## IR

### IR — AT: Empirics

#### “Empirical evidence” can’t prove the internal psyche of states.

Abulof ’15— Uriel; associate professor at Tel-Aviv University's School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs. He is a LISD research fellow at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School and at the Truman Institute. July 16, 2015; “The Malpractice of “Rationality” in International Relations”; *Rationality and Society*, Volume 25, Issue 3; Accessed Online via University of Michigan Libraries; //CYang

What is the purpose (or scholarly function) of ascribing rationality? Two aims are plain: describing/explaining or prescribing (wherein the actor or act either is, or ought to be, rational). Stein (1999) observes a curious shift: “What started as a normative enterprise has become a positive one. Tools once created to improve the quality of otherwise imperfect human decision making are now being used to explain choice” (p. 212). But this trend is more intricate. In principle, many contemporary RCT scholars agree that “rational-choice theory is first and foremost normative. It tells us what we ought to do in order to achieve our aims as well as possible” (Elster, 1989: 3). Still, in practice, RCT scholarship abounds in descriptive and explanatory analyses (Hampsher-Monk and Hindmoor, 2010; Lovett, 2006).

The descriptive-prescriptive schism should not obfuscate rationality’s third purpose: rationality “as if” it were real. I refer to this as subjunctive rationality. It is pervasive in RCT, especially in formal modeling (Morton, 1999). Accordingly, actors “behave as if they were seeking rationally to maximize their expected returns,” much like “the density of leaves around a tree” is determined “as if each leaf deliberately sought to maximize the amount of sunlight it receives, given the position of its neighbors, as if it knew the physical laws …” — this subjunctive “formula is accepted because it works,” not because it is a truthful account of reality (Friedman, 1953: 21,19,18; cf. Nagel, 1963). On a larger scale, decisions may then be aggregated in order to understand collective actions as if they were decided by rational individuals, even when it is not so (Satz and Ferejohn, 1994: 75).

Subjunctive rationality is neither descriptive nor prescriptive, neither objective nor subjective. Depending on its specific actual usage, it may be false, probable, indeterminate, or true. Subjunctive rationality offers important benefits. It fosters creative puzzles and theorization, otherwise hard to conceive. Its employment may moreover be predictive and, if correlative to desired goals, make for prescriptive claims. But these potential benefits of subjunctive rationality do not change the fact that it is not descriptive, let alone explanatory: “‘As-if’ explanations do not actually explain anything” (Elster, 2007: 25; see also Macdonald, 2003). Postulating subjunctive rationality as explanatory may commit the argumentum ad consequentiam logical fallacy: deriving an argument from desirable or undesirable consequences. Fall, however desirable, is not caused by the leaves’ rationality.

This fallacy lurks in FPA, for while the rational actor model implicitly follows RCT’s clear preference for either subjunctive or prescriptive rationalities (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 3, 24), FPA’s explanandum is usually very real and concrete, enticing the use of descriptive (and explanatory) rationality. However, as game theorist Herbert Gintis (2009) rightly insists, “rational actor model applies to choice situations where ambiguities are absent, the choice set is clearly delineated, and the payoffs are unmediated,” and not to complex “deliberative choices,” which forms the crux of FPA (p. 237).

### IR — AT: Conflict Data

#### Conflict data is a joke.

Crammer & Desmarais ’17 — Skyler J. Cranmer; The Ohio State University, Department of Political Science. Bruce A. Desmarais; Pennsylvania State University, Department of Political Science. April 24, 2017; “What Can We Learn from Predictive Modeling?”; *Political Analysis*, Volume 25; Accessed Online via University of Michigan Libraries; //CYang

Illustrative Application: Predicting International Conflict

We now endeavor to demonstrate as many of the advantages of predictive models discussed above as possible within the confines of a single example. We attempt the prediction of violent international conflict, something notoriously hard to predict, and consider what predictive modeling can teach us about this process.

5.1 The paucity of predictive models of interstate conflict

Empirical analysis in conflict processes research relies almost exclusively on explanatory modeling, typically using regression. Predictive models, which do not necessarily aim to operationalize a causal theory, are then often seen as the tools of applied scientists or policy analysts rather than of the basic, explanatory science in which we typically engage (Schneider, Gleditsch, and Carey 2010, 2011). It is perhaps not surprising then that there is little predictive work in this field and what does exist is relatively recent.

Beck, King, and Zeng (2000) touched off the contemporary debate on predictive models for conflict with a study that uses a neural network approach, which predicts 17% of conflicts, compared to 0% by a conventional logistic regression. This study led to much debate over the utility of restricting samples to only dyads that had a reasonable chance of conflict in the first place, and even sparked some interest in neural networks (which we discuss further below), but failed to produce a substantial literature on predictive models for conflict. In one of the few studies of conflict prediction that followed Beck, King, and Zeng (2000), Ward, Siverson, and Cao (2007) use a Bayesian, Hierarchical, Bilinear, Mixed-Effects model stratified by time to gain an improvement in out-of-sample prediction, again over a fairly standard logistic regression; in this case, the one originally proposed by Oneal and Russett (1999). The model offers a substantial improvement in predictive ability over logit, but does not compare the performance of its method directly to that used by Beck, King, and Zeng (2000).

One reason the predictive literature on international conflict is so sparse may be that the structure of the conflict data is such that predictive modeling is difficult with existing technology. For example, time-series approaches to prediction, well established in both economics and political science, are difficult to apply to data that span every possible conflictual relationship in the world over time. None-the-less, there has been a recent increase in predictive work on other conflict processes, including civil wars (Rost, Schneider, and Kleibl 2009; Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010), transnational terrorism (Desmarais and Cranmer 2011), and single-conflict timeseries analyses (Pevenhouse and Goldstein 1999; Schrodt and Gerner 2000; Brandt, Freeman, and Schrodt 2011; Schneider 2012).

### IR — AT: Science

#### IR is not a science.

Kavalski ’12 — Emilian; Associate Professor of Global Studies at the Institute for Social Justice, Australian Catholic University (Sydney). 2012; “Waking IR Up from its ‘Deep Newtonian Slumber’”; *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Volume 41, Issue 1; Accessed Online via University of Michigan Libraries

Is the discipline of International Relations (IR) a ‘science’? Its ‘scientific’ credentials have long concerned proponents and detractors. As Ronald Rogowski’s claim in the epigraph suggests, the hankering after an ‘elegant science of international politics’ has virtually become a ‘dream’ to which his and subsequent generations of IR scholars have succumbed. Belying this dreaming is a question whether IR’s social-scientific inquiry can ever approximate that of the natural sciences. Perceiving the natural sciences to be an ‘exact science’, cohorts of IR students have been developing ‘powerful’ and ‘parsimonious’ models for the explanation and understanding of international politics. Take the ‘balance of power’, for instance. Its aim is to ascertain the existence of a particular regularity in world affairs – parity between adversaries. Borrowing the notion of equilibrium from the natural sciences, the balance of power explains international order as a regulating mechanism motivated by the natural desire of states for survival.

In this way, IR has tended to propound explanations premised on assumptions of predictability rooted in the conviction that international life is a closed system, changing in a gradual manner and following linear trajectories, which can be elicited through discrete assessments of dependent and independent variables. What IR intends to produce in this way is a nearly mechanistic model of international politics that is perceived to be as rigorous and robust as the one of the natural sciences. In recent years, the simplification and reductionism underpinning this ‘dream’ of a scientific IR have come under severe criticism from different quarters. In fact, some – such as John G. Ruggie – have made the point that the discipline needs to wake up from this ‘deep Newtonian slumber’, if it is to have any bearing on the real world of international politics. The three books under review actively contribute to this decentring project by advancing the ‘complexification’ of IR. The notion of complexification entails different things for different authors, but what all of them share is some form of engagement with the complexity paradigm of the philosophy of science.3

Originating in the natural sciences, the complexity paradigm challenges the Newtonian view of an orderly world and suggests that global interactions occur in a non-linear fashion. Consequently, the outcomes of such interactions are difficult to infer, let alone to predict. In this respect, the proponents of the complexification of IR have noted that while the ‘hard’ sciences have become increasingly ‘soft’ as a result of their acceptance of the uncertainty and randomness of reality, IR has ‘hardened’ as a result of its suppression of ambiguity, disregard for surprises and over-investment in its capacity to forecast international developments. Richard Ned Lebow explains this search for (and commitment to) a predictable worldview of regularities as a ‘need for psychological closure’, reflecting a desire for definitive conclusions in support of preferred theoretical assumptions.4 It is in this context that Damian Popolo asks the pertinent question whether ‘scientific IR’ is not premised on ‘fundamentally misleading notions about science’.5 In other words, the question that emerges is whether things appear perplexing because the ken of the mainstream is askew.

In its response to this query, the complexity paradigm reveals that Newtonian IR tends to operate on very little information (usually a few variables); yet, this does not prevent it from jumping to conclusions as if it had knowledge about the whole picture. Such lack of sensitivity to what IR does not know then underpins a model of the world that is rarely stumped. As a result, when the accepted framework for explanation and understanding fails – that is, it faces a question that it cannot answer (for instance, ‘Why IR failed to anticipate the end of the Cold War?’) – IR comes up with a question that it can answer (for instance, ‘Why the Cold War ended?’, answer: ‘Because the Soviet Union could no longer maintain the balance of power and, therefore, without such capability it could no longer survive in the international system and had to implode’).

The complexified IR suggests that by answering the wrong questions, Newtonian IR enacts a theatre of validity to generate explanations far more coherent than reality. Therefore, the ‘incredible rate of failure’ of the very frameworks asserting the ‘law-like regularities’ of international politics to anticipate any of the major events of the past 25 years should not be surprising.6 The irony of this situation is not lost on Lebow, who notes that it is the ‘commitment to science and scientific methods by international relations scholars’ that provides ‘a major impediment to their practice of science’.7 Thus, this review article assesses the three books under review in the context of the current state of the art in the emerging complexity paradigm of IR. Since this paradigm intends a complete rethinking of the discipline, the article will focus on the complexification of the ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics of IR. It has to be stressed at the outset that while IR students will find all three books under review of immense interest, their authors reach out to much wider and interdisciplinary audiences – thus, the collection edited by Jonathan Joseph and Colin Wight will be of immense relevance to any of the subfields of political science, especially international political economy; Lebow’s work has historians, literary theorists and psychologists in mind; while Popolo’s book addresses political theorists and philosophers.

The Complex Ontology of IR

When he urged IR to come out of its ‘degenerating’ Newtonian repose, Ruggie specifically beckoned that the discipline re-engage with the reality of international life. As he pointed out with chagrin and frustration, ‘the term “ontology” typically draws either blank stares or bemused smiles’ from the IR community.8 The contention is that IR is plagued by attention blindness – that is, because of its preoccupation with ‘reductive theories about “the logic of anarchy”’,9 it cannot discern the vast and heterogeneous reality of global affairs. Owing to its Newtonian commitments, mainstream IR views reality ‘not as a continuous flux … but as a series of instantaneous “snapshots” extracted from this flux’.10 Thus, as Lebow suggests, the dominant accounts of interstate relations miss the ‘open-ended, nonlinear nature of the social world’.11 He insists that the ‘confluence and consequences [of international politics] are best envisaged as a complex, nonlinear system’,12 ‘in which multiple interrelated chains of causation have unanticipated interactions and unpredictable consequences’.13

The ontology of complexity therefore provokes a reckoning with the multiple possibilities of becoming and becoming-other inherent in the pervasive ambiguity of global life.14 As Popolo demonstrates, such commitment reflects the philosophical engagement of Gilles Deleuze and his insistence on ‘the continuous precipitation of new life and new meaning’.15 Of the three books under review, the volume edited by Joseph and Wight engages with the issue of ontology most explicitly. A unique feature of this collection is that it offers the first comprehensive account of Scientific Realism (SR) – one of the strands in the complexification of IR. SR originates in Roy Bhaskar’s work on the philosophy of science. Its application to IR is described explicitly as a ‘shift from epistemology to ontology’.16 The reason for this shift is the understanding of reality as ‘stratified’ between the actual, the empirical and the real.17 This stratification addresses three of the key ontological claims animating the complexification of IR: (i) that the international is emergent; (ii) that the international is irreducible to and much more than its constituent parts; and (iii) that the international is subject to unexpected and (often) radical transformations – that is, small alterations in initial conditions can lead to profound changes in outcomes.18

In this setting, SR asserts that the world with which IR engages, self-organises in complex and contingent ways. This observation is also confirmed by the other two books under review. For instance, Lebow frames world politics as ‘an open system whose outcomes are sensitive to – if not always the result of – chance, agency, and confluence’,19 while Popolo depicts international life as an ‘irreversible’ process that ‘grows out of complex systems to determine its own rules of development’.20 Yet, what distinguishes the collection edited by Joseph and Wight is the confrontation with the ‘ontological issue of the different layering of the social (and natural) world’.21 Conventionally, IR has tended to ignore that international politics both inhabit and are embedded in complex spaces. In this respect, SR infers one of the greatest ontological boons of complexified IR – the recognition of the ‘totality’22 of human and non-human interactions in global life.

Newtonian IR has been exclusively anthropocentric and inspired by the ‘Enlightenment belief in a “makeable world”’, according to which human/socio-political systems (such as civil society, states, international organisations, etc.) are both detached from (not only conceptually, but in practice) and in control of the ‘non-human’ environment in which they occur.23 It is worth pointing out that such diverse and profound considerations of the complex ontology of international politics are intended not merely as a criticism of Newtonian IR, but also as a provocation for re-engaging with the ongoing and overlapping interconnections animating global life. In fact, the radical totality of human and non-human interactions has recently been framed as ‘posthuman IR’. Following SR’s recognition of the qualitative and quantitative difference between human and nonhuman systems, the ‘complex ecologism’ of ‘posthuman IR’ uncovers that the ‘world is not divided into territories in which bounded societies of humans live under singular political authority and in the context of discrete natural environments’;24 instead, global life is ‘a complex interweave of numerous systems nested, intersected and embedded in each other, all undergoing processes of co-evolution and linked by innumerable feedback loops’.25 SR echoes this ontological commitment by describing world affairs as complex interactions ‘between people and each other, their products, their activities, nature and themselves’.26

An Epistemology for the Complexity of IR

As it can be expected, the inclusive ontological purview of the complexity paradigm presents a number of analytical challenges. Yet, as the proponents of SR indicate, assertions about the appropriate ways of describing the world emerge from the ontological assumptions of what the world is like.27 Thus, on a meta-theoretical level, the problem stems from the realisation that we can never be fully cognisant of the underlying mechanisms and processes of global life, because this will imply ‘knowing the not knowable’.28 Lebow explains that the contingency of our knowledge reflects ‘the critical importance of non-observables and non-systematic factors’. This should not, however, be taken as an indication of the impossibility to provide robust IR interpretation ‘rooted in non-linearity and confluence’.29 In this respect, the acknowledgement of the limits of our knowledge can become a very productive analytical point of departure. While all three books under review pay attention to epistemological concerns, Popolo’s endeavour specifically addresses this aspect of complexified IR. In fact, he ventures that the complexity paradigm provides a ‘genuine Epistemic Revolution’, which renders the Newtonian paradigm ‘obsolete’.30 What is revolutionary about this approach is not only its debunking of the common wisdoms of ‘scientific IR’, but also its dedication to ‘“uncertain knowledge”, where uncertainty is regarded and accepted as an intrinsic quality of nature and not as a result of imperfect knowledge’.31 The suggestion is that by focusing mainly on stable, equilibrium configurations, the study of IR has remained consciously ignorant of a whole ‘new species’ of discontinuous intuition.32 Thus, by painting itself in to the Newtonian corner, the disciplinary mainstream has, on the one hand, evaded the need to recognise that there are dynamics which are not only unknown, but probably cannot ever be meaningfully rendered comprehensible, and, on the other hand, stifled endeavours that can engage in thoughtful deliberation and productive management of the discontinuities, complexity and non-linearity of global life. There are several important features underpinning such an approach to knowledge.

Firstly, the contingency of both global life and our ability to know it makes it impossible to construct predictive explanations of outcomes. Lebow is quite emphatic when he asserts that ‘[v]ariation across time, due to the changing conditions and human reflection, the openness of social systems, and the complexity of the interaction among stipulated causes make the likelihood of predictive theory – even of a probabilistic kind – extraordinarily low’.33 Thus, the proponents of the complexity paradigm ascertain that due to its over-reliance on predictive theories, mainstream IR ‘must be totally discarded’.34 A further reason for such rejection is the observation that the production of knowledge by Newtonian approaches has also limited ‘what is open for debate’.35 For instance, due to the preoccupation with inter-state relations, the discipline produces foot soldiers for this or that theoretical approach to international anarchy rather than students genuinely interested in observing the complex patterns of global affairs.

Secondly, the unwillingness to engage with the unpredictable becoming of global life reflects the patterns of linear causality that still seem to inform the disciplinary mainstream. The issue of ‘complex causation’,36 as Lebow puts it, aims to enhance sensitivity to the unintended consequences of international interactions. Such effects defy the conventional focus on purposive behaviour. In fact, it is ‘chance, confluence, and accident that often play a determining role’ in global life, rather than intentionality.37 The complexified IR thereby intends to supplant reductive explanations by considering the ‘conjuncturally determined’ patterns of world affairs.38

Thirdly, the complexity paradigm critiques the way in which Newtonian IR has theorised international developments by focusing on major events. Lebow indicates that this bias towards events-thinking belies the predisposition ‘to think of big events as having big causes’.39 For instance, the origins of war are usually attributed either to singular events or to the resolve of specific individuals, rather than ‘the result of nonlinear confluences’.40 Thus, the focus on both spatially and temporally proximate causes underpins the blindness to the complex interactions of global life, which turns the disciplinary terrain into a frozen expanse of accidents. Complexified IR evinces that ‘mainstream IR cannot talk about underlying process, only about systems and units’. That is why it advocates the abandonment of the ‘talk of levels of analysis in favour of complex, layered assemblies of social relations’.41

The three-step of such epistemology for the complexity of IR intends simultaneously to rethink and reinvent the study of international politics. Interestingly, all three books under review are in agreement that this should be done through the ‘demystification of science’.42 Such demystification entails the rejection of the Newtonian ‘scientific fallacies’43 and the acceptance of ‘the fact of epistemological realism: namely, that all beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient, and neither truth values nor criteria of rationality exist outside of historical time’.44 It is also worth pointing out that while assisting the explanation ‘of our chaotic and unordered world’, the complexity paradigm is idiosyncratically self-reflexive about its own epistemological investments in a specific understanding of the international and readily concedes that ‘knowledge sometimes has the effect of accelerating disorder’.45

### Theory — Offensive Realism

#### Offensive realism is true of every great power.

Kaplan ’12 — Robert; a visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy, consultant to the U.S. Army's Special Forces, the United States Marines, and the United States Air Force. January 2012; “Why John J. Mearsheimer Is Right (About Some Things)”; *The Atlantic*; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/01/why-john-j-mearsheimer-is-right-about-some-things/308839/>; //CYang

Mearsheimer reveres both men for their bravery in pointing out unpopular truths, and throughout his career he has tried to emulate them. Indeed, in a country that has always been hostile to what realism signifies, he wears his “realist” label as a badge of honor. “To realism!” he says as he raises his wineglass to me in a toast at a local restaurant. As Ashley J. Tellis, Mearsheimer’s former student and now, after a stint in the Bush administration, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, later tells me: “Realism is alien to the American tradition. It is consciously amoral, focused as it is on interests rather than on values in a debased world. But realism never dies, because it accurately reflects how states actually behave, behind the façade of their values-based rhetoric.”

Mearsheimer’s intellectually combative nature first disturbed the policy elite in 1988, with the publication of his critical biography, Liddell Hart and the Weight of History. In it, he asserts that the revered British military theorist Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart was wrong on basic strategic questions of the period between the first and second world wars, especially in his opposition to the use of military force against the Third Reich, and was a de facto appeaser even after evidence had surfaced about the systematic murder of Jews. Mearsheimer expected that his perspective would draw fire from British reviewers who had been close to Liddell Hart, which it did. “Other political scientists work on capillaries. John goes for the jugular,” notes Richard Rosecrance, a retired UCLA professor who mentored Mearsheimer in the 1970s.

Mearsheimer certainly triggered a bloodbath with a 2006 article that became a 2007 book written with the Harvard professor Stephen M. Walt and dedicated to Huntington, The Israel Lobby and U.S.Foreign Policy, which alleges that groups supportive of Israel have pivotally undermined American foreign-policy interests, especially in the run-up to the Iraq War. Some critics, like the Johns Hopkins University professor Eliot Cohen, accused Mearsheimer and Walt outright of anti-Semitism, noting that their opinions had won the endorsement of the white supremacist David Duke. Many others accused them of providing potent ammunition for anti-Semites. A former Chicago colleague of Mearsheimer’s labeled the book “piss-poor, monocausal social science.”

Last fall, Mearsheimer reenergized his critics by favorably blurbing a book on Jewish identity that many commentators denounced as grotesquely anti-Semitic. The blurb became a blot on Mearsheimer’s judgment, given the book’s author’s revolting commentary elsewhere, and was considered evidence of an unhealthy obsession with Israel and Jewishness on Mearsheimer’s part.

The real tragedy of such controversies, as lamentable as they are, is that they threaten to obscure the urgent and enduring message of Mearsheimer’s life’s work, which topples conventional foreign-policy shibboleths and provides an unblinking guide to the course the United States should follow in the coming decades. Indeed, with the most critical part of the world, East Asia, in the midst of an unprecedented arms race fed by acquisitions of missiles and submarines (especially in the South China Sea region, where states are motivated by old-fashioned nationalism rather than universal values), and with the Middle East undergoing less a democratic revolution than a crisis in central authority, we ignore Mearsheimer’s larger message at our peril.

In fact, Mearsheimer is best-known in the academy for his equally controversial views on China, and particularly for his 2001 magnum opus, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. Writing in Foreign Affairs in 2010, the Columbia University professor Richard K. Betts called Tragedy one of the three great works of the post–Cold War era, along with Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man (1992) and Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996). And, Betts suggested, “once China’s power is full grown,” Mearsheimer’s book may pull ahead of the other two in terms of influence. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics truly defines Mearsheimer, as it does realism. Mearsheimer sat me down in his office, overlooking the somber Collegiate Gothic structures of the University of Chicago, and talked for hours, over the course of several days, about Tragedy and his life.

ONE OF FIVE children in a family of German and Irish ancestry, and one of the three who went to service academies, Mearsheimer graduated from West Point in the bottom third of his class, even after he fell in love with political science in his junior year. He got his master’s degree at the University of Southern California while stationed nearby in the Air Force, and went to Cornell for his doctorate. “I disagreed with almost everything I read, I venerated nobody. I found out what I thought by what I was against.” After stints at the Brookings Institution and Harvard, he went to the University of Chicago in 1982, and has never left.

Whereas Harvard, at least in Mearsheimer’s telling, is inclined to be a “government-policy shop” with close ties to Washington, the University of Chicago comes closer to a “pure intellectual environment.” At Harvard, many students and faculty members alike are on the make, networking for that first, or next, position in government or the think-tank world. The environment is vaguely unfriendly to theories or bold ideas, Huntington being the grand exception that proves the rule. After all, social-science theories are gross simplifications of reality; even the most brilliant theories can be right, say, only 75 percent of the time. Critics unfailingly seize on any theory’s shortcomings, damaging reputations. So the truly ambitious tend to avoid constructing one.

The University of Chicago, set off the beaten path in a society dominated by bicoastal elites, explains Mearsheimer, has always attracted “oddballs” with theories: political scientists who, while deeply respected, are at the same time not truly embraced by the American academic power structure. These iconoclasts have included Hans Morgenthau, as well as Leo Strauss, another German Jewish refugee, whom some link with neoconservatism. Realists especially have been outsiders in a profession dominated by liberal internationalists and others to the left.

For Mearsheimer, academia’s hostility to realism is evident in the fact that Harvard, which aims to recruit the top scholars in every field, never tried to hire the two most important realist thinkers of the 20th century, Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. But at Chicago, a realist like Mearsheimer, who loves teaching and never had ambitions for government service, can propound theories and unpopular ideas, and revel in the uproar they cause. Whatever the latest group-think happens to be, Mearsheimer almost always instinctively wants to oppose it — especially if it emanates from Washington.

The best grand theories tend to be written no earlier than middle age, when the writer has life experience and mistakes behind him to draw upon. Morgenthau’s 1948 classic, Politics Among Nations, was published when he was 44, Fukuyama’s The End of History was published as a book when he was 40, and Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations as a book when he was 69. Mearsheimer began writing The Tragedy of Great Power Politics when he was in his mid-40s, after working on it for a decade. Published just before 9/11, the book intimates the need for America to avoid strategic distractions and concentrate on confronting China. A decade later, with the growth of China’s military might vastly more apparent than it was in 2001, and following the debacles of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, its clairvoyance is breathtaking.

Tragedy begins with a forceful denial of perpetual peace in favor of perpetual struggle, with great powers primed for offense, because they can never be sure how much military capacity they will need in order to survive over the long run. Because every state is forever insecure, Mearsheimer counsels, the internal nature of a state is less important as a factor in its international behavior than we think. “Great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size,” he intones. In other words, Mearsheimer is not one to be especially impressed by a state simply because it is a democracy. As he asserts early on, “Whether China is democratic and deeply enmeshed in the global economy or autocratic and autarkic will have little effect on its behavior, because democracies care about security as much as non-democracies do.” Indeed, a democratic China could be more technologically innovative and economically robust, with consequently more talent and money to lavish on its military. (A democratic Egypt, for that matter, could create greater security challenges for the United States than an autocratic Egypt. Mearsheimer is not making moral judgments. He is merely describing how states interact in an anarchic world.)

Face it, Mearsheimer says in his book, quoting the historian James Hutson: the world is a “brutal, amoral cockpit.” To make sure readers get the point, he taps the British scholar E. H. Carr’s 1939 book, The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939, which takes a wrecking ball to liberal internationalism. One of its main points: “Whatever moral issues may be involved, there is an issue of power which cannot be expressed in terms of morality.” To wit, in the 1990s we were able to intervene to save lives in the Balkans only because the Serbian regime was weak and had no nuclear weapons; against a Russian regime that was at the same time committing incalculable human-rights violations in Chechnya, we did nothing, just as we did nothing to halt ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus. States take up human rights only if doing so does not contradict the pursuit of power.

But being a realist is not enough for Mearsheimer; he needs to be an “offensive realist,” as he calls himself. “Offensive realism,” he writes in Tragedy, “is like a powerful flashlight in a dark room”: it cannot explain every action throughout hundreds of years of history, but he exhaustively goes through that history to demonstrate just how much it does explain. Whereas Hans Morgenthau’s realism is rooted in man’s imperfect nature, Mearsheimer’s is structural, and therefore that much more inexorable. Mearsheimer cares relatively little about what individual statesmen can achieve, for the state of anarchy in the international system simply guarantees insecurity. Compared with Mearsheimer, Henry Kissinger and the late American diplomat Richard Holbrooke — two men usually contrasted with each other — are one and the same: romantic figures who believe they can pivotally affect history through negotiation. Kissinger, in fact, has written lush histories of statesmen in A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–1822 (1957) and Diplomacy (1994), embracing his subjects with charm and warmth, whereas Mearsheimer’s Tragedy is cold and clinical. Kissinger and Holbrooke care deeply about the contingencies of each situation, and the personalities involved; Mearsheimer, who was always good at math and science in school, sees only schemata, even as his own historical analyses have helped to rescue political science from the purely quantitative studies favored by others in his field.

Just as Mearsheimer’s theory of realism is opposed to Morgenthau’s in being structural, it is also opposed to the structural realism of Columbia’s Waltz in being offensive. Offensive realism posits that status quo powers don’t exist: all great powers are perpetually on the offensive, even if obstacles may arise to prevent them from expanding their territory or influence.

What was Manifest Destiny, Mearsheimer asks the reader, except offensive realism? “Indeed, the United States was bent on establishing regional hegemony, and it was an expansionist power of the first order in the Americas”: acquiring territory from European powers, massacring the native inhabitants, and instigating war with Mexico, in good part for the sake of security. Mearsheimer details Japan’s record of aggression in Korea, China, Russia, Manchuria, and the Pacific Islands after its consolidation as a nation-state following the 19th-century Meiji Restoration. To demonstrate that the anarchic structure of the international system, not the internal characteristics of states, determines behavior, he shows how Italy, during the eight decades that it was a great power, was equally aggressive under both liberal and fascist regimes: going after North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the southern Balkans, southwestern Turkey, and southern Austria-Hungary. He characterizes Germany’s Otto von Bismarck as an offensive realist who engaged in conquest during his first nine years in office, and then restrained himself for the next 19 years. “In fact, [that restraint] was because Bismarck and his successors correctly understood that the German army had conquered about as much territory as it could without provoking a great-power war, which Germany was likely to lose.” But when Mearsheimer picks up the story at the start of the 20th century, Germany is again aggressive, because by now it controls a larger percentage of the world’s industrial might than any other European state. Behind every assertion in this book is a wealth of historical data that helps explain why Tragedy continues, as Richard Betts predicted, to grow in influence.

“To argue that expansion is inherently misguided,” Mearsheimer writes, “implies that all great powers over the past 350 years have failed to comprehend how the international system works. This is an implausible argument on its face.” The problem with the “moderation is good” thesis is that “it mistakenly equates [so-called] irrational expansion with military defeat.” But hegemony has succeeded many times. The Roman Empire in Europe, the Mughal Dynasty in the Indian subcontinent, and the Qing Dynasty in China are some of his examples, even as he mentions how Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Adolf Hitler all came close to success. “Thus, the pursuit of regional hegemony is not a quixotic ambition,” though no state has yet achieved regional hegemony in the Eastern Hemisphere the way the United States achieved it in the Western Hemisphere.

The edgiest parts of Tragedy are when Mearsheimer presents full-bore rationales for the aggression of Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan.

The German decision to push for war in 1914 was not a case of wacky strategic ideas pushing a state to start a war it was sure to lose. It was … a calculated risk motivated in large part by Germany’s desire to break its encirclement by the Triple Entente, prevent the growth of Russian power, and become Europe’s hegemon.

As for Hitler, he “did indeed learn from World War I.” Hitler learned that Germany could not fight on two fronts at the same time, and he would have to win quick, successive victories, which, in fact, he achieved early in World War II. Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor was a calculated risk to avoid abandoning the Japanese empire in China and Southeast Asia in the face of a U.S. embargo on imported energy and machine tools.

Mearsheimer is no warmonger or militarist. His job as a political scientist is not to improve the world, but to say what he thinks is going on in it. And he thinks that while states rightly yearn for a values-based foreign policy, the reality of the anarchic international system forces them to behave according to their own interests. In his view, either liberal internationalism or neoconservatism is more likely than offensive realism to lead to the spilling of American blood. Indeed, because, as some argue, realism in the classical sense seeks the avoidance of war through the maintenance of a balance of power, it is the most humanitarian approach possible. (In this vein, fighting Nazi Germany was essential because the Nazis were attempting to overthrow the European balance-of-power system altogether.)