

‘The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis which began in February 2014’

John J. Mearsheimer, 19th March 2022

Who is to blame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine? The simple answer is the man who ordered the invasion, Vladimir Putin. Moving up one level of analysis, one could reasonably cite Russian neo-imperialism, fueled by booming hydrocarbon sales. For some on the left, these are unsatisfactory answers. After all, the US has been to blame for most major international disasters in recent decades, from the ‘war on terror’ to Iraq, Afghanistan, and even the emergence of ISIS. Somehow, this one must be America’s fault too.

This innate desire to blame the US has caused many on the left to embrace a theory of International Relations called ‘realism’. The more anti-American the leftist, the tighter the embrace of realism. This embrace has been awkward and embarrassing to watch, as most of these new ‘left-realists’ have a limited understanding of the nature or origins of the theory they have just adopted.

So what does realism say about international politics? Simply put, it posits that we live in a ‘tragic’ world where nothing really ever changes: war is ‘inevitable’, great powers ‘do what they can’, and small states ‘suffer what they must’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Melos#The_Melian_Dialogue). Some prominent realists, most famously John J. Mearsheimer (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>), argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a logical and predictable response to Western expansionism. Indeed, in 2015 Mearsheimer even ‘predicted’ that Russia would stop at nothing to prevent Ukraine from turning West. Thus, Russia is merely defending its sphere of influence and Ukraine must accept its fate as a Russian satellite state.

Many influential figures, from Noam Chomsky (<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/04/noam-chomsky-on-how-to-prevent-world-war-iii>) to Yanis Varoufakis, as well as a host of Swedish columnists (<https://www.expressen.se/kultur/ni-ar-manga-som-varit-putins-nyttiga-idioter/>; <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/7dM1Ow/goran-therborn-om-ukrainakrisen>; <https://proletaren.se/artikel/vagen-till-krig-i-ukraina>;) and social media influencers, have embraced variations of this account of the invasion. So too have those on the far right, such as Tucker Carlson (<https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-fox-news-tucker-carlson-putin-nato-china-1670699>) and Nigel Farage (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-ukraine-russia-eu-b2022400.html>). It makes sense that nationalists, conservatives, or even fascists would embrace realism, given its depiction of the world as theatre for endless nationalist competition. But for leftists, at least those who ostensibly believe that ‘another world is possible’, prescribing to a theory that denies the very possibility of human progress is fundamentally contradictory.

It also makes for some very uncomfortable logical corollaries. In a recent interview with CGTN (<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-17/John-Mearsheimer-responds-to-criticism-of-his-Ukraine-theory-19iybN6Zq6c/index.html>), an English-language Chinese TV station tightly controlled by the CCP, Mearsheimer explained his position in more detail. He noted that US does not allow countries in

its neighborhood to have independent foreign policies. So, why should Russia allow Ukraine to act independently, and ally with Russia's enemies? The logic is clear. Just as Ukraine must bend to Russia's will, so too must Latin America bend to the US's. This is how realism works, the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must. It is also the exact opposite of how the left looks at America's relations with Latin America.

These new 'left-realists' have yet to acknowledge these contradictions. They apply realism selectively. While Russia is a great power with legitimate spheres of influence, the US remains an hegemonic 'evil empire'. So, when Russia invades an independent state, targets civilians, and commits war crimes, this is just how the world works. It's a scientific inevitability. When the US overthrows left-wing governments and supports friendly right-wing dictatorships in Latin America, this is not a scientific inevitability.

Indeedz, the façade of science that realism cloaks itself in helps explain why the left has seized so specifically on John J Mearsheimer's account - look, a famous American professor even predicted it, it must be true! In fact, there appears to be a correlation – if you were one of those leftists who was convinced Russia was not going to invade, then you are more likely to a new 'left realist'.

Except, realism has a terrible record of predictions. According to realists in the 1980s the USSR was completely stable and the Cold War was set to run indefinitely. Even when the Berlin Wall did fall, realists still got it wrong: Mearsheimer himself predicted that if the USSR collapsed, so too would NATO. He also predicted that the EU would devolve into great power competition (<https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/A0017.pdf>) between the UK, Germany, Italy, and France – it would be the 19th Century all over again. Mearsheimer was not alone here, for a long time the inevitable collapse of NATO was an article of faith among realists. NATO survived, but continued to be targeted, as in 1997 when American diplomat and prominent realist George Kennan called the decision to expand NATO 'the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era' (<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>). It is doubtful that the people of Estonia, Lithuania, or Poland would agree. (<https://newrepublic.com/article/165603/carlson-russia-ukraine-imperialism-nato>)

Realism's predictive failure is not a secret, rather it is a canonical part of study of International Relations. It sits alongside other classic failures, such as the failure of economic interdependency to prevent WWI, or the failure of idealism to prevent WWII, as part of the introduction to the field.

The form of realism advocated by Mearsheimer and other 'purists' cannot accurately predict the future because it is reductionist and scientific. It simplifies the world to the point of absurdity. The occasional accurate prediction does not mean the underlying explanation is sound. Even a stopped watched is right twice a day.

Still, let's consider the proposal that Mearsheimer is correct and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the result of rational, realist response to regional geopolitics. So far Putin's war has turned Russia into a

pariah state, devastated the Russian economy, and is causing Sweden, Finland, Germany and others to reassess their entire postwar security stance. This ‘realism’ has hardly improved Russia’s geopolitical position.

The failings of realism used to be very obvious to the left. Robert Cox, one of realism’s greatest critics, drew on Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his seminal critique. Cox argued that ‘theory was always for someone, for some purpose.’ (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/03058298810100020501?journalCode=mila>) In other words, the dominance of realist theory in policy circles created a self-serving, self-fulfilling prophecy. The realists convinced everyone that this is how the world works, there is no other way. Some benefit, others suffer. This is how it has always been and how it will always be. Again, this is obviously a deeply conservative position that runs against the basic principle of progressive politics: that we can change things, that we can make the world better.

Perhaps one of the most disheartening things about watching leftists embrace realism is that there are much more nuanced, less Western-centric accounts out there. Scholars, journalists, analysts, those who have spent their lives studying Russia and Ukraine – who speak the language, know the culture, know the place and the people – are providing in-depth analysis. Rather than watching Mearsheimer on Youtube, the new ‘left-realists’ would be much better off reading Stephen Kotkin (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin>), Catherine Belton (<https://www.ft.com/content/764a455b-5592-46c3-b16f-41ba09a8ac4a>), or Michael Kofman (<https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael>).

Reading those nuanced accounts one quickly realises that the invasion was neither predictable nor inevitable. Even the Russian political elite was taken by surprise by the invasion – just as the new left-realists were! One could just as well lay the blame for the war on the terrible military intelligence Putin was fed about the state of both Ukraine’s and Russia’s military, or on Putin’s Covid-induced isolation, which has dramatically reduced the counsel he receives. Or the imperialist nostalgia and legacy-seeking which Putin himself has explicitly stated is driving his Ukraine policy. (<https://theconversation.com/putins-invasion-of-ukraine-attacks-its-distinct-history-and-reveals-his-imperial-instincts-177669>)

This is not to say that realism has no explanatory power, or that Mearsheimer should be ignored. Realism tells us something very important about the geopolitical context in which leaders make decisions of war and peace; it does not, however, singularly explain the decision to go to war. Mearsheimer has a long history of drawing on realism to advocate for American restraint, including opposition to the Iraq War. He is tarnishing this reputation as he digs in deeper, as in a recent interview when he appeared to first question, then justify Russia’s killing of civilians in Ukraine (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hH3s7MRJkAI&t=3653s>).

That some parts of the left have suddenly converted to realism in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance and continue to blame the USA is as understandable as it is intellectually lazy and morally corrupt. What better than a ‘scientific’ theory that tells them that even though they were completely wrong, they were actually right all along? As we have seen, the contradictions quickly accumulate: conveniently adopting a theory that is completely at odds with your entire philosophy cannot end well.