Preface

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Classical realism represents an approach to international relations that harks back to fifth century Greek historian Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian War. It recognizes the central role of power in politics of all kinds, but also the limitations of power and the ways in which it can readily be made self-defeating. It stresses sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and the need to base influence on shared interests. It emphasizes persuasion over coercion and the building of shared identities by political units through successful cooperation.

Classical realism has displayed a fundamental unity of thought across nearly 2500 years. Its principal theorists – Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Carl von Clausewitz and Hans J. Morgenthau – are concerned with questions of order, justice and change at the domestic, regional and international levels. Classical realists stress the similarities, not the differences, between domestic and international politics, and emphasize the importance of ethics and community in promoting stability in both domains. In keeping with their tragic understanding of life, they recognize that communal bonds are fragile and easily undermined by the unrestrained pursuit of unilateral advantage by individuals, factions and states. When this happens, time-honored mechanisms of conflict management like alliances and the balance of power may not only fail to preserve the peace but may make domestic and international violence more likely. Like Greek playwrights, classical realists tend to regard history as cyclical, in the sense that efforts to build order and escape from fear-driven worlds, although they may succeed for a considerable period of time, ultimately succumb to the destabilizing effects of actors who believe they are too powerful to be constrained by law and custom.

In the chapters that follow, well-known scholars offer thoughtful readings of classical realist texts, explore the connections between critical realism and political theory, and examine the similarities and differences between classical realism and critical theory. The issue has important things to say to international relations scholars, political theorists and anyone interested in a set of concepts more than ever relevant to the foreign policy of the great powers.

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