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Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought between Germany and the United States

Matthew Specter
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Matthew Specter's Atlantic Realists, a meticulously crafted, carefully examined, and powerfully contextualized seven-chapter study, stands as one of the most important recent contributions to the field of intellectual history, offering a compelling account of the origins of Political Realism. Specter's central thesis is that "Realism" in the discipline of International Relations (IR) is not a theory that emerged as a reaction to the "traumatic" events of the 1930s (Nazism, war) or as a continuation of an "eternal" Western tradition (Thucydides, Hobbes). Instead, realism has its origins in the 1890s, in the "transnational" and "entangled" intellectual exchange (Fredrich Ratzel, Alfred T. Mahan, Paul Reinsch, Karl Haushofer, Isaiah Bowman, Edmund J. Walsh, Nicholas Spykman, Carl Schmitt, Hans Morgenthau, William Grewe etc.) between the two rising powers of the *fin de siècle* era (late nineteenth-century decadence), imperialist Germany and the United States (US).

Specter aims to recover this long-forgotten intellectual lineage within the discipline and to demonstrate that the thinkers he identifies as the "Atlantic Realists"—those associated with the traditions of Weltpolitik, Geopolitics, and Political Realism—were fundamentally shaped by assumptions grounded in racial hierarchies, imperial projects, and *animus dominandi* (lust for power). In this regard, the book advances a genealogical and intellectual-historical analysis of international thought, tracing a trajectory from formative debates on sea power, space, and empire, through interwar geopolitics and legal imperialism, to the postwar reconfiguration of realism on both sides of the Atlantic.

As the author demonstrates, the 1890s marked a period in which both Germany and the US underwent rapid industrialization and nurtured ambitions to achieve greater international status through naval expansion. The "competitive globalization" of late nineteenth-century nation-states constituted the context in which Atlantic realist tropes first took shape: "it was this era of imperial globalization, rather than the liberal crisis of the 1930s, that left the earliest

imprint on realism" (p.9). Tracing the *fin-de-siècle* concepts of *Lebensraum* and *Weltpolitik*—both rooted in a Social Darwinism—yields a narrative quite different from the conventional story of a Bismarckian Realpolitik "rediscovered after disillusionment with Wilsonian idealism" (p.9). Specter extends this genealogy from the 1880s through the 1980s, and in doing so, he not only uncovers a long-forgotten connection but also broadens the debate by incorporating the postwar Atlantic realists' intellectual lineage in Germany during the Cold War.

As the book clearly states, Specter offers three substantive contributions. First, it demonstrates that political realism is not merely the response of German-speaking émigré scholars who fled Europe, such as Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers, and John Herz, to the crisis of liberal institutions in the 1930s, but rather the product of an imperial-era intellectual exchange between Germany and the US. In short, this exchange was not unidirectional; the flow of ideas went in "both directions" (p.11). For example, German naval elites were influenced by Mahan's conception of sea power, which directly informed the development of Weltpolitik (see Chapter 1). Likewise, Ratzel formulated the concept of Lebensraum by drawing on the American Monroe Doctrine and the US' territorial expansionism (Chapter 1). German thinkers such as Schmitt and Grewe adopted this doctrine in the 1930s to construct a "German Monroe Doctrine" (Chapters 3 and 4).

The second significant contribution is Specter's argument that the genealogy of political realism lies not in Realpolitik, which is centered on balance, restraint, and the *status quo*, but instead in Weltpolitik—a Social Darwinist, expansionist, and quest for dominance (*animus dominandi*) approach that stands in stark contrast to Realpolitik. Most importantly, Specter links the classical geopolitical tradition of the 1890s to the political realist tradition of the 1930s, revealing a shared intellectual origin and recovering a narrative that had been mainly forgotten (Chapters 2 and 5). According to Specter, the debates of the 1890s on "race, space, and sea power" (informed by Treitschke, Ratzel, Weber, Mahan, Reisch, etc.) fed directly into the geopolitical concepts later articulated by Bowman and Haushofer in the 1930s (Chapter 2).

The concept of geopolitics was at the core of this 1890s Atlantic realist tradition (Chapter 1).[1] Yet, the term was compromised and rendered politically untenable by its strong association with Nazism during the 1940s (primarily through Haushofer). Thus, "Realism" emerged as the perfect "semantic refuge" in 1940 for fugitives from the discredited discourse of Nazi geopolitics (p. 135). As Specter argues, "while at times uncomfortable to acknowledge", the connection between German and American empires in the twentieth century undermines the temptation to read either history as exceptionally virtuous (American exceptionalism) or pathologically deviant (the *Sonderweg*) from an assumed liberal norm (p.13 and p. 226).[2]

1 See İşcan, İ. H. 2004. Classical Geopolitical Theories in International Relations and Their Contemporary Interpretations. *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 1, 2: 47-79.

2 American exceptionalism is the belief that the US is fundamentally different from other nations and endowed with a unique mission often framed in terms of moral superiority or privilege. On the other hand, the concept of Sonderweg historically refers to the narrative that Germany's development followed a "pathologically deviant" special path diverging

The author does not treat realism as a coherent or tightly unified body of thought with a single origin; instead, he emphasizes that its core assumptions constitute a habitus — "system of lasting transposable dispositions" (p. 208) — or Haltung, a "particular posture toward the world", rooted in a common lineage (p.205). Thus, realism should be understood not merely as a theory, but as a deeply embedded cultural habitus. This habitus, one may say, is informed by philosophical idealism and romanticism. For example, the book shows that Mahan's conception of reality was simultaneously empirical and "ethereal", that is, grounded in "sentiment" and immaterial beliefs (pp. 46-8).

In chapter 2, Specter draws on this transatlantic genealogy to advance a critique of American exceptionalism. He identifies key *fin-de-siècle* texts of Frederick J. Turner, Paul Reinsch, and Archibald Coolidge as articulations of an outward turn in US foreign policy, in which the perceived limits of continental expansion, the rejection of isolationism, and the reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine served to justify overseas imperialism. Informed by Social Darwinism, these arguments framed world politics through racial hierarchies and linked American expansion to broader imperial logics. Specter criticizes American exceptionalism for obscuring the shared imperial, racial, and geopolitical assumptions underlying American and German political thought, thereby reinforcing the illusion of a liberal, non-imperial American trajectory.

In chapters 2 and 5, Specter demonstrates, with considerable nuance, that the thinkers conventionally labeled "idealists" in interwar disciplinary narratives were, in fact, intellectual heirs to the tradition of Weltpolitik. These figures were not idealists but "legalist imperialists" (p. 56). During this time (from the 1910s to the 1930s), the task was no longer expansion but the management of the existing international order. The instruments of this management were not power politics but institutions and international law. Key figures of this period include Elihu Root, Archibald Coolidge, and Isaiah Bowman.[3] Specter also shows that, beneath the genteel facade of Foreign Affairs, lay the explicit racism of Social Darwinists like Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard. First editor of FA, Archibald Coolidge, was simultaneously the doctoral advisor and close friend of Lothrop Stoddard, the author of The Rising Tide of Color, one of the most influential racialist-eugenic works of the era.

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the Atlanticist tradition and the racial–imperial dimensions in the works of Schmitt and the lesser-known yet highly influential postwar German jurist and diplomat Grewe. Schmitt's *Großraum* (Great Space) theory, unlike Lebensraum, offers a more legal and spatial account of hegemony. He explicitly invokes the US Monroe Doctrine

from Western liberal norms, particularly those of England and France. Although IR students are generally familiar with the former, the latter has received considerably less attention. For an excellent review, see: Kolasi, K. 2020. Alman Tarih Yazımında Sonderweg Tezinin Katkıları ve Sınırlılıkları: Özgün Yolun Ötesinde. In *Türk-Alman Çalışmaları Serisi I: Sosyal Bilimler Makaleleri.* ed. M. Önsoy and M. Er. Ankara, Nobel.

3 Root was the "father" of legalist imperialism and the architect of the Platt Amendment, which structured US intervention in Cuba. Bowman, a cartographer and advisor to President Wilson, was intensely preoccupied with Mahan's idea of the "closing of space."

as a precedent to legitimize the *Großraum* concept. Specter shows how Grewe, during the Nazi period (working in SS-affiliated institutes), eagerly employed the *Großraum* framework to legitimize Nazi occupations and Machtpolitik (power politics). According to Specter, this was not a uniquely "German pathology" and "treating Germany as the exceptional bearer of an exceptional science risks missing the extent to which geopolitics was more norm than exception in the North Atlantic world" (p. 119).

The remaining three chapters of the book trace "the death and rebirth of an Atlantic Realism". Because the postwar period rendered terms such as geopolitics and Realpolitik politically tainted by association with Nazism, intellectuals in this period (Bowman, Walsh, Spykman) were compelled to invent new terminology. Yet, as Specter shows, the irony is that geopolitics had already been widely used among American thinkers for nearly fifty years. For Specter, the "problems" of German geopolitics were metamorphosed into the "questions" of American realism. In Germany, by contrast, because geopolitics and Realpolitik could no longer be publicly discussed, realism was effectively imported from the US. One of Morgenthau's students, Gottfried-Karl Kindermann, even spearheaded the creation of a CFR-like organization in Germany. The debates surrounding Ostpolitik in the 1970s centered on interdependence. Yet when the political climate shifted in the 1980s, Wilhelm Grewe reemerged as a key figure and helped restore an older form of realism to the center of German foreign policy thinking.

According to many scholars, it is not an exaggeration to view the discipline of IR as an academic field shaped mainly by debates over realism. Nevertheless, surprisingly little is known about the intellectual and historical origins of realism itself. One notable discussion missing from the book's overarching scope is the tenability of Progressive Realism, which has gained prominence over the last two decades. Despite this omission, the author's later writings suggest that all realists share fundamental tensions as a *habitus* in a minimalist sense. Overall, Specter's *Atlantic Realists* makes a significant contribution to the growing body of intellectual-historical scholarship in IR; for this reason, it deserves to be read by all students.