

Game of Thrones as Theory

It's Not as Realist as It Seems -- And That's Good

By Charli Carpenter

Commentary by foreign policy analysts on the first season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* stressed its supposed underlying theme of political realism. Thus **one writer** claimed that the TV show and the George R.R. Martin novels on which it is based "clearly demonstrate the power of might over right," and **another** agreed: "In this kind of harsh relative gains world, *realpolitik* should be the expected pattern of behavior." But a closer look of *Game of Thrones* suggests a different take.

To be sure, life in Westeros is poor, nasty, brutish and short, and Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and David Benioff and D.B. Weiss' television program are laced with Hobbesian metaphors, Machiavellian intrigues, and Carr-like calculations of power. But the deeper message is that realism alone is unsatisfying and unsuccessful -- that leaders disregard ethical norms, the needs of their small-folk, and the natural world at their own peril. Jockeying for power by self-interested actors produces not a stable balance but suboptimal chaos; gamesmanship and the pursuit of short-term objectives distracts players from the truly pressing issues of human survival and stability.

On the surface, ethical norms and honor receive short shrift in the series. Norms -- collective beliefs about the proper behavior of actors -- are sometimes invoked, but usually only to foreshadow or bemoan their violation. [Spoiler Alert] Thus the first book, and season, begins with Ned Stark explaining to his son the proper rules governing executions -- and ends with Stark being executed improperly for his naiveté. But much of the characters' behavior is in fact rule-bound: Catelyn could not have captured Tyrion without her father's banner-men following norms of fealty, and Tyrion could not have escaped her grasp had norms of the "kings' justice" not trumped Lysa's desire for an execution (and Catelyn's desire to retain a hostage). Even powerful characters sometimes follow rules to their own short-term detriment and frustration.

Social relations in Westeros are sustained as much through bread-breaking rituals, arranged marriages, and promise-keeping as through backstabbing and treachery, and the power of such rules is only highlighted by their occasional breach. Lords and kings no less than oath-breakers are punished for violating custom and agreement -- either explicitly or through the inability to convert their hard power into material successes. Contrary to Cersei's assertion, kings cannot always "do as they like": Ned and the chivalry he represented may appear to have been the loser at the end of book and season one, but Joffrey's disregard for basic standards of justice will return to haunt him as it did his predecessors. The true moral of the story is that when good rules are disregarded, disorder and ruin follow -- just as Thucydides' story of Melos, **some argue**, when paired with his description of Pericles' death and Athens' fall, is meant to suggest that the gains that power achieves without justice cannot endure.

In Westeros, as in our world, norms exert power both by creating incentives for certain behaviors and by defining identities -- which in turn shape people's motivations, interests, and strategies. By following the rules and norms of the Night's Watch, ordinary criminals are reconstituted as protectors of the realm. Distinctive cultural norms surrounding death, sex, cuisine, and travel are what distinguish the Dothraki from Westerosi, not simply ethnicity. Power and norms together are what determine outcomes, in short, and the wisest actors are those who understand how to use both.

Discarding realism's exclusive focus on the powerful, *Game of Thrones* pays attention to all sectors of society, including those at the bottom. Martin uses many plot devices to force viewers to see the world of the elites through the eyes of stewards, prostitutes, bastards, and dwarfs. Even seemingly marginalized characters are forced to reflect on their own relative privilege, as when Tyrion calls Jon out for whining over his illegitimacy and Bran for sulking about his disability when they have been bred in castles.

Perhaps the most marginalized viewpoint in war literature, and political narrative more generally, is that of the enemy itself. Yet in *Game of Thrones*, even the despots, king-slayers, executioners, and slave-traders are humanized and contextualized. As [Adam Serwer notes](#), "Tolkien's monsters are literally monsters ... [but] most of Martin's monsters are people. Just when you've decided to hate them, [Martin] writes a chapter from their perspective, forcing you to consider their point of view." Martin shows how gender, race, class, age, and disability combine to produce multiple gradients and forms of power in Westerosi society, just as much as differences in material capabilities. By mixing things up, moreover, he reminds the audience that these categories are often constructed rather than fixed: the strong and handsome find themselves crippled; princes become slaves; noblewomen turn into stable hands; bastards grow to be commanders.

Indeed, the riddle of power from *Clash of Kings*, highlighted in one of the [trailers for Season 2](#), suggests as much: "In a room sit three great men: a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sell-sword, a little man of common birth, and no great mind. Each of the great ones bids him slay the other two. 'Do it,' says the king, 'for I am your lawful ruler.' 'Do it,' says the priest, 'for I command you in the names of the gods.' 'Do it,' says the rich man, 'and all this gold shall be yours.' So tell me -- who lives and who dies?" The answer from the book -- "that is up to the sell-sword" -- outlines the underacknowledged power of the lower orders. Peasants, infantry, sailors, stewards, camp followers, smiths, millers, and the like are the social foundations on which the elites stand and through whose allegiance they ultimately rise or fall. Today's academic realism has no such sophisticated social theory, whereas alternative, critical approaches put it at the center of their framework.

Perhaps nothing underscores this more than the portrayal of gender relations on the show. Westeros and surrounding lands are of course deeply misogynistic societies, but this hardly makes the show and novels sexist, as [some have claimed](#). Rather, they force the audience to confront the violent reality of feudal gender relations. Martin's in-your-face depictions of debauchery, sexual assault, trafficking, forced marriage, and illegitimacy refute the gendered myth that knights and armies exist to protect women and children, just as they refute the political myth that states exist to protect nations from serious external threats. In standard fantasy, female characters who fail to play along with these myths tend to be punished (compare Eowyn to Arwen in *Lord of the Rings*). Not so in Martin's realm: Sansa, the only character who appears to buy into notions of chivalry, is painted as pitifully naive.

The [stronger female characters](#) of Martin's world are indeed constrained by gender norms, but rather than embody them they chafe at and try to maneuver around their circumstances,

each representing **different feminist ripostes to the gender-blind realist narrative** of statecraft and world politics. Catelyn draws on her maternal power to guide her son's army. Daenerys, buoyed by the soft-power tactics she learned from her handmaid, seizes power in the wake of her husband's death, using it to, among other things, advance a feminist liberation policy in the lands across the Narrow Sea. Cersei uses her beauty and family connections ruthlessly, but constantly risks ensnarement by the very gender scripts she has so cleverly manipulated. Osha the wildling toys with Westerosi class and gender norms in conversations with Theon, then playfully throws them away in favor of a blunt eco-libertarianism. Arya refuses the roles society has set for her as a girl; warriors Brienne and Asha (whose name has been changed for the TV series) follow different paths to power on masculine terms.

Finally, *Game of Thrones* suggests a critique of the myopic focus on national security over the needs of individuals and the collective good -- a theme more consistent with human security doctrine than with classic political realism. Consider the foreign policy of Daenerys, the slave bride turned Bedouin queen of Dothrak. Newly bedragoned, but with husband and child dead, few followers, and no territory, she begins season two with little but soft power, ambition, and a concern for the oppressed. Tribal lords mistrust her, but refugees and former slaves flock to her banner, and her moral standing is crucial to helping her gain increasing power in the lands beyond the Narrow Sea. Daenerys faces hard choices and embodies contradictions, and she ends up grappling with all-too-familiar challenges and limits of humanitarian intervention and liberal imperialism. But she tries to balance the demands of power and principle rather than retreat into cynicism or indifference -- hardly the standard realist response.

Environmental disaster, meanwhile, threatens all even as it is ignored by most. Far from being **an allegory for immigration reform**, the story of the Northern Wall and the forces it holds at bay is about the mistaken belief that industrial civilization can stand against the changing forces of nature. The slogan "Winter is coming" is meant literally as well as metaphorically: planetary forces are moving slowly but inexorably toward climatic catastrophe as the infighting among kings and queens distracts them from the bigger picture. This is a collective action story, with the Night's Watch issuing increasingly desperate alarms yet receiving indifferent shrugs. The wight menace gives the term "human security" a new meaning, presenting Westeros with a common threat against which it might ally, but even so cooperation is difficult. The answer will eventually come from alliances with northern barbarian hordes, fringe populations who are the first victims of environmental change, and with these alliances will come dramatic tradeoffs in political culture, as newcomers bring with them distinct ideas about politics, society, and religion. The argument seems clear: if existing governance structures cannot manage emerging global threats, expect them to evolve or fall by the wayside.

As a foreign policy story, Martin's tale is far less conservative and far more transformative than meets the eye. A parable about the consequences of unchecked *realpolitik*, it does not celebrate power and the powerful but challenges and interrogates them. Society is complex, roles and identities are varied and contingent, and division risks disaster. *Hic sunt dracones* indeed.