Sept 18-20 (week 3) Stories without origin: World Politics as "Eternal Recurrence"

Assigned Reading

Dunne text: Richard Ned Lebow, "Classical Realism" (ch. 2)
John Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism" (ch. 3)
Kenneth Waltz (2012) "Why Iran should get the bomb,"
Foreign Affairs, 91(4): 2-5
Daniel Garst (1989) "Thucydides and Neorealism,"
International Studies Quarterly, 33: 3-27.

How the stories are told

- theories are not separate from the world and therefore cannot report on it as it really is

- theories are lenses that construct what we see

- one reality with various filters

- but Smith tends to focus on the big stories or grand narratives of IR

- its more familiar "isms" (its holy trinity: realism, liberalism, & marxism)

Smith on stories of IR

Frames versus lenses

states

individuals

class

different levels of analysis & normative lense tints, but same rationalist frames (more or less positivist epistemologies)

Post and antipositvist approaches change things

constructivists
keep the frame (grand narrative) but lose the lenses
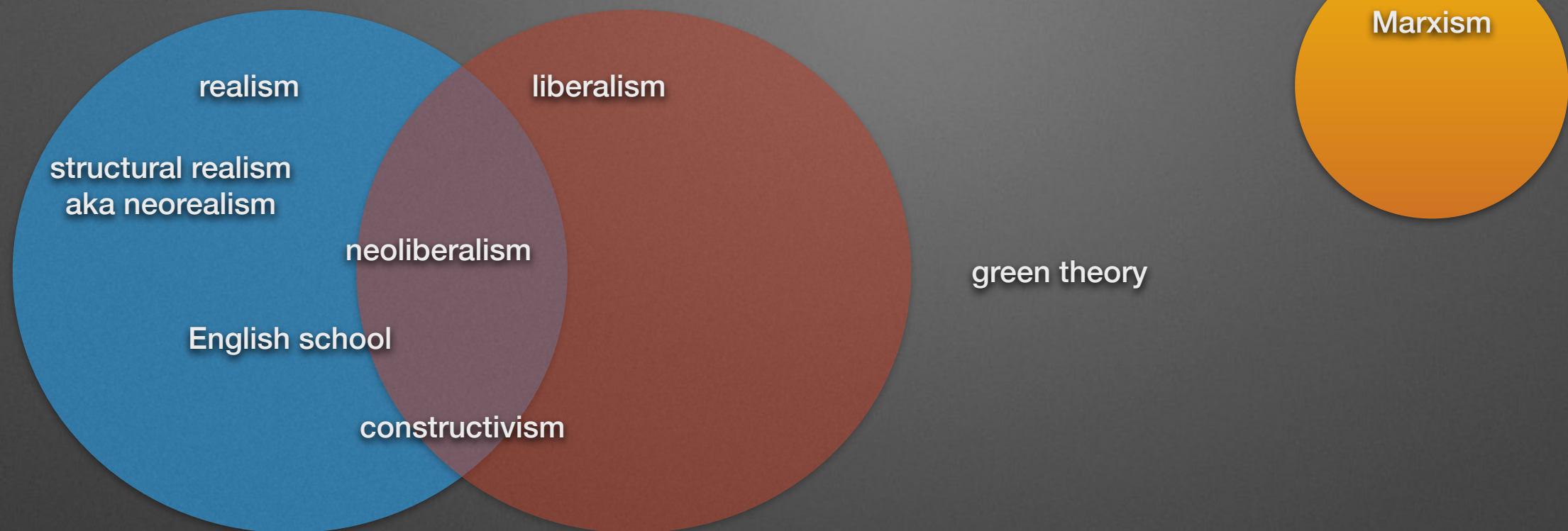(e.g. not looking at the *world out there* at all)

postmodernists
smaller, narrower *petits récits* ("little narratives"), such as the history of everyday life and of marginalized groups

So how many stories are there, Prof. Smith?

- Smith text divides world of IR into 8 distinct theories!

- this is a bit misleading

- many of these theories are derivatives, spinoffs, or adaptations, and even fusions of realism, liberalism, & marxism

- to confuse matters more, IR theorists use a wide variety of labels to refer to the same or similar things!

Mapping the theories (by ology)

Smith's inventory

realism

liberalism

structural realism
aka neorealism

neoliberalism

English school

green theory

Marxism

constructivism

meta theory

critical theory*

postcolonialism

poststructuralism

feminism

rationalist
theory of
knowledge
(epistemology)

1988 ISA
Keohane draws a line

reflectivist
theory of
knowledge
(epistemology)
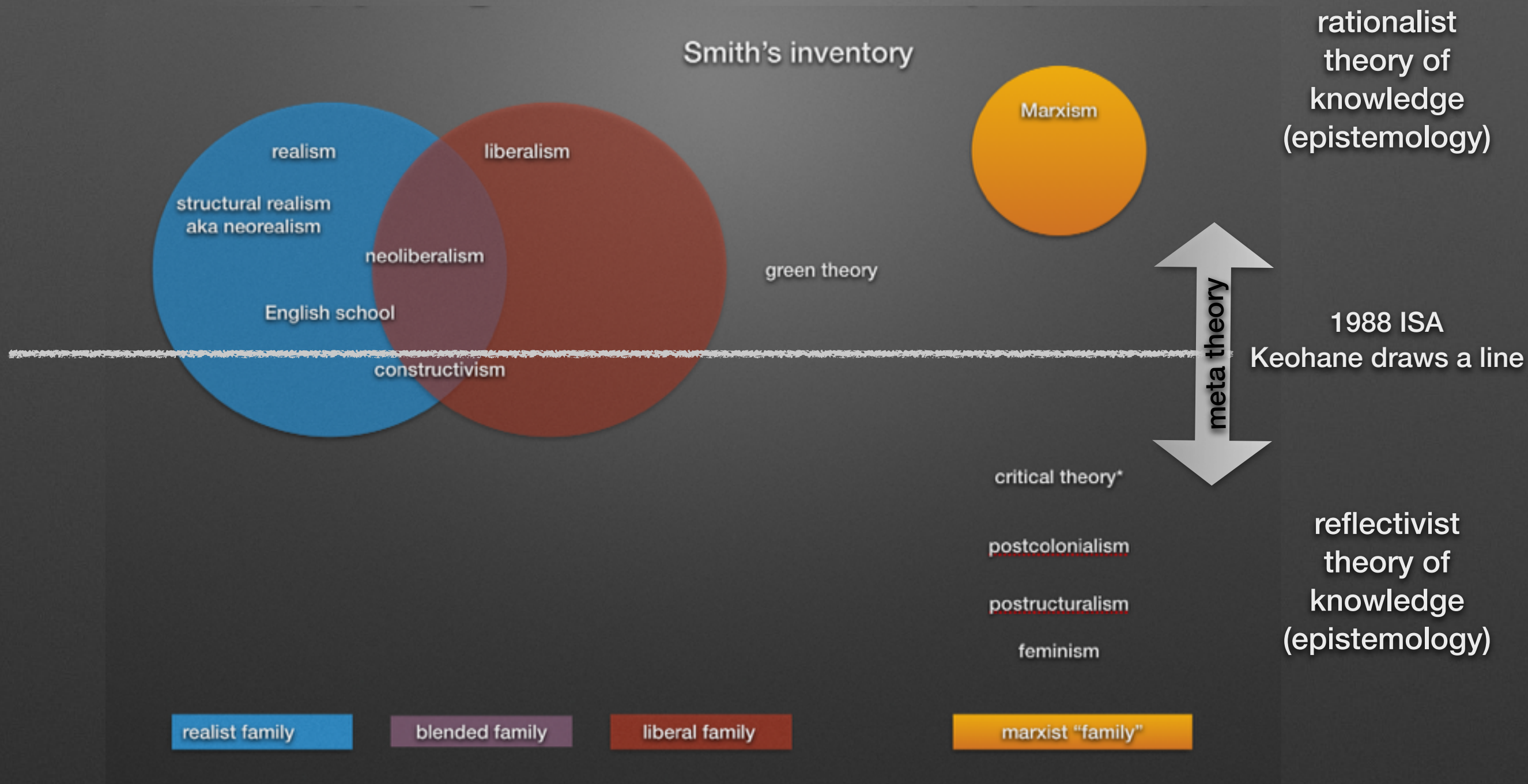
realist family   blended family   liberal family   marxist "family"

NOTE: many observers refer to "positivist" and "post-positivists" but this can be very misleading—e.g. traditional realists are rationalists but NOT positivists

Political realism as an occupational hazard?

- the status & potential of IR as a discipline is one its most contested and confusing aspects

- but for realists the story is relatively simple: international politics is, was, and always will be synonymous with power politics

- in this sense, the status of IR as a discipline is a side issue for realists: the essential features of the world remain the same regardless

- fundamental unity of thought across millennia

- but realists in the modern era have been drawn into disciplinary debates out of fear that we may misunderstand the core dynamic of world politics with disastrous consequences

There is no single tradition of political realism

- anyone who regards IR as a recurring struggle for power among independent, self-interested states (or state-like actors) can be called a realist

- classical realism is said to show a "fundamental unity of thought across a span of nearly 2500 years" (Richard Ned Lebow, p. 35)

- there are a number of realist variants, in modern IR theorizing two major types dominate: classical vs. structural realisms

- ALL realists agree that states are principal actors

- ALL realists treat anarchy & balance of power as core concepts

- ALL realists agree that states will try to act rationally

Morgenthau's archimedean point
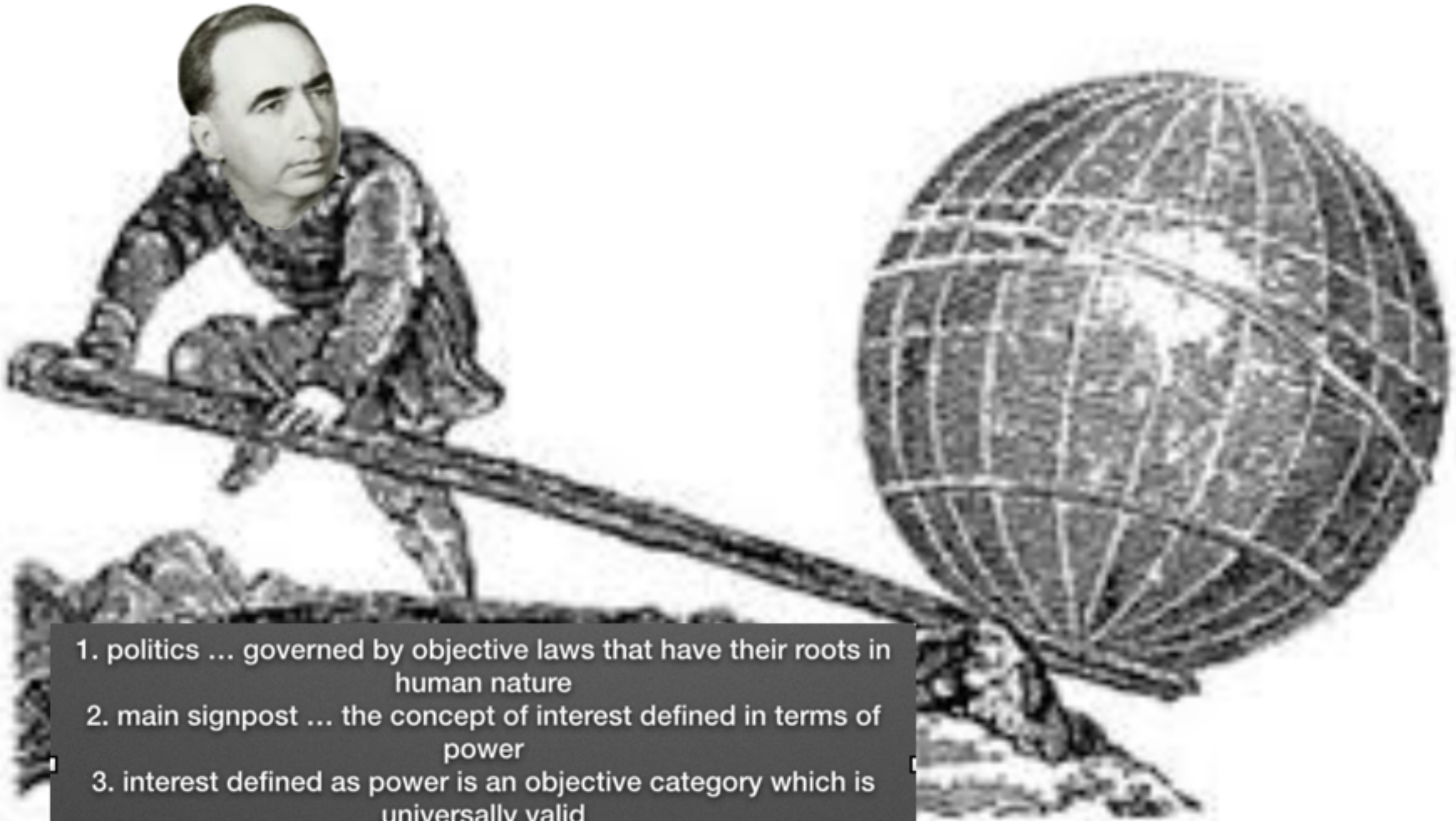
1. politics ... governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature
2. main signpost ... the concept of interest defined in terms of power
3. interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid
6. the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere

Waltz's archimedean point

Even when the actors and nature of actors in international politics change significantly, patterns of international politics recur
"If the same effects follow from different causes, then constraints must be operating on the independent variables in ways that affect outcomes" (TIP p. 68)
A systems level focus reveals that structure—"set of constraining conditions" (TIP p. 74) explains why dissimilar units may behave in similar ways
Structures are not direct causes but act "through socialization of the actors and through competition among them" TIP (p. 74)

Classical vs. Structural Realists

Two major points of departure

1. human nature versus structural constraints

2. power as an end, versus power as a means

Human nature

- classical realism has an essentially theological feel

- what RBJ Walker calls "the metaphysics of fallen man"

- e.g. Hans Morgenthau emphasizes evil human nature

- long tradition of emphasis on the tragedy of great power politics (history as cyclical)

IR as Greek Tragedy?

Sophocles
496-406 BCE

Peloppennesian War
431-404 BCE

Dover Beach
BY <u>MATTHEW ARNOLD</u>

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

1967

But human nature is *not* scientific! structural realism to the rescue

- realists get caught up in a general attempt to render political theory into a science

- political *science* (in order to deserve the name) needed to distinguish itself from other sorts of activity

- introduces distinction between thought & theory; between values & facts

- if realist pessimism was warranted, it had to look somewhere other than human nature to be taken seriously

Power as a means

- there are three major structural realists in IR: Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and John Mearsheimer

- each emphasizes fundamental continuity of IR over millennia but understand structural conditions of great power politics as the source of continuity

- like classical realists, structural realists have a special fondness for Thucydides

- but not because of what the Athenian generals told the Melians…

- but because of what Thucydides said caused the Peloponnesian War: "the growth of Athenian power and the fear this occasioned in Sparta"

It all boils down to security

- for structural realists power is not sought for its own sake but as a means to security

- the desire for power is an indirect and unintended consequence of feeling threatened

- states can never be sure of each others intentions and with no one to turn to but themselves (anarchy) mistakes can be lethal

the means by which I defend myself are the means by which others feel threatened

So: "is evil just something you are, or something you do"?

- for some critics, it doesn't really matter

- all realisms form "an anti-political apology for brute force and cynicism," Rob Walker

- can't engage or allow for change

- Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, tries to address this: distinguishes between systems change and systemic change

- but genuine, fundamental change not in the realist vocabulary, regardless of variant

To sum up

- classical & structural realists take a long view of IR and identify a "tradition" of insightful, appropriately pessimistic realist insight

- for structural realists timeless insights are rendered into law-like regularities

- but the real legacy of these authors for *all* realisms in IR questionable

- historical vs. stipulative tradition of IR

- to what extent are modern IR realists engaged in "conjuring the dead"?

- to what extent do each of these realist forms create the world they claim is unchanging?