similarities and differences between Aron and Morgenthau was warranted. The parallels are too striking not to disclose a fundamental affinity, yet there seems to be something crucially differentiating the two as well. While illuminating a crucial aspect of Classical Realism, recent scholarship on especially Morgenthau's and Niebuhr's concepts of power and national interest (Behr and Rösch 2012; Williams 2004, 2005b) also calls for further questions along the very lines that Hoffmann first laid out more than fifty years ago. If Morgenthau's ultimate interest was normative, why did he invest so much in the concept of power as *pouvoir* and left out the normative idea of power from his American writings? After all, his close friend and intellectual partner Hannah Arendt (Rösch 2013), equally normatively dedicated to political action rather than de-politicization of collective life, did exactly that when she distinguished the concept of power, with its politically transformative purpose, from other concepts such as authority, strength, force, and violence (Arendt 1972). This is what Rösch pointed out when examining the similarities between Morgenthau and Arendt (2014: 362). An answer that Morgenthau wanted to achieve empirical truth – and describe power as he found it in the 'real' world, does not suffice. For this purpose it would have been 'truer' to come up with a complex, multi-layered notion, in which power demonstrated itself in all sorts of ways, some politicizing, some de-politicizing and then single out a preferred conceptualisation of power, as Arendt did it in *The Human Condition* (1958). Instead, in his best known American works Morgenthau chose to employ a reductionist concept of empirical power.

2. Aron's Morgenthau

Raymond Aron strived to avoid being just a commentator on history and current affairs and produced a theory of international systems to account for both regularities in international politics and its units' reflexive quality. Morgenthau's conceptual reductionism, it will be argued, pursued precisely the same two functions. In his book *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (1968[1966]), Aron turned to the idea of international systems to locate the place of diplomacy in the unfolding of international politics. He maintained that it is misleading to conceptualise systems, i.e. the units of international politics, by simple geographic proximity (Aron 1968: 95). The aggregate, mutually competitive action of especially the international systems' diplomats constantly redefines the social relations that keep the systems alive and (re)define their physical and moral boundaries. One would be hard pressed to identify in Aron's international systems a full-fledged idea of self-organisation through self-correction that characterised best known systems theories of his time, such as Karl Deutsch's and Morton Kaplan's. Nevertheless, Aron aspired to give expression to a similar function in systems. This function is the ability to account for a social collective's existence in history, for its historic learning and ongoing reflection on its historic position.

In her introduction to Kaplan's last book which illuminates the meaning of his previous work in a manner defying the narrow confines of the Second IR Debate Inanna Hamati-Ataya emphasized that the key function of Kaplan's turn to systems theory was his quest to account for, among others, an idea of objective knowledge 'not in the context of scientific propositions ... but the fact that these

propositions can be successfully publicly communicated among different observers as long as they are warranted empirical evidence' (2013: 20). In this way, Kaplan sought to escape both the constraints of positivist social science as well as of postmodern relativism. Consequently Kaplan could never arrive at 'absolute truth' yet he avoided concluding that 'there is no truth at all' (19). It was Morgenthau who recognised that Aron produced what we might call a Kaplanian pragmatic position on truth (1967: 1110). This created a gap between Aron's theoretical framework and what Morgenthau considered exceptionally insightful substantive propositions resulting from 'the author's practical judgment' (1111). Morgenthau maintained that Aron stopped short of answering some of his well-formulated questions about international politics, because he would have to acknowledge that his own theory is 'standortgebunden', that is 'aris[ing] out of a concrete political situation with which it tries to come intellectually to terms in a new and meaningful fashion' (1111).

Morgenthau embraced 'Standortgebundenheit' (Behr 2013: 763; Rösch 2013: 822), sometimes translated as social determination of knowledge, although his own above mentioned description of the term best captured what it meant for him. What we might recognize as a reductionist concept of power in his American writings is power as he saw it arise out of a concrete political situation. He then intellectually engaged it, made it meaningful, without losing its empirical veracity. This intellectual engagement materialized in Morgenthau's signature argument about the separation of spheres of collective life, most importantly those of economy, politics, law and morality. Each sphere is governed by a different principle and for each to operate to its optimum it must remain autonomous. The principle of one sphere should not spill over to another, an idea that is readily understandable to anyone who worries that political decisions might be judged by the principle of economic profitability. According to Morgenthau, the principle of politics is power, but power in the 'standortgebunden' way. As Sean Molloy succinctly put it, for Morgenthau 'the essential task of political science [was] to isolate the truth of political experience' (2004: 7). The truth of politics is its guiding principle of power. In Morgenthau's 'political situation', this principle could be studied by focusing on the struggle for power in the international realm, on power politics. This did not exhaust all that was to be said about power in politics, but power as *pouvoir* was the best entry point to studying it. Because of this, the truth of the science of politics, domestic and international, is only a 'partial truth' (Molloy 2004: 8), even if the scholar ought to strive to understand it as comprehensively as possible.

Aron's critique of Morgenthau was nuanced yet formidable. This was because he agreed with Morgenthau more than most. It was grounded in his interest in the German sociological tradition, especially its quest to make sense of the historical nature of knowledge. This also distinguished his critique from Hoffmann's. While Hoffmann worried that Realism's individual building blocks cancelled out each other, Aron was confident there was solid inner unity to its underlying social theory – it just did not allow the Realists to achieve what they sought to do. In its broad direction, namely, Aron's and Morgenthau's interests in German sociological tradition were not too different. Each must have closely studied especially Max Weber, but also Karl Mannheim and others (Breiner 2011; Rösch 2013), even if only Aron wrote substantive pieces on sociology as such (Aron 1957; 1968). For Aron one of the key traits of political sociology was to operate in 'a historical situation in which man has lost the certitudes which he believed unassailable and must create his own individual life within a collectivity whose destiny opens upon the unknown' (Aron 1957: 135). But he claimed that eventually German sociology, most importantly Max Weber whom Morgenthau admired so much, could not sustain its commitments to political openness. In Weber's case, dwelling on uncertainties led to ideology; an alternative outcome was relativism. This is exactly what Aron held against Morgenthau. His 'standortgebunden' engagement with empirical power oscillated between embracing ideology and relativism. But Morgenthau believed he did manage to avoid each of the two.

The idea of autonomy of social spheres was meant to enable Morgenthau circumvent Aron's two unwelcome outcomes. The origins of this idea were not Morgenthau's; he took the gist of it from Weber and Schmitt (Turner and Mazur 2009: 494; Pichler 1998). But only Morgenthau surmised that theorising politics as an autonomous sphere can allow one to employ judgment and subsequently make human collective experience, including international politics, better – in the case of international politics, more peaceful. One way of examining this proposition is to ask whether he was successful in achieving this goal or whether he ended up with a Schmittian veneration of politics without being able to theorize ethically-minded interventions in it. Morgenthau's positive reception in (parts of) contemporary IR (Lebow 2003; Williams 2005a) suggests this goal was met. In the words of Michael C Williams, the ethic of responsibility inscribed in Morgenthau's Realism, as well as in the Realisms of his European predecessors such as Rousseau and Hobbes, requires 'individuals, political cultures, and institutions capacities of critical self-reflection and self-limitation', this 'upon both the means and ends that actors pursue' (2005a: 162). Realism considers 'the construction of responsible selves, moral choices, and political orders ... essential elements of an attempt to produce those selves and political orders' (162).

Aron was not convinced. He did not deny that Morgenthau was advocating ethical positions on politics and that this move had undeniable advantages over idealist international ethic (1968: 594). But what was to be admired about Realism was within the realm of praxeology rather than theory (599). 'To invoke national interest,' he wrote, 'is a way of defining not a policy but an attitude, of polemicizing against ideologies of perpetual peace, international law, Christian or Kantian morality, against the representatives of special groups who confuse their own interests with those of the collectivity as a whole and in time' (599). Aron, as well as Hoffmann, revered Morgenthau the polemicist. Praxeology cannot replace theory, and Aron maintained that Realist IR theory was effectively coming short of Realist ethical expectations. Morgenthau's IR theory was harmed precisely by his theoretical separation of the spheres of human social activity, which prevented Realism from recognising how occasional intertwining of politics, law and culture can have politically and ethically reinvigorating rather than de-politicizing effects. Crucially, Realism failed to understand the role of law in politics, as it was 'obsessed with a concern to refute the philosophy of the contract, the version of liberalism according to which respect of law and morality is enough to impose obedience on *homo politicus*' (595).

The Realists failed to realize that their expectation of domestic politics to operate differently from international politics was underwritten by the fact that conflicts between citizens '[took] their course according to rules' or were settled via institutions (595). Politics thus could not be theorized as wholly separated from law and culture, as in certain instances it should be understood by accepting the primacy of law or culture over its principle of power. Aron's direct critique stopped here, although he did hint at the possibility that a sociologically truer theory of domestic politics could correct the Butterfieldian—Hobbesian take on international politics as anarchy. But his point could be taken further and connected to Aron's work on political sociology separate from Realism. In this respect, it is noteworthy that it was three German jurists – Weber, Schmitt and Morgenthau – who were crucial in establishing the idea of separate spheres and in placing a theoretical wedge between politics and law. This not in order to better theorize or understand law but politics, which became dearer than law to all three. Yet Hans Kelsen's idea of pure law resonates strongly here. While Schmitt and Morgenthau directly engaged Kelsen (Scheuerman 1999: 74; Rösch 2015: 78–9), he is best to be understood as representing a culmination on one European tradition of thinking about the state, a tradition in which the advocates of the separation of spheres were steeped in. Weber, Schmitt and Morgenthau worked both against and with this tradition. When Kelsen identified the state with the legal order, they could not agree, as they also saw crucial link between the state and politics (Palonen 2011). But they never completely shook off Kelsen's idea of pure law. If law could be theorized as pure, so could be politics.

Aron directed us towards an alternative theory, one of non-pure politics and law. It is rooted in a different European intellectual tradition, one that was less prominent throughout the 20th century. Aron illuminated this tradition by focusing on Montesquieu (1968 vol. I)³, who was its paramount representative, with Tocqueville being another. Incidentally, Montesquieu was also a jurist and a practicing magistrate. But this experience led him to embrace the idea of separating the spheres of collective life in order to position one against each other as a means of mutual checks and balances (Aron, 1968: 30) and not as analytical phenomena. This move was grounded in an idea of power as a dominant force of social life, which is functionally similar to Morgenthau's idea of *animus dominandi* – lust for power – as the best proxy for human nature. But undifferentiated power was not interesting to Montesquieu. Montesquieu developed the concept of the 'spirit', with different spirits to be found in different political regimes and even political communities. This because according to him social history, material circumstances and institutions so fundamentally shape the possibilities for using power, that separate spirits need to be distinguished. Yet, there are considerable regularities to be found in how power is shaped in certain configurations and Montesquieu matches each type of political regime with a spirit. Furthermore, Montesquieu was ready to make a normative argument and claim that moderation of power via institutional balance of power and equilibrium of social groups is preferable to its other actualizations and that the means of achieving are several while limited (60). Moderation, it can be added, sometimes required that law dominated over politics.

The eighteenth century magistrate and philosopher did not develop a coherent theory of international relations, as Aron knew only too well. Yet, Aron's piecing together of Montesquieu's ideas on the origins of war yielded a direct reproval of Morgenthau's ethics. Montesquieu claimed wars did not originate in human nature, in individual quest for power (56). They were produced by society, by the fact of social life unfolding over time, under certain material conditions, with specific values and ideas in place. The same way as domestically the executive, legislature and judiciary had to be separated and moderated via institutionally and culturally provided checks and balances, so the social propensity to war could only be moderated, never eradicated (57). Moderation included an element of the ethics of responsibility, and Montesquieu's condoning of aristocracy as the regime in which institutional moderation with personal responsibility produced the best political outcome is the best illustration of this. However, he explored the challenges of the ethics of responsibility without moderation like none else. His epistolary novel, *The Persian Letters* (2008), features Usbek, a fictitious Oriental sovereign master over multiple wives and slaves who believed in the ethics of responsibility, but ended up behaving like a despot, because the 'spirit' of his palace, which missed moderation, did not prevent him from doing so.

Conclusion

Stanley Hoffmann and Raymond Aron, it may be concluded, produced critiques that pierced the heart of the ethical dimension of Classical Realism. Especially Hoffmann was rather exceptional in doing this at a time when the mainstream of IR turned away from addressing ethics as part of IR theory as well as from Classical Realism as such. Hoffmann's French education and engagement with Aron's work provided him with a vanguard position. Neither Hoffmann nor Aron seemed to have been happy about their findings, as they both appreciated the thrust of the Realist critique of idealism in IR and as if wished that Morgenthau *et al.* succeeded in their pursuit. Nor did this chapter seek to annihilate the Classical Realist position on political ethics and ethics in IR. Instead, it is best to read it as an effort to identify the weak point in Classical Realism, so that contemporary IR scholars inspired by mid-century Realism can address this issue in their own work, with the theoretical means and empirical knowledge of our day and age at our hands. This, after all, is what Morgenthau would call for, with his emphasis of 'Standortgebundenheit' of IR theorizing. Engaging – what with quite some licence might be called – the French tradition of sociological thinking about politics, Aron

managed to produce a useful alternative to the – broadly speaking – German tradition of juristic thinking about politics. Isolating the legacy of these two traditions in Classical Realism and in its critiques will, hopefully, allow us to further strengthen IR's turn to political ethics, which has revisited Classical Realism with so much energy. It is, therefore, encouraging seeing that there is renewed interest in both Hoffmann and Aron in English speaking IR,⁴ as evidenced by the recent volume *Raymond Aron and International Relations* (Schmitt, 2018), a special issue of *The Tocqueville Review* dedicated to Aron and Hoffmann (Welch, 2018), as well as some forthcoming books and articles. The dialogue between 'the Frenchmen' and 'the Germans' can carry on.

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¹ Hoffmann (1928–2015) was a generation younger than Morgenthau (1904–1980).

² Raymond Aron (1905–1983).

³ Aron uses a quotation on international law from Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* as the epigraph for his opus magnum *Peace and War* (1968).

⁴ Many authors are based in Europe, most of them in France.