

Review – The Atlantic Realists

Written by Felix Rösch

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FELIX RÖSCH, FEB 5 2023

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

By Matthew Specter

Stanford University Press, 2022

With *The Atlantic Realists*, Matthew Specter makes an important contribution to the history of International Relations as an academic discipline that we are yet to understand in its full complexity. In this story, the role of German-speaking scholars, many of whom were forced to emigrate with the rise of fascism in Central Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, and their interconnections with American scholarship should not be underestimated, as previous contributions (Shilliam 2009; Rösch 2014; Greenberg 2015) have established.

Looking back at their mid-twentieth century debates, we like to refer to many of the protagonists of this time, such as John Herz, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr, as realists. In fact, even a younger generation of scholars like Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer are called realists. At least, this is what they refer to themselves. It is in this context that Specter's book provides a unique new perspective. Not only does he go beyond this generation of intellectuals and study the interrelations between German and American scholars since the end of the nineteenth century, providing a more comprehensive picture of the realist tradition, but he also furthers our understanding of the crucial period between the 1930s and 1950s.

In doing so, Specter does not provide an uncritical hagiography. Far from it. Rather, in his own words, these Atlantic realists "mistook a Western tradition for a universal one" (p.7). This not only affected academic circles but had implications for international politics in the twentieth century, as these American and German intellectuals – Specter studied the works of Morgenthau, Wilhelm Grewe, Friedrich Ratzel, Paul Reinsch, Nicholas Spykman, Karl Haushofer, Carl Schmitt and many more – furnished foreign policy-makers with the tools to justify their imperial ambitions. In a recent piece for *Dissent*, Specter (2022, p.71; italics in the original) encapsulated his point by writing that there is a "larger story of realism's imperial investments. Realism was not born in the 1930s but the 1880s and '90s, a period when both the terms 'geopolitics' and *Lebensraum* (living space) were first coined."

The Atlantic Realists is strongest when Specter discusses the work of German scholars that so far have received relatively little attention in English-speaking International Relations, most notably the mentioned Grewe but also Ernst-Otto Czempiel and Hans-Peter Schwarz. Grewe was one of these career bureaucrats-cum-scholars who managed to have a seamless transition from the Third Reich to the *Bundesrepublik*. Having been appointed to a chair in jurisprudence in 1943, he kept his position after the end of the Second World War. Later, Grewe became a diplomat for the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he advised on what became known as the Hallstein Doctrine. He concluded his career as ambassador to the United States and later Japan.

Others with an even more remarkable career, not discussed by Specter, were Hans Globke and Kurt Georg Kiesinger. Globke co-authored the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws and later became the Chief of Staff of the Chancellery for Konrad Adenauer. Kiesinger was another who liked to stay close to the "kitchens of power", to borrow a term from Stanley Hoffmann (1977, p.49). A member of the NSDAP since 1933, he was elected the third chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1966, succeeding Ludwig Erhard. It took the bravery of a young

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woman, Beate Klarsfeld, to publicly shame enablers of the Nazi regime like Kiesinger by slapping him into the face at meeting of the Christian Democrats in 1968. Others like Grewe were never publicly held accountable. Quite the contrary, they received even the highest German orders (p.91). Czempiel and Schwarz were of a later generation. At the end of the war, both were still adolescents and only Czempiel was conscripted as a *Flakhelfer* in the final months of the war.

Specter has chosen the scholars for his study well. This is because they represent the entire political spectrum. This allows Specter to demonstrate how, with their help, American scholars (and returning émigré scholars like Ernst Fraenkel and Arnold Bergstraesser) reintroduced International Relations and political science at large as a *Demokratiewissenschaft* to German academia, how this younger generation of German scholars was informed by the United States, and how they in turn had an impact on American International Relations. While Czempiel, having been married to a social-democratic member of the German parliament, leaned more to the centre-left, Schwarz was heavily involved in intellectual circles close to the Christian Democrats and served as a member of the board of directors for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for many years. Czempiel became one of the most well-known peace studies scholars in Germany. He was a co-founder of the *Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* (Peace Research Institute) in Frankfurt, one of the most important German International Relations think tanks. Schwarz, by contrast, made his name by studying life and work of important conservative politicians like Adenauer and Helmut Kohl. For German International Relations, his most important contribution was to edit the handbook of German foreign policy, in which he highlighted the interconnection of domestic and foreign policies.

In studying this entire intellectual spectrum since the late nineteenth century, ranging from Nazi forerunners, sympathisers, and enablers to scholars being critical to fascism and imperialism, Specter provides a compelling, comprehensive study on how scholars on both sides of the Atlantic informed each other and how they contributed one way or another to the creation of a Western imperialist worldview in the twentieth century.

Despite its undisputable merits, Specter's book also has its shortcomings and this relates to the very notion of realism. Were all of the scholars discussed in the book realists? If so what realism are we talking about? As Hartmut Behr and Xander Kirke (2014) showed in a contribution to *E-International Relations*, if we continue to narrate the "tale of a 'realism'" in International Relations, we risk perpetuating a narrative brought forward by neo-realists, namely that they are a continuation of a thought tradition and that they have managed to translate the thought of scholars like Morgenthau into a science. Morgenthau, however, was critical of positivism as well as the scientification of academia and life in general. This critique runs through his entire oeuvre from the very first writings in Germany and Switzerland to his very last contributions in the late 1970s. This explains why the first part of *Science: Servant or Master?* (1972) is a barely altered translation of a German manuscript that Morgenthau wrote in 1934. Of course, as Specter (p.140) also writes, Morgenthau did a good job in concealing how much his thought in the United States was informed by his early work in Europe (Rösch 2020). Hence, would it not have been better to avoid labelling them altogether and excavate their intellectual and personal interconnections as an assemblage, field, or network?

As I elaborated in more detail recently elsewhere (Rösch 2022), seeing Morgenthau in intellectual agreement with Schmitt (or Grewe) is also problematic, as there is little historical evidence for it. Certainly, Morgenthau engaged with the work of Schmitt, like most *Staatsrechtler* at that time. Schmitt was a senior figure in Weimar Republic jurisprudence and a gatekeeper who could make or break careers of young scholars. Having to engage with his work, however, does not mean that Morgenthau would have been in agreement with his work. As Specter quotes as well, after having met Schmitt (to my knowledge, the only time in his life), Morgenthau considered him to be the "most evil man alive" (p.141). To my knowledge, there is just one further reference to Schmitt in a letter to Hannah Arendt in his archive at the Library of Congress, in which Morgenthau complains how shoddy Schmitt's work is. With Grewe, there is no evidence, as Specter (p.202) acknowledges, that they ever contacted or met each other. And we might ask, why would there be? Why should someone, who had to flee from Nazi Germany and then from Europe to save his life, find intellectual stimulation in people that actively supported this regime? Morgenthau was no apologist of power politics but someone who early on criticised what we would call today a climate of toxic masculinity in Germany for having contributed to the outbreak of the First World War, who criticised the squandering of natural resources and the impact on the environment, and who was not convinced about Western development aid, as it kept former colonies in dependency.

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A similar point can be made about Karl Haushofer. Treating him as an intellectual stimulus for Nazi ideology or aggressive imperial power politics overestimates contingencies of life and does not provide a comprehensive picture of his work. Already prior to the Second World War, Haushofer distanced himself from the Nazi regime and later was questioned by the Gestapo after Rudolf Heß, his former student, fled to the United Kingdom in 1941. After the 20 July plot in 1944, he was imprisoned and his son Albrecht was killed by the SS for having been a co-conspirator. As particularly scholarship that engaged with his work on Japan demonstrated (Watanabe 2019), Haushofer's thoughts on space highlighted the spatial conditionality of the state and focused on the relations that brought this space into existence. In fact, Haushofer's work encouraged scholars in East Asia to think beyond a Western dominated international order based on the nation-state.

Having said that, Specter's *The Atlantic Realists* is an invaluable, thought-provoking addition to the history of International Relations and sheds further lights on the debates that made this discipline. Readers will learn a great deal about American-German intellectual relations since the end of the nineteenth century and how they shaped International Relations. More of this kind of work is needed.

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