CHAPTER TWELVE

The Realist Politics of *Troy*

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Many readers of Homer, anticipating the pleasure of becoming viewers of Homer, have been disappointed by *Troy*. The film departs from the *Iliad* in numerous ways and makes no claim to being a literal adaptation of Homer. For example, patriotism and allegiance to one's country as shown in *Troy* are modern concepts that rest uncomfortably in an ancient Greek context. But the film deserves our attention for addressing modern concerns while simultaneously engaging in a dialogue with the *Iliad*. I am here concerned with the politics of *Troy*: the Trojan War and the wrath of Achilles as manifestations of contemporary realist politics. I agree with M. I. Finley that all art dealing with the past should properly be viewed as a dialogue between present and past, but I disagree with his conclusion that "it can only be a dialogue in the present, about the present."[1] Rather, popular art as *Troy* represents it is best thought of as a dialogue with the past about the present.

Richard Ned Lebow calls political realism "the dominant paradigm in international relations for the last fifty years," although its dominance has been challenged.[2] The roots of realist thought extend back to the Greek historian Thucydides, who has sometimes been called the founding father of realism.[3] Modern realists have also borrowed much from the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and others.[4] Yet realism as a systematic school of thought and self-conscious political ideology came about only after World War I in the groundbreaking work of E. H. Carr.[5] It received its classic expression in America in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz.[6] Four core principles of realism shape the plot of *Troy* and give it significant coherence: first, domestic and international relations are two manifestations of the same phenomenon, the universal struggle for power; second, the untamed nature of the struggle for power, resulting most notably in the evil of war, can best be explained by the presence of evil in human life since human nature is at least partly evil or flawed; third, only a precarious balance of power can achieve or maintain a modicum of peace and the rule of law in domestic and international relations; and, finally, political ideology is only a fiction designed to disguise the true nature of power politics and the evil inherent in mankind. As a consequence of this set of beliefs, realists adopt a tragic outlook on history and a pessimistic attitude regarding the possibility of solving the major social and political problems plaguing mankind, for in their view – one that also underlies many of the ancient Greek tragedies – human life cannot be creative without being destructive. I will examine these four principles in order and trace their presence in *Troy*. The film conforms to the tragic view of history as espoused by the major proponents of realism.

1 M. I. Finley, "Introduction: Desperately Foreign," in his *Aspects of Antiquity: Discoveries and Controversies*, 2nd edn (New York: Viking, 1977; several rpts.), 11–15; quotation at 15.

2 Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14. Contrast Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security*, 24 (1999), 5–55.

3 Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 20.

4 Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), provides an insightful history of various strands of realist thought. He thinks of realism as a tradition rather than a philosophy, "a spectrum of ideas of various hues from light to dark" (249).

5 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (1939; rpt. New York: Perennial, 2001).

6 I draw mainly upon the principles of the modern American version of realism, concentrating on Niebuhr and Morgenthau rather than on Waltz, who differs from his predecessors in a number of significant ways. Niebuhr views the desires of individuals and groups as rooted in the instinct for survival, the will to live only later translated into the will to power, while Morgenthau views the will to power as the primary impulse. Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), distinguishes between traditions and ideas associated with realism and the philosophy of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz.

1. Struggles for Power

Realists define politics as the sum of human relations involving authority and the use of power. "Politics," Morgenthau says, "is a struggle for power over men."[7] Realism views this irrational and never-ending struggle as the engine that drives human social and political life, domestic as well as international. Hence realism takes a stand in opposition to Marxist and liberal attitudes about politics and society. Niebuhr places the Marxist belief that "justice will be established because weakness will be made strong through economic forces operating with inexorable logic in human history" in the "category of romantic illusions."[8] According to Morgenthau, who argues against Marx, "historic evidence points to the primacy of politics over economics."[9] Morgenthau criticizes liberal and rationalist modes of thought for their optimistic belief that the most serious problems of war and peace are amenable to solution through the use of reason.[10] The idea of the importance of the struggle for power is ultimately derived from Friedrich Nietzsche's well-known idea of the will to power, which trumps even the human instinct for self-preservation.[11] In one of his earliest writings, Morgenthau expressed in the strongest possible language the strength of the will to power as the fundamental human drive:

> the selfishness of man has limits; his will to power has none. For while man's vital needs are capable of satisfaction, his lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God.[12]

7 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man* vs. *Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946; rpt. 1974), 195.

8 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932; several rpts.), 155 and 164. For the sake of accuracy, however, it should be noted that Niebuhr is not critical of all aspects of Marxist thought, for he sees Marx as having provided an admirable analysis of the contradictions inherent in bourgeois democracy. Cf. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959; rpt. 2001), 30.

9 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Brief Edition, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 63. This edition contains the complete first ten chapters of Morgenthau's book with all of his basic principles.

10 Morgenthau, *Scientific Man* vs. *Power Politics*, 2–6.

11 So Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 10–11. Morgenthau himself is not nearly as candid in acknowledging his influences.

12 Morgenthau, *Scientific Man* vs. *Power Politics*, 193.

In *Politics Among Nations*, his classic book on international relations, Morgenthau was less hyperbolic and poetic but remained committed to the belief that politics cannot be divorced from considerations of power. One of his basic principles held that the tendency to seek and exercise power is a significant element of all human associations.[13]

Morgenthau's analysis provides us with a precise definition of the concept of power that will aid our understanding of the nature of power politics in *Troy*. Morgenthau dissociates the idea of power from the potential or actual employment of force, which is only one manifestation of power. In his philosophy as in realism in general, war appears to be the natural human state of affairs.[14] Morgenthau defines power as "anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man."[15] Power is primarily a psychological and not a physical relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised.[16] Thus personal charisma must be taken into account as an independent element in determining relationships of power.[17] From the definition of power as essentially a psychological phenomenon it follows that seeking to enhance one's prestige – or, as it is put in *Troy*, seeking to win glory – is an important aspect of the universal struggle for power, since prestige gives one power over others:

> The individual seeks confirmation, on the part of his fellows, of the evaluation he puts upon himself. It is only in the tribute others pay to his goodness, intelligence, and power that he becomes fully aware of, and can fully enjoy, what he deems to be his superior qualities.[18]

The policy of prestige is just as central an element in the relationships among nations.[19] Perhaps the best way to distinguish power as it

13 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 37. Such recognition of the nature and importance of power politics goes back at least to Thucydides; cf., for example, A. Geoffrey Woodhead, *Thucydides on the Nature of Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 104: "Power consists, after all, in having the ability to ensure that others are prepared to do what you want them to do."

14 Cf. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 28.

15 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 11.

16 Cf. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 30. As Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard E. Flathman and David Johnston (New York: Norton, 1997), 48, phrased the same point: "Reputation of power, is Power: because it draweth with it the adhaerence of those that need protection."

17 Cf. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 32.

18 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 85.

19 Cf. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 84.

manifests itself in the potential or actual use of force from power as prestige is to observe a distinction implicit in the work of the classical realist thinkers but made explicit only recently in the writings of Joseph S. Nye. This is the distinction between "hard power," the potential or actual use of force, and "soft power." Soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments."[20] Soft power depends for its success upon an audience well disposed to appreciate its allure.[21] As regards international politics, *Troy* portrays the Trojan War as motivated solely by Agamemnon's quest for greater and greater power gained through the use of force. The theft of Helen is a mere pretext, and economic considerations of the sort that Marxists judge to be significant are nowhere taken into account as an additional incentive for making war against Troy. Similarly, domestic Greek politics is portrayed as an arena in which the hard power of Agamemnon is pitted against the soft power of Achilles, his only serious rival. The Greek and Trojan armies and the major protagonists, Agamemnon and Achilles, pay little heed to considerations of morality as they go about the business of conducting politics and waging war.

According to the controversial views of Bruno Snell and, later, Arthur Adkins, Homeric Greeks lacked the idea of the self as a moral agent and hence the proper modern – that is, Kantian – conception of oneself as a being with responsibilities defined in terms of one's sense of duty.[22] This view has frequently been challenged.[23] Still, it has some application to *Troy*, at least insofar as it pays little attention to the morality of individual or collective behavior in political decisions. There are only two explicit, if fleeting, references to character judgments in terms of moral standards, both made about Priam, king of Troy. During the banquet celebrating the conclusion of a peace treaty between the Spartans and Trojans early in the film, Menelaus speaks of Priam as "a good king, a good man." Near the end of the film, as Priam prepares to return to Troy with the corpse

20 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), x. Nye speaks of former American Secretary of State Colin Powell's use of soft power in securing the welfare of the United States.

21 Cf. Nye, *Soft Power*, 6–16.

22 Cf. the chapter entitled "Homer's View of Man" in Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, tr. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer (1953; rpt. New York: Dover, 1982), 1–22 and 310–311 (notes). According to A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (1960; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 2, Homeric Greeks lacked the Kantian sense of duty and hence the modern sense of moral responsibility.

23 See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; rpt. 1994), 21–49.

of his son Hector, Achilles commends him for being "a far better king than the one leading this army." Otherwise, we observe all political life to be conducted in terms of interest defined as power. Nevertheless, this autonomy of the political in *Troy* does not justify the conclusion that the characters do not recognize any moral standards. Nor should realists be taken to reject the validity of such principles. As Morgenthau argues:

> The realist defense of the autonomy of the political sphere against its subversion by other modes of thought does not imply disregard for the existence and importance of these other modes of thought.[24]

One of these other modes of thought is morality, for humans are moral as well as political creatures. Therefore the absence of the language of morality from most of *Troy* does not preclude the audience from making moral judgments about individuals whose behavior they witness. Indeed, in the course of the film both Achilles and Hector will emerge as good men according to Niebuhr: capable of being and doing good.

In his conduct of political affairs, Agamemnon is heedless of the importance of influencing others through a policy of prestige; that is, he pays no regard to the critical importance of soft power. The exercise of hard power alone, the use of force, offers him control over the fledgling Greek nation, a control that he desires to increase by the conquests of Thessaly and Troy. The depth of Agamemnon's greed for world domination is made clear in the film's opening sequence. Over a map of the Aegean world we read: "After decades of warfare Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, has forced the kingdoms of Greece into a loose alliance." This alliance is then referred to as "an emerging nation." Thessaly alone remains unconquered, and the film begins with Agamemnon's invasion of it. As the Greek army and the army of Thessaly are facing each other before combat, Agamemnon holds a parley with Triopas, the Thessalian king, who complains: "You can't have the whole world, Agamemnon. It's too big, even for you." This remark, prophetic of Agamemnon's death, elicits the first of many laughs we hear from Agamemnon, all in celebration of his power and its further extension. The Agamemnon of *Troy* conforms perfectly to Hobbes' description of Man in the first part of *Leviathan*: "He never laughs but with a feeling of pleasure in his own power and in the weakness of others."[25] Agamemnon later laughs

24 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 15.

25 So K. R. Minogue, "Hobbes and the Just Man," in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 66–84, at 67–68.

heartily when Menelaus, his brother, fights a duel with Paris. When the tide of battle turns against the Greeks because of Achilles' withdrawal, Agamemnon flies into a rage, fearing that the Trojans are now laughing at him. "Empires," Agamemnon insists in conversation with Nestor, "are forged by war. The gods protect only the strong." Like the Agamemnon of Thucydides, the Agamemnon of *Troy* employs fear as a weapon to maintain and enlarge the empire that he is attempting to extend through the use of hard power.[26]

When a disaffected Achilles decides to return home, Odysseus seems to speak for the Greeks in general when he defends his own decision to remain. His home island of Ithaca, he says, cannot afford an enemy like Agamemnon. "Fear," he counsels Achilles, "is useful." Achilles, however, refuses at any point to submit to Agamemnon's power over the Greek army and nation. Agamemnon remarks about Achilles even before he defeats the Thessalian champion: "Of all the warlords loved by the gods, I hate him the most." Achilles, who refuses to convey Triopas' scepter to Agamemnon, signals his refusal to recognize Agamemnon as his overlord. Achilles alone challenges Agamemnon's supremacy. In the words of Morgenthau quoted above, Agamemnon's "lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is if he became like God." Achilles embodies the threat represented by that last man. He prevents Agamemnon's assumption of god-like status, competes with him for power over the army, and by stubborn self-assertion threatens his long-term goals for the extension of his empire. In the end, Agamemnon's quest for power ends in his death, ironically during the sack of Troy, his most famous achievement. He suffers the ill effects of what Hobbes has called the "perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death."[27] This change from the well-attested story that Agamemnon returned home after the Trojan War appropriately emphasizes the realist concept that death alone terminates the quest for power.

If we understand power in *Troy* in realist terms as a psychological rather than a physical phenomenon, Achilles emerges as a "power politician" fully equal to Agamemnon, although he conducts politics exclusively by personal charisma or soft power. Achilles gets what he wants through attraction rather than, like Agamemnon, by coercion or fear. "I want what all men want," Achilles tells Briseis. "I just want it more."

26 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.9; cf. my "Agamemnon's Empire in Thucydides," *The Classical Journal*, 80 (1984), 8–10.

27 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 55.

Agamemnon's primary concern is to extend his power geographically; Achilles wants power extended over time. Agamemnon is ultimately unsuccessful, but Achilles wins for himself the immortality that he promised his Myrmidons as they prepared to land on the shores of Troy. As the film concludes, Odysseus, who acts as narrator, expresses a wish that future generations will tell his story and say that he lived in the time of Hector, tamer of horses, and of Achilles. Pointedly excluding Agamemnon from this honor roll, the film may be taken to endorse the ultimate effectiveness of soft over hard power.

The audience disposed to be moved psychologically by Achilles' charisma consists not only of the Myrmidons whom he commands but also of the whole Greek army and, of course, the film's audience. Agamemnon's army parts as the Red Sea did before Moses when Achilles rides in to face the Thessalian champion, cheering "Achilles, Achilles!" The soldiers never cheer Agamemnon, whom they obey out of fear. Achilles' heroism on landing at Troy incites others to emulate him and confirms his power over their minds and actions. Achilles and his men are the first to land, and Ajax, sailing behind, exclaims: "Look at him. Look!" Ajax is spurred on to become the second commander to storm the beach and after a battle with the guards of Apollo's temple pays proper respect to Achilles for his power: "You're as fearless as the gods. I'm honored to go to war with you." Later, when Achilles sends his troops home, his lieutenant Eudorus parts from him with the words: "Fighting for you has been my life's honor, my lord." *Troy* accords honor only to soft and never to hard power.

Odysseus, the film's pragmatist, serves as go-between in the power struggle waged by Agamemnon and Achilles. Morgenthau's analysis of the privileged position occupied by the individual who stands aloof from a given battle for power helps us understand Odysseus' role:

> The deeper the individual is involved in the power struggle, the less likely he is to see the power struggle for what it is . . . The more removed the individual is from a particular power struggle, the more likely he is to understand its true nature.[28]

Odysseus understands the true nature of the animosity between Achilles and Agamemnon. In the face of their unrestricted ambitions he tries, with varying success, to harness the energies of both in the interest of achieving the narrower but immediate goal of sacking Troy. Odysseus is

28 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 99–100.

acknowledged to be famous for his tricks, the first of which he plays on Achilles when he tries to persuade the younger hero to join the expedition against Troy: "Let Achilles fight for honor," Odysseus urges. "Let Agamemnon fight for power." This clever argument depends for its validity on the premise that questions of honor can be separated from considerations of power, an argument that seems specious in light of the realist logic underpinning political life in the film. Odysseus later encourages Achilles to "avoid the politics." Since politics is the struggle for power and power is the goal of all politics, Achilles cannot remain aloof from Greek politics and at the same time serve his personal interests. Although famous for his tricks, Odysseus can also be quite forthright when the situation requires blunt speech. After Hector kills Menelaus, Odysseus demonstrates his understanding of a truth so far voiced only by Agamemnon and in private conversations: the theft of Helen was a mere pretext for war. "The men believe we came here for Menelaus' wife," Odysseus says to Agamemnon. "We won't be needing her anymore."

If the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon is about the acquisition and maintenance of power, the same may be said of the Trojan War, although for reasons to be discussed below this truth is by no means self-evident to all. For example, Priam, repeatedly acknowledged to be a good man, wrongly thinks that the war is about love, specifically the love of his son Paris for Helen. He tells Hector upon the latter's return from Sparta:

> I've fought many wars in my time. Some were fought for land, some for power, some for glory. I suppose that fighting for love makes more sense than all the rest.

Hector, however, has a better understanding than his father of the war's true nature and sees through the public cause, the abduction of Helen. When Helen tries to flee from Troy and return to the Greeks to end the war, Hector restrains her: "This is about power, not love. Do you think Agamemnon cares about his brother's marriage?"

2. Power and Human Nature

The second core principle of realism holds that struggles for power, ultimately and frequently leading to war, can be traced to qualities inherent in human nature. Political theorists and historians traditionally locate

the causes of war in three areas. One is psychology: wars arise because of imperfections or evils inherent in human nature. Sociologically based beliefs trace wars back to the behavior of states. This is a more optimistic school of thought, one that realists might call liberal. Marxists, for example, believe that peace may eventually be achieved and war abolished after an internal reorganization of the state. Others, moving still further from considerations of human nature, locate the cause of war in the condition of anarchy that characterizes the state system at large.[29] Morgenthau and Niebuhr opt without reservation for the first view. Morgenthau declares that imperfections in the world are the result of forces inherent in human nature and unambiguously speaks of "the inevitability of evil."[30] "Man," he says, "cannot hope to be good but must be content with being not too evil."[31] There is no possibility of escape either from the power of evil or from the evil of power. As a theologian, Niebuhr approaches the question of the evil in man from the Christian perspective of mankind's sinful nature while recognizing the potential of the individual for both willing and doing good. "How can man be 'essentially' evil," he asks, "if he knows himself to be so? What is the character of the ultimate subject . . . which passes such devastating judgments upon itself as object?"[32] Niebuhr's view is concisely expressed in the title of his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Individuals, he argues, contain within themselves the capacity for doing good as well as evil, although they are morally obliged to do good. But when they form groups or associations of any kind, the flaws in their individual characters are exponentially magnified. Groups, therefore, cannot be expected to conduct social and political life according to the standards expected of individuals. In order to validate their actions, groups are given to formulating moral justifications for their behavior that appear manifestly hypocritical when viewed objectively.[33] Niebuhr, like Morgenthau, views much of political ideology as a cloak that nations use to conceal the base motives for their actions. "The moral obtuseness of human collectives," he says, "makes a morality of pure disinterestedness impossible."[34]

29 Cf. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*.

30 See Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3; the quotation is from *Scientific Man* vs. *Power Politics*, 191.

31 Morgenthau, *Scientific Man* vs. *Power Politics*, 192.

32 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1: *Human Nature* (1941; rpt. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2.

33 Cf. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 9.

34 Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 272.

Two of the principal ways in which individual goodness may manifest itself in relation to the selfishness of the group are in the actions of the patriot and of the idealist. About the patriot Niebuhr states: "Altruistic passion is sluiced into the reservoirs of nationalism with great ease." In his theory of the psychological origins of patriotism he claims that patriotic feelings arise when an individual sentimentally reflects on appealing scenes of his environment and the enchantments of his youth. His imagination then "transmutes the universal beneficences of nature into symbols of the peculiar blessings which a benevolent nation bestows upon its citizens," and so he becomes a patriot.[35] Patriotic sentiments are often exploited by the group in the interest of bad causes. On the other hand the idealist, whose patriotism is circumscribed or negated by allegiance to a transcendent cause or causes, proves his worth by standing in opposition to the selfish interests of the group or nation in which he lives.[36]

These realist descriptions of the patriot and idealist conform closely to the characters of Hector and Achilles in *Troy*, a film in which human nature reveals itself more in action than in speech. Even so, characters occasionally give voice to the pessimistic realist perspective that war is an inevitable result of human nature and has nothing to do with the corruption of the state or the political anarchy rampant in the film's portrayal of the Aegean world. Men are simply born to fight. Nestor, arguing for the need to enlist Achilles in the war against Troy, says that Agamemnon has no need to control his one major antagonist; he need only unleash him: "That man was born to end lives." Odysseus, enlisting Achilles in the campaign, says: "Your business is war, my friend." When Achilles threatens to desert the Greek army, Odysseus adds to this sentiment: "Stay, Achilles; you were born for this war." Achilles himself shares this outlook. When Briseis asks why he chose the life of a warrior, he responds: "I chose nothing. I was born, and this is what I am." After the death of Hector Briseis asks Achilles when the killing will finally stop, and he answers: "It never ends." This blunt declaration of the realist perspective on war is immediately followed by a quiet scene in which Briseis is sitting alone at night and watching the sea pound the shore. We may regard the constancy of the waves as a symbol of the realist view that war and violence are inevitable in human life.

Hector is the exemplary patriot, a moral man willing to give up his life for the group, an immoral society of Trojans acting in the interest

35 The quotations are from Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 91 and 92.

36 Cf. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 94.

of a bad cause, the theft of a Greek king's wife. "This is my country," Hector at first tells Priam, "and these are my countrymen. I don't want to see them suffer so my brother can have his prize." Nevertheless, Hector fights when called upon. His patriotism, in Niebuhr's phrase already quoted, "is sluiced into the reservoirs of nationalism with great ease." This exemplary Trojan hero wins our esteem for his sentimental attachment to family and country, which *Troy* idealizes. He even indulges briefly in the kind of fond recollection of his youth that Niebuhr sees as characteristic of the patriot. On the boat smuggling Helen from Sparta to Troy, Paris approaches his older brother and asks for protection from his enemies. Hector interrupts his carving of a toy lion for his little son and answers: "The last time you spoke to me like this you were ten years old and you'd just stolen father's horse." Niebuhr sounds just the note that captures the essence of Hector's character: he is given to transmuting "the universal beneficences of nature into symbols of the peculiar blessings which a benevolent nation bestows upon its citizens." Hector personifies his country as the truest and most important form of family. As the Greeks pour ashore onto the Trojan beach, he tells his warriors that all his life he has lived by a simple code: "Honor the gods, love your woman, and defend your country." Hector expresses his allegiances according to the typical Homeric scale of ascending affection. Here, country comes above all else, for to Hector it is the truest form of family. "Troy is mother to us all," he tells his troops. "Fight for her." And: "No son of Troy shall ever submit to a foreign ruler."[37]

Achilles, on the other hand, represents the realist's conception of the idealist, one who is good because he steadfastly opposes the immorality of the group. In this case the group is a fledgling Greek nation led by a ruthless tyrant who is seeking total control over the Aegean world. "Don't waste your life following some fool's orders," Achilles advises Patroclus. Achilles deserves a large measure of our regard simply for his hostility toward Agamemnon. "What are you doing in thrall to that pig of a king?" he asks Odysseus. Achilles' allegiance transcends the concrete political interests of the group; it is directed toward fulfilling the dictates of an abstract code of ethics predicated on the need to win glory and

37 The fact that Homeric heroes typically catalogue their loyalties in ascending order of affection was first pointed out by Johannes Th. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (1949; rpt. New York: Garland, 1987), 19–20 and 152–164. The Hector of *Troy* proclaims a different ascending three-part scale of affection from that of Hector in the *Iliad*. Homer's Hector places the citizens of Troy lowest, then family, and his wife Andromache highest (*Iliad* 6.450–454). On this see my *Plot and Point of View in the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 99.

attain a kind of immortality that surpasses in worth even what the gods themselves enjoy. "The gods envy us," Achilles tells Briseis. "Everything's more beautiful because we're doomed . . . We will never be here again." According to Niebuhr, idealists, whose patriotism is qualified by loyalties that transcend devotion to the state, must always remain a minority.[38] In *Troy*, this is a minority of one.

3. Balance of Power

Since the struggle for power knows no limits and human nature is in some measure evil, peace and social and political stability can be achieved only by a fragile balance of power. The idea of the balance of power can be found as early as the writings of Thucydides and Polybius.[39] It became a principle of international relations in early modern Europe and a central tenet of realism in the twentieth century.[40] What brings about a balance of power is the existence of a number of independent states that wish to remain independent. Balance, Waltz says, "is not so much imposed by statesmen on events as it is imposed by events on statesmen."[41]

According to Morgenthau, only power can check and limit the growth of power. Two main patterns exist in any particular instance where a balance of power prevails. One is the pattern of direct opposition. A may embark upon an aggressive policy to B, and B may counter A with a policy to preserve the status quo or with an aggressive policy of its own. The other pattern, that of competition, involves a fluid and dynamic interchange among three entities. The power of A to dominate C is balanced by the power of B, while in turn B's power to dominate C is balanced by A's.[42] Wherever the rule of law is not supported by the mutual interests of the powers involved, the balance of power in domestic and international contexts remains precarious.[43]

The politics of *Troy* reveals the operation of both patterns. In each case, power serves to limit power, and a modicum of peace and cooperation is achieved as long as a balance serves to limit the aspirations of the parties involved. In the antagonism between Agamemnon and Achilles in Thessaly and at the banquet celebrating the peace treaty between

38 Cf. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 94.
39 Cf. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 198–199.
40 Cf. Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity*, 90.
41 Cf. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 209.
42 Cf. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 188–192.
43 Cf. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 117–118.

Sparta and Troy, equilibrium in the distribution of power brings a measure of stability. But when one element in the struggles for power attempts to gain ascendancy over the other, in each case by the theft of a woman, balance breaks down. This breakdown in turn leads to the film's tragic conclusion.

In the pattern of competition, Agamemnon's power to employ the military services of the Greeks in his plan for conquest is checked only by the power of a recalcitrant Achilles. Achilles' power to dominate and establish his pre-eminence as a hero is in turn balanced by Agamemnon's hard power as a king who is maintaining a tense equilibrium in relation to the soft power of Greece's greatest warrior. Agamemnon requires the services of Achilles in order to extend his empire first to Thessaly and then to Troy. Achilles needs Agamemnon's military resources to provide him with a theater of operations on a scale so vast and unprecedented that his glory will never be forgotten. This balance of power leads to a quick and almost bloodless victory over the forces of Thessaly when Achilles dispatches the Thessalian champion with a single blow. However, later events prove the truth of the expository narration. Indeed Agamemnon leads only a loose and fragile alliance. Alliances founded on a balance of power are by nature precarious. The fragility of the Greek alliance is fully exposed during the Trojan War when Agamemnon encroaches upon Achilles' right to the possession of Briseis, a Trojan priestess whom Achilles has captured in a raid and with whom he falls in love. Achilles' earlier refusal to convey the scepter of Triopas to Agamemnon – "He's not my king," Achilles said to Triopas on that occasion – reveals to us the balance of power then existing in the Greek army. After the first successful day of fighting at Troy, however, Triopas will personally present this scepter to Agamemnon. At that moment Agamemnon will disturb the balance of power with his theft of Briseis.

Immediately after the Greek victory over the Thessalians, the scene shifts to Sparta and introduces us to the pattern of direct opposition. The expository narration again provides us with necessary information: "Agamemnon's brother Menelaus, King of Sparta, is weary of battle. He seeks to make peace with Troy, the most powerful rival to the emerging Greek nation." We are left to infer that Sparta and, given Agamemnon's imperialist nature, the rest of the Greek world have been pursuing an imperialist policy toward Troy. The Trojans seem to have countered with a policy of preserving the status quo, as we may infer from Hector's observation to Paris that their father Priam has for many years been working for peace. Troy and Sparta have finally reached a state of equilibrium in which peace serves the mutual interests of two powers

involved in a struggle for international supremacy. This balance is almost immediately disrupted when Paris steals Helen.

4. The True Nature of Power

Political ideology is only a pretext that disguises the true motives according to which states act.[44] The human mind, Morgenthau says, "in its day-by-day operations cannot bear to look the truth of politics straight in the face."[45] Therefore ideological disguises and slogans make power politics psychologically and morally acceptable.[46] Morgenthau's belief that humans and states are essentially evil raises the question why people, themselves as evil as states, should require ideological disguises for the actions carried out by the latter. Niebuhr shares Morgenthau's belief in the illusionary nature of political ideology, but in his view individuals are ethically and morally superior to states. So he is able to provide an explanation for ideological pretense: political ideology arises from mankind's inability to conform collective life to individual ideals.[47] Moral man requires ideological pretexts to shield him from recognizing the evil carried out by immoral society.

Troy fully dramatizes the realist concept that ideology is a pretext. After Paris' abduction of Helen, Menelaus comes to Mycenae to seek his older brother's help. Agamemnon promises to lead an expedition against Troy to avenge the insult to his brother, but as the two embrace Agamemnon looks off into the distance, as if he were contemplating the true reason for the coming war. He later acknowledges to Menelaus before the latter's duel with Paris: "I didn't come here for your pretty wife. I came here for Troy." As we already saw, Hector, Agamemnon's chief adversary, is aware that the theft of Helen is only a pretext to make

44 This core principle finds realism at its weakest. Winston Churchill noted in a speech entitled "Anglo-American Unity," delivered September 6, 1943, at Harvard University on receiving an honorary degree: "The empires of the futures are the empires of the mind." Quoted from *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches 1897–1963*, ed. Robert Rhodes James, vol. 7: *1943–1949* (New York: Chelsea House, 1974), 6823–6827; quotation at 6826. Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), xi, who slightly misquotes Churchill's words, interprets him to mean that the great powers after World War II would not be nation states but ideologies. Recent events surrounding the rise of hostility between much of the Islamic world and the West seem to confirm the truth of Churchill's observation.

45 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 16.

46 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 102–105.

47 Cf. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 9.

the war morally and psychologically acceptable to the Greeks. In *Troy*, ideology is a hypocrite's means to bridge the gap between the moral behavior of the individual and the immoral behavior of society. The film celebrates the fight for honor on the part of the individual. But revenge for an insult to the honor of the entire group serves only as a duplicitous pretext to disguise the hard truth of power politics resulting in war.

To Niebuhr, this inability of society to conform collective life to the moral ideals of the individual represents "one of the tragedies of the human spirit."[48] Morgenthau, too, came to regard tragedy as an inherent quality of human existence rather than a creation of Greek and later Western art.[49] Much of Greek tragedy juxtaposes human achievement and human transgression; the two are inseparable. Similarly, *Troy* transforms Homeric epic into tragedy. At its conclusion the film juxtaposes the horror of the destruction of Troy, seen through King Priam's eyes, with the claims to heroic achievement that Odysseus pronounces at the funeral of Achilles:

> If they ever tell my story, let them say that I walked with giants. Men rise and fall like the winter wheat, but these names will never die. Let them say that I lived in the time of Hector, tamer of horses. Let them say that I lived in the time of Achilles.

48 Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 9.

49 So Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 308.

Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to Hollywood Epic

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