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International Anarchy Reconsidered: Hobbes and International Relations

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Abstract: Hobbes has been regarded as a core figure of IR theory by political theorists and international relations scholars. However, against delusive interpretations of his political philosophy, I will reexamine in this essay the notion of international anarchy and the place of it in the Hobbesian corpus, focusing mainly on chapter 13 of *Leviathan.* My point is that both the Realist and Rationalist schools overlook central features of Hobbesian political philosophy and draw a somehow misleading picture of what Hobbes truly said with regard to interstate relations and the state of nature.

Keywords: political realism, rationalist school, international relations, anarchy, state of nature, war, peace

I. Introduction

The tradition of Political Realism has regarded three central figures from the history of political thought as its predecessors. Political Realists claim that the primogenitor

of their school has been Thucydides, while Machiavelli and Hobbes are the genuine continuators of it. In the case of Hobbes, his political doctrines and the famous realist concept of anarchy "often seem virtually synonymous in discussions of international relations", as Michael Williams have rightly observed in his insightful paper[1]. In particular, realists such as E.H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth N. Waltz engaged on a regular basis with the Hobbesian political notions, while one of the most influential scholars in the history of international relations, Martin Wight, regarded Hobbes as a core figure of Political Realism[2].

In the history of international thought, we can detect various traditions that engage with the concept of Hobbesian anarchy as an analytical tool in order to interpret the actions of states, foreign affairs and the international system. While the so-called Hobbesian tradition is already one of the most prominent theories of international politics, Cornelia Navari has rightly stated that Hobbes have been regarded as a theorist of international politics only after Pufendorf: "Whether the is a Hobbesian tradition in international relations is a moot point. Loose talk about states of nature does not constitute a tradition and the only theorist who attempted to develop Hobbes into a theory of international relations was Pufendorf in the later seventeenth century"[3].

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[1] Michael Williams, "Hobbes and International Relations: A Reconsideration", *International Organization,* Spring, 1996, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1996), p. 213.

[2] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, London: Macmillan & CO. LTD, 1946, p. 153. Martin Wight, *International Theory – The Three Traditions*, USA: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1992, p. 31-32. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979, p. 103. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War,* USA: Columbia University Press, 1959, pp. 85, 166. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*, Great Britain: Latimer House Limited, 1947, p. 151. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations,* USA: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, pp. 169, 391, 397.

[3] Cornelia Navari, "Hobbes and the Hobbesian Tradition in International Thought", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1982. p. 207.

There is a controversy, albeit a misleading one, among Realist and Rationalist schools which draw an insufficient picture of Hobbesian doctrines and underestimate central features of his political philosophy. To put it briefly, the former assumes that in Hobbes we find for the first time an utter illustration of the interstate relations as an anarchic condition, which gives rise to a permanent state of war between states devoid of any moral considerations, while the latter contradicts this assumption and supports a more nuanced picture of Hobbes that allows a space for interstate cooperation. However, both the Realist and the Rationalist schools are also divided with regard to Hobbesian anarchy. Firstly, "while classical realists and neorealists locate the source of "Hobbesian anarchy," and the ensuing amorality, either in the nature of human beings or in the nature of the state, structural realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, identify the structure of the interstate system itself as the progenitor of the anarchical condition"[4]. Regarding the Rationalist approaches, whereas the English School has rightly detected the weaknesses of the Realist School, it engaged with the wrong analytical problems, namely the problem of why Hobbes didn't formulate a notion of a global Leviathan. Furthermore, in the absence of a global Leviathan the Rational Choice theory has claimed that cooperation among states is possible only at a minimum level. Both versions of the Rationalist school provided a more nuanced picture of Hobbes. However, they lack explanatory clarity[5]. In order to find out what Hobbes truly said we must return ad fontes and especially in the scandalous chapter 13 of *Leviathan.*

[4] Theodore Christov, "The invention of Hobbesian anarchy", *Journal of International Political Theory*, 2017, p. 4.

[5] For a detailed analysis, see: Theodore Christon, *Before Anarchy: Hobbes and his Critics in Modern International Thought,* USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 106-111.

II. Hobbesian international anarchy

In chapter 13 of *Leviathan* Hobbes provided an insightful, albeit puzzling, description of the state of nature, which he portrayed as a permanent war of all against all (Bellum omnium contra omnes). Actually, Hobbes did assume that the state of nature is a state of war in the absence of a common power which would establish peace and prosperity: "Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man."[6] In this condition men are fully equal, because they are capable of inflicting devastating injuries on one another, even the weakest on the most powerful. From this equality of ability arises the equality of hope and in turn the equality of fear: "and in the way to their end, (*which is principally their own conservation*, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass, that where an invader hath no more to fear, than another man's single power; if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another."[7] As we can observe, human nature is miserable, nasty, fragmented, full of inconveniences and animosity, because men must rest upon their own powers for their preservation. So, in this condition human beings can neither flourish nor create civilization; all that they can hope for is survival. Realists tend to draw an analogue picture of interstate relations from this dark and depressing description at the individual level, assuming that in the absence of a global Leviathan states are in a perpetual war with one another. Instead, I argue that this

[6] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* chapter 13.8. For *Leviathan* I use the text edited by J. C. A. Gaskin, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. For *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* I use the Cambridge edition: Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural & Politic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928.

[7] Ibid, chapter 13.3.

interpretation is sketchy and overlooks the big picture of the Hobbesian argument.

First of all, we must highlight that the state of nature is an ahistorical concept, something akin to a thought experiment, which we cannot empirically detect in the history of mankind. Although history cannot provide us with something similar to the state of nature, Hobbes urged us to look at the relations between states in order to find something similar: "But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours; which is a posture of war."[8] To be sure, Realists are not at all wrong in assuming that interstate relations are the carbon copy of the natural condition but, as we stated above, this picture is somewhat misleading and flawed. Hobbes elaborated on his thought, elucidating that interstate relations might be an analogous condition of the state of nature, namely full of hostility and suspicion, but must be regarded on a more evolved phase than sheer primitivism: "But because they uphold thereby, the Industry of their subjects; there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the liberty of particular men"[9]. Therefore, international arena is not so brutish and miserable as the natural condition of men, since people have gathered together under a common power, the Sovereign, and as a result they have created civilization, they conduct with each other through industry, communicating their new ideas, thoughts and experiences. So is the case with all sovereign states.

On the contrary, industry is absent from the state of nature and along with it human flourishing is absent too: "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what

[8] Ibid, chapter 13.12.
[9] Ibid, chapter 13.12.

their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[10]

Chapter 13 is indeed an interesting and illuminating part of *Leviathan*, since it elucidates two interpretative problems of Hobbesian political philosophy. Firstly, it clarifies why there is no need of a global Leviathan, a theoretical problem the English School have engaged with, and, secondly, it accentuates that the sovereigns create a more civilized space among them than individual level. So, the state of nature among men differs from the state of nature among different sovereigns, since the absence of industry, production and trade from the former is what causes a miserable and nasty life; conversely, when political institutions are being created, we observe the upturn of trade between states and as a result the strengthening of their relations. Therefore, interstate cooperation is possible through commercial activity, which promote stability and international peace[11].

How much important is the industry for the prosperity and safety not only of the subjects but also of the sovereigns, is equally shown in an earlier work of Hobbes, namely *The Elements of Law Natural and Politics.* There, Hobbes regarded the cultivation of commerce as a Law of Nature: "It is also a law of nature, that men allow commerce and traffic indifferently to one another. For he that alloweth that to one man, which he denieth to another, declareth his hatred to him, to whom he denieth; and to declare hatred is war. And upon

[10] Ibid, chapter 13.9.

[11] For a thoroughly analysis with regard to trade and international order, see Tom Sorrel, "Hobbes on Trade, Consumption and International Order", *The Monist*, Vol. 89, No. 2, The Foundations of International Order (APRIL 2006), pp. 245-258

this title was grounded the great war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians. For would the Athenians have condescended to suffer the Megareans, their neighbours, to traffic in their ports and markets, that war had not begun"[12]. Now, if we count that the Laws of Nature are types of behavior that promote peace and that the Law of Nations is indeed identical to the Law of Nature, as Hobbes makes it clear again in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*[13], we can suppose that whatever is applicable and binding on men in the natural condition or after the constitution of a commonwealth, it is also applicable and binding on states in the international arena. From now on, we will turn to the Law of Nature and the causes of war in order to find out whether Arendt's assertion that "the Leviathan can indeed overcome all political limitations that go with the existence of other peoples and can envelop the whole earth in its tyranny"[14] is true or delusive.

As we mentioned before, Laws of Nature are types of behavior that promote peace. But what they dictate? Which is their primary end? Hobbes is extremely explicit on this matter: "And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason, that every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war. The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is, to seek peace, and follow it. The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, by all means we can, to defend ourselves"[15]. In the following chapter of *Leviathan* Hobbes outlines more laws of nature, which are all eternal and indeed promote stability, sobriety and peacefulness; through these chapters Hobbes makes it clear that the fundamental Law of Nature dictates peace as the

[12] Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic,* chapter 16.12.

[13] "As for the law of nations, it is the same with the law of nature. For that which is the law of nature between man and man, before the constitution of commonwealth, is the law of nations between sovereign and sovereign, after." Ibid, chapter 29.10.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* UK: Penguin Classics, 2017, p. 359

[15] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* chapter 14.4.

supreme goal of mankind, while war is not a Law but a right, precisely because there are circumstances in which men do not follow the percepts of Reason and Law and for someone in order to survive must resort to the advantages of war: "For he that should be modest, and tractable, and perform all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man else should do so, should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruin, contrary to the ground of all laws of nature, which tend to nature's preservation"[16]. This passage reminds the Machiavellian warning in *The Prince*[17]. Nevertheless, we must at this point be clear that the Machiavellian warning is one which is addressed solely to the abilities of the ruler, who must tame cosmic and malicious forces such as Fortuna in order to establish his dominion, while Hobbes' Sovereign is not someone who must deal with external forces and the hatred of the people but his sovereignty originates from the contract between his subjects. Thus, Hobbes's sovereign is not a natural person but an artificial one, we might say impersonal, in which the interests of his subjects merge.

Now, ss we enter into the international sphere, it could be useful to point out that for Hobbes the international system is neither dominated by anarchy nor has a life of its own. Actually, it is slightly an anachronism to attribute Hobbes a structural anarchic theory, which has only emerged in the twentieth century. This goes against neorealist interpretations, such as Waltz's, who "relies heavily on an analogy drawn from the work of economists to develop his argument that the international system possesses an independent structure that constrains the behaviour of states. States, he suggests, can be compared to firms operating in a situation of perfect

[16] Ibid, chapter 15.36.

[17] "For there is such a difference between how men live and how they ought to live that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his destruction rather than his preservation, because any man who under all conditions insists on making it his business to be good will surely be destroyed among so many who are not good." Allan Gilbert, *Machiavelli – The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 1, USA: Duke University Press, 1989, p. 57.

competition"[18]. Nevertheless, Hobbes took pains to illustrate that the international system is not the carbon copy of the state of nature, as we have argued above. Anarchy as a natural condition which emerges in the absence of a sovereign cannot be redirected to the international arena, because it is not a condition coming from isolated individuals but from sovereigns, namely representatives who have the legitimate means of power and who are bound to the Law of Nations and the Laws of Nature, which are identical as we have seen. Although the international domain is overwhelmed by war and as a result states must first and foremost safeguard their interests, which are identical with the wellbeing of their subjects, this condition does not militate the misery and the hostility of the state of nature, because there is a normative background according to which sovereigns must conduct themselves. One core element of this normative background is the fifteenth law of nature, which dictates the safety of mediators: "It is also a law of nature, that all men that mediate peace, be allowed safe conduct. For the law that commandeth peace, as the end commandeth intercession, as the means; and to intercession the means is safe conduct"[19]. So, the mediators who are responsible for the promotion of peace must be insulated from the harms of war by the Law of Nature and through this passage Hobbes accentuates the importance of diplomacy as a means of civilized behavior in foreign affairs which safeguards and propels peace.

However, in order to secure peace sovereigns have to increase their army capabilities, build fortresses, and train spies so that they can defend themselves from a foreign invader. This disposition matches utterly with the first Law of Nature that dictates peace and the right of nature to resort to war when it is needed. Hence, *armed peace* is what Hobbes encourages the sovereigns to promote. With regard to the causes of war, Hobbes considers that there are three principal causes: "So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence;

[18] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History,* USA: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 39.

[19] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* chapter 15.29.

thirdly, glory"[20]. The first cause refers to the acquisition of goods, the second to the protection of what we already have and the last one to the reputation that one aspires to have. So the first and the third cause are directly opposed to the Laws of Nature and as a result sovereigns must eschew conduct of war for the glory or the goods of others. As Hobbes notes in chapter 15, the nineth law of nature is against pride, while in chapter 29 Hobbes has included in the things that weaken or tend to the dissolution of the commonwealth the expansiveness of a state: "We may further add, the insatiable appetite, or βουλιμία, of enlarging dominion; with the incurable wounds thereby many times received from the enemy; and the wens, of ununited conquests, which are many times a burthen, and with less danger lost, than kept; as also the lethargy of ease, and consumption of riot and vain expense"[21].

Thus, states must conduct only *defensive* wars in order to protect their interests and in few circumstances they are justified to resort to *offensive* wars only when there are totally sufficient reasons to fear the actions of another sovereign[22]. As Christov rightly noticed in his influential work *Before Anarchy*, "Offensive wars, by contrast, may not be justified even in the state of nature "for [in the case of] reparable injuries, if reparation be tendered, all invasion upon that title is iniquity." Preemptive strikes against another group may, in few instances, receive justification only if no "sufficient caution be given to take away their fear," or, in even fewer circumstances, when the group itself is on the verge of physical extinction. Against popular Realist readings of Hobbes, states interact in a significantly more constrained environment than the far less secure competition of natural groups, seeking to master the greatest number of servants"[23].

[20] Ibid, *Leviathan*, chapter 13.6.

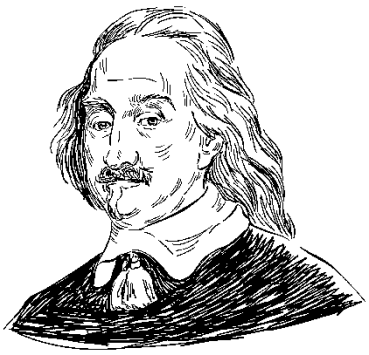
[21] Ibid, *Leviathan*, chapter 29.22.

[22] See also the insightful analysis of Delphine Thivet, "Thomas Hobbes: A Philosopher of War or Peace?", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 16:4, pp. 701-721.

[23] Theodore Christon, *Before Anarchy: Hobbes and his Critics in Modern International Thought*, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 129.

III. Conclusion

Taking all these into consideration, we can confidently dismiss as delusive Arendt's claim that the Leviathan can envelop the whole earth on its tyranny, since we have observed that the realist concept of anarchy does not match with what Hobbes claims regarding international domain. We have seen that interstate relations are not so miserable as the state of nature, because trade, commerce and industry promote the interstate cooperation which is protected by the Law of Nature; we have seen also that Peace is the first and foremost purpose of the Law of Nature and, last but not least, we have ascertained that for Hobbes a war is justified only for defensive purposes and not out of thrust for glory, reputation and acquisition. As one great scholar of IR theory remarkably stated, "As, after three hundred years, we salute Thomas Hobbes of Magdalen Hall, I ask you to remember that, among his many other distinctions, he was a true philosopher of peace"[24].



[24] Hedley Bull, "Hobbes and the International Anarchy", *Social Research*, Winter 1981, Vol. 48, No. 4, Politics: The Work of Hans Morgenthau (WINTER 1981), p. 738.