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On “Westspaining,” Realism, and Technologies of the Self: A Foucauldian Reading of the Realist Commentary on Ukraine

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Abstract: The article offers a Foucauldian reading of the Western realist commentary on the Russo-Ukrainian war which often faces the charges of “Westspaining.” It situates this commentary in the broader context of knowledge production and the power-knowledge nexūs it reproduces and conceptualizes realism as a *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense. As the article argues, this conceptualization allows one to capture its specific technologies of power which, in this case, can be understood as a form of *technology of the Self*, or, in other words, the disciplining of the collective subjects of world politics (nation-states) through the specifically realist constructs of *rationality* and *prudence* that all states are expected to adhere to in the making of their foreign policy. Additionally, the article suggests that this conceptualization of realism as a discourse can be analytically helpful in making sense of the way in which very different genres such as academic research and the op-ed policy commentary, frequently provided by realist IR scholars, are connected through the political economy of knowledge production, thus forming a relationship of discursive symbiosis and mutual legitimation.

Keywords: discourse, Foucault, realism, Russia, Ukraine, war, Westspaining

Introduction: Knowledge Production and “Westspaining”

The article is an attempt to give a Foucauldian reading to the Western realist commentary on Russo-Ukrainian war, as well as the broader realist discursive industry in which this commentary is embedded. It situates this commentary in the broader context of knowledge production and the power-knowledge nexūs it reproduces and conceptualizes realism as a *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense. As the article argues, this conceptualization allows one to capture its specific technologies of power which, in this case, can be understood as a form of *technology of the Self*, or, in other words, the disciplining of the collective subjects of world politics (nation-states) through the specifically realist constructs of *rationality* and *prudence* that all states are expected to adhere to in the making of their foreign policy.

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As such the text is *not* concerned with rebutting realist arguments, as their limits have been demonstrated both on the general theoretical level, in works of social constructivist theorists like Wendt (1992) and, more recently, through convincing rebuttals written to address specific contributions such as John Mearsheimer's essays and public comments on Ukraine (e.g., Specter 2022). Among other things these rebuttals have highlighted the visible circularity of the realist reasoning, conflation of the descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of theory, a poor to no engagement with area studies and, consequently, a very *selective*, inconsistent (pseudo)empiricism that easily overlooks uncomfortable facts and avoids falsifiability (see Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023). There has been some "friendly fire" as well from fellow realists who exposed the limits of Mearsheimer's structuralist arguments and criticized "the apparent hegemony of structural realism" within the broader and much more diverse tradition (Smith and Dawson 2022).

Some realists attempted to regroup and defend the third image line of reasoning from the intervention of domestic politics, claiming that the arguments put forth by the critics of realism about *siege mentality* (see Gaufman 2017; Gaufman 2022) and the *regime survival logic* as being the primary drivers of the Kremlin's foreign policy are "problematic," due to the fact that the full-scale war was not too popular with the Russian public (Götz 2022, 1534). Of course, this argument might seem somewhat less problematic if one does not turn it into a strawman and remember that the specific criticism which Götz is referring to was published *before* February 24, 2022. Even so, two years into the war it seemed that – popular or not – it has been instrumental to the successful regrouping of the Russian regime, leading to a "defensive consolidation" (Morris 2022; see also Medvedev 2023).

In sum, it seems somewhat puzzling that, in light of so many convincing rebuttals provided, this discourse continues to thrive and, as Moisis (2022, 2) puts it, there, nevertheless, persists "a pervasive need to rationalize Russia's action through theories of international relations." Following up on that the text attempts to relativize the realist discourse as a particular case of a power-knowledge nexus that tries to both constitute and discipline the collective national selves as *subjects* through its own constructs of rationality. In that, it picks up on Guzzini's (1998) earlier scrutiny of realism as *practice*. The text is not based on any systematic empirical research design. I would use it simply as an opportunity to highlight the benefits of a new conceptual interpretation for the agenda in question and outline the possible directions of future empirical research.

To do so I examine not only the specific op-eds that have been directly charged with "Westspaining" (e.g., Walt 2022) Ukraine and Eastern Europe but also the broader complex of realist thought in which the policy commentary is anchored intellectually, with a specific focus on the particularities of the *structural* realist theorizing whose long-time popularity in the discipline arguably reinforced and legitimized the more recent comments (Smith and Dawson 2022, 177).

The subject of *knowledge production* in IR has, once again, received increased attention since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine. One crucial aspect is the role of the

geographical location of researchers, which, as critical scholars previously pointed out, can "matter for a number of reasons" (Gray 2022, 24). This is where the "Westsplaining" debate also takes root. Since the term has gained increased prominence in the past years while also coming to be seen as potentially controversial or contested by some, in order to preclude ambiguity, I will provide a definition here of my own minting. It dates back to 2022 and has since been cited by some fellow academics. Thus, Westsplaining stands for "speaking without sufficient expertise but from a position of authority, often making false projections and assumptions that are based on the Western experience but are not necessarily relevant to the region in question. The point is not where you are from. Rather, it is whether you possess the necessary expertise and whether, before you decided to comment, you spent enough time following the region, learning the languages, and gaining some intimate understanding of the countries involved" (Kazharski 2022).

This recurrent combination of cluelessness and authority, backed up by resources, has also clearly been accompanied by some unfortunate structural developments in the knowledge production industry. For starters it has contributed to the inequality between grand theory and area studies knowledge with the latter finding itself in a somewhat secondary or subordinate position. Thus, "IR has routinely extracted the political realities of warfare from places far removed from the west and used them for abstract theorizing" (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023, 67). Also, as Makarychev and Nizhnikau (2023) argue, in virtue of their specific "inclusive" rules, the Western academic and policy environments have also created spaces for normalization and rationalization of authoritarianism and military aggression through a set of different discourses. Furthermore, alongside "normalizing" knowledge production there has also been intentional *knowledge distortion* carried out via manipulation with language and concepts and taking place in an atmosphere of "self-deceiving liberal-institutional triumphalism coupled with the post-truth era revisionism" (Tyushka 2023, 653). Much of it involved false projections like "ethnic conflict", "civil war" or "crisis," and, in the end, was, of course, closely connected to what Dutkiewicz and Smoleński (2023) dub "epistemic superimposition."

Here, though much of that criticism has a geographically specific recipient, as implied by the very term "Westsplaining," one, of course, must also remember that, at the end of the day, the question of individual expertise is always an empirical one. In accordance with the definition that I provided above, it is never hard-wired into any of the so-called "positionalities," whether cultural or professional and theoretical. This is also well illustrated by the development of the recent debate. For example, as the analysts of "epistemic imperialism" point out "albeit feminist IR is more critical than conventional IR, Western and Global South feminist debates on Ukraine have often displayed similar patterns of epistemic marginalization, power hierarchies and colonial projections as manifested in mainstream IR" (Hendl et al. 2024). Hence stems also the necessity to avoid a primitive "fixation on identities" (Kováts 2024) and to preserve the freedom of research and debate (Kováts 2023).

Foucault and Realism

Any reflection on knowledge production almost automatically begs for a Foucauldian reading. However, more specifically, the interpretation of realism as a *discourse* also seems to offer several concrete conceptual advantages. In the narrowest and most immediate sense, it offers a rather accurate depiction of the *academic* layer of the realist discourse, which has been a fuzzy intellectual grouping rather than a monolithic doctrine or one coherent school of thought. Yet, more importantly, this conceptualization could be a promising analytical framework for historicizing and exposing the contingency of the allegedly universalist realist wisdoms and for scrutinizing the particular technologies of power to be discovered in the realist discourse.

Previous Foucauldian takes on realism have drawn on Foucault's conceptual framework in order to problematize the understanding of *power* and *sovereignty* that are pivotal for the realist strands of thought (Paolini 1993). Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, I start my own analysis with the examination of the rationality/irrationality tension and show how it is central to the operation of the realist discourse that attempts to discipline through guidance and policy advice. Here IR knowledge production forms a nexus with relations of power (Foucault 1980), which, in turn, is understood in a diffused and dispersed rather than a "sovereign" manner (Foucault 1975). Realism is interpreted as a *discourse* rather than a *doctrine* and the critical approach to it as an investigation into its "conditions of possibility" rather than the truth or fallacy of its propositions.

Certainly, previous examinations of realism (Guzzini 1998), discussed in more detail below, made an important effort in historicizing (different forms of) realism and exposing it as a historically specific political *practice* that repeatedly strove to establish itself as a universalist theory. Without denying their validity, the present contribution would deepen and expand their scope through highlighting several additional aspects that are not necessarily immediately obvious from previous analysis.

First, the notion of discourse takes us far beyond the academic debate and even the language of diplomatic practitioners, whose "ideational lifeworld" (Guzzini 2020, 218) the IR debates are said to represent. Empirically speaking, a discourse is much more encompassing, as it includes the whole mediascape, ranging from major media outlets to the opinion leaders on social networks and the discussions they trigger. The concept also allows to denote different discursive fields with their specific *regimes of truth* and political economies and to pay specific attention to their interaction and symbiosis. For example, one can distinguish between the academic genre and the genre of public punditry eagerly practiced by some of the major theorists of realism, and consequently, analyze the effect of their mutual legitimation or the impact that the institutional requirements of popularizing and "disseminating" knowledge have on hierarchies in the academia.¹

¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for raising this particular point in the review which helped me strengthen the argument.

Finally, the Foucauldian notion of discourse is associated with the idea of power as *governmentality*, i.e., internalized self-discipline. This is where realist discourse, with its emphasis on *rationalizing* international politics, can be understood as involving a *technology of the Self*, that is internalization of the realist wisdom not only by those practitioners who are immediately involved in the crafting of foreign policies but also by the broader publics who are engaged by the discourse through a variety of channels.

In sum, the (re)conceptualization of realism as discourse offers the possibility of several new angles of empirical analysis discussed in more detail below.

Rationality and the Disciplinary Space of Realism

The rationality-irrationality tension lay at the very origin of the realist intellectual tradition and has arguably been somewhat of a constitutive trauma. The ultimate failure of what Morgenthau calls the "deficient reality" to live up to the standards of the rationality preached by the sages of realism seems to be a source of regular disappointment. Thus, on the one hand "only a rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success." Yet, on the other hand, things like "a perfect balance of power policy" are never found in real life which can only be an approximation to the ideal constructs in which realist theory deals. As Morgenthau (1978, 4) put it in the revised edition of *Politics Among Nations*:

"Political realism contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element. It knows that political reality is replete with contingencies and systemic irrationalities and points to the typical influences they exert upon foreign policy. Yet it shares with all social theory the need, for the sake of theoretical understanding, to stress the rational elements of political reality; for it is these rational elements that make reality intelligible for theory. Political realism presents the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy which experience can never completely achieve."

Ironically, at the heart of the realist argument about the world, there is what one may call an *idealist* standard of rationality that creates a constant tension between the *descriptive* and the *prescriptive* side of this theory. Hence, not only the persisting necessity to stress "the rational elements" but the recurrent disappointment and frustration with the imprudence, and the seeming "irrationality" of the actors involved. From E.H. Carr to J.M. Mearsheimer, the standard realist refrain is a complaint about the world failing to heed their advice. It is sometimes expressed ahead of things, as with Mearsheimer's 1990 lengthy reflections on the prospects of the post-Cold War European order, which he finishes by saying "I expect that the bulk of my prescriptions will not be followed" (Mearsheimer 1990, 56).

Characteristically, the frustration of failed rationalism, expressed in realist writings, also alludes rhetorically the figure of the madman or “fool” who has played the role of a constitutive other in the articulation of modern reason (Foucault 1988). “The error of realist predictions that the end of the Cold War would mean the end of NATO,” argued Kenneth Waltz (2000, 34), “arose not from a failure of realist theory to comprehend international politics, but from an underestimation of America’s folly”.

Running parallel to the Enlightenment’ project of *reason* that banishes insanity into the disciplinary space of the clinic (Foucault 1988), the rationalist project of structural realism makes an attempt to rid the world of what it sees as “folly.” In doing so, it constructs an image of a rationalist utopia, or as Ashley (1986, 258) puts it “an ideology that anticipates, legitimizes, and orients a totalitarian project of global proportions: the rationalization of global politics.” Alternatively, in the words of Paolini (1993, 112), “the realist discourse invests relations of power with a coherence, totality, and logic it does not possess in the international world.”

Thus, to Waltz, the *structural* or “systemic” theory that he elaborates in his exceptionally influential *opus magnum*, *The Theory of International Politics* (1979) is built on the micro-economic model of behavior driven by individual utility-maximization. This is perhaps not too surprising, considering the theorist’s prior background in economics (University of California Television 2003). This system level theory relegates the possible irrationality of individual state behavior to the domestic level, which it “black-boxes,” concentrating instead on a “small number of big and important things” (Waltz 1986, 329), i.e., the ordering principles of the *structure of the international system*.

Thus, Waltz’s solution to the problem of “folly” is ultimately *macroeconomic*: the IR analog of the “invisible hand of the market” translates the accumulated effect of the choices made by individual states into the global structure. On the individual level, states, hereby understood as *rational* (i.e., self-interested) *unitary actors*, may choose to ignore, or misinterpret the systemic pressures they are facing, but just as individuals are inevitably “punished” or “rewarded” by the market depending on their economic behavior, under the conditions of *anarchy*, states will also reap relative gains or face utter disaster as a consequence of their (un)wise choices. Or as another structural realist would put it, “foolish behavior invariably has negative consequence” (Mearsheimer 2001, 12).

This “market-based” model of IR marks the paradigmatic transition to “scientific” realism from the classical, also sometimes referred to as the “human nature” breed of realism, whose foundations the new model arguably “betrays” by “reducing political practice to an economic logic” (Ashley 1986, 258). To Ashley (1986, 268) this constitutes the reductionist “poverty of neorealism” as well as a hollowing out of the rich structuralist tradition of thought as, in Waltz’s adaptation, “neorealist ‘structuralism’ takes a shallow, physicalistic form.”

As Molloy (2010, 396) observes in a similar vein, the neorealist model is, in fact, a turning in the development of realism as with its advent, "realism is no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but rather of making the world conform to the model." Consequently, "not only must states be erased of their history, culture, and statecraft, but political life is described in terms of its similarity to 'a field of forces in physics'" which, in turn, amounts to "a fetishization of the natural sciences."

The charge of reducing the complexity of political life to a form of materialist, "mechanistic" determinism is not uncommon among the critics of neorealism. Thus, Specter (2022) pins down Mearsheimer's explanation of the Russo-Ukrainian war as "a predictably hydraulic universe of push and pull," and "a hydraulic account – of forces and counterforces vying for a finite geographical space." And although the structural realists themselves would certainly never admit to *this* form of crude scientific reductionism, they do at least sometimes seem to be keen to use the respective naturalist analogies as if to prove their point, such as when Waltz (2000, 23) argues that "as nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power."

Understanding the relationship between the structural IR-realist and other types of scientific discourse is, possibly, a promising research project, particularly in terms of what Foucault would refer to in his *archaeologies of knowledge* as the "episteme," vaguely defined as "the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities" (Foucault 2002, 211). However that may be, there is one aspect that definitely invites a Foucauldian reading and it has to do with the image of a "finite geographical space."

Waltzean neorealism initially crafts an image of international politics that is based on the Cold War situation. It turns out to be a world where "there are no peripheries". Namely, "with only two superpowers capable of acting on a world scale, anything that happens anywhere is potentially of concern to both of them. Bipolarity extends the geographic scope of both powers' concern" (Waltz 1979, 171).

This image of the world that is laid bare to the strategic gaze of its two "poles" is similar to the earlier effect of the pre-World War I classical geopolitical gaze as scrutinized by critical geopolitics scholars. Thus, "the naturalized geopolitics characteristic of this epoch" included "a world divided into imperial and colonized peoples, states with 'biological needs' for territory/resources and outlets for enterprise, a 'closed' world in which one state's political-economic success was at another one's expense (relative ascent and decline), and a world of fixed geographical attributes and environmental conditions that had predictable effects on a state's global status" (Agnew 2003, 94).

The project of *critical geopolitics* is built on the Foucauldian assumption of a power-knowledge nexus. Thus, the discourses of geography and classical geopolitics are understood as going hand-in-hand with colonial domination over the "closed world" which has

become the object of both scientific scrutiny and colonial domination and exploitation. The European map is literally a projection of the European imperial power on the globe.

Naturally, by the time the Waltzean “world with no peripheries” was conceived in the neorealist tradition, colonialism, as well as the traditional “organicism” geopolitics of the Haushofer breed, had long become anathema – at least in the Western liberal democratic societies. Specter (2022) makes a key observation pointing to the controversial links of realist thought to the darker legacies of the 19th century and the “broader amnesia about and denial of its imperial origins.” This is a fair observation, but I would nevertheless suggest a slightly different reading of the relationship between the two.

Thus, neither Kenneth Waltz nor John Mearsheimer, nor any other established realist these days appears to be an intellectual heir of the racism, social Darwinism, and pseudo-biological essentialism espoused by the “classical” geopoliticians, writing about states as if they were *living organisms*. Waltz’s “episteme” in IR is clearly all about mimicking economics not biology. Incidentally, in his case, it can be even argued that, as compared to Halford Mackinder’s (in)famous view of the world, the role of space and geography in his theory is significantly diminished.

However, the room for analytical comparisons remains, as both cases clearly fit the Foucauldian notion of the power-knowledge nexus by objectifying the world in its closed totality. Consequently, it is through policy advice and the constant ambition to participate in statecraft that realism plugs into a set of power relations embedded in the existing international system. After all, as one of the founding fathers of realism argued, it is the “desire to cure the sicknesses of the body politic has given its impulse and its inspiration to political science” (Carr 1946).

Thus, when Waltz discusses polarities in his 1979 *opus magnum*, his interest clearly reaches beyond pure theoretical contemplation. He is seeking out a model of the international structure that would prove to be the most stable and the least conflict-yielding one. He ends up delivering a comprehensive rationalist argument on the advantages of bipolarity as opposed to multipolarity, the advantages that owe to its relative simplicity and predictability.

Notably, the ambition “to cure the body politic” does not stop there. Waltz then goes on to argue that long terms co-existence in a bipolar system changes the *quality* of relations between the two superpowers and creates more room for the joint “management of international affairs” (Waltz 1979, 170–183, 194–199).

Arguably, this “*superpower* management” vision may have fewer career opportunities with the offensive strand of structural realism that is promoted by John Mearsheimer. Yet even Mearsheimer proves to be eager to provide great power management strategies, such as when he proposes detailed policy recommendations for stabilizing the post-Cold War Europe (see Mearsheimer 1990 above).

In sum, the realist discourse constructs a particular image of the world that is based on rationalist assumptions, but this image goes beyond theoretical contemplations. It is intimately connected with the notion of a clever and efficient exercise of power carried out by major players with the intent of *optimizing* international politics by minimizing conflict and maximizing security. That refers to national security above all else, but not exclusively as the ideas of collective great power management based on the realist-produced knowledge about international politics always resurface in this discourse.

Beyond “Westspaining?” Prudence, Neutrality, and *Technologies of the Self*

At this point, it would be tempting to read realism as an ideological doctrine that is created by great powers in order to rationalize and legitimize their subjugation of the smaller countries and facilitate their submission to great power management. This reading would be non-Foucauldian as it would assume a distinct “sovereign subject” behind the exercise of power. In effect, it would be very much congruent with how Moscow sees the world through its imperial supremacist lens. In the Kremlin’s view, great powers are the ones who are entitled to both making *and* breaking the rules whilst small countries cannot by definition be sovereign (see Čanji and Kazharski 2023). In Russia, sovereignty in world politics is said to be a privilege of the very selected few.

The Russian geopolitical thinking is ultimately also underpinned by a staunch belief in a global conspiracy, hence the recent popularity of the term “collective West” in the Russian discourse. However, the polycentric and polyphonic nature of Western polities – as well as Western alliances – brings them much closer to Foucault’s notion of *dispersed* and *anonymous* power than to the ideas of a collective (or hidden) sovereign.

It would thus make more sense to see realism as a *discourse* rather than a *doctrine*. The analytical difference between the two is that a doctrine is produced consciously and intentionally by a sovereign actor for the aims of his/her/its power. In contrast to that, a discourse, in the distinctly Foucauldian sense, lacks a subject. Subjects are themselves constituted by a discourse, but the power associated with it is “a multiplicity of force relations,” that is “simultaneously ‘intentional’ yet ‘nonsubjective’” (Smart 2002).

This Foucauldian notion is productive for grasping broad and heterogenous discursive formations like realism. On the one hand, they are themselves polycentric, involving different theoretical subfamilies and scholars, the fuzzy grouping that is sometimes dubbed “the broad church of realism” (Smith and Dawson 2022, 179). While this “church” may have its revered “saints,” it clearly does not have a “pontificate.” In other words, it is not tied to one authority or institution that would steer the development of this discourse or underwrite an unwavering orthodoxy across it. Disagreement between realists is business as usual when it comes both to theoretical foundations and the interpretation of major international crisis (see Smith and Dawson 2022). In the end, the relationship between

the different breeds of realism can be described as a “rhizome” (Molloy 2010) or, perhaps, even a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance.”

Yet, on the other hand, the realist discourse does thrive in between conceptual nodes many of which are distinctly realist both in terms of their genealogy and their usus. The concepts of “anarchy” and self-interested security-driven rationality clearly fall under this category. And, to repeat, these concepts are more than just an ivory tower exercise. They are part of a power-knowledge nexus insofar as they inform policy advise and stimulate, legitimize, and reinforce particular ways of framing international politics in several discursive planes, including academic, journalist, politician, or even everyday discourse.

Consequently, realism can be understood as a disciplinary space with its own disciplinary *gaze*. Furthermore, it is disciplinary in both meanings of the word; namely it is, a *discipline* institutionalized and reproduced through academic publishing outlets, university tenures, and syllabi. But also, it is a disciplining discourse insofar as its gaze on world politics strives *to discipline* international actors (states) into its peculiar standard of rationality.

The locus of this disciplining can be understood as the gap between expectations and reality, between the prescriptive and the descriptive *modi operandi*, between the wisdom of learned realist pundits and the disappointment that “deficient reality” (Morgenthau) and the “folly” (Waltz) of the decision makers regularly bring. Also, this disciplining is distinct from the hierarchical understanding espoused by those fans of great power management, who believe that the rules are for the small and the unimportant, for those bound to always be the “objects” of history.

In this sense, the realist discourse operates beyond the subject/object distinction because it strives to discipline and construct both great powers *and* smaller players as security-driven, prudent, and rational actors. Thus, to Waltz the disappearance of the USSR was unfortunate because removed the structural restraints on the US foreign policy making, depriving it from its due dosage of “rational fear” or “rational paranoia” (Freyberg-Inan 2006). This, in turn, would increase the room for irrationality and imprudence:

“With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the United States no longer faces a major threat to its security. As General Colin Powell said when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: ‘I’m running out of demons. I’m running out of enemies. I’m down to Castro and Kim Il Sung.’ Constancy of threat produces constancy of policy; absence of threat permits policy to become capricious. When few if any vital interests are endangered, a country’s policy becomes sporadic and self-willed” (Waltz 2000, 24).

In a similar vein, Stephen Walt (2016) also develops his “case against peace.” In his account, the “wolf at the door” is a protagonist who stimulates the efficiency of domestic policies.

One of course may try to downplay this as a particular case of Waltzean *defensive* realism, which – in contrast to offensive realism – prioritizes the balance of power (in a bipolar system) over the maximization of power. To the offensive realists it seems, “being the biggest and baddest dude on the bloc” (University of California Television 2002) as they choose to put it is the best way to ensure one’s security.

Yet, this would be a misleading assumption as, alongside power maximization, Mearsheimer preaches prudent self-restraint for the US. This is why he believes both the 2003 Iraq adventure and intervening on behalf of Central and Eastern European states to be a mistake. As Mearsheimer explains in his 2001 offensive realism treatise, an overseas intervention makes strategic sense only in a situation when a continent like Eurasia is in clear danger of being dominated by a single power, which it can eventually use it as a springboard for a global hegemony bid.

And even beyond the structural realist subfamily, neoclassical realists like Schweller (2006) introduce the concept of “underbalancing” in order to make sense of the “deficient reality,” that is, to explain why states do not in fact behave in accordance with the predictions that can be made on the basis of the observable systemic pressures outlined by the “structural” theory. Schweller’s analysis opens the “black box” of domestic politics to discover that richness of ideological and institutional factors which is, at best, glided over by the structuralist explanations.

Yet, in the end, the neoclassical explanatory model plays a similarly disciplining role. “Underbalancing” is ultimately the result of a defect in foreign policy making, which – if crafted correctly – should follow the iron *diktat* of the security-driven self-interest logic prescribed by the systemic pressures. Further efforts have also been made by realist scholars to refine this model by factoring in the *regional* – as distinct from the global – level. Thus, as Hutto (2023) argues, alongside the global systemic pressures, smaller powers are also pushed into particular “creative” ways of behaving by regional security concerns (“security externalities”).

In sum, the realist discourse operating through its multiple varieties, works to discipline powers, great and small, into its standard of rational behavior. Hence, a realist’s frequent argument is that self-restraint is vital and “ambitions should be limited to avoid hubris” (Bahenský 2022). Naturally, this sword cuts both ways and smaller players are also disciplined along the way. This is the case, for example, when Mearsheimer or Walt try *to talk some sense* – that is, what they themselves believe to be sense - into Ukraine by saying that, in light of their geographical situation, the Ukrainians need to be reasonable and accept neutrality as the best available solution. The appeals of the realist policy advice to rationality and prudence thus go hand in hand with the expression of “pastoral” concern for the good of the Ukrainian people. As Walt (2022) argued several weeks before the war:

“The best hope for a peaceful resolution of this unhappy mess is for the Ukrainian people and their leaders to realize that having Russia and the

West fight over which side ultimately gains Kyiv's allegiance is going to be a disaster for their country. Ukraine should take the initiative and announce it intends to operate as a neutral country that will not join any military alliance. It should formally pledge not to become a member of NATO or join the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. It would still be free to trade with and welcome investment from any country, and it should be free to choose its own leaders without outside interference."

The standard charge of "Westspaining" usually includes the practice of treating Russia's smaller neighbors as *objects* rather than subjects of history, denying them *agency*, and, as Maria Mälksoo (2023) puts it, "effectively negating the political right to sovereign choices." The semi-camouflaged colonial-imperialist approach of Western commentators to CEE states as objects is, indeed, a serious problem that remains to be tackled. Nevertheless, examining this from a Foucauldian perspective, it is interesting to observe that this realist-produced discourse of prudence does construct a subjectivity of sorts.

Thus, Walt notably delegates the management of Ukraine's proposed neutrality to the Ukrainian people and their democratically elected leadership. That amounts to a subtler and more sophisticated technology of power that lies beyond the subject/object divide and employs what, following Foucauldian analysis, one could call a *technology of the Self* (see Luther et al. 1988). To Foucault the constitution of a *self* through self-discipline and self-restraint is essential to the operation of power. This idea runs through his analysis of sexuality, the "care" and "cultivation" of the self (Foucault 1986), and concepts like *governmentality* imply that the policing functions can be outsourced to the self-disciplining subject who internalizes certain norms of behavior.

The realist discourse thus operates in line with the Foucauldian description of the techniques of power. In particular, this concerns the *modern* forms of power with their tendency towards increased efficiency, calculation, productivity, optimization, and comprehensive control or "pastoral care" over the subjects through which these forms of power construct and through which they operate. The realist project of *rationalizing* international politics thus becomes a disciplining exercise that seeks to construct both great and small powers as self-disciplining, self-restraining, "prudent," and rational actors, employing the respective technologies of the collective national selves.

In Lieu of Conclusion: Relativize, Rebuke, Remain Silent?

As Foucault pointed out, asserting something as *science* by implication means "disqualifying" and relegating other types of knowledge to the inferior status of the non-scientific (Foucault as cited in Molloy 2010, 394). There is an "episteme" that sets the standards for what is deemed worthy to be admitted to the "field of scientificity" and allows us to "separate what may from what may not be characterized as scientific" (Foucault 1980, 197). The fact that this "episteme" is socially and historically contingent makes it possible for us to engage in critical relativization of scientific hierarchies.

As far as the latter are concerned, realism has been known as an approach that claims some sort of privileged access to truth or to "reality" as the very name of the paradigm suggests. Despite sometimes framing itself as "an attitude not a doctrine" (Betts 2015), its ambition to be a positivist science universal truth can be more than pronounced. As Kubáľková (2009, 210–211) points out, the Western (American) "hegemony" IR, is exercised by senior "neorealist" or "neoliberal" scholars who, "admire micro-economists," "suffer 'physics envy,'" "devote endless amounts of attention to rational choice," and "treat anarchy as a constitutive premise for the discipline." They are also "willing to make whatever assumptions, both metaphysical and substantive, necessary to proceed in the disciplined manner of science," but, at the same time, remain "indifferent to the global and regional networks of scholars in IR."

Indeed, much of what is sold as "universal" science may in fact be deeply rooted in specifically Western assumptions about actorness and rationality, and this can explain, among other things, the confusion of the American realist punditry with respect to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Specter (2022) makes an important recommendation with respect to *historicizing* realism following on earlier work that demonstrates how some of its central concepts such as anarchy, though presently taken for granted, had actually been invented and mainstreamed in the discipline fairly recently (Donnelly 2015).

It is here that we can also follow up on the work of those who previously exposed realism as a political *practice* that had tried to legitimize itself as/through an academic theory. Thus, Guzzini's (1998, 11) monograph puts forth an understanding of the realist school as "the attempt to translate the rules of the diplomatic practice in the nineteenth century into scientific rules of social science which developed mainly in the US." Guzzini shows this with respect to two notable episodes in the history of realism. The first one is about Morgenthau's attempts to substitute the lost aristocratic tradition that previously informed foreign-policy making "the necessary cultural (normative) force that enabled a balance of power system to work as a peace-preserving mechanism." The second one refers us to Henry Kissinger's efforts to convert 19th century notions of international order and the concert of powers into a wisdom and "a common language" for the 20th century (Guzzini 1998, 29, 95–107).

Historicizing is also very much part of the Foucauldian type of analysis, the aim of which is to demonstrate not only the temporal but also the *contingent* and exclusive nature of the things broadly accepted as universal. However, the notion of a discourse stretches far beyond the academic outlets or that community of practioners (statesmen) directly engaged in the making of foreign-policy who were said to have been the immediate target audience of Morgenthau's reeducating efforts. So, this is where we can broaden the perspective previously offered by Guzzini (1998), and include in our analysis different discursive fields such as the academic and punditry genres and their curious symbiosis as suggested below. Scrutinizing and interrogating the latter in a critical manner could thus be one of the research agendas opened by a Foucauldian reading that the present text suggests.

Therefore, with respect to the strictly academic component, I would perhaps bring up the exclusion or, at least, subordination of area studies training to universalist IR theorizing. Structural realism, of course, is a particularly convenient framework for those who would like to produce authoritative statements without possessing profound country expertise because it famously “black-boxes” domestic politics. Arguably, this tendency also has to do with a (dubious) image of a world that is “transparent” and easily accessible to positivist analysis. This image apparently underpins the “episteme” of theorizing about the post-Cold war globalized world where cultural and political differences are erased or, at least, relegated to the background. Perhaps, a consistent Foucauldian critique of American positivists could imply a rethinking of the disciplinary hierarchies that exist between theorizing and area studies. This is yet another possible research agenda that would possibly involve a new sociology of IR as a discipline.

However, there are also other discursive tactics to be pointed out in realist commentary, which have to do with the broader scope of the discourse mentioned above. One of them is the strange symbiosis between “punditry” or policy commentary in the op-ed genre, on the one hand, and academic genre scientific articles and books on the other. These are two distinct categories of texts with their respective “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980) and two different industries of text production with their own *political economies*. Thus, the commentary genre, delivered in a simple and accessible manner, tends to attract significantly more public attention than lengthy, theory-laden academic works, which, in turn, is more than likely to shape the strategies of the respective media outlets.

Nevertheless, the two discursive fields become intimately linked through the scientific alibi that the academia provides to the op-ed genre. Thus, Mearsheimer “claims the authority of an objective social science for his policy recommendations” (Specter 2022) but even if he did not do so explicitly, the “authoritative” effect would implicitly still be there.

The policy comment genre that does not undergo tough academic peer review creates room for a number of discursive tactics. Simplicity of account or “parsimony” is certainly one of them, and sometimes it proves to be extremely effective. Here, it can be argued that the realist commentary follows in the wake of Samuel Huntington’s (in)famous 1993 *clash of civilizations* article, a text that has been a source of great inspiration for many journalists and politicians, and an equally great source of frustration for social scientists who have bluntly refused to recognize it as good social science (see Rubenstein and Crocker 1994).

Looking beyond the charms of simplicity, one also finds inconsistency and simplification. Thus, in 2014 op-ed Mearsheimer makes his case in the name of the structural theory but in the process relies on historicist arguments about Russia’s collective memory, thus bringing back area studies knowledge but in a rather naïve and superficial manner. As Smith and Dawson (2022, 181) put it, “to add nuance and weight to his arguments he typically has to reach for additional variables, particularly domestic ones, that his theory explicitly

disregards" (cf. Kazharski 2019, 17). In some of his more academic texts Mearsheimer actually does provide a more solid discussion of the key role that political ideologies play in the origins of wars (see Mearsheimer 1990, 24–25), though some observers still find his position to be inconsistent (Johnson 2023).

A similar charge can also be addressed to some of Walt's most recent commentary. Thus, in his 2022 op-ed, he rationalizes Moscow behavior by quoting the general realist truth about great powers who "tend to be extremely sensitive to the security environment in their immediate neighborhoods." This does not only ignore the obvious historical examples of former antagonists who successfully overcame the security dilemma, but also the explanatory opportunities offered by Walt's (1987) own theory of the *balance of threat*, which attributes a leading role to intentions and domestically constituted perceptions alongside the state's position in the relational structure of the international system.

The op-ed industry tends to have weaker filters for inconsistency and superficiality than academic peer-review and the objective reasons for that are perfectly understandable. This does not, however, change the fact of how certain discourses operate through a peculiar symbiosis of discursive fields with different truth regimes in order to produce medialized quasi-scientific doxas. Subsequently, these doxas tend to become "received wisdom" with those who – just like so many fans of Huntington's civilizationism – may have never had the time to open the original texts and scrutinize them for inconsistencies. A comprehensive Foucauldian analysis would aim at uncovering the constellation of discourses and their "conditions of possibility," how their "regimes of truth" convert, among other things, the contingent and the inconsistent into authoritative scientific expertise. In this sense, the present contribution has barely scratched the surface. Here, apart from a clear research agenda addressing the curious symbiosis of the different but actively communicating discursive "vessels," there is also a bit of room for policy advice when it comes to improving the quality of the media and journalist work. This is where we could side with Dutkiewicz and Smoleński (2023, 629) in urging "editors and the news media to interrogate the claims made by academics rather than assuming their expertise". From the research side, perhaps, this also implies a critical scrutiny of expert credentials done by researchers from the field of media studies.

Last but not least, a Foucauldian take would be incomplete without the question of dissent and resistance. To Foucault, attacking the various forms of power dispersed in a society at a given period was one of the essential functions of the intellectual. Realism turns out to be a comprehensive discourse that attempts to discipline through imposing a particular type of rationality (constituted by "rational paranoia" (Freyberg-Inan 2006)) and a particular technology of the collective (national) self. Foucault's (1975) famous dictum claims that power always generates points of resistance and there is no doubt that the disciplining activity of the realist discourse is resisted on many fronts. For one thing, the stubborn resistance of the Ukrainian people to the Russian invasion demonstrates how the so-called "reality" can sometimes get back at the "realists."

Foucauldian notions of power and discourse lack a “sovereign subject” and a clearly identified locus. Power is “non-subjective,” dispersed, and “capillary;” it is “a complex strategic situation,” (Smart 2002) and “resistance is never in a position of exteriority to it” (Foucault 1975). Applying this logic to our own professional situation, we can now come back to the beginning of this contribution and the apparent banality of the critical rebuttals delivered in response to the realist punditry on Ukraine. In other words, does maintaining the never-ending scientific jostling with this commentary and repetitive debunking of its empirical and conceptual inconsistencies have an effect on the power-knowledge nexus that underpins it? And if there is indeed, as some posit, *a responsibility to remain silent* (Axyonova and Lozka 2023) when it comes to knowledge production, whose responsibility might that be in the end – the realist’s or mine?

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