

A Bestiary of International Politics Lies

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John Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie. The Truth About Lying in International Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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From Machiavelli until nowadays, lying has been understood as a common solution when dealing with political facts. The shrewder the lie, the more effective the politics. When such a statement becomes a truism, it is not worth reflecting upon it, you take it as it is. Yet, who would have thought that lying in politics remains a questionable issue? In January 2011, the international relations editorial market was enriched with an interesting and challenging book written by the well-known scholar John Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie. The Truth About Lying in International Relations*.

R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor and Co-director of Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago, John Mearsheimer revealed a powerful voice in the neorealist studies of international politics. His other three books, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (co-written with Stephen Walt) (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), *Conventional Deterrence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), as well as his articles published in various important journals like *International Relations*, *Foreign Policy*, *European Political Science*, and so on, reflect

Mearsheimer's visibility and relevance in the studies of world politics.

In the 160 pages of the book, organized in nine chapters, preface, introduction, notes and index, the author attempts to reveal the signification of lying, the circumstances which determine it and its consequences on political relations. The usual assumption regarding politics, generally, and international politics, particularly, is that lying represents a habit among leaders. In this respect, Mearsheimer realizes a proper *ouverture* of the play by revealing the implications of President Bush's reactions after 9/11. As a matter of fact, the reports on the Iraq intervention asserted that Hussein had claimed he had had weapons of mass destruction and he would have used them. But, when intervening in Iraq, the Americans discovered that he had been bluffing all along the '90s. In fact, the report was lying and not Hussein, who declared several times that there were no weapons of mass destruction in his country. In Mearsheimer's opinion, the Bush administration told four lies (on the existence of evidences regarding the presence of weapons, Hussein's collaboration with Osama bin Laden, Hussein's implication in the September 11 attacks, the United States' determination to peacefully settle the disagreements with Hussein, when in fact the plans to attack Iraq were already made). In conclusion, the United States had lied and Iraq had told the truth. This recent international situation represents the reflection on how a lie can be used in order to influence the public opinion and, more exactly, how a lie quashes a truth.

Even though the former situation is understood as a classic case of telling a lie (from Bush's perspective), Mearsheimer brings in the verdict that lying in international matters is not as frequent as lying with national implications only. This statement is based on two main arguments which proclaim, firstly, that there are a few lies in international relations and secondly, that democracies are more likely to lie to their own people regarding external policies.

In politics as in every-day life, lying involves internal and external consequences, determined or undetermined results and despite the moral judgment, lying is not that harmful after

all. International lying is not necessarily misconduct; in fact, it is often thought to be clever, necessary, and even virtuous in some circumstances. Still, the paradox is that even though lying in international relations is not exactly a habit, it is regarded as indispensable to political realities. In addition, the international lies are almost any time easy to forgive because their invocation is considered to be in the public interest and for the maintaining of the stability of one state. International lies are forgettable because the international system is anarchic. Mearsheimer points out the fact that if something happens to a state, there is no one who could help it. By being aware of this situation, leaders use lying as a strategy for providing the safety of their country.

In the national system, telling a lie is punishable because there is a coercive force legitimated to correct any deviation from norms. The national system is therefore hierarchic and lying, even spreading it, should be punished because the use of this kind of strategies determines a perpetual lack of confidence between people.

Everybody lies in all kind of situations and from different reasons. As a matter of fact, telling lies is as usual as telling the truth concerning certain facts or events. Mearsheimer is mostly concerned about the high political lies told by leaders of developed states, understood as strategic lies (as opposed to the selfish lies) because they do not regard the personal benefit of those who use them, but the public national or international interests.

By questioning the meanings of lying, Mearsheimer admits that together with concealment and spinning, it is submitted to deception. Deception manifests itself as the consequences of preventing the other from finding the true side of facts, while lying, submitted to deception, is “when a person makes a statement that he knows or suspects to be false in the hope that others will think it is true. A lie is a positive action designed to deceive the target audience” (Mearsheimer 2011, 16). The aim of lying is to give a false image of the truth and it is the result of making-up facts or the combination of true elements in order to take one away from the true side of facts, in order to introduce the untrue, the false conclusion.

Mearsheimer avoids giving a so-called metaphysical answer, even though the question is one of a kind. In fact, he gives a procedural definition of lying, understanding it from a utilitarian point of view. This means that lying is good if it helps to overcome some social or political situations. Even if the intentions were good, their internal or external consequences are unfortunately not always positive. In this sense, the author operates with two sets of distinctions: a) lies that states tell each other and lies that leaders tell to their own publics; b) strategic lies and personal or corrupt lies. The four resultant types of lies can be mixed-up, but not all are acceptable. De facto, only the strategic lies and those between states can involve positive issues. Mearsheimer identifies seven kinds of lies, classified on the criteria of their specific purposes: inter-states lies, fearmongering, strategic cover-ups, nationalist mythmaking, liberal lies, social imperialism and ignoble cover-ups. Mearsheimer analyzes each one of these seven categories for their answer to two important questions: “why do states lie each other?” and “when do they lie to each other?”.

Firstly, the goals of inter-state lies are to gain a strategic advantage and to cut off the other’s chances of gaining similar advantages. Secondly, fearmongering presupposes increasing the intensity of a specific aspect in order to caution the population against a certain danger, by using fear and panic. Thirdly, strategic cover-ups hide some negative or destabilizing facts, under the false pretense of protecting the national interests. Fourthly, nationalist myths refer to the stigmatization of the other (be it a group or even a state) and the consolidation of the cohesion between citizens. This sort of lying appeals to national symbols and historic (often distortional) facts as to legitimate the policies of the moment. Fifthly, liberal lies are those made up to dissimulate the behavior of one state which breaks the well-accepted norms and the international law. Sixthly, social imperialism means lying to its own citizens with respect to other states; in other words, distracting them with international insignificant facts as to forget the unsatisfying domestic realities. Seventhly, ignoble cover-ups are the most condemnable because by such methods the leaders’ severe errors are hidden in their own benefits.

Despite identifying seven types of lies, only the first five are used in the name of national interest. This is the reason why Mearsheimer further neglects the two last ones. He remains consistent as he had already announced, in concentrating on strategic lies and not on the selfish ones. His concern focuses on the strategic lies because they are politically legitimate, as their aim is to determine positive consequences on the state. In fact, it is their intention which matters most, and not their consequences. In an analytical manner, Mearsheimer attempts to identify the main features of lying in international politics: types of international lies, reasons why leaders lie, what are the circumstances and the costs? The lesson that Mearsheimer tries to teach us is: lie only when it is absolutely necessary; you can never know its consequences beforehand – a necessary truism. Furthermore, taking into account the weight of the numerous cases of lying in the American presidential experience, I think that Mearsheimer's particular bet is to convince the American leaders to lie less.

After presenting the relevant systemic parts of the book, it is necessary to underline Mearsheimer extreme attention for clearness and coherence. His need of such a well-organized attempt is revealed by this fragment at the beginning in which he announces: “this book is comprised of nine chapters. I start by defining lying and the other two forms of deception: concealment and spinning. The subsequent chapter lays out the inventory of international lies. I distinguish between strategic lies and selfish lies, and explain why the focus is on the former kind. In the next five chapters, I look in detail at each of the different kinds of strategic lies. I consider the logic behind each type and when it is more or less likely to occur. In the penultimate chapter, I consider the potential pitfalls of international lying. I assess which kinds of lies are most likely to backfire and undermine a state's foreign policy and which are most likely to cause damage on the home front. I conclude with a brief discussion of what all of this means for American foreign policy and the United States more generally” (Mearsheimer 2011, 14).

Unfortunately, the September 11 events in United States – the example from the beginning of the book – is not, in

my opinion, a simple state of lies. In fact, it is a matter of relevance because what is a lie may prove to be important, and a truth may prove to be insignificant. The famous discourse of Donald Rumsfeld, former United States Secretary of Defense, on the same occasion, marks out this statement: “There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know”.

After turning the last page of the book, the impression of any reader might be that in international relations, lying has almost always negative effects. But what about the truth? What about the states with an official politics of lying (the case of genocidal politics in Nazi Germany hidden from the other states)? Which are the determined boundaries between lying and telling the truth? Can political realities be settled on the path of the truth and what are the costs? In this respect, lying and telling the truth should be done only when necessary. As two sides of the same coin, truth and lie function as conjectural moral instances. Beware of lying! Beware of the truth!

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