Fear and Freud in Politics: Critical Notes on Mearsheimer's Structural Realism

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/04/fear-and-freud-in-politics-critical-notes-on-mearsheimers-structural-realism/

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Given neorealism's standing or self-image as a structural International Relations (IR) theory whereby anarchy, not people or regime types, explains state behaviour in world politics (Mearsheimer 2001), it is remarkable that in his latest large-scale assault on political liberalism in foreign affairs, John Mearsheimer (2018: 14) presents his 'own thinking about human nature and politics'. And what is even more surprising is that, in doing so, he locates fear on all three levels of analysis: as a powerful factor in individual life, social groups and the international system.

My goal in this chapter is to explain and challenge, by utilising Freudian psychoanalysis as a methodological backdrop, each of these images of fear as Mearsheimer presents them, and to outline an alternative position of a structurationist type of mutual fear that can be derived from the minds of human agents, albeit without reducing the notion of Freudian fear to some kind of states-as-a-person analogy. Here, my argument against the notion of Mearsheimer's human nature of fear is this: it is too idealistic, superficial and, obviously, ideologically biased in favour of the status quo.

Yet before we get to the critical Freudian analysis of what Mearsheimer thinks of *You* and *Me*, and why he thinks that we so profoundly fear *Them*, I should begin this opinion piece with two disclaimers. The most important one is that, if pressed, I would squarely place myself in Freud's camp. That is, while the Freud Wars continue to rage on, are unlikely to end soon as he proves to be one of the most significant, yet contested, theorists of the human mind, sceptics might want to read up on the fact that recent studies in affective neurosciences and neurobiology have backed much of the stuff for which Freud had to use his couch in the now world-famous Viennese Berggasse 19 apartment (see Solms 2018).

As for the second methodological disclaimer, I should also mention here that in terms of positive and normative IR theory and political methodology, my work adopts a Classical approach (Bull 1966), and is much inspired by Hans Kelsen's theory of law, the state and international legal order. That is to say: human nature does not tell us what is right and wrong because *ought* can never be derived from *is*, but being brave about libidinal impulses, facing the *id* head-on, good or bad, sharpens our craft to think and rethink, day in, day out, what is really possible in individual and political life (Schuett 2021). Or as Ken Booth (2007: 241) put it, 'Freud showed us how radical such revisions might be.'

Now, to turn to the first image of Mearsheimer's concept of fear, critics of neorealist logic might be pleased to finally get to hear, directly from him, what has long been suspected. Like any other kind of political and IR theory, neorealism's offensive variant has an Achilles' heel, in that it is built on assumptions about human nature, which tend to be kept in an undisclosed part of the theory and thus must be uncovered, most notably because this is one way of doing ideology critique (Schuett 2010). The fact that, in *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, Mearsheimer (2018: 14) lays out his political thinking and criticism of liberalism by reference to 'those attributes that are common to all people' does not, however, help his case. In fact, it diminishes it, and I wonder how he can possibly explain how he gets from a somewhat naïve and idealistic notion of human nature to the kind of conservative–nationalistic struggle for power in a structural setting of international anarchy.

If it really were true that fear is—merely—the function of some kind of rationalistic neo-Hobbesian account of individual and group life whereby we all wish to escape the state of nature, it would not be immediately clear why he can be so certain that nation-states 'are so obsessed with self-determination' and why, therefore, there 'is not going to be a world state anytime soon' (Mearsheimer 2018: 150). For what he is really saying seems to be this: although we all tend to be quite reasonable, we all fear for our own survival because we cannot be certain whether, in the struggle over the fundamental principles and values of our living-together, things might turn viciously violent or even deadly. From a Freudian standpoint, that is not wrong; but the problem of fear as one of the supreme emotional and motivational driving forces of *You* and *Me*—leading to a problematic *Us* vs. *Them* structure in international life—is much bigger or far worse than Mearsheimer seems to realise.

When I say that I find Mearsheimer's position on the human nature of fear startlingly idealistic, it is because what we have learned from Freud (1916–17, 1923, 1926, 1933) is not only that fear is ever-present in the mental apparatus, but also that it is located deep down in each and every one of us. It is so very innate, and there is so little chance of escaping from our fears (though we are not trapped either, of which more later) that one might truthfully say: we are a fearful lot. To say that we fear each other and worry about our survival is one thing; it is quite another to argue that a more realistic take on fear would have us recognise that our fears are linked to external threats, and emanate from within. The former type of fear, so-called 'realistic anxiety', is a manifestation of the instinct of self-preservation, and gives us a normal yet unpleasant feeling when facing dangers in the world around us. The latter type of fear, however, is hidden deep down in the unconscious: there is fear of our own libidinal impulses, a 'neurotic anxiety', when the *ego* has to battle it out to keep the *id* at bay; and then there is the equally lasting fear of societal repression, a 'moral anxiety', when the *ego* is in conflict with what the *super-ego* wants us to do in terms of internalised cultural norms, mores and rules. While Mearsheimer is right in his insistence that security is key in life, he gets it wrong when he expresses his belief that fear for one's own survival is the one psychological base from which everything social and political can be deduced.

Fear, according to Freud (1930), signals danger: we fear physiological decay, illness and death; we fear the destructive forces of Nature; and—of course—we fear *Us*. That is, we fear the aggressive side in each and every one of us (violence), and we fear the real antagonism inherent in all rule and authority in that what is willed by *You* is rarely what is willed by *Me* (power). All this may appear to be way beyond the concerns of any type of structural IR theorising, yet I would argue that these kinds of assumptions about the human nature of fear are, or may very well be, central for future attempts to repair what is neorealism's core theoretical problem: that this kind of political realism lacks a micro-foundation, a substantiated theory of human nature and fear that would allow neorealists to generate political units—and, I would add, political structures such as international anarchy—from the minds of human agents (see Fischer 1996). In fact, this is what Mearsheimer (2018: 14–44) seems to have been trying to do, because in the aptly titled chapter 'Human Nature and Politics', he gets real (quite rightly—at least to me, anyway) about the importance of 'micro-foundations' for all political and IR theory. All this is a far cry from*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), to be sure, where human nature is seen as a distant relic from the pre-behavioural past, and we might commend him for bringing human nature back in, which is important: to have all the philosophical assumptions of one's political thinking out there for everyone to see and judge.

Yet Mearsheimer—as I see it—remains too superficial, by which I mean that although his discussion of human nature and fear is informative and, as ever, accessible to the interested reader, it falls short on actually explaining how human nature really relates to liberalism, nationalism and structural realism—and above all, how the three images of fear relate to one another. In essence, what he gives us is a kind of unsubstantiated narrative of a states-as-person analogy whereby fear is, actually, a by-product, not the centre, of individual and collective life. As Mearsheimer (2018: 15) puts it: 'That lurking possibility of violence, which leads individuals to fear each other and worry about their survival, applies to relations among societies as well as among individuals.' While he is right to point out that 'human beings are profoundly social beings' (15), we are left wondering why fear between different political communities would necessarily lead to a degree of mutual fear so high that international anarchy becomes an almost natural ordering principle in world politics.

Little wonder, then, that in the emotional and motivational factor of fear—if we were to follow Freud (1930, 1939)—we find an explanation as to why it makes perfect sense for *You* and *Me* not to go it alone, but to enter political

community, even if that means that all of us have to cut back on the *id*. Freud does not buy into the idea of a Rousseauian noble savage, enjoying life in an uncorrupted state of nature. That we want to reduce our existential fears—the realistic, neurotic and moral ones—comes at a great cost, however: groupism becomes a most central part or fact of the human condition. And in Freud's analysis of the mental apparatus, groups are, at one and the same time the real and moral reference points for security, traded for instinctual renunciation, as much as the vehicles for instinctual satisfaction vis-à-vis *Them*. This is all thorny, and it gets messy fast. We have fear and we instil fear—that much has been clear since Thucydides' day, when terrified Spartans 'had' to fight traumatised Athenians.

The real tragedy, not Mearsheimer's superficial one at a pseudo-structural level, is this, then: driven as human nature is by the sensations of fear and the *id*, and given that the dynamics of all group formation are so intimately intertwined with how *You* and *Me* are trying to really reduce fear, the universality of groupism in time and space is so very much a rational phenomenon, as much as it is, to let Freud (1921: 143) speak for himself, 'an inherited deposit from the phylogenesis of the human libido'. As a consequence, we end up with political communities that are, by innate design, deeply conflictual: within and without. Fear makes us huddle us together, and so does the *id*: we want to survive, and have the pleasure of love (*Eros*). Where this explosive combination leads us is clear. Where there is so much real and psychological pressure, rooted in fear and *Eros*, to suppress most instinctual gratification in the group, our bundle of fear and our aggressive drives, *Thanatos*, finds real outlets in the form of power projection, violence and war—directed at *Them* (Freud 1920, 1930).

Of course, unlike the case of Mearsheimer, to an earlier generation of political realists, all of this Freudian line of psychoanalytical and political thinking has more or less been a core of the reasoning behind a 'real' political realism. What so-called classical realists like Hans Morgenthau and John Herz, along with Reinhold Niebuhr, E. H. Carr, Walter Lippmann and George F. Kennan, have shared is this: there is an almost existential necessity, at least to some degree, for us to have our instinctual desires repressed at home; and of course, there is a need to constantly rethink how much repression is really necessary (the classical restatement is Marcuse 1955). But what we always have to reckon with is the fact that a sizeable number of *Us* will project our thwarted libidinal impulses, notably our seeking of the greatest possible share of power, pleasure and prestige, upon our nation. That is, people will identify with the leader of a nation, and then this very national leader—idealised as a powerful father (or mother)—functions as the final vent for the aggressive side of the *id*; there, on the international scene, we seek to act it all out, and this creates fear, and ever more mutual fear (Freud 1921, 1930; Schuett 2010).

All of this sounds terribly archaic and authoritarian, elitist and masculine (that Freud is not the enemy, see Mitchell 1974). But then, from this Freudian perspective, it is possible to explain the main structural feature of neorealism's theory of world politics—anarchy—not by exploring human nature in a superficial way, but by really looking at the mental apparatus: that is, Freud's (1923) theory of the tripartite mind (*id*, *ego*, *super-ego*). All this, then, allows us to restate what a 'real' political realism might look like; and I see, at least here, two facets.

First, fear is both a product of international anarchy, and fear makes—and remakes—that type of structure at the third level of analysis, or third image, through a pattern of behaviour that, most notably, Morgenthau and Herz feared for its distorting effects on foreign-policy making in terms of misperceptions spiralling out of control, and the tragedy of self-fulfilling prophecies. In short, Freudian fear, as a powerful emotional and motivational factor at the individual level of psychology, creates deep structures at the second level in terms of a sociology of groups, and then also at the third level, which is the structural force of international anarchy as in third-image IR theories; it is these structures, then, that co-determine the thought and behaviour of states and people living under these conditions.

To turn to the second facet of what makes a 'real' political realism (Booth 1991; Schuett and Hollingworth 2018), there is the question of whether we are trapped in a vicious circle of fear and flag, and nationalism and war, as a structural phenomenon? Mearsheimer (2018: 220) seems to think so: a realist-based foreign policy of restraint can ameliorate the 'folly' of a liberal IR theory put into practice, but all things considered, he argues, 'states have little choice but to compete for power, which can be a ruthless and bloody business'. To this he adds, just to make sure: 'Realism does not inspire a hopeful outlook for the future.' Surely, political realism has never been 'for grandiose plans to transform international relations' (Lieber 2009: 28), yet there is little reason why we possibly should perpetuate the (pseudo-)realist myth that, in political and international life, there is no alternative—for, as Ken Booth

(2014) puts it so neatly and cleanly, 'there invariably is'.

Now, my central mission in this chapter has been to utilise Freudian psychoanalytical theory as a methodological background to expound the concept of fear in world politics. To showcase what Freud's human nature of fear might look like in IR theory, and what we might do with it, I have sought to challenge Mearsheimer's recent interpretation of human nature, and the role of fear, in offensive neorealism's political thinking. Although I truly believe that turning his mind to what is civilisation's oldest problems—*You* and *Me, Us* vs. *Them*—is really what makes a classic political and IR theorist, such as Mearsheimer is, I must say that I am not convinced of his realism's philosophical assumptions, or micro-foundation. As I have sought to show, his human nature of fear not only is underdeveloped and naïve, or idealistic, it also is not substantiated; nor does Mearsheimer—as one would expect of a structural IR theorist—present us with any kind of deductive generation of political structures, national and international, from the actions of (fearful) people.

Freud might help political realism, but then he cannot really, perhaps at least not with respect to this type of offensive realism that Mearsheimer promotes in the theory and practice of world politics. On the one hand, Freud's orthodox theory of the mind is able to derive the concepts of political community and international anarchy from what is quite a realistic psychoanalytical individual and social psychology in a structurationist type of ontology. On the other hand, even if you take Freud at his worst—he notoriously said once, 'I have found little that is "good" about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash' (quoted in Schuett 2010: 154)—one could not use, or appropriate, him for what is Mearsheimer's decidedly pessimistic, if not also quite deterministic, status quo-biased (pseudo)-realism. Of course, we may not be as good as some would have us believe, but then, as Freud kept pointing out, we are not necessarily the slaves of our passions either; hence, all social and political life is not the realm of causality or Nature, but, rather, the realm of normativity and contingency. That is to say: in the perennial struggle between what human agency might 'allow' and what structural forces might 'dictate', there is much space for *the political*: the struggle for power and peace that can go many, many ways—to the good, the bad and the ugly.

From what we have seen in Mearsheimer's take on human nature and fear, I, for one, am left with a kind of unease that since he does not explain the real roots of his offensive realism, his political and IR theorising is more ideological than analytical. And in turn, what we can take away from Freud is a kind of Freudian realism of fear that sees much more potential for progress and change in world politics than neorealists care to accept. What we are left with, here in this chapter, is Freud's politics and methodology. Work unceasingly towards getting rid of anarchy, and try to make the world safe for a kind of international law with teeth. As a perfect kind of orthodox Stoicism, Freud really tells us this for along the way: accept fear, but never give in to the emotion, and instead, deal with each and every situation of danger, real or imagined, on the basis of a 'cool appraisal of one's own strength' (Freud 1916-17: 341).

Freud need not deserve his current reputation as one of the declining stars of a crude psychologism, retaining only some utility for the project of a psychoanalytical IR theory or leadership studies at the first and second levels of analysis (Volkan 2020). What I would like to suggest is Freud's continued relevance for the project of ideology critique with regard to assumptions about human nature—and what is more, that we can use Freudian psychoanalytical theory as one possible way to look at how structures in world politics, such as international anarchy on the third level of analysis, can be explained, and tested for their resilience, on the basis of a very shrewd appreciation of the hyper-dynamic interplay of social structures and human agency.

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