

## Interview with Dr. Matthew Specter



**CV:** I want to welcome our readership and audience, for anyone who may be viewing the [video recording](#) as well. For those who do not know me at this time, my name is Casey VanSise. I am the 2021-22 Thomas J. Davis Fellow for CENFAD this academic year. And I would like to welcome our guest today, Dr. Matthew Specter, who is joining us from California. We are going to be interviewing him about his book, [The Atlantic Realists](#), which was just published this year (2022) by Stanford University Press.

**MS:** Thank you! Good to be here, Casey. And thank you to CENFAD and to Alan McPherson for the original invitation and [the lecture](#), which I really enjoyed giving at Temple University a few weeks back!

**CV:** Very good. Thank you! I will proceed with questions from there. So, to give a basic summary, your book examines the overall intellectual interchange between US and German realist policymakers – “realist,” quote-unquote, because a major point of

your book is deconstructing what realism means, and where it originated. So that is a very important component of your book. But could you just introduce, in general, the subject-matter that you examine and the overall thesis of your book to our audience and readership? For instance, maybe introduce some of the main figures that your book examines, and what inspired you to write this?

**MS:** So this was a project with deep roots in my own personal biography. As a freshman at Harvard University in the 1980s, I took a class with Joseph Nye on “Ethics and Foreign Policy,” and I was introduced to the concept of the “national interest,” as the kind of lodestar of any state’s foreign policymaking. And the essential premise of the course was that ethics was something that needed to be negotiated—that ethical concerns had to be negotiated—*vis-à-vis* the “national interest.” And yet I found in our readings, many of which were authored by classical realists, that the “national interest” was never clearly defined. It never really was clear to me who got to decide what the “national interest” was. Why was it that, say, with the Carter Doctrine, that Persian Gulf oil was a vital “national interest?” Well, you can see that was very much a political decision, and yet simply by framing it as *the* “national interest”—as something more objective than the supposedly “softer” or “more emotional” ethical concerns—I felt that it stacked the deck in favor of a certain kind of strategic logic.

So, that was thirty-five years ago. I did not start working on the book until about ten

years ago. I wanted to understand the tenacity of certain fixed ideas in not only US foreign policy thought, but in Western foreign policy thought more generally. And because of my training in German intellectual history, I had discovered a number of different things. You know, I have taught about and studied the Holocaust and its ideological discourses of *lebensraum* and space. At the same time, I also teach world history, and think about the rise of the “American Century” and the debates over American empire. So I was looking for a project that would bring my concerns as a citizen about American empire, and its pathologies and shortcomings, into dialogue with my expertise as a Germanist, and without making any kind of facile comparisons between America and Nazi Germany, but to link the two histories through the figures of German *émigrés* who fled Nazism and who migrated to the United States. And the most famous of those was Hans Morgenthau, a German-Jewish *émigré*, who became the author of the bestselling textbook in academic international relations, and sort-of singlehandedly promoted the prestige of the realist paradigm, both in academia and in Washington DC, through his friendship with George Kennan and others.

So the book began as, really, an intellectual biography of Morgenthau – I went into his papers at the Library of Congress. And, at that time, I was most interested in the influence of Carl Schmitt, an authoritarian conservative legal and political theorist who elected to go with the Nazis and to rationalize their empire-building – especially in a famous text from 1939, in which he takes the Monroe Doctrine as a model for a German imperium in Central Europe. So I got very interested and sort-of convinced that there was something specific about the US-German Transatlantic dialogue that was

constitutive of the American realist sensibility. Other historians had already pointed this out – that Morgenthau in America brought with him many ideas, whether it was [Friedrich] Nietzsche or [Max] Weber or [Sigmund] Freud or Schmitt. So this was not entirely original to me. What was original was that, rather than beginning the story of realism with the Germanization of American thought in the 1930s and 1940s through the emigration, I instead decided to move the story all the way back to the 1880s and 1890s, because I became convinced that the dialogue was much more longstanding, and that there was a sense of affinity between German and American historical experiences as young and rising empires. They possessed similar challenges, and had a similar sense of “frontiers.” In the United States, they had the sense of a “closing frontier,” which led them to pursue overseas opportunities, and there was a similar turn in Germany from continental empire to overseas, naval empire.

So it was a project that began trying to look at Schmitt, Morgenthau, and a third figure, Wilhelm Grewe, who was the West German ambassador to the United States during the Kennedy administration. And Grewe, I like to joke, was the “German Kissinger,” and of course, Kissinger himself was *the* “German Kissinger” also, but because he was from Bavaria, we can perhaps instead call him the “Franconian Kissinger,” and reserve the label “German Kissinger” for Wilhelm Grewe. So the project began trying to understand Wilhelm Grewe – someone who had a long and distinguished career in West German diplomacy in the 1960s and 1970s, but had begun his career in the Nazi Foreign Office writing legal opinions justifying Nazi empire in Europe that were deeply influenced by Carl Schmitt. Those were my main three protagonists in the beginning—

Schmitt, Morgenthau, and Grewe—and I think of them as a triangle, with Schmitt at the top, and Morgenthau and Grewe in the other corners of the triangle.

But then, as I said, I decided to go back to the 1880s and 1890s, and brought in a whole other cast of characters, including Friedrich Ratzel, the coiner of the phrase “*lebensraum*”; Alfred Mahan, the theorist of “sea power”; and, in the interwar period, Karl Haushofer, the dean of German geopoliticians. And then I trace a whole story about the American ambivalence about “geopolitics,” initially denouncing it as a German science that was inherently evil, and then pivoting very rapidly and deciding that an “American geopolitics” was necessary, and people like Father [Edmund A.] Walsh, the founder of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, exemplified this geopolitical turn. So it is really a genealogical history of a concept and a practice – both the concept of “realism” and some of its practical applications in foreign policy, in Germany and the United States, from the 1880s to the 1980s. It examines a very long time period—longer than most historians are comfortable with—but I felt like I was able to do justice both to the diachronic story of change over a longer period of time, but also with a great deal of depth and contextualization in each of the moments.

**CV:** Well, very good, and thank you so much for that great, very extensive overview of the contents of your book! That is very helpful to our readership and to our audience. So proceeding from the intellectual history that you were used to doing before, I should let our audience know that you previously authored a book on the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and that was eponymously entitled *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*. That was

published by Cambridge University Press in 2010. So I guess I am curious what it was like making that shift from analyzing a single figure in a lot of depth, to doing this project of much greater scope? In what ways, perhaps, does *The Atlantic Realists* compare and contrast with your previous scholarship, including *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*?

**MS:** Yeah, that is a nice question. I have not reflected very much on it, so it is a nice opportunity to do that. I mean, one sort of continuity between my two books is the nature of the sort-of “national context of thought” and the “transnational context of thought.” What I was trying to do in the first book [on Habermas] was to argue [against the grain about] a thinker who, in Germany, is seen as somewhat Americanized, and who has had a very successful career in American critical theory, philosophy, and political science, and thus could be depicted as a strongly “Transatlantic” figure, someone who took onboard a great deal of insights from John Dewey and [the philosophical tradition of] “American Pragmatism.” I argued the opposite: that Habermas needed to be seen, first and foremost, as a German thinker, and not only that, but a *West German* thinker. And the premise there was methodological – that there was a kind of organic connection between the abstract, systematic philosopher and sociologist who writes very challenging theoretical treatises, and the West German intellectual who wrote hundreds of pieces for the newspapers on the issues of the day, from book reviews; to interventions in political debates; to debates on West German foreign policy, the student movement, and university reform. And, in the end, I wanted to show how one thinker navigated what [Pierre] Bourdieu would call an “intellectual field” – that is, when a thinker begins to do their creative work, they

have certain resources available to them, and they also are contending with certain “force-fields,” or the stakes and symbolic coordinates of certain positions, from left to right.

And what I tried to argue was that, as creative an intellectual as Habermas was, he could only create with the materials at hand, just as other great thinkers wove their syntheses from the materials at hand, whether it was Freud in Vienna, or Karl Marx bringing together British, French, and German strands of thought. And so I guess I would say that there was a kind of huge, somewhat obsessive effort on my part to reimagine Habermas from the inside-out, and to understand him as well as I possibly could. And my book was supplemented by some interviews with him, and I was immensely gratified by his reaction to the book, which he felt did represent the connection between his theoretical and political work in a convincing way. So, if the Habermas book took a Transatlantic thinker and put him back in a German context, what I have done with realism is to take a concept that is often seen as foreign and German—*realpolitik* and its alleged descendants—and to show that the story is not just of a movement of ideas from Germany to America, but that many of those original, so-called “German ideas” were actually Transatlantic in nature. For example, *lebensraum*, the idea of “space for living” that became so important in the Third Reich, was coined by a thinker and geographer who had spent a great deal of time in the United States, and saw the great expanse of the American continent as a model for what empires should try to achieve.

So you are right, Casey, that I paint on a much bigger canvas. The first book was really just about one thinker in West

Germany, though I do go past reunification [in 1989-90], from the 1950s to the 1990s. And I think what I was trying to do in [my most recent] book was to expand my range by taking on another national historiography, which is, of course, a risky thing to do, but that is how we grow.

**CV:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that comparison between what you have done, and what you did in this project! I thought that was a fascinating component of your book – realism and *realpolitik*, terminologies that I often conflated before, having an arguably fairly facile understanding of realism. Still, I think that is very common for even international relations (IR) scholars who are actual realists to make realism and *realpolitik* synonymous, as it were. So your critiques of that are a fascinating aspect of your book. To pivot to another question, I am curious – how does the theme of “empire” figure into your work, because that is a major part of the subtitle of your book—“Empire and International Political [Thought]”—so how does that figure into what you are examining regarding the Transatlantic relationship between Germany and the United States, and thinkers in both of those respective places?

**MS:** Right. Well, there has been kind of a robust historiography on the connections between “liberalism [as an IR theory] and empire,” but I think what I was trying to do in this book was to bring out the relationship between “realism and empire” to a greater extent than has been the case. And in a nutshell, I would say, with some risk of oversimplification, that realism has empire in its DNA, and that the mainstream of realism has a huge imperial blind-spot. It has a tendency to naturalize empire under the rubric of “great power” prerogatives, or the inevitability of “power politics,” or the

inevitability of *realpolitik*. And postcolonial scholars have shown us how international relations has really been dominated by Western paradigms, whether it is the universality of the nation-state or the “naturalness” of realism. What I was trying to do in the book was to provincialize realism in the same way that postcolonial scholars [e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty] have tried to provincialize the European historical experience, and to show the imperial dimensions of traditions that have been approached as transcendentally valid. So, in other words, the “history of realism” is usually approached as “the perennial truths of a Western tradition from Thucydides to Morgenthau and [Kenneth] Waltz,” right? And that kind of evacuates the tradition of any kind of historical specificity, let alone the fact that it also does not address that the modern, industrial nation-state is not the same as the [ancient] Greek *polis*, right?

So you have to wonder where do these ideas of these abstractions come from – that the “international system is always anarchic, always has spheres of influence, always has imperial poles,” and so on. Is it possible that that common sense, that transcendental idea that we have, actually emerges in a specific time and place that is more recent, and has less of a universal pedigree than we imagine? And my argument is that late-nineteenth century imperial competition is the [temporal] place where many of our founding concepts that are assembled into the realist paradigm are first tested, deployed, and coined. I think there is a strong case to be made that Mahan is the first theorist of “vital national interests,” and I argue that the way he describes empire as “being in the nature of things,” which is a phrase he actually takes from George Washington, is one of the founding gestures of a whole thought-style and sensibility that we have internalized, encouraging our

students and practitioners to internalize this as the “common sense” of the world. And, like historians of science and other kinds of intellectual history, I am trying to defamiliarize this “common sense” by saying it is not just “free-floating truths” that are as available to the ancient Chinese as they are to the twentieth-century Americans, but rather, that there is something provincial about the North Atlantic imperial experience that became a kind of “hot-house” of these ideas, which then were transmitted through the German emigration, and were taken up into the “American Century” and universalized through the power of American empire, which disseminated “international relations” as a new discipline all over the globe.

**CV:** Very good. Thank you for that! We are probably running a little bit low on time as far as the interview goes, so I guess my final question is how might the subject matter explored in your book relate to current or recent events, or alternately, what might be of relevance to specialists in multiple disciplines, given CENFAD being very interdisciplinary, and your book having a lot of interdisciplinary insights as well? How might it be valuable to historians, but also IR scholars, political scientists, and so on, which you were already starting to allude to with the answer to your last question?

**MS:** I mean, I got into history because I was interested in intellectual history, and I was interested in intellectual history because I was looking for a space in which I could think about philosophy and political thought, not *sub specie aeternitatis*, but rather in the moments when it mattered, and in dialectic with actual historical experience. So my method has always been intellectual history, but what I have done in this book is take a major paradigm in international relations theory, which has strong overlaps with the

realist tradition in political theory (albeit slightly different than the realist tradition in international relations theory), and I have tried to give a genealogical account that will enable self-reflection on these paradigms. Now that is not to say that IR theorists have not been self-reflective before, but I think that there is a certain amount of exhaustion with “camps” and “-isms” in IR theory itself. And therefore, my genealogy may help people.

What I am trying to do in the book is not to tar “realism” so that we all become “liberal internationalists.” I am looking for something beyond “realism” and “liberal internationalism.” I think my account will speak to “constructivists,” because I have a great deal to say about the imagination of what it means to be a “great power,” and what it means to be a “power of the first rank.” That is an imaginary, a kind of idea or image. That is a construction of “power politics,” as a famous constructivist [Alexander Wendt] put it, that “anarchy is what states make of it.” So “power politics” is not natural, but a construct. Of course, there is “hard power,” but power is not a constant in history – it changes. And both the “nature of power” and the “nature of the prerogatives of power” are ideas. How we think about international affairs shapes our practice, so I think intellectual history is not just relevant, but vital for shaping practice.

Now, with regard to current events, and I will just be quick, what we see today in Ukraine is Russian imperialism, and I think those who wanted to believe that Russia is simply a rational actor with legitimate security interests and a legitimate “sphere of influence” – I think I have been sorely disappointed by the strongly ideological nature of this imperial invasion. So not all realism can be tarred with the brush of being “soft on imperialism.” That would be a great

mistake, and John Mearsheimer has unfortunately been calumniated very unfairly and slandered for being some kind of apologist. He is not – he is trying to explain Russia, not to justify it. And yet, I do think that realism has a normative deficit. It does not allow us to proclaim self-determination and the pursuit of anti-imperialism as vigorously as I would like. So I am looking for a philosophy that can critique the imperialism of realists, but also the imperialism of liberal internationalists.

**CV:** Well, thank you for answering all of those questions and agreeing to this interview! So, for our audience, that was Dr. Matthew Specter, discussing his book *The Atlantic Realists*, published this year, which I would encourage anyone and everyone to acquire a copy of. It makes for great reading —

**MS:** — In paperback! —

**CV:** — Yes, available in paperback as well!