8. Coral Bell and the Classical Realist Tradition¹

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Like JDB Miller, I have known Coral Bell for half a century, having met her in London in 1955–56—I an intending graduate student, she already an established scholar at Chatham House. Later our paths crossed quite frequently, but we were direct colleagues only for a few years in the 1980s, in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University.

Her contributions to international relations are multifaceted, but I shall focus on three of her books on American foreign policy and Cold War diplomacy—each of them a significant and timely input into the scholarly discussion of the burning issues of the day. (It is easily forgotten how intense were some of the concerns, and how fierce some of the debates, in those years). The books in question—*Negotiation from Strength* (1963), *The Conventions of Crisis* (1971) and *The Diplomacy of Detente* (1977)—influenced my understanding of the issues at the time, when I was working on closely related topics. Returning to them, one is not only reminded of old debates but also rewarded with new insights.²

Negotiation from Strength offers a sparkling commentary on the 1950s: the decade during which the Cold War in Europe hardened into a rigid confrontation between two heavily armed military blocs, seemingly in perpetuity. At first sight, the diplomatic formula which provides the book's title offered little more than a device for indefinitely deferring unwanted negotiations, but Bell shows that, on the contrary, the varied uses of the formula can serve to illuminate the potentialities for a more imaginative Western diplomacy during those years, and the reasons why this was not attempted. The reader gains a heightened sense of choices forgone and an appreciation of the qualities of key decision-makers—of Winston Churchill's eagerness to explore potential openings for diplomacy, Dean Acheson's scepticism and John Foster Dulles's stubborn belief in the dangers attending any negotiation.

She does not, in the manner of George Kennan's advocacy of disengagement, argue for a particular course of action, but more subtly counters the familiar

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2 See Coral Bell, *Negotiation from Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963; *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971; and *The Diplomacy of Detente: The Kissinger Era*, Martin Robertson, London, 1977.

apprehensions of the risks of negotiation with the unfamiliar thesis of the costs of indefinitely postponing it. Her thesis is that in the pursuit of absolute military strength the Western leaders lost sight of the relative overall strength of their position in the early to mid-1950s. By the early 1960s, a skilful Soviet diplomatic offensive had narrowed the agenda to the preservation, or otherwise, of the special status of West Berlin. For contemporaries this was a highly challenging interpretation of the central Cold War issues. For later scholars it offers many illuminating insights: into the (often unfortunate) interplay of domestic and external 'imperatives'; the role of key decision-makers (the sketch of Dulles has not been improved upon); and the relentless priority accorded to the military build-up, but also the facile claims associated with it. For this reader, the multiplicity of reasons for American policy-makers' subordinating diplomatic to narrowly conceived military considerations remains of particular interest.

This is not a criticism that can be made of Henry Kissinger, whose diplomacy is examined in *The Diplomacy of Detente*. Indeed, although Bell does not labour the point, Kissinger is shown to have remedied the deficiency exposed in *Negotiation from Strength*. That is to say, he based his policy on an acute perception of America's overall strength relative to its communist adversaries. In exchange for their easing the way for a face-saving settlement in Vietnam, he could offer the Soviet Union a relaxation of economic restrictions, and China strategic reassurance vis-à-vis the perceived Soviet threat. Detente, of course, also signified shared benefits, in particular a limitation of the strategic arms competition, but did not signify a general relaxation of the Cold War conflict, merely its pursuit at lower levels of tension. Just how robustly Kissinger could pursue American interests is shown in his manipulation of the October 1973 crisis in the Middle East to exclude the Soviet Union from its resolution and, as it proved, from a major role in subsequent Middle Eastern diplomacy.

At the time of its publication the book offered a discerning interpretation of the detente and a persuasive rebuttal of many of the polemical charges levelled against détente diplomacy. From today's vantage point, notwithstanding or perhaps because of the vast literature that has accumulated, it stands up remarkably well as an overview, and also a reminder of central issues and insights half-submerged in the subsequent accumulation of voluminous specialised studies of the period.

Similarly, although for different reasons, *The Conventions of Crisis* remains of more than historical interest. At the time it offered both an introductory overview and well-informed reflections on what was, arguably, the central problem for Cold War policy-making, vis-à-vis how best to cope with the crises that appeared to be built into the superpower relationship. Like most of the earlier literature on the topic, it can be read as a historical document: a statement of how things looked at the time. Some of its suggestions were

superseded by the vast scholarly literature of the following years, much of it highly specialised and even more firmly embedded in the context of the Cold War. What stands out today, however, is that this slim volume also raises issues that were not followed up, or only to a very limited extent—for example, her image of the ‘crisis slide’, or the relationship between external and ‘intra-mural’ crises, and even the nature and significance of conventions in this context and, by implication, of their absence. Thanks to its wide-ranging, essay-like character, *The Conventions of Crisis* still has much to offer to those who might seek orientation to the problems raised by crisis diplomacy in quite changed circumstances.

How might one best locate her work in relation to the traditions of international thought, and to the contemporary discipline of international relations? Most readers would place her in the realist tradition—that of ‘classical realism’, drawing on the humanities, not the neorealism of contemporary American theory, based on a narrow conception of social science theorising. She prefers to characterise her approach not as realist but as traditional analysis: ‘in the sense that it derives from the tradition of reflection on political and diplomatic and strategic events that goes back to Thucydides ... and uses rather simple and traditional concepts and ... vocabulary’.³ And she refers to the formative influence of Martin Wight, for whom international relations could never be subsumed under a single theoretical approach but required an appreciation of the insights afforded by multiple perspectives. Even if we, her readers, want to insist that the message that comes through is unmistakably realist, her particular version of realism, and the richness and subtlety of her arguments, show the imprint of Wight’s multi-perspectival thinking.

Classical realism, grounded in history and the humanities, is out of fashion in the contemporary international relations discipline, especially in the US, even though it remains alive and well in the policy journals. But times may be changing. Leading academic journals, even in the US, now invite contributions from ‘the variety of intellectual traditions included under the rubric of international relations’, to quote one formulation.⁴ It cannot be said that classical realism, or even ‘traditional analysis’, has been finally superseded.

Even more unfashionable, however, is her Wight-like scepticism concerning theory and her total disdain for methodology.⁵ Arguably, the discipline’s current

3 Coral Bell, ‘Journey with Alternative Maps’, in J Kruzal and JN Rosenau, (eds), *Journeys through World Politics: Autobiographical Reflections of Thirty-four Academic Travelers*, Lexington Books, Lexington, 1989, p. 344.

4 The policy statement of *International Studies Quarterly*, each issue.

5 For her own comments on her ‘marked resistance to the use of the word ‘theory’, see Bell, ‘Journey with Alternative Maps’, pp. 347–8). For Wight’s scepticism, see Martin Wight, ‘Why is there no International Theory?’, in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1966, pp. 17–34.

preoccupation with methodology is excessive and a robust affirmation of the use of everyday language in academic writing is a useful corrective. However, it has come to be accepted in international relations, as in the other social sciences, that even when explicit theory is absent, research and scholarship are guided by theoretical assumptions. Of course, there is much bad theorising, but the answer cannot be to reject theory as such, but rather to enhance one's awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of different theories, and of one's own theoretical presuppositions.

Coral Bell's writings, like those of many historians, leave it to the reader to tease out the theoretical assumptions that underlie the analysis. It is instructive to attempt this, if only in order to locate her work more confidently within the spectrum of classical realist ideas. My reading is that it is at the opposite pole from the realism that postulates harsh necessities, inevitabilities or structural imperatives. It is a realism that highlights the scope for political and diplomatic choice, not only in the case of a superpower such as the United States but also with respect to Australia—not all the time, but much more than is generally recognised.⁶ The constraints that figure most prominently in her narratives stem from domestic politics and the fixed beliefs of decision-makers and those in their milieu. If this reading is correct, her version of realism is a much-needed corrective to the systemic, structural emphases in the prevailing neorealist doctrine. But why is this not made explicit? There may be art as much as modesty in the disclaiming of theoretical intent: a theory is never so persuasive as when it is securely embedded in a good narrative.

⁶ On Australia, see for example, Coral Bell, 'Introduction', in her *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy*, 3rd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1993.

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