

Change and World Order in Classical Realism: Understanding the Revisionist Challenge

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Abstract: A revisionist state is one pursuing a subversive policy over the status quo and trying to implement its vision in the new world order to come. This basic statement that can easily be found in the current literature on revisionism is far from neutral. The problems when defining revisionism, the status quo to be disrupted, or the motivations of the revisionist actor have impeded a full comprehension of the phenomenon. The penetration of this ambiguous term in Trump's rhetoric obliges the discipline to examine closely the treatment that revisionism has received in the literature and the nuances that have been omitted with the lapse of time. This paper performs this task in two ways: firstly, by underlining all the difficulties when dealing with revisionism in International Relations to create a multi-programme foundation for the discussion, and then by going back to Classical Realism to examine how revisionism was first drafted and treated by the literature. This choice of Classical Realism responds to its role as the first research programme discussing revisionism. Therefore, a theoretical review has been performed using the works by Schuman, Carr, Schwarzenberger, Morgenthau, Kissinger, Organski and Aron to understand the evolution of Classical Realism. Thanks to this, three phases (coining, stigmatization, and deconstruction) are identified, and several conclusions are drawn about the rights and wrongs of Classical Realism when dealing with revisionism, which have penetrated the following literature due to reductionist interpretations of such a complex phenomenon. This field of research should be a priority of International Relations Theory in the coming years to undo past mistakes and ensure the clarity of the terms coined and used in the academia and in international politics in general.

Keywords: revisionism, world order, International Relations Theory, Classical Realism, International Security.

(A) INTRODUCTION: CLASSICAL REALISM AND REVISIONISM

The birth of International Relations as a scientific discipline in 1919 was promoted under the conviction that great wars could be stopped through education. This utopian verdict was founded on the idea that common sense could create a harmony of interests among all nations in the world order. However, the interwar period proved idealists wrong. Academically, the first debate in International Relations Theory, among idealists and realists, emphasised the limitations of the former's analysis for its utopian character, far from reality. But more importantly, politically, the challenge posed by Nazi Germany to the interwar regimen created through the Treaty of Versailles served as evidence of the shortcomings of the idealist approach. The subsequent contributions, especially from the Realist research programme¹, underlined the importance of analysing the world for what it is instead of focusing only on what it could be.

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¹ The intended use of the term 'research programme' implies following Imre Lakatos' contribution to the Philosophy of Science. Contrary to Kuhn's 'paradigms', Lakatos (1978, pp. 47-52) defines a 'scientific

As a consequence of this debate, Realism is based on the idea of states as supreme actors, within an anarchic environment, struggling for power in the pursuit of their national interests, among which survival is the most important. These basic foundations have evolved from Classical Realism, between the 1930s and the 1960s, to Neorealism in the 1970s and 1980s and Classical Neo-Realism since the 1990s. This trend in the Realist programme also meant a transition between the focus of the power to be pursued by states: from a political power that encompassed all the spheres of national and foreign policy in Classical Realism to the inclusion of economic power and even cultural power by the rest of the subprogrammes within Realism. The central position of the Realist research programme along the different International Relations debates has stressed the relevance of Realism as a ground foundation to comprehend complex theoretical concepts within the discipline.

An integral part of the Realist research programme has been its understanding of states like actors participating in this struggle for power irrespectively of their political systems. This 'black boxes' argument has been significantly questioned by theoretical contributions like the peace democratic theory, but the US participation in several armed conflicts in the 2000s blew the credibility of this criticism. In any case, this attempt to assign different attributes according to the national politics of the states is far from new. When Carr in 1937 discussed international politics in the interwar period, he distinguished between two rival groups, one led by Germany, Italy and Japan, and another led by France and the Soviet Union. Regarding this, Carr mentioned:

"The current habit of classifying countries by the type of political theory professed by their government is misleading. The rival groups are linked not so much by a common political faith as by the fact that the first group is, for varying reasons, dissatisfied with the territorial settlement of the world made in 1919-a settlement which the second group desires to maintain."²

Classical Realism, in the post-World War II scenario, started to formulate a cleavage between states participating in the world order according to different characteristics. Among them, while Kissinger envisioned a distinction between national political values, the contributions made by scholars like Schuman, Morgenthau or Organski emphasized the formulation of state categories based on power calculus. Through this last approach and influenced by the antagonism derived from the ideological confrontation between the US and the USSR, a distinction started between two groups of states: those defending the preservation of the status quo, led by the US, and those attempting to subvert the existing world order, represented by the USSR and China. In other words, contrary to the Realist theoretical hard core affirming that all states attempting to increase their power

research programme' as the theory or group of theories that share an irrefutable 'hard core' around which a protective belt is built, named 'positive heuristic'. This positive heuristic refers to the auxiliary hypotheses that can be tested and refuted to reinforce the programme, allowing a certain degree of evolution that would strengthen the hard core. However, the most significant part of this contribution is the fact that transitioning from one research programme to another is not the result of a scientific revolution, as Kuhn defended, but of the struggle and dialogue between different programmes, which provide feedback and question certain hypothesis to sophisticate the hard core. This vision of the theory as the result of changes promoted by external factors, including other programmes, is shared throughout this entire article.

² E.H. Carr, *International Relations since the Peace Treaties* (Macmillan and Co., London, 1937), at 258.

to pursue their national goals, certain nations, named status quo, have been identified as contributing to the stability of the world by refusing or resisting the struggle for power.

This contest between the conservationist and the revisionist forces has penetrated the diverse realist theoretical models advocating for stability. On the one hand, the balance of power defends the preservation, through the method of alliances, of the multiple units existing within the system under the threat of a power aspiring to universal domination. On the other hand, the power transition theory explores the challenge posed by rising powers aspiring to subvert the existing international system that privileges the dominant power, which imposed that order after gaining its hegemony. In both cases, despite their disagreements on whether the stability lies in a multipolar or a unipolar system, the theories have pointed out the existence of certain nations adopting a more aggressive stance within international politics, separating them from the status quo powers.

Consequently, the distinction between status quo powers and revisionist states has been included in theories that are part of the positive heuristic of Realism, even if it was a contradiction of its hard core. This anomaly has remained in the Realist research programme due to the undertheorization of the term ‘revisionist’. Without a clear concept of what revisionism is, realist scholars have used the term without a clear distinct meaning, provoking the misuse of the concept and the terminological confusion that has remained in the theory. Far from being just a matter of words, this misunderstanding has penetrated the practice of international politics. In 2017, the Trump Administration’s National Security Strategy stated that China and Russia were revisionist powers as they “want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests.”³ When an academic misunderstanding trespassed the limits of the academia and entered the public debate, the problem is much more significant and leads to this necessary reflection about how this confusion about revisionism was made.

(B) THE PROBLEM OF REVISIONISM: HOW TO WORK WITH AN UNDEFINED TERM

The revisionist state is assigned with a capital role in the theoretical explanations about state interactions, and, even more, the breach of the stability. Despite this fundamental role that state revisionism seems to play in the literature, the term ‘revisionist state’ is complex, confusing and even diffuse. This ambiguity has not limited its use by the Classical Realist scholars, who have understood revisionism according to their historical context. As Johnston stated: “Perhaps because [...] Nazi Germany is the paradigmatic revisionist state, international relations theory has tended to assume that we should recognize a revisionist state when we see one. But it is not always obvious.”⁴ Therefore, this section is devoted to understanding very briefly what the revisionist state is and what is not.

As a preliminary approach, the revisionist state is perceived as an actor which, in its unrestrained lust for power, promotes change in international society, posing a threat to

³ United States Government, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2018), at 25.

⁴ A. I. Johnston, ‘Is China a Status Quo Power?’, 27 (4) *International Security* (2003), 5-56, at 10 [doi: 10.1162/016228803321951081].

the system as a whole and endangering structural stability, as formulated by Boulding.⁵ This threatening character means that the revisionist state is normally associated with systemic actors, which are the ones holding the capacity to pose a schism around systemic stability. On the opposite side, status quo powers are those who, preliminarily, seek to maintain the world order as it is. Having said this, one of the fundamental problems in understanding the revisionist state lies precisely in apprehending the status quo that it denies and proposes to change. This question has rarely been addressed by the theoretical literature, leading to confusion over the object of revisionism. In any case, what is important is that revisionist states and status quo states represent two realities of the forces of transformation: resistance and change, preservation and revision.

From a micro-international perspective⁶, the revisionist actor tends to be linked to the state. From the Realist perspective of states as supreme actors, the revisionist state is protected under its sphere of sovereignty in the anarchic context. This state presents an unlimited lust for power, apparently overpassing the *animus dominandi* that is attributed to all states according to Morgenthau.⁷ Additionally, due to the systemic importance of its proposal for change, the revisionist state is linked with a great power, that is, a member of Schwarzenberger's international oligarchy.⁸ This serious contender in the international hegemonic competition seeks, due to the resistance of status quo states, a preponderance of power to remove any opposition to their change proposals and pave the way for the implementation of its revisions within the international system.

At a macro-international level, revisionism is generally promoted in a heterogeneous international society, developing universal aspirations to build a unipolar or homogeneous system. Because it is tough to determine which type of polarity or heterogeneity will be more peaceful, i.e. with no armed conflicts, the aspiration on this macro-international level should be for adaptative stability, as Gilpin formulates.⁹ This adaptive stability allows for the contemplation of demands for change without the need to automatically consider any reform motivated by a state as a cause of systemic instability. Consequently, the goal is not only the absence of wars or the preservation of the system but both simultaneously. Thus, this objective avoids being stuck in the debate between balance-of-power or power-transition theories, as the aspiration should not be power parity or preponderance but adaptive stability granting peaceful change at the systemic level.

This analysis tries to break the conceptual stretching, using Sartori's words¹⁰, of revisionism due to the stigmatization it has associated. The term has been used to describe

⁵ K. E. Boulding, 'Stability in International Systems: The Role of Disarmament and Development', in R. B. Gray (ed), *International Security Systems: Concepts and Models of World Order* (Peacock Publishers, Itasca, 1969), at 195-196.

⁶ This distinction between micro-international and macro-international was first made by R. Calduch-Cervera, *Relaciones Internacionales* (Ciencias Sociales, Madrid, 1991), at 31, and then developed in R. Calduch-Cervera, *Proyecto Docente de Relaciones Internacionales* (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, 2000), at 353-355.

⁷ H. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1965), at 192-193.

⁸ G. Schwarzenberger, *La Política del Poder: Estudio de la Sociedad Internacional* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1960), at 91.

⁹ R. Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), at 13.

¹⁰ G. Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics', 64(4) *The American Political Science Review* (1970), 1033-1053, at 1041 [doi: 10.2307/1958356].

any opposition to an existing international system at a specific time and regional context, but it is not value-free. Drawing parallelism with the term ‘terrorism’, one may even say that one man’s revisionist state is another man’s state fighting for justice in the world order. From a dynamic perspective of international society, the power fluctuates, and the unflexible preservation of a particular system installed after a major war tends to be problematic when facing any kind of antagonism. According to Organski, factors like long-standing friendship or cultural proximity could reduce the resistance to change in the case of a new challenger, as happened with Great Britain and the US in the early 20th century.¹¹ Therefore, national interests and narratives also affect the identification of revisionism. Considering the Anglophone leadership of the discipline, this implies a particular cosmovision to notice when dealing with the revisionist challenge theoretically speaking.

In this regard, six fundamental prejudices can be found in International Relations Theory when working with this undefinition of revisionism: (1) the preferred stability is structural stability to maintain the system as it is; (2) the existing international society benefits all the units within; (3) any proposal for change in the world order is problematic and should be considered as destabilizing; (4) the maintenance of the international status quo is a public good carried out by certain great powers and would require the efforts of all actors in the system; (5) the revisionist state is, therefore, an actor that poses a threat to the international system and must be defeated before it achieves its disruptive goal; and (6) the revisionist state is driven by an extraordinary lust for power which makes it selfishly prefer conflict to security.

The bias stipulated in these six erroneous statements comes from a privileged perspective of those powers who still enjoy a place in the sun.¹² From that interested point of view, the maintenance of the status quo is the only course of action when a proposal for change is made, with the entire system necessarily pursuing the interests of the advantaged dominant nation. Any alternative is perceived as devious and an existential threat to sovereignty and systemic values, and this is why any minor state that supports it will be considered disloyal to the system as a whole. This stigmatization is the result of the destabilizing role theoretically attributed to the selfish revisionist state, identification of stability with structural stability, a positive bias towards the status quo and the generosity of those defending it, and a negative bias towards any change to be proposed in the international system for apparently attacking the interests of the majority of states.

This confrontation has tended to be perceived as a dualism between good and evil. This distinction between binomial categories is the result of an ‘artificial’ heterogeneity, that is, an effort to underline the differences between political communities to justify the sacrifice of this fight.¹³ As a result, the contenders are perceived to be either the

¹¹ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (Alfred N. Knopf, Nueva York, 1958), at 441.

¹² The expression ‘a place in the sun’ comes from a speech delivered by Von Bülow, German Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in 1897: “We don’t want to put anyone in the shade, but we too demand our place in the sun”. This is cited in M. Murray, ‘Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition Before the First World War’, 19(4) *Security Studies* (2010), 656-588, at 677 [doi: 10.1080/09636412.2010.524081].

¹³ The inspiration for this term is found in R. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Routledge, New York, 2017), at 102-103. It was developed in P. A. Sánchez Rodríguez, *El Revisionismo*

‘saviours’ of the international system with their defence of the status quo or the risk and threat to stability posed by revisionist actors. This comprehension of international society and the traditional search for stability has derived into an antagonistic stance that is more common in authoritarian regimes promoting a homogenizing vision to which all members of society must adhere or be punished for their dissent. This is the effect reached by propaganda in such a heterogeneous reality as the international arena, where there is an evident difficulty in establishing common values and defining a shared order and tranquillity.

In other words, it is unclear what the revisionist state is, but it is logical to assume that it has a negative connotation. This is the case especially when used to describe realities like Napoleon in the 19th century, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 20th century and currently Russia and China, which were systemic rivals of the Anglophone dominant powers at the time. Despite this confusion and the conceptual stretching mentioned before, the label ‘revisionist’ has become a refined disqualifier on the Western side, as were in the context of the Cold War the mutual accusations of imperialism by both blocs. Connected to this, it is also remarkable how the term revisionism in the international system is often confused with other types of revisionism, like historical revisionism, Marxism revisionism or geopolitical revisionism (also called irredentism), which have nothing to do with the revisionist state that has been presented above.

On a final note, it is pertinent to separate also other concepts that have traditionally been assimilated in all cases with revisionist powers: ‘dissatisfied states’ and ‘unsatiated states’. The former is the result of the ambiguity provoked by Organski in the formulation of the power transition theory when understanding that dissatisfaction was the distinctive characteristic of the challenger.¹⁴ Despite this, dissatisfaction is just a sentiment that can lead to revisionism, but it is not a sufficient condition for the development of a revisionist policy, even less a synonym.¹⁵ In the case of ‘unsatiated states’, the confusion comes from the early Classical Realist idea that revisionism is the materialization of an unlimited lust for power that distinguishes them from satiated status quo states. As in the case of dissatisfaction, the satiety or the lack of it may represent a problematic situation to the emergence of revisionism, but it should never be mistaken with revisionism itself from a systemic perspective.

This terminological confusion is also translated into other terms that, in particular works, have incorrectly not been labelled as ‘revisionist’ while examining the proposal for change within the world order. This is the case, for example, of Morgenthau’s imperialist policies,¹⁶ Schuman’s unsatiated nations,¹⁷ Chan’s dissatisfied powers,¹⁸ or Kissinger’s

Internacional en el Programa Realista: Construcción Crítica de un Concepto Ambiguo (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, 2023), at 118-120.

¹⁴ A. F. Organski, *supra* n. 11, at 325-333.

¹⁵ To understand more about this, see P. A. Sánchez-Rodríguez, ‘Addressing Dissatisfaction in the World Order: From Revisionism to Russian Resentment’ (Tesi di Laurea Magistrale at Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Rome, 2019), at 91-112.

¹⁶ H. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1948), at 26-46.

¹⁷ E. L. Schuman, *International Politics: An Introduction to the Western State System* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York and London, 1933), at 509-510.

¹⁸ Some examples are S. Chan, ‘Can’t get no satisfaction? The recognition of revisionist states’, 4 *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2004), 207-238, at 216 [doi: 10.1093/irap/4.2.207]; and S. Chan, ‘Exploring Puzzles

revolutionary systems.¹⁹ Despite the diverse wording, all these concepts refer to the characteristics commonly attributed in the literature to revisionist states. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that, as it has been underlined throughout this section, the nature of revisionism has found no consensus. Subsequently, it is unclear if it is a label with a definitional nature capable of identifying directly states under it, if it refers to certain policies developed by those states, or if it is the heterogeneous system some states aspire to fulfil against the existing values. In the next section, a preferred formula of 'revisionist states' will be followed for being the most common in the literature.

(C) ANALYSING REVISIONISM IN CLASSICAL REALISM

The most recent literature about revisionism²⁰ has been inclined to identify the theoretical starting point of their research in Schweller's announcement of the 'return of the revisionist state' in 1994.²¹ This popular article by Schweller provided new popularity to revisionism within the International Relations Theory after the abandonment of the term by Neorealism, except for Gilpin. This re-emergence of revisionism in the literature has also been attributed to the debates between Mearsheimer's distinction between Offensive and Defensive Neorealism,²² or power-transition scholars following, developing and reinterpreting Organski's original formulation of the theory. However, as Rynning & Ringsmose point out:

"A central concern of world politics today is the likelihood that one or several powerful states will seek to revise the Western order, and we argue that the Classical Realist understanding of international politics must be revitalized to enable us to understand war and peace in our time. Classical Realism has the tools for grasping why some states develop revisionist foreign policies and seek to upset politics among nations."²³

Therefore, it is considered relevant to go to the root of the problem regarding the ambiguity that has crystallized in the literature, and Classical Realism offers the first theoretical incursion into revisionism of the world order. This research has been

in Power-Transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American Relations', 13(3) *Security Studies* (2004), 103-141, at 108 [doi: 10.1080/09636400490914077].

¹⁹ H. A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Europe After Napoleon, The Politics of Conservatism in a Revolutionary Age* (The Universal Library, New York, 1969), at 12.

²⁰ To cite some of them: J. W. Davidson, 'The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy, 1922-39', 11(4) *Security Studies* (2002), 125-159, at 125 [doi: 10.1080/714005356]; L. Moure Peñín, *El Programa de Investigación Realista ante los Nuevos Retos Internacionales del Siglo XXI* (Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 2009), at 282-283; B. Pisciotta, 'Russian revisionism in the Putin era: an overview of post-communist military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria', 50 *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* (2020), 87-106, at 88 [doi:10.1017/ipo.2019.18]; and N. Egel & S. Ward, 'Hierarchy, revisionism, and subordinate actors: The TPNW and the subversion of the nuclear order', 28(4) *European Journal of International Relations* (2022), 751-776, at 753 [doi: 10.1177/1354066122112611].

²¹ R. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In', 19(1) *International Security* (1994), 72-107, at 72 [doi: 10.2307/2539149].

²² J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2001), at 19-29.

²³ S. Rynning & J. Ringsmose, 'Why Are Revisionist States Revisionist? Reviving Classical Realism as an Approach to Understanding International Change', 45 *International Politics* (2008), 19-39, at 35 [doi: 10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800217].

conducted to cover the main authors of Classical Realism who wrote about revisionism in their seminal works from 1933 to 1962. The list is far from comprehensive, but it is believed that an analysis of seven scholars from Classical Realism offers a significant vision of the treatment revisionism received when it was first mentioned. Therefore, the selection of the works, and their original dates of publication, to be analysed are: *International Politics* (1933) by Schuman,²⁴ *International Relations after the Peace Treaties* (1937)²⁵ and *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939)²⁶ by Carr; *Power Politics* (1941) by Schwarzenberger;²⁷ *Politics among Nations* (1948) by Morgenthau;²⁸ *A World Restored* (1957) by Kissinger;²⁹ *World Politics* (1958) by Organski,³⁰ and *Peace and War* (1962) by Aron.³¹

The comprehensive study that has been performed³² regarding Classical Realism evidenced the existence of three phases concerning the treatment of revisionism in the world order: (1) a phase of irruption into the Realist programme with Schuman and Carr, marked by the Treaty of Versailles and from a limited understanding of revisionism; (2) a phase of consolidation in the Realist programme with Schwarzenberger, Morgenthau and Kissinger, who, affected by polarization during World War II and in the early-Cold War context, will begin the stigmatization of revisionism in their analysis of very particular historical realities that have been misinterpreted to apply to all cases; and (3) a phase of deconstruction with Organski and Aron, who, from their critical views, have made it possible that revisionism is much more than the modification of a legal document or an unlimited lust of power, as it is affected by interests, dissatisfaction and passions to which states are no strangers, as the Realist research programme defended from its hard core.

However, one cannot understand the treatment of revisionism in interwar Classical Realism without starting with the Treaty of Versailles. This document marked much of the European politics of the period and its representation of the status quo made it, along with France as its guardian, the target of proposals for change in the 1930s. Consequently, the early Classical Realism of Schuman and Carr, in addition to discussing how natural revisionist aspirations are in an anarchic reality, understands revisionism as an appropriate reaction to a dictated peace serving as the basis for narratives favouring stability and peace. However, this could hardly fit with the situation experienced by Germany or with Italian and Japanese aspirations. For these authors, therefore, the starting point is a revisionism fundamentally centred on the desire to revise the Treaty of Versailles. This policy, despite its systemic implications, does not see destabilization as its end, but rather as the means to achieve its objectives of change.

Subsequently, it has been perceived that Schwarzenberger and Morgenthau, with a vision more centred on power as an accumulation of resources, work on a different

²⁴ F. L. Schuman, *supra* n. 17.

²⁵ E. H. Carr, *supra* n. 2.

²⁶ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Macmillan Press, London, 1939).

²⁷ G. Schwarzenberger, *supra* n. 8.

²⁸ H. Morgenthau, *supra* n. 16.

²⁹ H. A. Kissinger, *supra* n. 19.

³⁰ A. F. K. Organski, *supra* n. 11.

³¹ R. Aron, *supra*, n. 13.

³² For a complete analysis of the contribution of these scholars, see P. A. Sánchez-Rodríguez, *supra* n. 13, at 208-353.

kind of revisionism. This is based on the desire for expansion and control of the rest of the units of the system or an ambition for resources to guarantee the survival of the state. In this way, the change occurring during the Second World War is observed, which associated revisionism not with a sense of justice, but with greed. This greed, for Schwarzenberger, is justified by raw power politics, while for Morgenthau is justified by the very nature of politics itself. In other words, both understand international reality as a constant struggle, in which states seeking to expand their resources at the expense of other systemic actors can be considered imperialist and therefore in conflict with those seeking to maintain their positions and the system itself.

In a way, Kissinger, with his fundamentally historical work focused on the praise of individualism in the first half of the 19th century, has served as a link between this imperialist revisionism of Schwarzenberger and Morgenthau and the veneration of the status quo when the United States already held a hegemonic position in the international system. Thus, with his contribution to 'revolutionary' revisionism as the one seeking to establish a new system of values around a different principle of legitimacy, Kissinger was already dealing with heterogeneity, which would be extensively worked by Aron. The problem with his contribution is that, coming from the Napoleonic case, Kissinger perfectly represents the confusion of revisionism regarding concepts, subjects, and objects, for his work is full of contradictions which, when taken this work as a reference, lead to the crystallization of this ambiguity.

Finally, the third phase of Classical Realism is constituted by Organski and Aron, who are considered the initiators of the process of deconstructing revisionism in the realist programme. Organski, formulating his power transition theory, returns to Schuman's and Carr's contributions to understand that, in a reality in full hegemonic competition, the state which, despite ascending finds an order imposed they cannot modify, will develop a dissatisfaction that would turn them into a destabilizing factor within the system. Organski thus lays the foundations for the understanding of a hegemonic and dissatisfied, but also natural and cyclical, revisionism. Moreover, one of Organski's main contributions is based precisely on the understanding of the positions for and against change as mere narratives in which neither of them enjoys a moral monopoly or presents better intentions, as in both cases states will try to gain access or maintain systemic benefits.

This questioning of the stability provided by the maintenance of the status quo will also be partially maintained in Aron's contribution. This scholar, starting from a very broad theoretical framework, will dedicate part of his work to eliminating the relation of revisionism with elements such as offensive strategies or conflict. Thus, Aron recognizes the reciprocal nature of revisionism and maintenance of the status quo, but from a perspective centred on substate actors or the entities constituting an empire, drawing inspiration from the case of Algeria and France. As a result, his work, especially regarding polarity and heterogeneity, demonstrates, using a sociological approach, a significant bias due to the bipolarity and dual heterogeneity of the Cold War context and the French experience, which leads him to attribute revisionist labels sometimes without a clear profile. Consequently, Aron's work is considered to be the most successful contribution when deconstructing the stigmatization of revisionism from the second Classical Realism, but it fails to provide an approach to solve the theoretical problems his work creates.

The real problem of this analysis is that Organski's and Aron's deconstruction efforts to break the stigma associated with revisionism were never continued by Neorealists like Waltz or Gilpin. In fact, it was Buzan in 1983,³³ from the English School of International Relations, who resumed this academically serious approach to revisionism and developed a better understanding of revisionism in the classical English vision of international society. Therefore, Neorealism crystallized the terminological confusion of revisionism by not providing a clear understanding of what it meant and how the categories of status quo states and revisionist powers could be applied from a structural perspective. This failure to continue the work initiated by the third phase of Classical Realism underlines that the beginning of the problem and the solution were already provided in Classical Realism. Therefore, it is required to recognize the merit of Rynning and Ringsmose when remarking on the undermined role of Classical Realism in the literature about revisionism.

(D) CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF CLASSICAL REVISIONISM IN THE REVISIONISM LITERATURE

This paper has underlined the misconception about revisionism in International Relations Theory, which is evidenced by the lack of a common definition in the literature and the terminological confusion with other terms that are used as equivalents. The Realist research programme, where revisionism started to be recognized as an option for states' foreign policy, has also served as a complex group of theories to explain state behaviour. The evolution within the programme proves the exercise performed to bind the Realist hard core, with limited success when dealing with revisionism. In fact, it has been considered that the distinction between status quo states and revisionist states is an anomaly to the Realist rational consideration of all states pursuing power with very limited restraints of the *animus dominandi*. Nevertheless, due to its role in the conformation of the revisionist label, Classical Realism was revised looking for answers about the term.

The result of this literature review has been the identification of three fundamental patterns in the revisionism literature: (1) a value-free coining of the term based on the particular historical context of Germany's attempt to subvert the Treaty of Versailles, and the system created around it; (2) a stigmatization of revisionism based on drawing parallelisms with the past and the scientifically-ideal advocacy for general laws in International Relations with not enough scientific validity, due to the few cases involved; and (3) a deconstruction of the term to explore causes and factors influencing the behaviour of states pursuing this path in international politics. As it has been mentioned above, this process from coining to deconstructing the term offers enormous possibilities in terms of analysis because it allows the discipline to observe that the awareness about the misunderstanding of revisionism is not new, although Classical Realist solutions were abandoned by the later literature, especially by Neorealism.

Before moving forward with this conclusion, it is required to warn the reader about the reductionist effort performed in this section. Classical Realism is far from simple and,

³³ B. Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Wheatsheaf Books, Surrey, 1983), at 175-181.

while the categories created have endured, only a careful reading of its works can really provide an understanding of their nuanced usage, which has not endured. For instance, it is insufficient to confront Carr's revisionist states, primarily motivated by justice, with Morgenthau's imperialist states, which are driven by a pursuit of power. Similarly, while Kissinger's revolutionary states, seeking to redefine principles of legitimacy, may share some patterns with Schwarzenberger's "black sheep" states inspired by universalist ideologies, they diverge from Organski's challengers, who seek dominance within the existing power hierarchy, or Carr's multifaceted revisionist entities.

Having stated that, several conclusions³⁴ can be drawn about how Classical Realism treated revisionism in its literature and whose virtues and weaknesses, due to the lack of consideration by Neorealism, had remained until the 1980s and 1990s and even perpetuated until today. First, international revisionism is considered strictly associated with state behaviours and policies, which is coherent with the Realist view of states as the supreme actors of the system. Second, revisionist states are identified as actors trying to challenge, alter or subvert the international system, posing a threat to dominant powers, or other conservatives forces within the system, which may lead to the depiction of the revisionist state as the "enemy" of the system, especially from a structural stability perspective.

Third, despite this stigma, Classical Realists diverge on the motivation driving state revisionism. For some, revisionism is rooted in selfish ambitions, such as unlimited lust for power, revanchism, or ideological universalism. In other cases, revisionism is linked to the seeking of justice in the international order, including correcting historical injustices, addressing systemic abuses of power by dominant actors, or just representing the dynamic nature of the international system. Fourth, the political-military focus on Classical Realism significantly shapes its understanding of revisionism, as the political-military substructure is perceived as the arena where great powers compete for hegemony and where revisionism is identified. Although economic and social factors are acknowledged, this approach that subsumed them under the political-military substructure also provokes that the confrontation between status quo and revisionist powers is depicted in political terms, concerning peace agreements, the pursuit of peace and the desire to establish a new world order.

Fifth, connected to the last conclusion, peace agreements are seen in Classical Realism as artificial constructs imposed by victorious powers to secure their interests, and therefore, as a cause of dissatisfaction for the vanquished. Nevertheless, the crystallization of this attitude in hegemonic competition leads to a certain resistance to change, because the revisionist actors, if succeed, will impose a new system favourable to themselves, perpetuating a cycle of structural stability disguised as peace. Sixth, Classical Realism recognizes the multifaceted nature of revisionism, from a natural response to dictated peace to an imperialist and universalist tool to establish new principles of legitimacy, or just means to power-seeking ambitions. This diversity suggests that revisionism is a broad, complex phenomenon that includes multiple dimensions and meanings and, as explained above, it cannot be fully comprehended with reductionist approaches.

³⁴ The complete version of those conclusions can be found in P.A. Sánchez-Rodríguez, *supra* n. 13, at 355-362.

Seventh, due to this complex nature, the Classical Realist literature has tended to identify two types of changes: incremental adjustments to be accommodated within the existing system, and systemic transformations that require the establishment of a new order. This difference between changes in the order and changes of the order represents one of the main innovations offered by Schwarzenberger and Aron to reduce a reductionist vision of revisionism. Eighth, even with this attempt at categorization, revisionism remains a broad and ambiguous concept in Classical Realism due to the attempt to build general laws over a phenomenon based on stereotypical cases that are affected by their historical contexts and the political preferences of the analysts. As a consequence, an uncareful reading of those classical works has been translated into the creation of overly simplistic frameworks, losing the richness of details in their original articulations.

Ninth, Classical Realists agree on the role of revisionist states in the outbreak of hegemonic conflicts. Due to the resistance presented by status quo powers to systemic mechanisms of peaceful change, revisionist states are condemned to the use of violence to achieve their systemic goals, which has made them perceived as initiators of major international wars. Finally, there is a very limited common identification of historical examples of revisionist states in Classical Realism. Nazi Germany is the only accepted archetype of state revisionism, but there is no full consensus on commonly cited cases such as Napoleonic France or the post-1945 Soviet Union. This emphasis underlines the importance of the interwar period and the Treaty of Versailles in the construction of the concept of revisionism, which has since struggled to find similarly paradigmatic cases.

In short, the analysis of the literature clearly demonstrates that the contributions of the Classical Realists are far from being obsolete in the debate on revisionism. Not only the deconstruction of this stigmatization associated with revisionism started by Organski and Aron in Classical Realism, but the ten conclusions we have drawn from Classical Realism's treatment of state revisionism have also marked many of the subsequent analyses of state revisionism. In particular, the perpetuation of indefiniteness and ambiguity, which dominates the contributions in Classical Realism, is probably the vestige that has been most visible in the later literature, despite the influence of Neorealism and the return that Schweller announced regarding the revisionist state. Indeed, revisionism has returned to theoretical approaches, but it has done so by dragging along what could already be read in Classical Realism.

The subsequent confusion in the most recent literature is the result of an uncareful reading of Classical Realism. As decades have passed by, the theoretical misunderstanding around revisionism has become even more widespread, making its comprehension and theoretical use even more difficult. A renowned effort is required in International Relations Theory to take responsibility for past mistakes in the academia and perform a careful examination of the literature to understand what revisionism is and open a new debate over this concept that has a profound impact on the current hegemonic competition between the US and China. Without these clear categories, the International Relations scholarship can hardly avoid the penetration of these ambiguous concepts into the practical realm of international politics. With unpredicted actors like Trump, this effort should be one of the top priorities of International Relations Theory and International Security research groups in the coming years.