The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities | John Mearsheimer

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INTRODUCTION

John Mearsheimer (born December 14, 1947) is an American political scientist and international relations scholar, who belongs to the realist school of thought. He is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. Mearsheimer proposed the theory of offensive realism which describes the interaction between great powers as dominated by a rational desire to achieve hegemony in a world of insecurity and uncertainty regarding other states' intentions. He was a vocal opponent of the Iraq War in 2003 and was almost alone in opposing Ukraine's decision to give up its nuclear weapons in 1994 and predicted that, without a deterrent, they would face Russian aggression. His most controversial views concern alleged influence by interest groups over US government actions in the Middle East which he wrote about in The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy. In accordance with his theory, Mearsheimer considers that China's growing power will likely bring it into conflict with the United States. His work is frequently taught to and read by twenty-first century students of political science and international relations.

WHY DO I CARE?

John Mearsheimer’s stated mission in this book is to examine what happens when a powerful state pursues liberal hegemony, which involves examining the relationship among the three “isms” of liberalism, nationalism, and realism. His analysis leads him to the conclusion that the United States should abandon its ambitions of liberal hegemony and instead, adopt a more restrained foreign policy based on realism and a clear understanding of how nationalism limits a great power’s room to maneuver.

Q: What was your objective in writing this book?

John Mearsheimer also spends a good deal of time reflecting on and analyzing culture and how it shapes individuals and societies. I think he means to emphasize that it is a feature, not a bug. Humans are essentially social creators in his view. Individuals are carved out of the social collective, not the other way around, and nations (and national cultures) are therefore more compatible and in-tune with social biology and the state of nature. Furthermore, it follows from his writings that he believes it is not only difficult to change culture, but too much change too quickly, can destroy a society, even if some large part of that society believes that culture to be wicked.
Therefore, another way to think about John’s interest in this topic is that it attempts to answer the question: “What is the best way to hold a society together?” For professor Mearsheimer the answer is clear: “A philosophy of realism that respects the power of nationalism, exercises restraint in the use of force, and demonstrates humility for the limits of nation building and social engineering.

**HUMAN NATURE & POLITICS**

According to John, there are (1) significant limits on our ability to reason about first principles, and (2) we are social animals at our core. Taken together, these assumptions tell us three important facts about the world. First, it is (i) populated with a great number of social groups, each with its own distinctive culture. There is no reason to think that situation will change in the near or distant future. In effect, the crucial universal traits of humankind lead us to a world distinguished by its particularism. Second, (ii) social groups have no choice but to build political institutions, which means politics and power are at the center of life within societies as well as among them. Third, (iii) survival is of overriding importance for individuals as well as social groups. It runs like a red skein through human history.

**State of Nature** — John Lock wrote that in order “to understand political power right…we must consider what state all men are naturally in.” Q: What assumptions do you make about human beings and social reality? Q: What do you believe is the state of nature? What state are we naturally in?

**Which Came First?** — Q: Are humans fundamentally social animals who carve their individuality out of the group, or are they individuals who form social contracts? Q: What identity comes first, that of the individual or the group? Q: How do we know? Q: What are the compelling arguments?

**LIBERALISM, NATIONALISM, & REALISM**

**The Three Ism’s** — Q: What do liberalism, nationalism, and realism have in common? Q: What don’t they have in common?

**Liberalism & Democracy** — Q: What is the relationship between liberalism and democracy? Q: What are some examples of liberal autocracies? Q: Why is it hard to find examples of illiberal democracies?
Five Basic Concepts — Much of your discussion around human nature and politics revolves around five basic concepts: culture, groups, identity, political institutions, and society. Q: What can you tell us about these concepts and why are they important?

REASON, POLITICS, & MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Types of Rationality — Q: What is the difference between substantive and instrumental rationality? Q: How do these relate to your political analysis?

Limits to Reason — Q: Why does it seem that there are limits to what reason can tell us about the good life? Q: Why do people have such difficulty agreeing on first principles? (socialization, innate sentiments/biology, reasoning)

The Good Life — Q: What can reason tell us about the good life? Q: Have our critical faculties developed to the point where we can reach some rough moral consensus on what defines the good life? Q: What does it say about how we should behave and arrange our lives, how a society should be organized, and what rules should govern its members’ conduct? Q: What can our critical faculties tell us about the bedrock ethical, moral, and political questions that confront all individuals and societies? Q: How do we distinguish between right and wrong?

What the Ism’s Have to Say — Q: What does liberalism, nationalism, and realism have to say on this matter?

Education vs. Consensus — You make an interesting statement in the book regarding education – that it “hones our ability to reason but ultimately makes it more, not less, difficult to reach agreement on first principles.” Q: Why do you think that is? Q: Does that mean that the ideology of any group or society is destined to always be arbitrary?

Survival Imperative — Q: What is the survival imperative and how does it relate to groups? Q: How does this term relate to the more familiar “survivalist instinct” (the individual, biological imperative)?

Global Society — Q: Why is there no global society? Q: Are there things that limit this?
DEMOCRATIC PEACE, ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY & INSTITUTIONALISM

Liberal hegemony is built around three missions: increasing the number of liberal democracies in the world, facilitating an open economic order, and building international institutions.

(1) Democratic peace theory maintains that liberal democracies do not fight wars with each other, but it does not predict any decrease in wars between democracies and non-democracies. The principal explanation for peace among liberal democracies is that their deep-seated respect for individual rights, coupled with their emphasis on tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution, overwhelms any rationale they might have to initiate a war. Other accounts maintain that specific institutional and normative characteristics of democracy, not liberal rights, prevent war between liberal democracies.

(2) Economic interdependence theory grows out of the liberal emphasis on the right to own and exchange property, which inexorably leads to promoting investment and trade among states. The ensuing economic intercourse not only leads to greater prosperity for the trading states but also makes them dependent on each other for their prosperity. This economic interdependence, the theory says, militates against war, simply because the costs of fighting become unacceptable. In the end, concerns about prosperity trump political as well as security considerations.

(3) Liberal institutionalism stems from the importance liberals place on acting according to well-established rules that stipulate the rights and obligations of individuals. According to the theory, states voluntarily come together and establish international institutions, which are effectively a set of rules that states agree to obey even when they are tempted to disregard them and act aggressively. When push comes to shove, a deep-seated commitment to the rule of law will quash any temptation a state might have to start a war.

DPT, EIT, & LI — Q: Why do you feel that these theories, even if accepted on their own terms, don’t provide a formula for leaving realism behind? Q: What is the flaw behind the economic interdependence theory and what are some of the historical lessons we can draw? (Norman Angell’s “The Great Illusion”)

The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements... There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture. — Alasdair MacIntyre
Liberalism: Core Assumptions — Q: What are the core assumptions underlying political liberalism?

Liberalism’s Paradox — Q: What are some examples of “liberalism’s paradox”? Q: How does this help explain the intolerance we are seeing today among the Anglo-American left? *** particularist vs. universalist strands

Progressive vs. Modus Vivendi — Q: What is the difference between modus vivendi liberalism and progressive liberalism? Q: Is the former more aligned with what we think of as being “libertarianism”? Q: How do these differences manifests in practical terms (e.g. role of the state)?

Liberal Strains on Reason — Q: How do progressive liberals and modus vivendi liberals view the limits of reason and what it can provide in terms of answer to foundational moral questions?

Positive vs. Negative Rights — Q: What differentiates positive rights from negative rights? Q: What accounts for the emphasis on equality of opportunity for progressives but not for modus vivendi?

Forces Driving Rise of Liberalism — Q: What are the three major forces that drove progressive liberalism’s ascendancy?

*** (1) Industrial Revolution, (2) Nationalism, and (3) Need for Large, Standing Armies

Civil Rights & the Cold War — You make an interesting claim in the book that the civil rights movement and the subsequent legislative effort was a partial byproduct of the Cold War (i.e. we needed to set a good example for our potential allies). Q: Can you elaborate on why this was?

Liberal Idealism vs. Christian Fundamentalism — Q: Is liberal idealism similar to Christian fundamentalism only instead of pushing values discovered through revelation, they are values that we can supposedly reason our way towards?
PROBLEMS WITH LIBERALISM

Case for Liberal Hegemony — Q: What is the case for liberal hegemony?

Flaw of Inalienable Rights — Q: How is the assumption that humans are solitary individual a flaw for liberalism? Q: Why is it wrong to assume that individual rights are inalienable and self-evident. Q: How does this present problem?

(1) Nationalism is at play in every country, which is reflected in the fact that we live in a world of nation-states. Liberalism, however, is not a powerful force everywhere. Liberal democracies have never made up a majority of states in the international system. (2) Given nationalism's pervasiveness, liberalism must always coexist with nationalism. It is impossible to have a liberal state that is not a nation-state and thus nationalist to its core. Liberalism, in other words, operates within the confines of nation-states. (3) Liberalism invariably loses when it clashes with nationalism. Q: If liberalism and nationalism are both powerful forces in our world, what is the relationship between them?

Nations have six fundamental features, according to John, that when taken together, distinguish them from the other kinds of large groups that inhabited the planet before nations came on the scene. (1) A nation is a large community of people with a powerful sense of oneness, even though each member knows only a small number of fellow nationals. In addition to this sense of solidarity, a nation’s members also tend to treat each other as equals. (2) What separates nations from each other is culture. Each nation has a distinct set of beliefs and practices that are shared by its members and that distinguish it from other nations. In essence, the real

Individual rights and the rule of law do not fare well in a country that maintains a large and powerful military and is addicted to fighting wars. — John Mearsheimer
basis of nationhood is psychological, not biological. There is another important reason for the durability of national loyalties: the movement from oral to written traditions. The movement from an oral to a literate culture not only created tighter bonds within Europe’s burgeoning nations but also made those communities more robust and resistant to change. (3) Most people think their nation is superior to others. Sometimes, nations go beyond feeling superior to other nations and end up loathing their competitors. This is called “hypernationalism.” (4) “Chauvinist mythmaking,” as Stephen Van Evera notes, “is a hallmark of nationalism, practiced by nearly all nationalist movements to some degree.” Nations also employ myths to argue that they have ancient roots, which explains in part why ethnicity is occasionally defined in terms of timeless features. This phenomenon was commonplace in nineteenth-century Europe, when nationalism was sweeping the region and history was becoming a scholarly enterprise. Patrick Geary describes the result: “Modern history was born in the nineteenth century, conceived and developed as an instrument of European nationalism. As a tool of nationalist ideology, the history of Europe’s nations was a great success, but it has turned our understanding of the past into a toxic waste dump.” Mythmaking and nationalism go hand in hand, which is why Ernest Renan said, “Historical error is an essential factor in the creation of a nation.” (5) Nations invariably identify with specific geographical spaces, which they treat as sacred territory. If any part of that imagined homeland is lost, the nation’s members are almost always committed to recovering it. In short, a nation’s territory holds enormous intrinsic value as part of its cultural heritage, which means it is indivisible. (6) Finally, nations aim to
maximize their control over their own political fate, which is another way of saying they are deeply concerned about sovereignty, or how political authority is arranged inside a state as well as among states. In domestic terms, sovereignty denotes where supreme political authority lies within a state.

**Nationalism** — Q: What is nationalism? Q: How recently did it emerge? Q: What was the world like before nationalism came onto the scene?

**Nations Want States** — Q: Why do nations want states? Q: Is the state the equivalent for nation of a shell for a hermit crab?

**States Want Nations** — Q: Why do states want nations? Q: How powerful is nationalism as a story that allows the powerful elements of the state to exercise control? (e.g. military implications)

There are five key differences between liberalism and nationalism. (1) **Liberalism** focuses on the individual and pays little attention to social groups. **Nationalism** does the opposite: it rivets on the social group, which is the nation. (2) Natural rights and toleration are central components of liberal theory. Nationalism pays them little attention, although a nation-state can certainly have its own set of rights and preach toleration. (3) Liberalism has a particularist strand, which stems from its assumption that there are no final truths about the good life, and a universal strand, derived from its emphasis on inalienable rights. A certain tension exists between these strands. **Nationalism** does not have a universalist strand; despite its universal appeal, it is particularist all the way down. (4) Although the state is of central importance for both theories, its relationship to the wider public is different in each. With progressive liberalism, the state’s main functions are to act as a night watchman, arbitrate disputes, and do significant social engineering for the purposes of promoting individual rights and managing the various problems that attend daily life in a modern society. **Liberalism** cultivates hardly any emotional attachment to the state among its citizens, even despite their enormous dependence on it. The nationalist state also maintains order and does substantial social engineering, but it inspires powerful allegiance. People are willing to fight and die for it. (5) Liberalism and nationalism view territory differently. **Nationalists** tend to think of the land they live on, or aspire to live on, as sacred. It is their fatherland or motherland, and so worth making great sacrifices to defend. Where the land’s borders are located matters greatly. **Liberalism** has no room for hallowed territory; it pays little attention to where countries draw their borders, which squares with the emphasis liberals place on universal rights. In the liberal story, land is most important as private property that individuals have an inalienable right to own and sell as they see fit.

**Liberalism vs. Nationalism** — Q: What are the key differences between liberalism and nationalism?

Q: Why does nationalism trump liberalism?

**Authoritarian Temptation** — Q: What is the “authoritarian temptation?” Q: What is the risk that authoritarianism can take hold of a liberal democracy? Q: Are we at risk in the West?

*The Rights of Man...had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them...the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human [was] their greatest danger.* — Hannah Arendt
INTERNATIONAL REALITIES

Realism is built on six assumptions, which describe the system’s basic architecture. (1) **States are the main actors on the world stage and there is no centralized authority above them.** (2) **The international system is anarchic, which is not to say it is chaotic or disordered, only that there is no ultimate arbiter.** (3) **States can never know for certain whether a potential rival’s intentions are benign or hostile.** They can sometimes make reasonable guesses, but they can never be sure. (4) **Survival is every state’s primary goal.** States always have other aims as well—one reason it is difficult to know their intentions—but survival must always take priority. (5) **States are rational actors.** They have the ability to devise strategies that maximize their prospects for survival. States, in other words, are instrumentally rational. (6) **States understand that the best way to survive in an anarchic system in which they can never be certain about the intentions of other states is to be as powerful as possible relative to their competitors.** States therefore aim to maximize the military assets they control and make sure other states do not gain power at their expense, while also looking for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favor.

**Hobbesian Realism — Q:** Is realism most closely aligned with a Hobbesian view of nature?

**World State — You have said that if we ever were to get a world state that this state “would probably not be a liberal state.” Q:** Why?

**LIBERALISM AS TROUBLE**

You cite three major factors for why liberalism creates problems and exacts costs on the international stage. (1) **Liberal hegemons with a formidable military at their disposal are strongly inclined to fight wars not only to protect individual rights in other countries but also to spread liberal democracy, which they see as the best way to safeguard rights and protect against important security threats.** (2) **Liberal hegemony makes diplomacy with authoritarian states more difficult.** (3) **Liberalism undermines the sovereignty of other countries and eventually, its own.** Q: Why does liberalism abroad undermine or damage the fabric of liberalism inside a state’s own borders? Q: How does this impact transparency at home? Q: Are such nations prone to distorting the truth?

The great political fact of global history in the last 500 years is the emergence of a world of states from a world of empires. That fact—more than the expansion of democracy, more than nationalism, more than the language of rights, more even than globalization—fundamentally defines the political universe we all inhabit. —David Armitage
Russia & NATO Expansion — The strategy for making Ukraine part of the West consists of three linked components: (1) NATO enlargement (2) EU expansion (3) the Orange Revolution, which aimed at fostering democracy and Western values in Ukraine and thus presumably produce pro-Western leaders in Kiev. From Moscow’s perspective, the most threatening aspect of that strategy is NATO’s movement eastward. Q: What was the case for making Ukraine part of the west? Q: Why was this a bad idea?

Engagement with China — Since Nixon, the US has engaged with the Middle Kingdom. This policy accelerated after the fall of the USSR. It seems there is good reason to believe this policy is now over, and that the US is moving into what will be a prolonged period of disengagement. Q: How/where did U.S. policy towards China go wrong? Q: Where are we headed with China? Q: What are the dangers? Q: How big does China’s economy need to get in order to pose a serious, geopolitical threat to the United States? Q: Is democracy compatible with China’s political culture and history?

Iran — Q: Should we be engaging with Iran? Q: What is your opinion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (so-called “Iran Nuclear Deal”) and should we have pulled out in your view? Q: Where do you think this relationship between the US and Iran is headed? Q: What are the biggest risks going forward?

North Korea — It seems that the denuclearization of North Korea is the single most difficult foreign policy challenge facing any administration. Q: Should the US be concerned about N. Korea’s arsenal or is that China’s problem now? Q: What do you think of Trump’s tactics vis-à-vis Kim Jong-un?

Europe — Q: Are you concerned about the health of the transatlantic partnership, or are worries about the state of the relationship under Trump overblown? Q: What are the biggest challenges facing both the partnership and the stability of Europe’s own nations and the EU overall?

Latin America — Latin America has been securely fastened to the US orbit since at least the Spanish-American War. Q: Do you see any sources of geopolitical instability in this part of the world for the US?

Future of Power & Diplomacy — Nation state power has historically been a function of economic output, population size & demographics, and geostrategic positioning. Q: Does modern technology change this calculation? Q: How might climate change alter our preconceptions about what is and is not geostrategically vital territory to control?

QUOTES

“The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.” — Alasdair MacIntyre

“A close look at Strauss’s writings suggests that he believes reason’s strong suit is not discovering truth but calling into question existing moral codes and other widely held beliefs. He comments at one point that “the more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism: the less are we able to be loyal members of society.” This belief in reason’s deconstructive power helps explain why Strauss thinks political philosophers are a danger to their own society and also why he believes political philosophy reached a dead end with Nietzsche. In other words, even though political philosophy is deeply concerned with the noble pursuit of the good life, it is ultimately a self-destructive enterprise because it privileges reason.” — John Mearsheimer