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## THE ORCHARD OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM – WEATHERED TREE, GRAFT OR SEEDLING?

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to assess the progressiveness of neoclassical realism (NCR) in the context of neorealism's development. By appealing to the idea of Lakatos research programs, it shows possible ways of NCR's development and projects its possible futures. The article proceeds in three parts. The first one juxtaposes literature concerning Lakatos's notion of scientific progress in IR with the philosopher himself and consequently shows how trying to operationalize his methodology in social science is not the way to go. The paper refers to both Elmans' (2002, 2003) and Schweller's (2003) proposals, pointing out that the first attempt at a detailed operationalization of Lakatos's idea is not possible in social sciences, and that the second, relying on a commonsense approach, also proved insufficient to apply Lakatos's criteria in practice. The second part of the article identifies the theoretical contents of NCR: hard core as well as its positive and negative heuristic, whereas the third one presents how Lakatos's philosophy inspired the authors to develop three metaphors – weathered tree, graft, and seedling – that help to convey something about the present version of NCR and its possible futures. Conclusions draw the readers' attention to the question whether and which of the presented metaphors shows the progressive promise of NCR's progress as understood in Lakatos' terms.

**Keywords:** neoclassical realism, research program, progress, Lakatos

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE DEAL WITH THE PROGRESSIVENESS OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM (NCR)?

If we use a simple optics to look at international relations (IR), we see three relevant paradigms, research programs or traditions: realism, liberalism, and social constructivism. The one that generates the most agitated discussion about its scientific progress is realism; especially its latest, neoclassical version.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to show similar level of dedication to the question of progress within constructivism, and when it comes to liberalism, it is a mixed bag – appraisal of its progressiveness happens mostly in the context of democratic peace thesis<sup>2</sup> or in the disputes on the progressiveness of NCR.<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is Legro and Moravcsik, who can be read as a liberal attempt to subsume newly heralded NCR to their own tradition as a sign of its progressiveness. They attempted this subsumption based on their claim that causal logic of NCR was in fact bottom-up and hence it did not differ from the bottom-up logic of their own brand of liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this paper is to assess the progressiveness of NCR in the context of neo-realism. By being inspired by Lakatos, we want to show possible ways of NCR's development and project its possible futures having in mind the dynamics of realist tradition

<sup>1</sup> See: J. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs. An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 91, no. 4 (1997), pp. 899-912; G. Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, vol. 51, no. 1 (1998), pp. 144-172; J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?", *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1999), pp. 5-55; P.D. Feaver (et al.), "Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)", *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2000), pp. 165-193; C. Elman, M.F. Elman, "How Not to Be Lakatos Intolerant. Appraising Progress in IR Research", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2002), pp. 231-262; C. Elman, M.F. Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations Theory. Appraising the Field*, London–Cambridge 2003, R.L. Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism", [in:] C. Elman, M.F. Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations...*, pp. 311-347; B. Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name. Neoclassical Realism and the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism", *Security Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2008), pp. 294-321; A. Quinn, "Kenneth Waltz, Adam Smith, and the Limits of Science. Hard Choices for Neoclassical Realism", *International Politics*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2013), pp. 159-182; M. Foulon, "Neoclassical Realist Analyses of Foreign Policy", [in:] C.G. Thies (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis*, Oxford 2015, pp. 255-266; N.A. Sears, "The Neoclassical Realist Research Program. Between Progressive Promise and Degenerative Dangers", *International Politics Reviews*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2017), pp. 21-31; S.E. Lobell, N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and the Foreign Policy*, Cambridge 2009; N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, New York 2016; K. Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigm and Domestic Politics. A Critique of the Newest Realism", *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2017), pp. 155-190.

<sup>2</sup> E. Harrison, "The Democratic Peace Research Program and System Level Analysis", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2020), pp. 155-165; J. Ungerer, "Assessing the Progress of the Democratic Peace Research Program", *International Studies Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1-31; F. Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*, Stanford, CA 2014; A. Freyberg-Inan, E. Harrison, P. James (eds.), *Evaluating Progress in International Relations. How Do You Know?*, New York 2016.

<sup>3</sup> M. Foulon, "Neoclassical Realist...", passim; K. Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigm...", passim.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody...", passim.

as a fundamental part of IR. However, first we need to discuss a link between the concept of progress and the use of philosophy of science to legitimize it in the discipline.

The issue of scientific progress of the IR is almost as old as the discipline itself, since the narration about it fueled what is called the 1<sup>st</sup> great debate, sparked by Edward Carr's book and his distinction between 'degenerated' idealists and 'progressive' realists.<sup>5</sup> The question of scientific progress was revisited, among others, by Kaplan at the beginning of the 1960s during the 2<sup>nd</sup> great debate. He equated it with the development and proliferation of theoretical knowledge that was supposed to be the core of scientific IR.<sup>6</sup> The problem of progress has only gained momentum when it was married with the significance of philosophy of science as a foundation legitimizing IR theories as properly scientific and their appraisal as such; either in general terms,<sup>7</sup> based on Tomas Kuhn's notion of paradigms and revolutionary change in science,<sup>8</sup> or the methodology of scientific research programs à la Lakatos.<sup>9</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, IR scholars have engaged in a cottage industry of devising a paradigm for every occasion. This stemmed from the need to prove the progressiveness of one's own approach through framing it as a paradigm – an entity within which normal (progressive) science occurs. But it also had a 'less progressive' impact on the discipline. If everyone is within a paradigm, the truly progressive academic debate becomes a victim of incommensurability and crashes onto the border of boredom.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, when referring to the problem of scientific progress, especially in the case of NCR, authors frequently apply different philosophies of science. We have scholars inspired by Kuhn's idea of scientific revolutions and epistemic communities working within one paradigm that is probably on the downwards trend.<sup>11</sup> After the turn of the centuries, there is more and more use and abuse of the Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programs.<sup>12</sup> It seems that 'research program' began to supersede 'paradigm' as a buzzword of choice. Nonetheless, one can also find authors who actually mix ideas and categories derived from works of both philosophers, who in fact

<sup>5</sup> See: E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939. An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, New York 1939, 1946, 1951, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> M.A. Kaplan, "Is International Relations a Discipline?", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1961), pp. 462-476.

<sup>7</sup> K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Long Grove 1979, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> J. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm...", passim; M. Banks, "The Evolution of International Relations Theory", [in:] M. Banks (ed.), *Conflict in World Society. A New Perspective on International Relations*, Brighton 1984, pp. 1-21.

<sup>9</sup> R.O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York 1986.

<sup>10</sup> O. Wæver, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate", [in:] S. Smith, K. Booth, M. Zaleski (eds.), *In International Theory. Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 149-185.

<sup>11</sup> M. Banks, "The Evolution...", passim; J. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm...", passim; S. Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy*, London 1998; K. Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigm...", passim.

<sup>12</sup> J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody...", passim; C. Elman, M.F. Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations...*, passim; B. Rathbun, "A Rose...", passim; N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory...*, passim.

developed two diverse and somewhat contradictory ways of describing and assessing scientific progress. It is acceptable when a conscious attempt is made to synthesize two philosophies of science, even if it fails because the approaches are too far apart.<sup>13</sup> The problem arises, however, when somebody writes about *hard core of paradigm*<sup>14</sup> or [t] *he full set of assumptions of the realist paradigm, shared by each of these subparadigms, is laid out systematically by Patrick James. Drawing from Imre Lakatos, he describes them as the "hard core" to which all realist theories must conform*,<sup>15</sup> which might suggest that the authors struggle to understand the appropriate thread of philosophy of science to which they refer. This is the exact problem in the passage above; Narizny mixed the terms from Kuhn and Lakatos in one paragraph, creating a chimera. One recurring pattern can be identified after analyzing these works. Scholars use motifs developed within philosophy of science in order to justify their own take on the progressiveness, either of the discipline itself or a particular approach within it. A good appraisal needs to use the philosophy of science to legitimize one's approach; a good example of this instrumental treatment is the publication of Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein,<sup>16</sup> which mentions the concept of Larry Laudan's research traditions, but does not necessarily make use of it.

There is also a group of scholars who are fine with writing about the progress of NCR without justifying it with a particular philosophy of science.<sup>17</sup> Other scholars are very skeptical or even reluctant to the idea of using concepts from the philosophy of science in IR publications focusing on IR theories, and point out that referring to Kuhn's paradigms or Lakatos's scientific research programs in fact perpetuates conflicts between researchers and hinders proper communication.<sup>18</sup> We want to be identified with this group, as while referring to NCR, we do not want to operationalize<sup>19</sup> a particular strand of philosophy of science. Instead, we are only inspired by Lakatos's philosophy, and precisely because we respect it, we do not want to use it in our appraisal of NCR as a yardstick, but merely as a source of inspiration.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, we confront literature referring to Lakatos's notion of scientific progress in IR with the philosopher himself and consequently

<sup>13</sup> J. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm...", passim.

<sup>14</sup> B. Rathbun, "A Rose...", pp. 294-295.

<sup>15</sup> K. Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigm...", p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> R. Sil, P.J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms. Analytic Eclecticism in World Politics*, New York 2010, pp. 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> G. Rose, "Neoclassical Realism...", pp. 144-172, R.L. Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical...", pp. 311-334, A. Quinn, "Kenneth Waltz...", passim; M. Foulon, "Neoclassical Realist...", passim.

<sup>18</sup> O. Wæver, "The Rise...", passim; T.C. Walker, "The Perils of Paradigm Mentalities. Revisiting Kuhn, Lakatos, and Popper", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2010), pp. 433-451.

<sup>19</sup> By 'operationalization' we understand: 1) formulate a hypothesis on the basis of a particular theory, for instance 'NCR is a progressive research programme'; 2) indicate what particular empirical phenomena could be used to falsify or verify it, for example 'NCR contains theoretical innovations the explanatory logic of which has not been presented in the discipline at large so far'; 3) show beyond reasonable doubt why, on the basis of your chosen theory, you are referring to those particular phenomena, 'in the case of the methodology of scientific research programs, the indicator of progressiveness is the ability of a particular program to predict novel facts, which can be in turn attained only by theoretical innovations.'

show how trying to operationalize his methodology in social science is not the way to go. We refer to both Elmans' and Schweller's proposals,<sup>20</sup> pointing out that the first attempt at a detailed operationalization of Lakatos's idea is not possible in social sciences, and that the second, relying on a commonsense approach, also proved insufficient to apply Lakatos's criteria in practice. In contrast to these authors, in the second part of the article, we use Lakatos's ideas as a way to reconstruct the neorealist research program from *Theory of International Politics* to *Neoclassical Theory of International Politics*. We use the language of Lakatos's philosophy by identifying the theoretical contents of NCR hard core as well as its positive and negative heuristic. Finally, we show how Lakatos's philosophy inspired us to develop three metaphors – weathered tree, graft, and seedling – that help to convey something about the present version of NCR and its possible futures. Additionally, we consider NCR a positive heuristic consisting of a partially articulated set of guidelines on the development of a new version of the program or as a new research program as such. Therefore, our metaphors can be considered possible projections of the futures of NCR and thus act as guides for researchers. In the third part, by referring to particular texts/theories and authors, we appraise them as being best understood through one of our metaphors. Consequently, we use them as examples needed for projecting possible futures of NCR.

## PROBLEMATIZING LAKATOS

In their reflections regarding Lakatos' framework, Elmans gave a lot of attention to the issue of progressiveness of a particular research program – in itself and *vis à vis* other programs.<sup>21</sup> The problem of appraising a specific research program *vis à vis* others seems to be of paramount importance in our discipline, mainly due to the fact that scholars are still experiencing theoretical pluralism, i.e., almost simultaneous development of many diverse theories offering different views of international reality as such. Therefore, our metaphors will demonstrate the possible development of NCR in the background of the whole discipline.

Elmans argued that the central category for the evaluation of progressiveness (in both instances) was the notion of 'new facts' that the program(s) is/are predicting. Thus, they claim that it is possible to determine the progressiveness of particular program and to rate programs' progressiveness.<sup>22</sup> To acquire that, Elmans argue, it is important to empirically point the new facts that legitimize or show the progressiveness of particular program. They are well aware of the importance of new facts to the MSRP as a whole: 'Because predicting new phenomena is such an important part of the

<sup>20</sup> C. Elman, M.F. Elman, "How Not to Be...", pp. 231-262, R.L. Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical...", pp. 311-334.

<sup>21</sup> See: C. Elman, M.F. Elman, "How Not to Be...", pp. 231-262, C. Elman, M.F. Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations...*, passim.

<sup>22</sup> C. Elman, M.F. Elman, *Lessons from Lakatos*, in C. Elman, M.F. Elman (eds.), *Progress in International Relations...*, pp. 21-68.

methodology of scientific research programs, the definition of novelty plays a crucial role.<sup>23</sup> This statement is uttered after the authors analyze three types of *ad hoc* hypotheses and the way they show the intrinsic progressiveness of particular programs, and in particular combinations, the progressiveness of one program in comparison to another.

The essence of their argument is the importance of the prediction of new facts by a particular program and how it provides for its progressiveness.<sup>24</sup> After providing various definitions of new facts present in Lakatos's thought and a critical appraisal of some controversies that arose around it, they present the definition, and claim it as their own, from the text of Worrall (1978: 48-49): [MSRP] *embodies the simple rule that one cannot use the same fact twice: once in the construction of a theory and then again in its support. But any fact which the theory explains but which it was not in this way pre-arranged to explain supports the theory whether or not the fact was known prior to the theory's proposal.*<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the new fact is one that, from the functional point of view, does not make a vicious cycle – it is not used as an example of explanation in particular theory, and then is not the example of the successful prediction upon its basis. What is more, while explaining the role of 'new facts' in the 2002 article, the authors referred not only to the idea of Worrall, but also to the concept of Zahar, who had also worked together with Lakatos, and Musgrave.<sup>26</sup>

Elmans stressed that the ideas of Zahar and Worrall are more relevant, especially in reference to social sciences. A fact cannot buttress a theory if it has played some heuristic role in that theory's construction.<sup>27</sup> The fact that this idea was accepted not only by Worrall, but also by Lakatos himself, is the best proof that a precise definition of a 'novel fact' is almost impossible. What is more, it caused some obstacles to Lakatos, the author of this framework. Thus, Elmans, although aware of all the difficulties and controversies regarding the possible use of Lakatos's framework they elucidated quite clearly, did not try to take a step forward and propose their own way of using Lakatos' ideas of appraising research programs. They offered neither an explicit proposal to set the Lakatos' idea aside nor any way to modify or redefine the elements that continue to generate problems.

It is of course the amiable way of interpreting the explication of new facts made by Elmans (with help of Zahar and Worrall). Unfortunately, even then, the category itself is not clear enough, it does not provide easy to operationalize criteria and cannot

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-33.

<sup>25</sup> J. Worrall, "Research Programmes, Empirical Support and the Duhem Problem. Replies to Criticism", [in:] G. Radnitzky, G. Andersson (eds.), *Progress and Rationality in Science*, Dordrecht 1978, pp. 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> E. Zahar, "Why Did Einstein's Programme Supersede Lorentz's? (I)", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1973), pp. 95-123; I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", [in:] I. Lakatos, J. Worrall, G. Currie (eds.), *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, Cambridge 1978, pp. 8-102; A. Musgrave, "Logical versus Historical Theories of Confirmation", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1974), pp. 1-23.

<sup>27</sup> I. Lakatos, E. Zahar, "Why Did Copernicus' Research Programme Supersede Ptolemy's?", [in:] R.S. Westman (ed.), *The Copernican Achievement*, Berkeley 1975, pp. 375-376; C. Elman, M.F. Elman, "How Not to Be...", p. 239.

be readily used for evaluation of a particular theory or research. The term 'new facts' is quite controversial in social sciences, where researchers are part of their research problems, and the latter cannot be isolated and subjected to observation free from the constraints of language, values, beliefs, or even ideology. While thinking and describing 'new facts,' scholars use the language that was developed within already existing research programs, so they can (even unintentionally) shape these 'new facts,' which, according to Lakatos, would no longer be new. Occasionally, the very anticipation of new facts by researchers working on new theories influences their description and analysis, making their novelty questionable as well. Thus, one can assume that in social sciences, old facts construct the language used to speak about new ones.

In the context of Elmans' and Lakatos's idea of progress, we would like to refer to Randall Schweller's ideas on the subject. Similarly to us, Schweller did not operationalize Lakatos's assumptions, indicating that this would be unfeasible, especially given the peculiarities of social science, the multiplicity of IR theories, etc. He stressed that applying Lakatos's methodology to IR theory might bring serious obstacles<sup>28</sup>. Obviously, it is not the lack of insightful characterization of Lakatos's research programs that make Schweller's approach questionable. We find his adoption of a commonsense approach quite reasonable. However, he did not even try to rationalize why particular elements of Lakatos's conception might encounter some obstacles, as in the case of Elmans. Actually, we follow some of his arguments about the difficulties of applying Lakatos's idea. However, we build our commonsense approach on the basis of Lakatos's framework, whereas Schweller did not want to have anything to do with the idea of scientific research program. In contrast to Schweller, we build our metaphors inspired by Lakatos's philosophy of science and we use descriptive language of MSRP to reconstruct neorealism and NCR as a positive heuristic or a brand new research program in this context. We refer to the realist hard core, positive and negative heuristic as well as Lakatos's idea regarding criteria for evaluating the progressiveness of a research program only retrospectively.<sup>29</sup>

## INSPIRED BY LAKATOS SERIOUSLY

The three metaphors can be treated as our way of creating commonsense framework inspired by Lakatos's ideas. We chose to develop the metaphor of the weathered tree to indicate a possible degeneration of the NCR research program as evidenced by elements already discussed or even criticized in the discipline. The metaphor of the graft, on the other hand, is used to illustrate the NCR program that, although sometimes somehow incoherent, is used by scholars and thus bears fruit, that is, offers sufficient explanation (or understanding) of international realm. Finally, we use the metaphor of the seedling to show a possible development of NCR into a progressive research program distinct from its predecessor, neorealism. This metaphor indicates that NCR

<sup>28</sup> R.L. Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical...", pp. 312-314.

<sup>29</sup> I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology...", p. 73.

can disconnect from neorealism's metatheory and causal logic forming a distinct and progressive research program.

Lakatos's 'methodology' has its own unique problems rooted in a certain vagueness of his philosophical prose: Is a program one theory that changes along the program's lifespan or rather a string of theories added over time to the core? What are the specific criteria for placing certain contents within the categories of hard core, negative or positive heuristic? Who is the actor? Is it a single theorist or an epistemic community? Can the hard core be modified by the contents of the negative and positive heuristic or do such modifications herald the creation of a new research program? Lakatos did not precisely specify whether the sequence of theories within the program should consist of theories developed by a single theorizing subject or derive from a single paradigm (the same ontological and epistemological assumptions). He did not specify how extensive a research program should be, indicating that even 'science as a whole can be regarded as a huge research program.'<sup>30</sup> We assume that a research program is a set of theories developed by diverse theorizing units. In a way, our stylized presentation of neorealism, starting with Waltz's hard core followed by the negative heuristic present in the constellation of structural theories that were building upon it and topped by the positive heuristic of NCR, effectively responds to these questions.

By 'negative heuristic,' we understand all the theories based on the hard core formulated by Waltz, that led to modifications of realism itself without changes within the main assumptions. Hard core is protected from refutations by 'negative heuristic.' When theory and experimental results are incompatible, this rule (negative heuristic) prohibits the *modus tollens* to be directed at the sentences constructing the hard core of the program. The research program also includes a 'protective belt' of auxiliary hypotheses. The role of the 'protective belt' is to take the full impact of the tests and be repeatedly adjusted, or even replaced altogether, so as to defend the core. The protective belt arises as recommended by positive heuristic. As Lakatos writes, positive heuristic consists of a partially articulated set of suggestions or hints on how to change, develop the 'refutable variants' of the research-program, how to modify, sophisticate, the 'refutable' protective belt.<sup>31</sup> Positive heuristic can be perceived as a long-term plan of action, anticipating successive 'refutations' and ways of including successive anomalies in the research program's confirmation register. It is a kind of guide, 'it protects the researcher from getting lost in the ocean of anomalies.' That is why we consider NCR as positive heuristic that must take on all the criticism and be developed so that, over time, it can be solidified and incorporated into the negative heuristic. Positive heuristic is more than just a mechanism for forcing the refinement of working versions of the 'protective belt.' Here, positive heuristic specify a repertoire of supporting hypotheses when the research program is confronted with relevant anomalies. To summarize, positive heuristic is the part of the research program that both determines the problems to be solved, selecting the relevant anomalies, and determines the methods of solving them. Now, we

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 50.



are ready to present our understanding of 'hard core of neorealism,' how we define its negative heuristic and why it is possible to consider NCR as a positive heuristic.

The hard core of the neorealist research program is explicated in Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, which is subject to different interpretations. For us, the notion of self-help system as an ideal type of international politics at large is central for the hard core. Here, we have the three levels of the definition of the structure – anarchy as an ordering principle on the highest level of abstraction, like units that wish to propagate their existence, and the distribution of capabilities among them. Self-help system with such a structure has consequences: 1) the units in the system tend to balance one another either by finding allies to pool their capabilities together or by the intensive development of one's own capabilities; 2) systems in which the capabilities are distributed mainly between two states tend to be more stable than those in which the capabilities are spread to three or more powers; 3) systemic change is understood as a change of ordering principles (ex. anarchy to hierarchy) – changes in distribution of capabilities are confined within the system and do not affect its primary logic.

This hard core was criticized on many different accounts,<sup>32</sup> and Waltz's own responses to the criticism could be understood as an initial negative heuristic of the nascent neorealist program. There were also positive responses, some scholars picked up particular consequences of Waltz's hard core and created their own theories that built upon it. As the first consequence, there is the theory explaining the patterns of alliance building, external balancing,<sup>33</sup> as well as the theory that addresses and problematizes the 'passiveness' of Waltzian units in form of Mearsheimer offensive realism.<sup>34</sup> The second consequence guided to an extent the construction of the theory aimed at updating the logic of Waltz's self-help system<sup>35</sup> or developing the nexus between the distribution of capabilities and the norms and regimes governing the international system.<sup>36</sup> The third consequence of the hard core was tackled by the IPE theory of change in capabilities and its consequences for norms that govern the provision of the economic aspect of international public goods.<sup>37</sup> At the point of their creation, all these theories should be considered part of neorealist positive heuristic, but over time, they have matured the neorealist program and became its negative heuristic. The new wave of theories, the NCR, could thus be considered neorealism as positive heuristic.

There were problems, though. The older set of theories were able to move successfully from the positive to negative heuristic of the neorealist program because they were built upon the direct consequences of the Waltzian hard core. The new set of theories, the NCR, were further removed from the core and were predicated not only on the consequences derived from it, but also form the direct criticisms of the neorealist

<sup>32</sup> See: R.O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism...*

<sup>33</sup> S.M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca 1987.

<sup>34</sup> J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001.

<sup>35</sup> B. Buzan, Ch. Jones, R. Little, *The Logic of Anarchy. Neorealism to Structural Realism*, New York 1993.

<sup>36</sup> S.D. Krasner, *International Regimes*, Ithaca 1983.

<sup>37</sup> R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge 1981.

program so far (as in the 1990s). The NCR can be derived, first, from the consequence of the neorealist core, namely the Waltz's insistence on the need of creation of the theory of foreign policy that would complement his own theory of international politics, which in turn could provide the precision needed for predicting the behavior of particular states in particular contexts. Second, from the criticism that neorealism was unable to predict the end of cold war – this critical claim is in itself very vague, but nevertheless carried a significant intellectual weight aptly represented by the drive toward the second image (state level) considerations as a way forward for the whole discipline.<sup>38</sup> Hence, NCR as a positive heuristic of neorealist research program has been much further removed from the core than the generation of theories that preceded it, and its content as whole has been, especially its quixotic insistence on both the systemic and domestic levels, much more problematic.

The move of the first set of neorealist theories from positive to negative heuristic is history now. We can consider it as a sign of progressiveness of neorealism at the time. This claim is also coherent with Lakatos's thought as far as he was arguing that the appraisal could be done only from the perspective of time. What can we say, then, about the progressiveness of NCR as a positive heuristic of neorealism or a new research program? We will show three interpretations of the present and their impact on the future in form of metaphors, as they can be useful for the reader to do the appraisal themselves according to their own values and metatheoretical stance. In conclusion of the article, we will do it ourselves from our stance, as well.

The metaphor of a weathered tree starts with the notion of degenerating research programme. For Lakatos, the degeneration stemmed from inability to deliver new facts as a response to anomalies the program faced. Here, the problem with the category of a new fact and its use in social sciences, as opposed to natural sciences, is married with the historicity of the appraisal. Lakatos stated that his method should be used to appraise the programs of the past, not to judge those of the present.<sup>39</sup> Thus, we would consider as a weathered tree, a program where there is a theory which is not new and can be perceived as bringing to the table not a new fact, but an old mistake – a flawed theoretical notion, a definition or explanatory logic of a particular content from within a program that is like a weathered tree. Here, the context of the particular program should be considered, namely a discipline within which the program functions. We believe that programs themselves are not lonely islands, incommensurable *vis a vis* one another, but function in a larger social whole, the discipline, with its history, debates, language, problems, and controversies. Thus, as a sign of degeneration, we would take, at the very least, a claim made from within a particular program that has already been made somewhere else in the discipline and did not gain traction then. This would be likened to the yellowing of the leaves or dropping fruits before they ripen. The degeneration can be deeper, though, for instance, when a program develops contents that have a certain

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<sup>38</sup> R.N. Lebow, T. Risse-Kappen, *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, New York 1995.

<sup>39</sup> I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology...", *passim*.

quality that was criticized in the discipline during its history, and consequently these contents failed to produce vibrant research on their basis in the long run. What is more, those that work within a particular program are oblivious to the fact that they are making old mistakes, which results in their program being akin to an old husk of a tree – its branches broken, its roots rotten, its trunk hollowed by dry rot, standing alone and uninteresting for an orchardist. Thus, the idea of this metaphor is to look for theoretical notions or mechanisms that are very similar, if not identical, to the problems that were raised in the history of IR, preferably with the authors of these present notions oblivious to this fact. In the case of the NCR, this degeneration could involve presenting certain developments made by NC realists as something new and original, whereas these developments would be in fact ideas or notions that used to be presented throughout the history of the discipline and were considered unpromising.

The metaphor of a graft is inspired directly by the passages from Lakatos where he describes the wave–particle duality as a core of early quantum physics research program.<sup>40</sup> The value of such a duality, even though it breaks the law of excluded middle, is aptly described by famous quote from Albert Einstein: ‘But what is light really? Is it a wave or a shower of photons? There seems no likelihood for forming a consistent description of the phenomena of light by a choice of only one of the two languages. It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.’<sup>41</sup> Despite the incoherence in the hard core of the program and between it and its extensions, it can be viewed as progressive, as long as its fruits are fresh and appealing. The metaphor of the graft takes off from here: if we consider the neorealism as a stock (hard core and negative heuristic) and NCR as a scion (positive heuristic), we have a tree with strong roots of elegant and parsimonious systemic theory that garnered a lot of scientific credibility in its life, and scion of unit level variables that are conducive to the research that bears ripe and sweet apples. In this instance, the NCR as a research program would be a hybrid. It would lessen the pressures for its coherence and parsimony, as long as its fruits, research based on this hybrid, would be tasty for general IR public. Those fruits can be best understood as, on one hand, the descriptive language, causal generalizations, and theoretical umbrella, that can be used by particular researchers to legitimize their own empirical work, on the other, as an easy to use (due to its hybrid, quixotic nature) epistemological other for research programs in IR that do not share NCR’s realist DNA.

The metaphor of a seedling is a tricky one. If we consider neorealism an orchard that stems from the roots of Waltz’s proposition and ends with the buds on the highest branches, which are its positive heuristic – the NCR – what kind of an offspring would this tree yield? This question requires that we turn to the distinction between

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> A. Einstein, L. Infeld (eds.), *The Evolution of Physics. The Growth of Ideas from the Early Concepts to Relativity and Quanta*, Cambridge 1938.

philosophical and scientific ontologies.<sup>42</sup> The former is the metatheory that divides the approaches based on their answers to the questions of how the social world exists (the subject-object of knowing problem) and how we can talk about it in a scientific fashion (can we transcend with our scientific statements the reality that gives us the basic material for those statements). The latter is the language of a particular research programme (indirectly predicated upon a particular metatheory) that both constructs and describes the subject matter of the particular theory created within this program. The present orchard of realism is roughly positivist (the language of explanation, variables, detached observers, data, causality, etc.) in the first instance, and system-centric in the second one (the causal logic of independent variables on the level of system, intervening variables on the level of the state, and dependent variables in form of the state's policy behavior). The metaphorical seedling we propose would cut the link between positivism and realism (NCR), and require another metatheoretical stance (from among the ideal types presented by Jackson's analyticism would be the most obvious fit) and through the use of the vocabulary of realism embedded in the discipline (political community – the state, power, interests, capabilities, security, amorality, etc.), construct with it another scientific ontology, arising from the concerns about the state and its qualities and then looking for answers on the systemic level. Hence, the NCR as a seedling would first look for the insights about the state's foreign policy inside of the state itself and then for additional insights on the level of the international system. For some, such a move suggests that it would cease to be realism altogether,<sup>43</sup> but since these voices were tuned to the neorealism on the basis of positivistic metatheory, the NCR, understood as a neorealism's positive heuristic, seedling with a different one, would successfully evade them.

## CASE ANALYSIS: THREE METAPHORS

### The Weathered Tree

Referring to our first metaphor, we want to point out an important weakness of NCR, frequently mentioned in the literature, namely the identification of an increasing number of new intervening variables whose arbitrary use leads to accusations of formulating *ad hoc* or even *post hoc* arguments.<sup>44</sup> The main argument of neoclassical realists is that pressures generated by the international system's structure are mediated by the state level variables.

Since the late 1990s, NCR has essentially evolved through the identification of an increasing number of intervening variables that theorists have used according to the

<sup>42</sup> P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, London–New York 2010, pp. 28-32.

<sup>43</sup> J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody...?", *passim*.

<sup>44</sup> S.M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition", [in:] I. Katznelson, H. Milner (eds.), *Political Science. State of the Discipline*, New York 2002, pp. 197-230; B. Rathbun, "A Rose...", pp. 294-321; S. Tang, "Taking Stock of Neoclassical Realism", *International Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2009), pp. 799-803.

*pick and choose* strategy. The first attempts to deal with the criticism of using intervening variables in an *ad hoc* manner were the volumes of Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell published in 2009 and 2016. They claim: 'Our objective here is to develop a comprehensive neoclassical realist research programme of international politics, which provides greater explanatory leverage than the conventional alternatives, including structural realism, liberalism, or constructivism.'<sup>45</sup> This might suggest that the authors wanted not only to propose a comprehensive and complete version of NCR, but also a version able to explain both state foreign policy and international outcomes as they called it 'neoclassical theory of international politics' – a theory better than the three approaches mentioned by the authors.

In order to fulfill the promises formulated in the book's introduction, the authors classified the intervening variables and indicated when NCR researchers could use their particular groups. They identified four clusters of intervening variables: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions.<sup>46</sup> Apart from Rose's proposal from 1998, this was one of the most meaningful attempts to group intervening variables of NCR. The authors also tried to determine the importance of particular variables in particular situations. Their idea was to *clarify when the different intervening variables can influence the dependent variable to different degrees over time*.<sup>47</sup> For instance, *when states are responding to crises and making short-term foreign policy decisions, the role of leaders is paramount, especially since there is little time to consult societal actors. (...) therefore, it would make most sense to select variables from the leader image and strategic culture clusters, since the short time frame reduces the impact of the societal and institutional variables*.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, when decision-making processes are stretched in time, variables from the other three clusters become more important. The authors also identified three phases of decision-making process and indicated that in each phase, neoclassical realist should refer to different clusters of intervening variables; in the first phase, leader's images are the most important, whereas in the second and third (implementation) phases, neoclassical realists should focus on strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the assumptions formulated by Ripsman and his colleagues also face obstacles. Identifying four clusters of variables, each of which can be expanded indefinitely, did not solve the problem of a catalogue of unrelated variables that *amount to no more than a laundry list*.<sup>50</sup> No variable is in fact excluded from the program proposed in their study.

Their catalogue did not change much compared to what Rose did in his article from 1998. The three clusters are in fact nothing more than the state's extraction capacities

<sup>45</sup> N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, St.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory...*, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-79.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

already mentioned by Rose, which consist of strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. All of them influence the state's ability to act in or influence international realm. Moreover, borders between two clusters seem blurred sometimes and it may be unclear whether to treat some variables as belonging to the strategic culture or the state-society relations. In particular, the authors referred to civil-military relations as an element of state-society interaction, although they also considered them a part of the strategic culture. They stressed: *The nature of civil-military relations captures a final element of state-society interaction. Civil-military relations involve matters related to the interaction between civil society, political elites, and the military as an institution*,<sup>51</sup> although previous paragraphs read: *For Kupchan, strategic culture – or deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security – take root among elites and the general public*.<sup>52</sup> Here, the authors referred to democratic norms shaping relations between democracies. It also blurs the lines between these two clusters of variables. Actually, this begs the question why identify these clusters at all, when one variable can appear in two of them and therefore influence different phases of the decision-making process.

Second, the authors did not explain how system pressures are transformed by intervening variables; they did not formulate any kind of a transmission belt converting the system's demands into state actions. Consequently, their volume promises more than it gives, as it did not follow the demand formulated by the authors for the Type III neo-classical realism that should offer more than structural realism and *explain phenomena ranging from short-term crisis decision-making by individual states up to and including broader patterns of international outcomes and structural change*<sup>53</sup>.

It is to be doubted whether the authors are following the assumptions of 'soft positivism,' as they claim. They emphasized their awareness of all the limitations of positivism in the social sciences – human subjectivity and interpretation that complicate the fact-value distinction.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, they follow the idea of McCartney that soft positivism shares with hard positivism the assumption that it is possible to attain objective knowledge of the world and that theory testing and empirical analysis are the hallmarks of social scientific inquiry. Furthermore, soft positivists are convinced that social scientists cannot just use natural sciences methods, which distinguishes them from hard positivists. One should ask whether Ripsman and his colleagues follow the assumptions of soft positivism. On the one hand, they declared they were trying to create a theory allowing generating hypotheses and propositions tested against carefully selected cases.<sup>55</sup> On the other, their proposal is still only a catalogue of variables with very unspecified causal linkages between them. Moreover, by including as many intervening variables as possible, they are trying to do the impossible from Waltz's perspective: they want to generate a theory, which by definition is supposed to be parsimonious and elegant, that is almost

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

one to one corresponding to social reality. In 1979, K. Waltz described similar development as a step backward and a renewed turn toward behaviorism hampering theoretical progress.<sup>56</sup> The idea of incorporating as many intervening variables as possible and creating a 1:1 model of reality have lead neoclassical realists far away from building a sparse theory. Thus, it seems almost as if Waltz criticized NCR twenty years before it appeared.

Hence, what we get is not a theory or a progressive research program, but the same mistake foreign policy scholars made while struggling for a Grand Unified Theory (GUT). It has proven impossible, just as it will be impossible to create a program that considers an infinite number of intervening variables. In his famous publication from 1966, Rosenau suggested that the field of foreign policy analysis was dominated by studies indicating numerous internal and external factors determining states' behavior, however *to identify factors is not to trace their influence*.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, he stated: *The field has an abundance of frameworks and approaches which cut across societies and conceptualize the ends, means, capabilities, or sources of foreign policy, but no schemes which link up these components of external behavior in causal sequences*.<sup>58</sup>

The similarity to NCR is not coincidental. It resembles a weathered tree because by indicating more and more intervening variables, it only offers theoretical content that reproduces old mistakes, both made by foreign policy scholars who, following the idea of behaviorism, wanted to generate GUT, and criticized by Waltz. Moreover, one should expect an explanation of reasons behind combining theories and variables from diverse levels of analysis. In fact, the authors did not clarify, how their version of NCR is a step forward as a positive heuristic or a new program.

## The Graft

We chose the article about the Political Theory of Economic statecraft for a case presenting NCR as a graft precisely for its quixotic nature.<sup>59</sup> It can be argued that it is not even 'realistic' in the traditional sense. If the definition of NCR is a theory that: 1) looks at the system (anarchy) and its particular qualities (geopolitical balance of power) as an independent variable and then 2) identifies how the qualities of a state understood as intervening variables translate system level stimuli into 3) a dependent variable, namely, state behavior, then Blanchard and Ripsman work is clearly NCR. When we look at their model,<sup>60</sup> we see the pressure of the system in two aspects: 'international factors' understood as the geopolitical and geoeconomical present state that is the background for 'economic stimuli,' direct economic incentive or sanction from another actor mitigated

<sup>56</sup> A. Quin, "Kenneth Waltz...", passim.

<sup>57</sup> J.N. Rosenau, "Pre-theories and Theories and Foreign Policy", [in:] F.R. Barry (ed.), *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics*, Evanston 1996, p. 31. [Reprinted in J.N. Rosenau (ed.), *The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1980].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> J.-M.F. Blanchard, N.M. Ripsman, "A Political Theory of Economic Statecraft", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2008), pp. 371-398.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382.

by possible third-party involvement. Moreover, we have the general 'feeling' of the system as anarchic, so able to intervene without any higher authority into the relation between the state using economic statecraft and the resisting/succumbing state. Then, we have the state level variables that intervene and work as a 'transmission belt' for the causation of systemic variables. In the case of the work in question, it is the stateness of the actor receiving a particular economic stimulus. Stateness is a composite intervening variable consisting of three elements: decision making autonomy of foreign policy executive, its capacity to co-opt or coerce major internal societal actors, and its legitimacy *vis a vis* the state's society. These elements explain the state's resistance to economic stimuli. It is the dependent variable of state's behavior. Furthermore, we have the assumptions of motives of foreign policy executive (state's leader). She wants to stay in power, which translates to the general motive for her state survival.<sup>61</sup> This, coupled with the title, namely 'political theory,' gives the whole paper a strong realist undertone. Last but not least, the second author belongs to a later NCR triumvirate advertising their 2016 theory as a start of a proper new NCR research program.

Yet, there are reasons why Political Theory of Economic Statecraft placement in NCR camp is somewhat problematic. First, the authors posit their theory as a solution to the existing problems of economical statecraft literature, and among it, the realist approach to the subject. They do so without even mentioning their own affiliation. Second, their treatment, where it is actually systemic, of the system and its influence on the state reacting to some other actor's attempt on the economical statecraft<sup>62</sup> is more akin to general treatment of the subject by the mainstream IR embodied by neo-neo synthesis<sup>63</sup> than to the neorealist orthodoxy.<sup>64</sup> Third, their independent variable is in essence still a stimulus from other actors in international politics more than from the system itself – this, coupled with the fact that the publication itself is in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, raises the question if the FPA affiliation of the text's contents is more in place than in the NCR camp.

Their metatheory does not help with answering the above question. They follow the qualitative positivist approach faithfully. They carefully explicate their intervening variable, specifying its three aspects of autonomy, capacity, and legitimization,<sup>65</sup> and they place it within their broader theoretical model. They also undertake the operationalization of these aspects qualitatively by giving each of them three possible states (high, mid or low) and then showing what real-world phenomena will indicate the level of each aspect. In the end, they specify what combination of the three components

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 377.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-379.

<sup>63</sup> As understood by: O. Wæver, "Figures of International Thought. Introducing Persons Instead of Paradigms", [in:] I.B. Neumann, O. Wæver (eds.), *The Future of International Relations. Masters in the Making?*, London 1997, pp. 18-21; S.L. Lamy, "Contemporary Mainstream Approaches. Neo-realism and Neo-liberalism", [in:] J. Baylis, St. Smith, P. Owens (eds.), *Globalization of World Politics*, New York 2014, pp. 126-140.

<sup>64</sup> Exemplified by: K. Waltz, *Theory of International...*, passim.

<sup>65</sup> J.-M.F. Blanchard, N.M. Ripsman, "A Political Theory...", pp. 377-382.



qualifies stateness level.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, to test their explanative model, they conduct case studies showing how Romania, Hungary, and Nepal's foreign policy behavior, when under pressure of economic statecraft, conform with their model's expectations. Their adherence to the positivist ideal type of metatheory is not a factor to determine their NCR/FPA identity. Nevertheless, it shows how positivist low to mid-range theories can explain interesting empirical cases, adding to the discipline the explanatory logic that can be used by other scholars.<sup>67</sup>

This is the moment where the quixotic nature of our graft metaphor comes into play. If we consider the problematic status of the NCR affiliation of the text in question, but treat it as a graft on neorealism as its positive heuristic, its fruits are progressive in the context of the whole discipline. This model is easy to use in research thanks to its explication and operationalization. Its explanative logic could very well be used as a part of a more general theory of IR and it is puzzling for us why so little, if anything, of it was included in the later work Ripsman co-authored with Taliaferro and Lobel.<sup>68</sup>

But in the end, it adds to the question on how to apprise progressiveness of Blanchard and Ripsman's theory of economic statecraft. Does it represent the progress of NCR as a new and independent research program, and if so, why did its parts not find their way into *Neoclassical Realist Theory*? Does it represent the progress of the older neorealist program that NCR is part of as its positive heuristic? Or may it be the progress of neo-neo mainstream of social science of IR at the time the text was written? We will address these questions in the conclusion.

In the second study, we want to refer to Taliaferro's *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery*,<sup>69</sup> a perfect example of a possible NCR development in the way described by the graft metaphor. NCR could develop a theory that offers explanations, although in the process, it might sometimes depart from neorealist hard core. There is duality in Taliaferro's idea: first, when it comes to realist assumptions, because system variables and state variables are treated equally – Taliaferro did not prioritize systemic stimuli; and second, the dualistic nature of Taliaferro's text results from a combination of two different theories derived from two disciplines.

His most valuable contribution is the use of the prospect theory assumptions to explain why superpowers are more likely to initiate risky actions far from their territory and remain committed to their decisions even when the vision of victory is distant and the costs of engagement are rising. Thus, he developed the assumptions of NCR by referring to the leaders' image as an intervening variable. By applying the prospect theory, he was however able to explain how exactly the intervening variables transform system's pressures. Prospect theory assumes that a change brought by a particular action (in this case, taken in the area of foreign policy) can be perceived by the decision-maker either as a gain or as a loss in this junction with reality. Individuals who interpret the result of the

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 383-384, 394-395.

<sup>67</sup> As per the analytical eclecticism endorsed by: R. Sil, P.J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms...*, passim.

<sup>68</sup> N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory...*, passim.

<sup>69</sup> J.W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risk. Great Power Intervention in the Periphery*, Ithaca 2004.

decision (in relation to the relevant reference point) as a profit tend to be risk-averse. On the contrary, if they consider the result of a decision a loss, they will show a higher propensity for risk in further decision making: *The necessity of avoiding losses in their state's material power, status, or reputation weighs more heavily in the calculations of leaders than the prospect of gains in those commodities. Senior officials initiate risky diplomatic and/or military intervention strategies to avoid such losses. They then persevere and even escalate failing peripheral interventions to recoup past losses.*<sup>70</sup> The author focused on the perceived losses in terms of the state's relative power, international status, and prestige, which are determinants of risky behavior, thus combining the prospect theory with the assumptions of defensive realism and referred to three major cases: Germany's initiation and escalation of the 1905-06 Morocco crisis; Japan's decisions for war in 1940-41; and the United States intervention in and escalation of the Korean War in 1950-51.<sup>71</sup> He also discussed four other cases: the Japanese government's decision regarding border clashes with the Soviet Union in 1938 and in 1939, and the two Truman administration's decisions to seek a negotiated settlement to the Korean War in 1951. In these cases, leaders did not initiate risky diplomatic or military commitments in the periphery or attempted to withdraw from such commitments in the face of rising costs.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, by applying the prospect theory, Taliaferro showed how to incorporate state-level or individual-level variables into research conducted in neorealist research program without developing complex explanations how to use them in explaining each phase of decision-making process. He stressed that [b]y building prospect theory into defensive realism, we can provide a more accurate descriptive account of elite decision-making and generate predictions about the likelihood, scope, and duration of great power intervention in the periphery.<sup>73</sup> As such, the prospect theory offers a 'transmission belt' between the system's pressures and domestic level variables. By the term 'transmission belt,' we understand not only the intervening variables (which may be more or less precisely defined), but also a kind of well-defined mechanism (or causal logic) that identifies how to use them, that is, the mechanism that shows what values a variable takes in a particular circumstance and how these values influence the dependent variable. That is why we see this kind of NCR development as a prospective one, as it offers valuable explanation without the necessity of applying *ad hoc* hypotheses and without the application of state level variables according to 'the pick and choose' strategy. Undeniably, the scope of the explanation proposed by Taliaferro is limited, but that is an essential feature of all middle-range theories.

Taliaferro offered scholars a kind of well-designed middle-range theory based on positivist assumptions and showed a way of developing NCR in the future, as his study is a perfect example of NCR's application in research. His main achievement derives from the fact that he did not aim at creating a general theory that might be problematic

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

(if not impossible) for positivists. The latter, while sometimes trying to outline the framework of a general theory in social sciences, encounter such a level of complexity of social reality that consequently their proposal is floating in an ocean of anomalies. As Taliaferro resigned from this way of developing NCR, he benefited from good positivist theory that also offers prospects for future development.

Taliaferro decided to use a theory developed in the area of psychology and further used in economics. It can serve as a starting point for researchers who wish to use theories from other research disciplines in the development of NCR, like for instance, theories concerning the psychology of small groups as decision-making bodies or theories linking biological factors to decision-making processes in politics. Scholars might use different theories from various disciplines in order to develop NCR. If they do so, as Taliaferro did, their graft bear appropriate fruits: valuable explanations.

### The Seedling

We chose Toje's book about EU as a small power<sup>74</sup> as our first case to illustrate our third metaphor: a seedling. To show why his work is an exemplary NCR research that breaks its bond with neorealist research program, let's first turn to the ontological and epistemological assumptions he employs. *The main distinguishing feature of neoclassical realism is, as Gideon Rose has noted, the view that systemic-level variables are "translated through unit-level intervening variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structure". Neoclassical realists, like all classical realists, believe that the world is out there and that it thus can be explained but also that it changes.*<sup>75</sup> Toje's metatheory can be considered vaguely positivist. He uses the language of variables that have distinctly positivist connotations in our discipline. The phrase that 'the world is out here' can be interpreted as a claim concerning the dualistic relation between subject and object of knowing, which is also an integral part of positivistic metatheory.<sup>76</sup> If Toje actually employs a positivist metatheory, what is progressive in his work enough to judge it as a seedling, an example or NCR research that progresses toward an independent research program?

We would argue that in actuality Toje's work is only paying a lip service to the positivist language and metatheory. First, his work is very sensitive to historical context: *For the most part, the necessary qualifications about exactly which group a small power fits within a given historical context will be subject to discussion.*<sup>77</sup> This and the in-depth discussion of the history of European integration as a political project that he presents as a crucial context of his argument are not sufficient to depict his break with the positivism. On the other hand, his historical sensitivity is more akin to the holistic historicism of the classical realists than case study historicism of their neo(classical) realist successors. His reliance on the 'interviews' with policymakers, diplomats, and

<sup>74</sup> A. Toje, *The European Union as a Small Power. After the Post-Cold War*, London 2010.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry...*, pp. 44-50.

<sup>77</sup> A. Toje, *The European Union...*, p. 139.

members of EU bureaucracy also problematizes his positivism. Although he does not overuse this source, it plays an important role in his narration about the self-image of the EU's foreign policymaker elite and its perception by others in the context of small power status of the EU. If he properly operationalized these interviews and made them standardized according to research questions they purport to answer, he would be a positivist for sure. He is, however, content with the information he was able to gather and intuitive inferences he draws from it. This is not positivism; it is more akin to the way classical realists used the phenomena from the world out there without the expressed need to phrase them into the language of explication, operationalization, and research design. The final clue leading to the interpretation of Toje's metatheory as problematic from positivist perspective is his employment of the term 'presence': (...) *intentionally chosen for its lack of precision; the most recent relevant debates on this question goes under the heading "actorness."*<sup>78</sup> Here, Toje shows his awareness of the contemporary debates about social ontology and agency, but he chooses to use the term in a monist way, as referring mostly to images and self-images considered on ideational level of social reality.

The remarks above problematize Toje's metatheory to the extent where it can be regarded either vaguely positivist or analyticist.<sup>79</sup> Then, it is possible to present his work as an example of breaking with neorealist hard core on the level of metatheory: as a seedling of neoclassical realist approach reconnecting with its proper ancestor (classical realism) on the level of epistemology, which, in the context of our metaphor, can be judged progressive.

The other aspect of a seedling would be its ability to propose something new within the discipline and the realist tradition in particular. Only then could it be judged progressive enough to warrant the promise of a new research program. In the case of *The European Union as a Small Power*, this promise is contained within the title. At face value, realism is perceived as an approach to international relations that either belittles the impact of international organizations or views it as an extension of material capabilities of dominant powers seeking to make rules for international system according to their own material interests. Moreover, the usual realist narrative is preoccupied with the most potent actors in international politics – be them traditional great powers or their cold war incarnation – superpowers. In this context, the use of small power category to analyze the phenomenon of transnational super organization is definitely something new! However, one can argue that despite the Toje's self-identification as neoclassical realist, his approach is anything but that. This argument could be based on the reasoning presented by Legro and Moravcsik and by Narizny,<sup>80</sup> because Toje looks for the reasons behind the EU behavior and presence in international relations as that of a small power, within it – mostly through categories of capabilities-expectations and consensus-expectations gap.<sup>81</sup> This in turn can

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry...*, passim.

<sup>80</sup> J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody...?", passim; K. Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigm...", passim.

<sup>81</sup> A. Toje, *The European Union...*, p. 119, 129.

be seen as an overturning of the traditional neorealist hierarchy of causation: Toje's work seems to treat domestic level variables as independent, with the system level ones as intervening and the EU small power behavior as a dependent.

Here, our previous discussion of Toje's metatheory comes into play. As we have argued, critical voices claim that NCR is indistinguishable from liberal approaches, because it is looking for domestic variables to explain the state's behavior, can be upheld only based on positivistic language and metatheory – if we read Toje as a non-positivist (analyticist) and couple it with the novelty of his approach, we have a fine example of how NCR work can be interpreted as a proper seedling.

The second example is *Unanswered Threats* by Schweller. He develops his version of NCR by referring to four intervening variables: elite consensus, elite cohesion, society cohesion, and regime vulnerability, as he aims to show that 'aggressive expansion requires a unified state composed of elites that agree on an ambitious grand strategy, and a stable and effective political regime with broad authority to pursue uncertain and risky foreign policies.'<sup>82</sup> Schweller points out that the lack of elite cohesion and consensus as well as the lack of society cohesion historically provides us with more examples of underbalance than the balance of power: *Elite consensus and cohesion primarily affect the state's willingness to balance, while government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion affect the state's ability to extract resources for this task. The combination of these four variables determines the degree of state coherence.*<sup>83</sup>

What we find most interesting or even provocative in his study is the way he developed his line of reasoning compared with the way of NCR. First, he indicated four intervening variables able to transform the system's stimuli. Then, he made a step forward and tried to show how different combinations of the four variables determine final foreign policy decisions, specifically whether they determine states to balance or underbalance. He also showed possible ways to operationalize the indicated variables referring to both great-powers and small-powers case studies. More importantly though, his way of NCR's development that starts with showing causal chain linking the intervening variables ends with identifying 'ideal types' of states that, according to identified causal schemes, are more inclined to balance than to underbalance. This departs from the metatheoretical assumptions of positivism. Therefore, although one might assume that Schweller tried to generate a positivist middle-range theory, he created a more general typology of ideal types of different states, which act differently depending on the diverse arrangements of the domestic variables.

Therefore, one should ask whether his proposal does not depart too far from neorealist hard core. It would solve two problems. First, once the assumptions of positivism are accepted, it is difficult to have a single general theory (such as Waltz's proposal for realism and Wendt's for social constructivism), because the complex international reality generates too many anomalies for properly operationalized positivistic general

<sup>82</sup> R.L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats. Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, Princeton 2006, p. 113.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

theory. Second, after reading Schweller's text, we have a strong impression that the intervening variables are treated almost as if they were the independent ones. If that is the case, a seedling interpretation of his theory is warranted. It breaks from neorealist hard core both in methodology and causal logic.

Let us take a closer look at his first chapter. He discusses different types of rising powers that are trying to extend their power in the system and analyzes two groups of factors determining rising powers policy: risk propensity and main aims (whether the state is revisionist or revolutionary). Due to this, Schweller can be accused of prioritizing state-level variables, whereas neorealists should treat system's structure as the determining factor. However, both types of states (challengers/extenders and defenders) do in fact respond to the international system's pressures. Extenders are dissatisfied with the position and chances provided by the system and see it as an opportunity to expand their power, or there is simply no dominant player in the system – and the system abhors a vacuum. Defenders must react to changes generated by extenders' actors. Both must have the resources to take appropriate and successful action, which are intervening variables in NCR's language. This, in turn, would problematize treating Schweller as breaking with neorealist causal hierarchy. But again, he stressed that in some cases the systems forces the states to balance, but it is the states are the ones that do not respond appropriately.<sup>84</sup>

Schweller, however, did not operationalize the system's stimuli, as he did not suggest any particular structural theory, which should be our starting point for considering any impact of intervening variables. Hence the impression that he considers the latter not as intervening but as independent. Whether a state is considered an 'extender' or a 'defender' depends essentially on how we interpret its activity; and although it is an activity within the international system, its pressures are not operationalized well enough to act as the proper independent variable.

In the last chapter, Schweller tries to answer the question why states are usually timid and do not balance, but rather decide to underbalance as a response to system's stimuli. The answer draws our attention to states' motivations and again to state level variables. And while Schweller considers issues of political regime and power-public relations, he still treats them as factors in the pressures of the system. Moreover, in the end of the chapter, he shows how four of the intervening variables could affect the interpretations of the aforementioned pressures. Schweller presents possible causal links combining different variations of intervening variables in a table together with examples discussed in the book. The table, however, shows us rather types of possible states' behavior (as ideal types) than hypotheses derived from positivist theory, and furthermore ideal types that turn the neorealist causal logic upside down.

Consequently, the entire publication indicates that Schweller generated possible ideal types of potential attitudes adopted by individual states. As he did not create a middle-range theory allowing hypotheses to be formulated in a positivist fashion, we assume that his proposal could be a seedling – a way of NCR development towards a new way of reasoning that departs from positivism considered as realism's roots. This is why this idea

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

is not a graft (linked with the tree trunk), but a new entity offering hope for a whole new way of thinking that reverses the hierarchy of causality giving primacy to state level variables. Nevertheless, Schweller did not specify his intention of moving beyond positivism, therefore we cannot be sure whether he actually aimed to direct researchers' attention to a possible departure from positivism or not. One should, of course, ask whether this way of thinking could still be considered neoclassical realist in the sense given to it by Rose, Legro and Moravcsik as well as Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Our discussion regarding the progressiveness of NCR might be considered as validating Guzzini's idea that realism as a core of the discipline is periodically recurring.<sup>86</sup> Although the author is skeptical about this way of periodical realist comeback, we disagree with this suggestion. Our disagreement is based precisely on our discussion regarding NCR's progressiveness and on our final judgment of this progressiveness. We appreciate all the discussions focused on the NCR's progressiveness, as we claim that they elucidate the importance of the problem of progressiveness as such, not only for this approach, but for the IR discipline at large.

As it should be clear right now, our three metaphors inspired by Lakatos are both an appraisal and a blueprint for possible futures of NCR's development based on good or bad epistemic practices contained within it. It is also clear that all these possible ways of development endorse pluralism and eclecticism. They represent different modes of theorizing – from an attempt to create a general theory,<sup>87</sup> through building frameworks based on theoretical achievements from diverse disciplines,<sup>88</sup> to non-dogmatic theorizing stretching the meaning and scope of traditional take of what realism is in IR.<sup>89</sup>

Based on the mainstream approach, positivistic metatheory, the promise of progress is embedded within research conducted within the metaphor of a graft. The scholars working in the way described by this metaphor usually take the assumptions of positivism and NCR seriously. Thus, their research, based on middle-range theories, can provide solid empirical knowledge about small parts that finally construct the bigger picture of international reality. By conducting their research under NCR umbrella, they want to additionally legitimize it, but as far as their research is progressive in context of their positivistic metatheory, it can be judged as a progress of IR mainstream as such. Consequently, NCR interpreted through the graft metaphor, shows the progressive

<sup>85</sup> G. Rose, "Neoclassical Realism...", passim; J.W. Legro, A. Moravcsik, "Is Anybody...", passim; N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory...*, passim.

<sup>86</sup> S. Guzzini, *Realism in International...*

<sup>87</sup> N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro, S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory...*, passim.

<sup>88</sup> J.W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risk...*, passim; J.-M.F. Blanchard, N.M. Ripsman, "A Political Theory...", pp. 371-398.

<sup>89</sup> A. Toje, *The European Union...*, passim; R.L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats. Political...*, passim.

promise of moving from positive to negative heuristic by incorporating contents from other disciplines (however properly adopted) to neorealist research program and broader tradition of realistic IR. The best example of this is the incorporation of psychological theories, as shown by Taliaferro, that work as human nature within classical realism, but do so on the social scientific premise.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, there is another possible story that arises from our analysis. As the first metaphor of the weathered tree showed, it is extremely difficult to generate a kind of general theory based on positivism, mainly due to a high level of generality and myriad anomalies resulted from it. Additionally, this theory should be elegant, parsimonious and offer a way of operationalizing the independent, systemic variable. Although we do not reject the idea that this kind of theory might be developed in the future, we find it highly unlikely. This in turn leads us to a proper seedling: NCR general theory not only based on metatheory other than positivism, but also understanding states' behavior, first on the base of states' internal composition, and then on the systemic context of their behavior. This might be somehow associated with Kuhn's idea of scientific revolution, however for Kuhn, each paradigm creates its own language incommensurable to other paradigms. For us, the general language of the realist tradition is precisely what connects the research program of neorealism with the new hypothetical program of NCR. Taking this story further on the assumption of metatheoretical pluralism and analytical eclecticism, such a general theory could be understood in the context of division of labor within broader IR. It would mean that the scholars working on the highest level of abstraction creating non-positivist general theory should do their best to make it intelligible for scholars working on the positivist middle-range level. The latter in turn should be open to translating the assumptions of general theory into their own metatheoretical positivist language. Thus, we need not only a theoretical, but also a broad metatheoretical pluralism facilitating dialog and transcending incommensurability. The story of NCR in regard of our conclusion, however idealistic, can be understood as our own take on the progressives of the whole discipline.

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<sup>90</sup> J.W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risk...*, passim.



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