

State of the Field Essay: On the Unreality of Realism in International Relations

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In 1939, E.H. Carr published *The Twenty Years' Crisis*,¹ which argued that the world was divided into two camps: utopians and realists. Utopians like President Woodrow Wilson and his followers had made a mess of the world through their well-intentioned but naïve attempts at international cooperation. Realists were those, like Carr, who recognized that the struggle for power and survival were perennial features of human life and politics among nations. Carr wanted policymakers to face the facts, acknowledge reality, and not get lost in idealistic dreams. 'Realism' as a professionalized academic school of international relations was born.

To understand 'realism,' it helps to ask what function the ideology tries to perform. What do its advocates think realism does? What problem does it purport to solve? Realism is an ideology defined in opposition to "idealism," "ideology" (including religious ideology), "utopianism," or, these days, "liberal hegemony." It is principled opposition to moral aspiration in politics. But why? Realists claim that moral aspiration is dangerous because it is "unrealistic," that is, it cuts against the grain of reality. Going against reality or trying to change other people's beliefs or behavior is always hard, often impossible, and inevitably costly and risky. Catholic and Protestant zealotry plunged Europe into the Wars of Religion; French revolutionary utopianism plunged Europe into the Napoleonic Wars; and Wilsonian utopianism lost the peace after World War I and set the stage for its sequel. If such catastrophes are the consequence of ideological crusading, better leave off and accept the world as it is.

Realists advocate the path of least resistance: go with the grain of reality for a low-cost, low-opposition foreign policy. In popular usage, realism means being hawkish; realism in the academic sense means something closer to the opposite. Carr's 1939 book was a defense of appeasement towards Nazi Germany. George Kennan, probably the most prominent American realist of the Cold War, was hesitant about the formation of NATO, thought the democratization of Japan a waste of time, opposed the Truman Doctrine and the recognition of

¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*: Reissued with a new preface from Michael Cox. (New York: Springer, 2016).

Israel, and criticized most the American government's implementation of his policy of "containment."² Today's realists, like John Mearsheimer and Steve Walt, advocate 'restraint' or 'offshore balancing,' and have called for a dramatic reduction of American involvement abroad to avoid what they see as needless conflicts and ideological crusades.

There is an oddity in realists' policy positions. Why would they bother having any in the first place? One of the often-noted chief problems with realism is that it blurs the line between description and prescription. It usually begins by presenting itself as a neutral description of the way the world is—but then it becomes a policy agenda and tries to persuade policymakers to comport themselves with realists' understanding of reality. But if realism is an accurate description of reality, why do policymakers need persuading? Policymakers' behavior is, by definition, part of the reality that realism purports to explain. If policymakers are not acting in accordance with realism—as when they repeatedly embark on ideological crusades—realism is not a very good description of reality. If they are acting in accordance with realism, realism is entirely superfluous as prescription.

Given realists' record of advocacy, they seem to recognize that the first problem is the bigger one. Realism is not a very good description of reality. In fact, it is not a description of reality at all: it is an ideology, one that cloaks itself with the rhetoric of 'reality' as a biased framing device designed to make itself look natural, truthful, hard-nosed, no-nonsense, and data-driven, while its opponents are supposedly the opposite. Realism uses its rhetorical trappings to try to convince us that moral aspiration is dangerous and that we should instead accept that the pursuit of national power and national security is the telos of international politics.

But realism is unable to account for the very real, and very universal, moral dimension of the human experience. Human beings have moral aspirations; only rarefied scholars in elite universities could convince themselves otherwise. The idea that human beings can or should act without reference to morality when they enter the political sphere is a strikingly unrealistic view—no small irony for an ideology that labels itself 'realist.' Realism can become an uncomfortably dogmatic and un-empirical ideology in its refusal to acknowledge the lived experience of human life. Hans Morgenthau's attempt at a pared-down definition of realism in his classic 1948 text, *Politics Among Nations*—the pursuit of national interest defined in terms of power—solves no problems.³ It only raises the question: what is 'interest' and what is 'power'? What is the nation? The entire burden of liberalism and constructivism is to highlight how values, identity, and culture can—and should—influence human behavior, human politics, and human societies. When we simply recognize that these things are real, they immediately become more realistic than so-called realism.

Realism and History

Like all schools, realists mined the past to construct a useable history. The work of Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, the culture of *realpolitik* in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, and perhaps scholarship in the parallel field of strategy all served to give the emerging school of realism a sense of

² For a record of Kennan's views, see John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*. (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle For Power and Peace*, 5th ed., revised (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1978).

roots and the authority of a tradition. Having a lineage gives one confidence that comes from inheriting the wisdom of the ages, even if that lineage is only discovered ex post facto. The narrative that realists tell about themselves—that they are the inheritors of the mantle of Thucydides—is a self-serving fiction (as all narratives are), because there is no continuous tradition of Thucydidean interpretation, and realpolitik originally meant something close to the opposite of how most people understand the term.⁴

Hobbes is a plausible figurehead for the founding of realism. We could view intellectual history since 1648 as a prolonged debate about how to organize Europe and the world in the aftermath of Christendom. On the one hand were the loosely connected ideas of realism, nationalism, and absolutism; on the other side, liberalism. Hobbes is a father of realism not just because he ascribed to mankind “a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”⁵ His banishment of religious ideology from the public square, his reinterpretation of sovereignty, his insistence on unrestricted national autonomy, and his emphasis on anarchy and competition as the natural state of humanity were all essential parts of this way of viewing the world. This meshed well, first, with absolutism; subsequently, with nationalism, both of which overlapped with Hobbes’s foundational ideas.

The realist-nationalist tradition in Western thought continued after Hobbes in the work of continental philosophers and jurists like Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694), Christian von Wolff (1679-1754), and Emer de Vattel (1714-1767). Writing in the century after the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, their burden was to explain and defend a new understanding of sovereignty and a new meaning of statehood, and to describe how independent sovereign units should aspire to maintain an “equilibrium of power” amongst themselves (the phrase is Vattel’s).⁶ Previously, sovereignty meant responsibility for the commonweal, for upholding abstract notions of justice and peace, starting with one’s own realm but not excluding the wider world. Crucially, this sense of responsibility came from standards external to the state (God, Scripture, Church, or Nature), standards to which the sovereign was ultimately accountable. Wars over which standard to use, Catholic or Protestant, or what the standards actually meant ultimately led thinkers to deny that there was any standard at all.

Hobbes and his successors reinterpreted sovereignty to mean the only thing it could mean in a world shorn of Christendom’s cosmology: the sanctity of borders, territorial integrity, political independence, and freedom from interference from outsiders. It also meant freedom from any standard of accountability to which sovereigns had to pay court. For them, the defense of the state elided into the security of the state, in turn evolving into the power of the state under the guise that power was necessary for security. In that way the Westphalian tradition gave birth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the doctrine that states should pursue power for its own sake. The state became self-legitimizing, and *raison d’état* became a recognized

⁴ John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan, or, the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes, Vol. III.*, Sir William Molesworth, ed. (London: C. Richards, Printer, 1845), 85-86.

⁶ Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, Or, Principles of the Law of Nature, Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns, with Three Early Essays on the Origin and Nature of Natural Law and Luxury*, edited and with an introduction by Bela Kapossy and Richard Whitmore (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund: 2008), 496.

principle. “In regard to those things which affect nations, natural reasons are to be derived from the purposes of the state,” Wolff had argued, “from which is to be measured the right of the whole against individuals.”⁷ The “purposes of the state” are the measure of right, and are not measured by it. Prior to Westphalia, the major question of political theory was how to salvage a world of common values; afterwards, it was about how to consolidate power at home and balance power abroad.

Realism and Nationalism

This is an important history to keep in mind as we enter the contemporary debate about realism, nationalism, and classical liberalism. Realism is, as John Mearsheimer rightly argues in his recent magnum opus, *The Great Delusion*, a good fit with nationalism.⁸ That was true historically because early modern nationalists’ keenness to secure their independence and build their nations drew them to a strong Westphalian understanding of sovereignty. It was also true for the theorists of Westphalian sovereignty because they envisioned a world of mutually distinct, fully autonomous, internally coherent national units whose competition for power and prestige was to be the defining fact about the world.

For Mearsheimer, realism means embracing nationalism because nationalism is a natural and universal aspect of human politics. “Nationalism is more in sync with human nature than liberalism” (215) because nationalism “satisfies individuals’ emotional need to be part of a large group with a rich tradition and a bright future” (2056) while liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism, leaves us wanting something more. National identity and national loyalty are, for Mearsheimer, of defining, overriding importance in human life and human history, more so than allegiance to ideals of human rights, limited government, or reciprocal tolerance. The nation “fundamentally shapes [people’s] identities and behavior,” he argues, going so far as to claim that nations “help shape their essences and command their loyalties” (1598). These are bold claims about human nature, psychology, and political fundamentals. “Allegiance to the nation usually overrides all other forms of an individual’s identity,” (1614) which is why “nationalism is much like a religion” (1832).

That nations exist and command primary allegiance over human lives is important for Mearsheimer’s overall argument. His brand of realism depends on nationalism being more powerful than liberalism. He is a realist because he argues that we cannot and will never arrive at a common understanding of the good life across cultural and national lines; we therefore band together in tribes or nations that serve as survival vehicles; and these national units compete with one another for power, wealth, and survival in an anarchic world. He thinks that a politics of moral aspiration necessarily involves trying to impose a vision of the good life on one another, and he wants us to abandon such efforts. This is essentially Hobbes’s argument against the belligerents of the English Civil War and Pufendorf’s against the combatants in the Thirty Years’ War.

⁷ Christian von Wolff, *The Law of Nations Treated According to a Scientific Method. Carnegie Institute Classics of International Law* 13:2, James Brown Scott, ed., Joseph H. Drake, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 173.

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). All references in text are to Kindle locations. See the H-Diplo/ISSF roundtable at <https://issforum.org/roundtables/11-2-delusion>. Some of this material is drawn from Miller, “Structural Realism Has No Clothes,” *Law and Liberty*, 15 April 2019. The material is reprinted with permission. <https://www.lawliberty.org/book-review/structural-realism-has-no-clothes/>

Despite the importance of the concept of the ‘nation,’ Mearsheimer spends strikingly little time interrogating it. Nations are characterized by six features: “a powerful sense of oneness, a distinct culture, a marked sense of specialness, a historical narrative that emphasizes timelessness, a deep attachment to territory, and a strong commitment to sovereignty or self-determination” (1814). That, for Mearsheimer, is sufficient for his purposes. Mearsheimer neither defends nor provides empirical evidence for his assertion that there exist mutually distinct and internally coherent nations. “The human population is divided into many different nations composed of people with a strong sense of group loyalty,” (1613) he says, and now that nations have acquired states, “The world is now entirely populated with sovereign nation-states” (2800).

That is an extraordinary claim because of how much evidence there is against it. Excluding micro-sovereignties, there are almost no nation-states in the world today. This is a clear example of how realism has little connection to reality. Early modern efforts to create nations with a homogenous culture, language, or ethnicity were legendarily brutal, and almost all were unsuccessful. Virtually every state in the international system today is a pluralistic, multiethnic, multilingual polity in which questions of who or what defines the polity are live debates. Perhaps only Japan and a few European countries have the strong sense of oneness and a cultural consensus that Mearsheimer says defines nations (and Europe is in the midst of a fractious debate about immigration and national identity).

Most developed Western states today are more akin to the multiethnic empires of the past than the culturally homogenous units of the nineteenth century’s aspirations. The postcolonial states of Africa and Asia are even less “national.” Indonesia and India have scores and hundreds of constituent ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Nationalism—the correspondence between nations and states—has always been more aspiration than reality, in part because of the ambiguity surrounding what exactly a “nation” is. Realism is, in one perspective, the effort to decide the matter by fiat, announcing that “national” identity will take priority over more particular identities, and that the state’s efforts to bolster that identity are presumptively legitimate. But no one seems to be able to give a clear and consistent answer to the question of what national identity really is, which is a far greater problem for realism than is widely recognized.

Mearsheimer relies on a view of national origins that is consistent with the story nations tell themselves and their citizens. Nations weave myths about their naturalness, antiquity, and rootedness in smaller forms of affiliation. In this myth, the family, tribe, and nation are simply different versions of each other at different scales. We owe to our fellow nationals the same familial devotion, attachment, and loyalty we owe to our siblings and parents. (Yoram Hazony recently made the same argument at greater length in *The Virtue of Nationalism*.)⁹ Of course, this story is untrue. A nation is not simply a large tribe; it is the conquest by one tribe over many other tribes and their assimilation—usually coerced—into a larger unit. Nationalism is internal imperialism, typically the rule by a majority group over minority groups under the ruling group’s language, culture, or religion. As a nation’s definition gains specificity—as it settles on a particular language, culture, or religion—it necessarily excludes those who do not share the nation’s identity. In fact, nationalism is not the opposite of a politics of moral aspiration; it is another version of the same, substituting Nation for God, Scripture, Church, or Nature.

That is why everywhere nationalism has actually been tried, it has rarely resulted in states that are at peace with themselves and their neighbors. Nationalism is virtually always contested: once citizens come to believe

⁹ Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (London: Hachette UK, 2018).

that their state should embody something called a “nation,” people immediately begin to fight over what that nation is and who counts as a member. Historically, nationalism has an unsettling tendency to attract racist, xenophobic, and sectarian fellow-travelers. The age of nationalism is the age of civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, and “national” liberation movements, to say nothing of inter-national competition and war. “Nations” are not very realistic, and efforts to act like they are tend to be destructive and harmful.

Mearsheimer acknowledges some—but only some—of this reality. He acknowledges that nationalism oftentimes comes with chauvinism, but implies that this can be addressed through some form of federalism or power-sharing. In his telling, some “nations” are actually composites of majority and minority constituent nations. They have to fabricate a sense of shared unity at a higher level to allow themselves to coexist and develop a thicker sense of peoplehood at lower levels. He describes more homogenous nations as those with a “thick” national culture, while pluralistic polities that are better understood as confederations of nations come together and create a “thin” national culture. Somewhat bafflingly, he puts the United States in the category of states with a “thick” national culture that “largely comprises one nation,” despite the United States’ long history as a melting pot of the world (2045).

Mearsheimer is right that a thin national culture may be the right path to keep the peace domestically. But the problem remains: even thin national identities exclude those who do not share them. Mearsheimer recommends the solution used by absolutists, autocrats, and nation-builders throughout history: “The key to success is to eliminate heterogeneity,” (1962) such as by enforcing a single national language. There are, of course, even less savory ways of eliminating heterogeneity. The problem with nationalism is that plenty of people do not want to be part of whatever culture the state tries to enforce as the national model. If nationalism is much like a religion, it does not often admit room for heresy. Eliminating heterogeneity may be pragmatic, but it is not liberal.

Realism is, at root, the ideology of state power. The defense, maintenance, and increase of state power is a self-justifying principle, the standard of legitimacy against which other policies are judged. Nationalism goes well with this agenda because it involves the state using its power to create a more homogenous, governable nation, one that can be taxed, conscripted, and pacified at lower cost. But to the extent that realism is entwined with nationalism, it is taking its cue from a distorted version of reality at the expense of the empirical data. Nations do not have a natural existence, meaningful human lives does not depend on there being mutually distinct and internally coherent nations, and the effort to create such nations is usually exclusionary and violent in practice. In fact, the effort to create nations goes against the grain of reality, an effort to impose an artificial construct on human society—the criticism realists usually lodge against their opponents.

Classical Liberalism

Hobbes and his followers were not wrong that Christendom had fractured and that the world needed new principles of sovereignty, legitimacy, and world order. But theirs were not the only ideas in currency. The alternative to realism and nationalism is, and has always been, classical liberalism. Liberalism was just as fast off the blocks as realism in the race to define the coming world order after Westphalia, most famously articulated by John Locke (1632-1704), but also the Baron Charles-Louise de Montesquieu (1689-1755), and Adam Smith (1723-1790), among others. For that matter, some religious thinkers started advocating early liberal ideas even before Locke in recognition of the flawed political theology of their predecessors, thinkers like John Smyth (1570-1612), John Milton (1608-1674), and Roger Williams (1629-1676).

Liberalism argues that the fundamental unit of politics is the individual, not the nation; that sovereignty derives from those individuals and is accountable to them; that sovereignty is therefore not a plenary grant of power to do with whatever the sovereign pleased; that the state's jurisdiction is limited in an important sense by the fundamental rights of its citizens; and that states can escape endless competition and anarchy through cooperation, especially with like-minded states. Liberalism holds out the promise of a different basis of politics both domestically and internationally. It is unapologetically an aspirational ideology, hoping to ameliorate the human condition, liberate human beings, and enable human flourishing through applied reason. In that sense, it is inimical to realism. It is also at odds with nationalism and tribalism because it stresses the individual over the group and minority rights over social cohesion. For realism to be persuasive, it has to offer a better explanation of the world than liberalism.

Thinkers have spent centuries trying to reconcile versions of realism, liberalism, and nationalism with each other. The intellectual and political currents weaved and sometimes overlapped, especially when nationalists looked to liberalism to structure their national political life. But the broad trend is of realists, absolutists, nationalists, and other reactionary forces defining themselves in opposition to liberalism. That was as true of Carr, defining himself in opposition to the Wilsonian project after the Great War as it was of Otto von Bismarck and other practitioners of *machtropolitik* in the nineteenth century. For that matter, it was true of the Holy Alliance as it sought to contain liberalism after Napoléon.

It is also true of today's realists. Mearsheimer's arguments are predictably hostile to liberalism. This hostility to liberalism is odd because, on the surface, it seems to match much more neatly with his insistence that human beings cannot and will never agree on ultimate truths. Mearsheimer rightly says that, "A liberal state seeks to stay out of the business of telling people what kind of behavior is morally correct or incorrect" (985). Interestingly, that distinguishes the liberal state from the nationalist state. The nationalist state tells people that national identity is an essential part of the good life and national loyalty is morally correct behavior (a point Mearsheimer does not address). If liberal neutrality is viable, we do not have to put up with the illiberality of nationalism.

Mearsheimer must therefore argue that such neutrality is not possible. He suggests that liberal neutrality is a façade—which amounts to saying that liberalism is impossible at root. "The rules that govern social groups reflect a particular vision of the good life and invariably favor some individuals' or factions' interests over others," (783) he says, "The state is unable to be neutral" (1018). It cannot be neutral because disputes over the good are intractable; "There is no such thing as a neutral state that merely acts as an umpire among rival factions" (2244). Liberalism is an exercise in hypocrisy: "When liberals talk about inalienable rights, they are effectively defining the good life," despite their protestations of neutrality (2115). This is all the more true when liberalism goes abroad. When the liberal hegemon tries to foster liberalism in illiberal societies, Mearsheimer claims, it discovers that many people do not like liberalism. "Many people around the world do not privilege individual rights," (2327) he says, "There is little evidence that most people think individual rights are inalienable or that they matter greatly in daily political life" (2617).

Mearsheimer asserts this as fact without citing evidence. In fact, a 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center across 38 states across the world found 78 percent of respondents supported representative democracy, which

is tightly correlated with individual rights.¹⁰ The poll included respondents in non-Western states like the Philippines, Turkey, and Kenya, and autocratic states like Russia. Another worldwide Pew poll in 2015 found 65 percent support for women's rights, 74 percent support for religious freedom, and 56 percent support for the freedom of speech. Even the notoriously illiberal Middle East registered 73 percent support for religious freedom and 43 percent support for free speech.¹¹

One might question the depth of commitment behind those numbers and emphasize that people are unlikely to prioritize rights when survival is threatened. But then again, women across the world registered much higher support for women's rights than did men, probably because to them, rights are survival—and that points to a key flaw in Mearsheimer's dismissal of the universal appeal of liberalism. This is the same argument that powerful men in autocratic states make about why their country is never quite ready for liberal rights. Sunni Pashtun men were the most hostile to the arrival of democracy in Afghanistan—but democracy proved wildly popular among women, Shia, Tajiks, Hazara, and others. Mearsheimer spends no time discussing the empirical evidence about the appeal of liberalism around the world, particularly to the disenfranchised and powerless. Like Mearsheimer's comments about nations and nationalism, his arguments about liberalism are strikingly detached from any empirical analysis. (I have written elsewhere about the surprising strength and resilience of non-western liberalism.)¹²

It is, in fact, an odd time to doubt the global appeal of liberalism and democracy because the post-Cold War era is the high point of human freedom in recorded human history. Mearsheimer claims that “true Liberal democracies have never made up a majority of states in the international system,” (1608). The word “true” does a lot of work in that sentence. Freedom House estimates that 45 percent of states in the world are “free” today and another 30 percent are “partly free”—and that is after a decade of democratic decline. By another measure, Freedom House counts a majority—114 of the world's 195 states—to be electoral democracies.¹³ There is nothing uniquely Western about not wanting to be oppressed. Liberalism is far stronger and more broadly popular than Mearsheimer grants.

The legacy of realism is to set itself in opposition to one of the greatest achievements of human political institutions in history. The question of whether liberal neutrality really is possible is a complex and difficult question for political theorists. For our purposes, we can simply note that if Mearsheimer is right that liberal neutrality is impossible and that liberalism is actually smuggling in a vision of the good life, then we seem to have come extraordinarily close to global consensus on a vision of the good life, or at least one aspect of it,

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy,” 16 October 2017. <https://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/>.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, “Global Support for Principle of Free Expression, But Opposition to Some Forms of Speech,” 18 November 2015, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2015/11/18/global-support-for-principle-of-free-expression-but-opposition-to-some-forms-of-speech/>.

¹² Paul D. Miller, “Non-“Western” Liberalism and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41:2 (Summer 2018): 137-153.

¹³ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World, 2018,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018> and “List of Electoral Democracies,” <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/List%20of%20Electoral%20Democracies%20FIW%202018.xlsx>

disproving one of the key philosophical presuppositions behind Mearsheimer's realism. If, alternatively, liberal neutrality is possible, it makes his realism unnecessary because we can then conclude liberalism truly is universalizable across cultures and nations and might hold out the promise of fostering international peace among liberal democracies.

The Democratic Peace Theory

That, of course, is anathema to the foreign policy that realists prefer. The idea that liberalism might lead to world peace is a cornerstone of liberalism, one of its strongest selling points to scholars and practitioners, and a potential death-blow to realism. The idea of a liberal or democratic peace is almost as old as liberalism itself, having first been outlined by Immanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795). Kant argued with remarkable prescience that a confederation of republican governments could be the anchor of world peace. Two centuries later, Jack Levy famously would observe that "the absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations."¹⁴ Despite the initial failure of the Wilsonian project, subsequent decades have gradually vindicated much of it through the spread of democracy and international cooperation. If it is true that liberal democracies do not fight each other, then a foreign policy that champions and encourages democracy abroad holds out the promise of spreading peace, stability, and prosperity—and to do so on grounds antithetical to realism. If the democratic peace theory is true, realism is not only false, it is basically immoral for leading humanity away from its best hope for peace.

Given the challenge that the democratic peace theory presents to realism, it is striking how rarely realists engage with it. In research for my last book, I found almost no effort to rebut it in the major recent works advocating for restraint or retrenchment. Mearsheimer commendably tries to fill the gap. He argues that for the democratic peace theory to be relevant, it has to trump concerns about survival. Clearly it does not; states and people care more about survival than about freedom, Mearsheimer claims, and so the theory is of limited applicability. Mearsheimer seemingly argues that this scope condition is a weakness of the democratic peace theory: "These conditions do not always exist. The world has never been populated with democracies alone, which significantly restricts the scope of democratic peace theory" (3579). Democracies will always have to live by realist logic, like the balance of power, when dealing with non-democratic powers. He later notes that democracies can backslide, making the democratic peace not apply to them anymore.

Mearsheimer's argument is a non-sequitur; he is refuting an argument no one makes. Advocates of the democratic peace theory do not argue that democracy is or will be global, or that it must become global for the democratic peace theory to be relevant. We do not claim that democracy is more important than survival or that it exempts democracies from acting according to realist logic in relation to non-democratic powers. (In my book I specifically argue that the two logics operate in tandem). We claim that the question of survival does not arise in the first place between two liberal democracies, and thus does not have to be trumped. And I was taught in graduate school that specifying your theory's scope conditions strengthens your case; it does not weaken it. By contrast, Mearsheimer claims "Realism is a timeless theory," (2551) which is simply false, arising as it did in the unique conditions of post-Westphalian Europe to explain the era's new interpretation of sovereignty. In any case, if it were timeless, realists would be unable to explain variance across history.

¹⁴ J. S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18:4 (Winter 1988): 653-673, 662.

Mearsheimer is not engaging with a fair version of his critics' arguments. This is particularly on display with his treatment of Francis Fukuyama, whose arguments he repeatedly mischaracterizes. Fukuyama's "End of History" essay is essentially a restatement of the democratic peace theory, resting as it does on the potent idea that liberal democracy and capitalism are superior to their alternatives and that their spread will also spread peace, liberty, and human flourishing. But in his critique of liberalism, Mearsheimer returns several times to Fukuyama and uses a caricatured version of it as a foil for himself. "According to Fukuyama, [democratic] nations would have virtually no meaningful disputes, and wars between great powers would cease," Mearsheimer argues (165). In his reading, Fukuyama believed "liberal democracy would steadily sweep across the globe, spreading peace everywhere" (3635).

What Fukuyama actually wrote was very different from what Mearsheimer recounts. Fukuyama wrote in his original essay that the 'end of history' does not mean "there will no longer be events to fill the pages of Foreign Affairs' yearly summaries of international relations." Fukuyama did not suggest that every state would immediately convert to liberal democracy. "At the end of history, it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society." Nor does the End of History mean the end of war: "This does not by any means imply the end of international conflict per se... terrorism and wars of national liberation will continue to be an important item on the international agenda." Conflict would continue and many states would remain within "History" for the foreseeable future. "Russia and China are not likely to join the developed nations of the West as liberal societies any time in the foreseeable future," he wrote.¹⁵

More positively, in contrast to his discussion of nationalism and liberalism, Mearsheimer's treatment of the democratic peace theory does engage with some of the empirical data. Mearsheimer argues there are four clear-cut cases of democracies fighting against each other: Germany against the Allies in World War I; the Boer War (1899-1902); the Spanish-American War of 1898; and the Kargil War between India and Pakistan in 1999. Along the same lines, he also claims that the United States "has a rich history of toppling democratically elected governments," further disproving the democratic peace theory. He cites Guatemala in 1954, Iran in 1953, Brazil in 1964, and Chile in 1973 as examples. None of these cases hold up.

Mearsheimer gives prominent place to his claim that Wilhelmine Germany was a liberal democracy, and thus that World War I falsifies the democratic peace theory. (Christopher Layne makes the same argument in *Peace of Illusions*).¹⁶ The claim is false. The Polity IV project gives Germany in 1914 a score of 2 on its scale of -10 (full autocracy) to 10 (full democracy). Like many hybrid, transitional, or incomplete democracies, Wilhelmine Germany blended traits of democracy and autocracy. It held elections and had a parliament; it also censored the press and established a military dictatorship over foreign and defense policy with no democratic checks on war-making powers. This is not the kind of regime that scholars of the democratic peace have in mind.

The Boer War and Spanish-American War and coups in Guatemala, Iran, and Brazil fail by the same measures. One or the other party in the war or coup simply were not full democracies. As importantly,

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18.

¹⁶ Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 2006).

Mearsheimer does not engage with more recent historiography on these cases; he is recycling old talking points by critics of U.S. foreign policy.¹⁷ Suffice to say, the coups are more complicated than Mearsheimer's single sentence makes them out to be. (Chile, in particular, was emphatically not a U.S.-sponsored coup, despite what your college professor told you). If these cases are to be used to disprove the democratic peace theory, more is needed.

Mearsheimer's discussion of the democratic peace theory has more problems. "Perhaps the most damning evidence against the case for liberal democratic norms is found in Christopher Layne's careful examination of four cases where a pair of liberal democracies marched to the brink of war, but one side pulled back and ended the crisis," (3772) he writes. No, in fact these cases are not evidence against the democratic peace theory; if anything, they could be seen as evidence for it because the democracies in question did not go to war. Whatever the causal mechanism at work, the cases simply do not comment on the democratic peace theory because they do not include examples of democracies going to war against each other.

The Kargil War is perhaps the single case of a militarized crisis between two democracies (Pervez Musharraf overthrew the Pakistani democracy months later), though one that was so small and brief, and killed so few people, that the Uppsala Data Conflict Program (UDCP) codes it as falling below the conventional threshold of 1,000 battle deaths that political scientists use to define "war" (UDCP estimates 886 battle deaths).¹⁸ That is a technicality, however, and the case does raise a potential problem for the democratic peace theory. But not a large one. As I often tell my students, the fact that scholars have spent so much time debating the marginal cases proves that the democratic peace theory is true the rest of the time—which is to say, it is true for the other 99.9 percent of cases. It is true enough for policymaking: scholars can reliably trust that democracies virtually never go to war against each other. And if it is true, realism is not just a faulty guide; it is a treacherous one, leading us in exactly the opposite direction we should go.

Liberal Hegemony: Realism's Straw Man

Today the debate between realism and liberalism is most vividly on display in the debate over U.S. grand strategy. The central complaint of realists like Mearsheimer—and Steve Walt, whose *The Hell of Good Intentions* is another recent attempt to vindicate realism¹⁹—is that the United States has pursued a grand strategy of liberal hegemony, which is costly, self-defeating, and doomed to fail. Like past realists complaining of religious violence, revolutionary utopianism, or Wilsonian naïveté, Walt and Mearsheimer take issue with the moral aspiration to foster a more liberal international order. Their views are an excellent test case of

¹⁷ See, for example, *Foreign Affairs*, Special Section on "The Cold War's Cold Cases," 93:4 (July/August 2014): 1-42. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2014/93/4>.

¹⁸ Uppsala Data Conflict Program, "Government of India—Government of Pakistan," <https://ucdp.uu.se/#statebased/422>.

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). References in the text refer to Kindle locations. See also the H-Diplo/ISSF roundtable at <https://issforum.org/roundtables/10-31-walt>. Some of this material is drawn from Miller, "To Hell and Back," *Law and Liberty*, 20 August 2019. The material is reprinted with permission. <https://www.lawliberty.org/2019/08/20/to-hell-and-back-stephen-walt-good-intentions-review/>.

realism today. They offer a perfect illustration of how realism is historically myopic, morally stunted, and strategically incoherent.

Mearsheimer claims that liberal hegemony aims “to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies while also fostering an open international economy and building formidable international institutions” (40). Mearsheimer characterizes liberal hegemony in bold language: “In essence, the United States has sought to remake the world in its own image” (41). Liberal states “have a crusader mentality hardwired into them that is hard to restrain” (121). The United States “is likely to end up fighting endless wars” (130). Again, he argues that “the costs of liberal hegemony begin with the endless wars a liberal state ends up fighting to protect human rights and spread liberal democracy around the world. Once unleashed on the world stage, a liberal unipole soon becomes addicted to war” (2861). He warns that if the United States continues to pursue this strategy, it “is likely to end up in a perpetual state of war” (2935) because liberal hegemony “calls for doing social engineering all across the globe” (3489).

Walt, similarly, is unsparing in his critique. Like Mearsheimer, he accuses the United States of pursuing liberal hegemony since the end of the Cold War. “The United States spent the past quarter century pursuing an ambitious, unrealistic, and mostly unsuccessful foreign policy,” (49) he argues. Advocates of liberal hegemony are guilty of “viewing the United States as the ‘indispensable nation’ responsible for policing the globe, spreading democracy, and upholding a rules-based, liberal world order” (122). He agrees with Mearsheimer that “Washington sought to remake other countries in its own image” (391).

Before we examine Walt’s and Mearsheimer’s critique of liberal hegemony, we should ask if this is an accurate description of U.S. foreign policy. Realists claim to be the empiricists in the room: how well have Walt and Mearsheimer taken stock of the empirical reality of U.S. foreign policy? As I wrote in my book, a liberal hegemon worth the name that was trying to enforce liberalism and entrench American hegemony would have acted differently than the United States has since 1989.²⁰ Walt claims the United States should have “retrench[ed] slightly” after the Cold War but “the foreign policy establishment never considered this possibility for more than a moment” (372).

Walt is reiterating a piece of conventional wisdom that is false. The notion that the United States expanded its overseas commitments after the Cold War is one of those frustrating notions that most people seem to believe because they have never paused to examine it. In fact, the United States retrenched considerably after the Cold War: it cut its military and intelligence budgets by a third, reduced the size of its standing military forces by the same amount, severely cut foreign aid, public diplomacy, and the diplomatic corps, demobilized and destroyed its own chemical weapons stockpile, decommissioned three-quarters of its nuclear warheads, and withdrew half of its troops from East Asia and over three-quarters of its troops from Europe. These are not the choices of a state hell-bent on hegemony.

We see the same restraint in American foreign policy choices. Realists emphasize the handful of American interventions in the 1990s and after the terrorist attacks of 2001, but rarely consider everything the United States did not do. The United States did not insist on the democratization of Kuwait after its liberation from Iraq in 1991. When it did intervene in Afghanistan, after 2001, it did so in response to a direct attack and

²⁰ Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

made only desultory and unimpressive efforts to liberalize and rebuild the country. The United States did not go to war against North Korea or Iran to enforce the nonproliferation regime.

Nor did the United States prioritize liberalism. It did not halt Hugo Chávez's rise to power in Venezuela or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's in Turkey; did not halt or reverse coups against democratically elected governments in Turkey, Mali, Pakistan, Thailand, or Egypt; did not find opportunities to use the Arab Spring to advance liberalism in the Middle East; and did not invest in the reconstruction of Libya after overthrowing its government. The United States did not join a host of beloved liberal institutions and treaties, such as the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol, the Law of the Sea Treaty, or the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in fact pulled out of several others. Perhaps most damningly, it made only a paltry and ineffective effort to push for the democratization of Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union and did nothing to stop Vladimir Putin's reestablishment of autocracy there.

Whether you think these are good policies or bad policies, the fact remains that they do not add up to the strategy of a crusading liberal hegemon. The United States demonstrably has not tried to do "social engineering all across the globe," is not "addicted to war" and has no "crusader mentality." Mearsheimer's and Walt's books exemplify the way in which so much of the foreign policy commentary in the past decade has fallen prey to recency bias over Iraq: because the United States' most recent large foreign policy initiative went poorly, commentators read that failure backwards and forwards in history and find Iraq-like problems everywhere they look. Walt blames the strategy of liberal hegemony for the "costly quagmires in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other countries," (272) as if the United States invaded those countries with the express and sole purpose of forcibly democratizing them. Of course, that isn't the case: the United States got into those wars out of concern for terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Regardless of one's views of those wars, it hardly seems fair to blame them on a purported strategy of liberal hegemony.

Walt complains that U.S. leaders did not pursue hegemony "in order to protect the American homeland from invasion or attack. Rather, they sought it in order to promote a liberal order abroad," (1136) later criticizing military deployments to "faraway places" (1143) such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, and others. Afghanistan was, of course, in direct response to an attack on America. Bosnia and Kosovo were related to European allies' security. Iraq was (mistakenly) thought to be a threat to U.S. security because of weapons of mass destruction. But more importantly, the dichotomy between American security and liberal order is a false one. The heart of the case for a more engaged, internationalist grand strategy is that liberal order is the outer perimeter of American security, an argument Walt and Mearsheimer do not engage with.

Walt supports his claim about America's expansionism by highlighting that the United States' treaty commitments have grown. It is true that NATO has increased its membership, but the larger number of states in NATO did not increase the United States' defense commitments; it simply moved the boundary line of the United States' singular commitment to European security. Worse, Walt lists the 1947 Rio Treaty as another example of America's overstretched defense commitments. The Rio Treaty, ostensibly a mutual defense treaty across the Western Hemisphere, is dead, having never made a single claim on U.S. resources or attention in 70 years. Several states have formally left the treaty in recent years, and no one treats it as a serious entity, much less a drain on U.S. defense.

Indeed, it is not even clear if Walt actually believes in his own boogeyman. He acknowledges the many ways in which the United States did not pursue liberal hegemony—but then ties his arguments in knots characterizing those policies as exceptions or aberrations to the broad pattern of liberal hegemony. Everything

bad about U.S. foreign policy is because of liberal hegemony, and everything that is good is because the U.S. did not pursue liberal hegemony but actually exercised wise restraint instead. He treats the Cold War similarly: by and large, it was an example of wise offshore balancing—except Vietnam, which was liberal hegemony. Occam's razor is useful here: a simpler way of reading the data is that the United States never actually pursued the elusive strategy of liberal hegemony in the first place.

Mearsheimer and Walt overstate the extent of American interventionism and bellicosity—sometimes dramatically—and consider none of the ways in which the United States has retrenched or held back from the many opportunities it had to further advance liberal ideals or American power over the past three decades. “Liberal hegemony” is a straw man concocted by Mearsheimer and Walt with which to pillory U.S. policymakers. It is a rhetorical exaggeration, a caricature of their opponents' arguments in terms they would not recognize, designed to make their opponents' arguments look extreme and theirs moderate by comparison. If this is “realism,” it is detached from empirical reality and offers little insight into the real successes and failures of American grand strategy in recent decades.

American Foreign Policy

Despite the problems with realism as a theory, Walt and Mearsheimer both use it as their main interpretive lens in long editorial commentaries on the Clinton, Bush, and Obama foreign policy records in which they make plain their disdain for American policy. In this, they are solidly in the tradition of Carr and his commentary on British policy in the 1930s. Mearsheimer asserts that the United States “helped start” the war in Syria (3144) and “played a central role in escalating the conflict” (3126); argues that “Washington has played a key role in sowing death and destruction across the Greater Middle East” (183); repeats his infamous claim that “American policymakers also played the key role in producing a major crisis with Russia over Ukraine” (2882); says the Bush administration created a “virtual gulag” at Guantanamo Bay (3447); blames the United States for interventions in Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria; and says the United States has waged seven wars since the Cold War (it is unclear what or how he is counting).

The only consistent thread in this list of accusations is that America is always to blame. The United States invaded Iraq in main force but refrained from doing the same in Syria, yet Mearsheimer counts them both as blameworthy “interventions” that prove America is on a crusade for liberal hegemony. The United States undertook nation building in Afghanistan and notoriously failed to do so in Libya, yet both are counted against America's record. Bashar al-Assad gets no credit for the war in Syria nor Vladimir Putin for the one in Ukraine. In his eagerness to prove that America is addicted to war, Mearsheimer is apparently counting peacekeeping missions and airstrikes alike as “war.” It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this version of ‘realism’ is less scholarly analysis than dogmatic anti-Americanism.

Walt offers a similar list of American sins, with a similar double standard. The war in Ukraine? America's fault for expanding NATO. ISIS? America's fault because of the Iraq war. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran's hostility to the United States? America's fault for pressuring Iran. Walt overemphasizes the United States' agency to the exclusion of other world actors such that even their direct actions and choices, like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are always explained as rational responses or reactions to American mistakes. He rarely considers the alternative: that the United States choices are rational responses to other actors' threats.

Mearsheimer's engagement with the Ukraine crisis is illustrative. He argues that "Western elites were surprised by events in Ukraine because most of them have a flawed understanding of international politics" (3316). I was not surprised, having accurately predicted Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years before it happened.²¹ More importantly, he blames the United States for antagonizing Russia by expanding NATO. "Ukraine serves as an enormously important strategic buffer to Russia," he explains (3303). In Mearsheimer's telling, Russia was justifiably upset by Ukraine's tilt westward and NATO's 2008 promise of eventual membership. In response to American policymakers' insistence that Russia's security perceptions are invalid, Mearsheimer replies that "It is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them" (3315).

So do the Ukrainians, of course, who figure nowhere in Mearsheimer's analysis. Ukraine, understandably upset by Russia's history of aggression, was just as entitled to seek security however and wherever it could, including from the West. For that matter, the United States is also entitled to its own security perceptions. Why can't it decide that a Europe "whole and free" is essential to the peace and prosperity of its biggest trading partners? Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine crisis involves a double-standard. When Russia demands a sphere of influence in Europe as part of its security, Mearsheimer accepts its demand at face value. When the United States does the same, Mearsheimer argues that American policymaker's claims are not only mistaken, but illegitimate. Mearsheimer carries water for the Russians but speaks truth to power to the Americans. And when Ukrainians define their security as not being under Russian dominance, Mearsheimer pays them no attention whatsoever. Given Mearsheimer's endorsement of nationalism, it makes one wonder why Ukrainian nationalism does not figure in his arguments anywhere.

In truth, there is no moral equivalence between Russia's expansionist view of its security requirements and the nesting of American, European, and Ukrainian security in liberal order. Superficially, both states define their security in extraterritorial terms, but Russia's depends on the unilateral dominance of other states, while the liberal order helps secure the independent aspirations of those uninterested in belonging to Russia's sphere of influence. Mearsheimer does not accept this and instead places the blame for the world's conflicts solely at America's feet. This sort of analysis of contemporary events leaves one with little confidence that realism can see clearly or offer meaningful insight into world affairs.

Walt goes further. He takes his criticism of U.S. foreign policy to the individual level, spending the bulk of his book on pointed criticisms of the American foreign policy elite. Walt does the work of an anthropologist or ethnographer, describing the ecosystem and the epistemic community of scholars, policymakers, think tankers, journalists, and others who make up America's foreign policy establishment. His description is apt and the chapter could serve as a useful career map for aspiring foreign policy professionals (probably not what Walt intended). He damns the community for a culture of lax accountability, which is true, and he is dead on about the "activist bias" of the U.S (2118) foreign policy establishment, the inveterate need to "do something" in response to the headline of the day.

But he goes further. "Today's foreign policy elite is a dysfunctional caste of privileged insiders who are frequently disdainful of alternative perspectives and insulated both professionally and personally from the consequences of the policies they promote" (1684). This, I think goes too far. In the most questionable

²¹ Miller, "I Predicted Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/07/i-predicted-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

accusation of the book, he argues that foreign policy elites support the strategy of liberal hegemony because it is a “full-employment policy” for themselves (285). The establishment “understood that [liberal hegemony] was very good for them. Open-ended efforts to remake the world in America’s image gave the foreign policy establishment plenty to do, appealed to its members self-regard, and maximized their status and political power” (281).

To be clear, Walt offers no evidence for this claim. Instead, he simply highlights the alignment of interest. He pays perfunctory lip service to foreign policy professionals’ patriotism and sincerity, but doubles down on the claim that liberal hegemony is attractive to the foreign policy elite because of the prestige, power, and employment opportunities it provides. (His argument is out of date: the job market has already moved in his direction more than he recognizes.) Certainly, this might be an unconscious motive for some in the “Blob,” but if it were systematically true of a preponderant portion of foreign policy professionals in America, we would expect to see evidence in private memoirs, letters, or emails; or in public sources, such as job postings, job training programs, university advertisements, think tank reports, and more. Walt provides none, in the absence of which his accusation is scurrilous and cannot be taken seriously.

Conclusion

Academic realists today advocate a strategy of restraint, offshore balancing, or retrenchment that pays much less attention to liberal ideals and the liberal international order that the United States has painstakingly constructed over the past 75 years. Their views ignore the reality of liberalism and depend on unrealistic assumptions about how the world works. In the alternative reality Walt sketches, for example, the U.S. exercised restraint after the Cold War, and in subsequent years, avoided every bad thing that has actually happened in the past quarter-century. Just one example: Walt argues that his strategy would have prevented terrorism from becoming a serious problem because restraint would have prevented the United States from getting involved with democracy promotion and military occupations abroad, thus avoiding the nationalist backlash that he thinks fuels terrorism. This makes sense only if he is talking about terrorism within Iraq and Afghanistan aimed mostly at other Iraqis and Afghans. The international terrorist attacks of the past three decades—for example, by Egyptians, Saudis, Pakistanis, Jordanians, Kashmiris, and Chechens—were not motivated by anger at democracy in their home countries, because there is none.

What is remarkable is that, despite decades of scholarship and centuries of change in global politics, today’s realists have revised or changed almost none of their views. Nationalism’s historical baggage and troubling fellow-travelers have not given realists pause. The straitjacket of Westphalian sovereignty, the paralysis it forces on the citizens and governments of the world in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing, is greeted by silence from academic realism. Even more, the rise of China, the return of multipolarity, and the emergence of cyberspace and artificial intelligence have not any updated or revised conclusions in either Mearsheimer’s or Walt’s books. After the Cold War the United States cut its military and diplomatic budget and personnel and withdrew most of the troops it had stationed overseas (only slightly and temporarily slowed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan)—yet realists continue to call for more retrenchment. It is unclear just how far the United States should retrench to meet the demands of realists.

It is also surprising that realists have never offered a serious response to the longest-standing criticism against them: that amorality is unrealistic, that it is an inaccurate description of human beings, that it cannot serve as a sustainable basis of foreign policy, and that calls for amorality are, functionally, immoral. Mearsheimer, in fact, doubles down on this aspect of realism by developing a defense of moral equivalence—or, more

accurately, moral relativism. “There are no universal truths regarding what constitutes the good life,” (216) he writes. Humans have divergent views of the good; we have never reached consensus; and so Mearsheimer concludes we should admit there is no such thing as an objective or universal good. That is why Mearsheimer’s arguments idealize a world of nation-states grouped around distinct cultures and competing visions of the good vying for power and wealth, without too much concern for which state has the better side of the moral argument. The various ideological explanations and justifications that states give for their policies are so much rhetorical window-dressing, epiphenomenal to the true underlying driving forces.

This leads Mearsheimer into an odd contradiction. “The fact that many people believe universal truth exists and that they have found it only makes the situation worse, as thinking in terms of absolutes makes it hard to promote compromise and tolerance” (853). Mearsheimer is here echoing a cliché that believing things to be true is tantamount to being a fanatic, a zealot, a theocrat, or a fascist—which is obviously false. But there is another difficulty. Mearsheimer very clearly holds up tolerance and compromise as goods. But within the framework he has advanced, he gives us no reason to prefer tolerance and compromise over their opposites. Why should we value tolerance and compromise as components of the good life if “There are no universal truths regarding what constitutes the good life”?

Why are realists so afraid of moral aspiration? The answer may lie in the age in which realism was born, or the ages in which it is reborn again and again. Hobbes blamed the Wars of Religion on ideological zealotry, as his successors would do for the Napoleonic Wars and the Great War. Realists in the twentieth century saw the initial failure of the Wilsonian project and attributed it to overweening moralistic ambition. But as importantly, they interpreted the rise of fascism as another example of moralistic crusading idealism. Fascism, after all, was a political religion, an example (realists thought) of how dangerous it can be to infuse politics with idealistic zealotry.

Realism, in this perspective, looks like a typical example of a movement taking shape in overreaction to something it opposed. Wilsonianism failed, and so we have to throw out liberalism forever; Nazism was evil, and so we have to throw out all political morality of any kind. Napoléon nearly conquered Europe, so we must turn our backs on the Revolutionary ideas that gave him birth. The War of Religion wrecked Europe, so we must banish religion to the “private” sphere and teach statesmen to act as if values do not (and should not) affect their decision-making.

Overreactions rarely have anything to commend them. Liberalism is obviously salvageable, having outlived Wilson’s failure and spread across the globe over the past century. As for political morality, it seems too obvious to point out that one can believe in morality without being a Nazi—but that obvious point seems lost on many realists, for whom any form of moral aspiration is a dangerous sign of incipient fascism. As constructivists would argue, political morality is inevitable: everyone carries a morality with them. What matters is the content of that morality. A liberal morality that says all humans have equal moral dignity and deserve a chance at flourishing is about as good as it gets—better, certainly, than a realist morality that counsels the singular pursuit of national power above all else.

In fact, there is at least as good a case to be made that the catastrophes of the past two centuries are due in part to realism’s success as its failure; that Napoléon and Hitler understood the ideology of state power too well; and that the solution should have been more liberalism, not less of it. It was precisely during the age when statesmen took least heed of conventional morality, when they took to heart the ideology of state power, that they involved themselves in foolish crusades for national glory. When you define political morality as the

pursuit of political power, but refrain from defining what power is responsible for, you open the door to the untrammled pursuit of power for its own sake—which is a pretty good description of the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the return to which is no rational person’s aspiration.

After almost a century of formal development in the academy, and four centuries in broader cultural currents, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that realism is polemic against moral aspiration masquerading as scholarship that takes little note of empirical data and whose analysis of foreign policy is riddled with double standards. Worse, realism cuts us off from the very moral resources we need to envision a better world. Students of international relations may be forgiven for fearing that realism has deteriorated from a viable research program into a dogmatic intellectual straightjacket. The field deserves better.

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