1 Classical theory and international relations in context

Beate Jahn

The contemporary world is widely described as globalized, globalizing or postmodern. Central to these descriptions is the claim of historical change or even rupture. A globalized or globalizing world is juxtaposed to an earlier international world just as the postmodern world has left modernity behind. In the light of these claims of historical change it is remarkable that classical authors[1] reflecting on a modern or even premodern, but certainly international, world still play an important role in International Relations.

Three main uses of classical texts in contemporary International Relations can be identified. First, classical authors are frequently cited as precursors to contemporary theoretical approaches: Realists trace the roots of their thinking back to Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau; Liberals most prominently to Kant; the English School to Grotius; Marxist approaches obviously cite Marx as well as Gramsci; and Nietzsche as well as Hegel play an important role in Postmodernism.

Secondly, classical authors are used for the purpose of explaining contemporary political developments and for the justification or even propagation of specific foreign policies. A case in point is the – academically and politically – influential use of Kant in explaining the data of the Democratic Peace and the implicit or explicit propagation of the spread of democracy and market economy accompanied by a strict legal and political separation of liberal from non-liberal states in contemporary world politics.[2]

[1] Classical authors are here understood to have written before the constitution of International Relations as a separate discipline; their work is thus characterized by a relatively holistic approach to social and political life.
[2] See, for the most influential formulation of the Democratic Peace thesis, Michael Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs' in Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and

Finally, classical authors are used to define and structure contemporary theoretical and political debates. Theoretical debates in International Relations are frequently presented – in the mainstream – as Liberal or Kantian approaches versus Realist or Hobbesian/Machiavellian approaches[3] as well as – from the margins – for instance as Marxist versus Realist approaches.[4] Similarly, contemporary political world views and policies are defined with reference to classical authors and pitched against each other. Most recently and very prominently, for instance, Robert Kagan has characterized the European world view and approach to international affairs as 'Kantian' and the equivalent American position as 'Hobbesian'.[5]

These three different uses of classical authors in contemporary international thought and practice – providing philosophical foundations for contemporary theories, explaining and justifying contemporary policies, and defining and structuring theoretical and political debates – ultimately aim at illuminating contemporary theories, political practices, and theoretical and political debates. It is in order to provide a foundation for contemporary international theories that scholars read Machiavelli; in order to explain the contemporary liberal peace or propagate liberal foreign policies that scholars turn to Kant; in order to classify and specify competing contemporary world views and policies that scholars refer to Kant and Hobbes. This motivation to explain

Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 3–57. The article was first published in two parts in Philosophy and Public Affairs 12 (1983), 205–235, 323–353. Kant is also prominently used in support of the Cosmopolitan Democracy project heralded by David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Daniele Archibugi, 'Models of International Organization in Perpetual Peace Projects' *Review of International Studies* 18 (1992), 295–317; and 'Principles of Cosmopolitan Democracy' in Daniele Archibugi, David Held and Martin Köhler (eds.), *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 198–228; as well as Andrew Linklater, 'Citizenship and Sovereignty in the Post-Westphalian State' *European Journal of International Relations* 2 (1996), 77–103; and *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[3] After E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981) had famously introduced this distinction at the end of the 1930s, there is hardly a textbook in International Relations which does not reproduce it – notwithstanding variations in the authors aligned with each of these positions as well as different strands of thought within them.

[4] See, for example, Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1994).

[5] Robert Kagan, 'Power and Weakness' *Policy Review* 113 (2002). This classification is widely reproduced not just in academic literature; see William Pfaff, 'Kant and Hobbes. Look Who's Part of the Harsh Disorder' *International Herald Tribune* (1 August 2002).

and understand the contemporary world, implicitly or explicitly, recognizes the necessarily historical location of our own motivations for scholarly enquiry. And yet, it also relies on the assumption of historical and intellectual continuity. These approaches to classical texts posit a significant historical continuity in the development of individual theoretical approaches to International Relations, in the development of international politics as well as in the structure of the theoretical debates and political struggles between them.

Hence, we are confronted with a puzzling tension between widespread claims of more or less radical historical change and widespread uses of classical authors based on the assumption of historical continuity. And it is not the case that only those theories that deny radical historical change in the nature of international politics – most prominently Realist approaches[6] – rely on the continuing relevance of classical authors; in most cases, the contradiction is located within rather than between theoretical approaches. Postmodernists are inspired by Nietzsche and even Clausewitz as are Globalization theorists by Kant. In theory, this contradiction is easily resolved by the recognition that both historical continuity and change mark European intellectual and political development. And, indeed, contemporary theorists generally accept the existence of both to varying degrees.[7]

Such a theoretical recognition of a mixture of continuity and change, however, does not answer the question of which aspects in any given classical text can be considered continuous with the contemporary world and its problems and which fall into the category of change. In the following pages I will first argue that a fruitful use of classical texts for International Relations theory and practice today requires the specification of elements of both historical continuity and change. And I will show that much of the contemporary use of classical authors is characterized by presentism; that is, it does not live up to this requirement with the result that contemporary assumptions are read back into

[6] See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 235f; and R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 7.

[7] Ian Clark 'Traditions of Thought and Classical Theories of International Relations' in Ian Clark and Iver B. Neumann (eds.), *Classical Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 1; Chris Brown, Terry Nardin and Nicholas Rengger (eds.), *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts From the Ancient Greeks to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 5.

classical authors instead of being opened up for reflection through the use of classical authors.

In the course of this discussion I will identify three areas – the intellectual context, the political context and lineages of reception – in which such historical specificity can be established. These three contextual dimensions of inquiry provide the structure of this book which I will set out in the final section of this introduction. The individual chapters in the main part of this volume all reconstruct the intellectual and/or political context of classical texts or the trajectory by which these texts have been included – or excluded – from International Relations theory and practice. They demonstrate in a variety of cases that the reconstruction of these contexts unlocks the rich potential of classical authors for illuminating and developing further contemporary international thought and practice.

Continuity and discontinuity

A lack of continuity in actors, issues and concepts between the reflections of classical authors and contemporary international thought and practice would render the former insignificant for the study of international relations today. And, obviously, there exists some continuity between European classical authors and contemporary international theory and practice: classical authors reflected on social and political developments which provide the historical bases of the contemporary European – and through European expansion also to some extent non-European – world; moreover, classical theories have shaped the conceptual framework for our reflections on this world over time. Such continuity or 'points of contact between one period and another' undoubtedly needs to be established for any fruitful use of classical authors in International Relations.[8] It may exist, for instance, in certain social and political phenomena which the contemporary world shares with classical times. If Hobbes discussed the problem of civil war – and 'his' civil wars have something concrete in common with contemporary civil wars – his writings can contribute to an analysis of contemporary civil wars. And yet, it may also be the case that the necessary 'point of contact' between Hobbes' and contemporary civil wars consists mainly in the use of the same term for historically very different social and political phenomena. In this case, Hobbes' discussion of civil wars raises questions about the nature and

[8] Brown et al. (eds.), *International Relations*, p. 5.

extent of historical change – rather than to provide possible solutions for contemporary problems.

This example demonstrates two things. Firstly, both historical continuity and historical discontinuity may provide the basis for insights into contemporary international affairs. Yet, they do so in different ways. The greater the similarities between historical cases, the more we can build on classical analyses – or their shortcomings. Moreover, if it turns out that a classical analysis is satisfactorily applicable to contemporary cases, the solution provided by classical analysts can also be discussed as a possible solution for today. And even if the analysis is convincing but the solution – with historical hindsight – found wanting, it can at least be excluded from the range of contemporary options.

In contrast, discontinuities between classical and contemporary cases do not allow us to follow in the footsteps of the classics with regard to analysis or solution. Instead, they throw into relief areas of historical contingency in social and political life. The identification of such areas of contingency are valuable for their specification of what is open to social and political change. Furthermore, they guide research into the causes and consequences of historical change and thus lead to a better understanding of contemporary phenomena. And, finally, such social and political discontinuity coupled with conceptual continuity firmly puts the question of the relationship between theory and practice – and their historical development – on the agenda.

Secondly, given that historical continuity and discontinuity provide different kinds of insight and call for different applications to contemporary cases – one based on identity, the other on difference – the elements of continuity and discontinuity in any given text have to be specified. That is, the attempt to apply Hobbes' solution to contemporary civil wars if the latter were radically different from the former could at best prove futile, at worst disastrous. Moreover, inasmuch as we must assume that every classical text contains a mixture of continuity and change in comparison with the contemporary world, the relevance of the totality of these theories must be assessed in the light of the specific form this mixture takes. That is, those elements which are similar to the contemporary world may not be the core ones for either a classical author's analysis of the problem or the basis of the proposed solutions. Alternatively, a classical theory may appear to deal with phenomena alien to the modern world, or utterly outdated concepts, and yet – beneath the level of appearance – it may turn out to be based on very similar social and political forces or theoretical meanings.

Moreover, it can be argued that the element of discontinuity is at least as important as the element of continuity. This may be so, firstly, because a mixture of both in a classical text makes it likely that the argument as a whole has to be relativized in the light of significant discontinuities. But, secondly, and more importantly, elements of discontinuity allow potentially for greater insights than elements of continuity. On the one hand, as I will show presently for the use of classical authors in Interntional Relations, 'the continuities . . . are so omnipresent that they have made it all too easy to conceive of the past as a mirror, and the value of studying it as a means of reflecting back at ourselves our own assumptions and prejudice'.[9] In this situation, paying particular attention to the discontinuities can help illuminate aspects of the contemporary world which are otherwise generally overlooked. While in this instance the importance of studying discontinuities stands and falls in relation to the dominant practice, it may also be argued to have an independent value. And this value lies in the fact that the discontinuities point the social scientist towards those aspects of social and political life which are historically contingent and therefore open to social and political change. And, hence, it is the identification of discontinuities which indicates the areas of necessary further research into the conditions of change.

Nonetheless, the assumption of some element of continuity provides the basis for engaging with classical authors in the first place. And, indeed, this assumption is prominent in much of the reception of classical texts in International Relations. Unfortunately, however, more often than not it lacks historical specification with the result that its overwhelming function is to 'mirror' back to us contemporary assumptions and prejudices. The consequences of this presentism are, at best, the irrelevance of classical texts for a better understanding of the contemporary world. At worst, however, this approach entails an unreflected misrepresentation of classical texts as well as of the political issues and intellectual debates at stake in them. And such misrepresentation, since it functions to underline contemporary assumptions, entrenches contemporary debates rather than deepens or broadens them, and it buries – albeit unconsciously – a more constructive reading of classical authors under layers of 'authoritative' interpretations. Finally, the overwhelming prominence of continuities – real or imagined – stands in contradiction to recent claims of historical change.

[9] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 111.

Intellectual contexts

Historical continuity is clearly the operative assumption in inventing traditions of international thought. It is argued that Realism can trace its roots back to Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau, Liberalism to Kant, the English School to Grotius and so on, because the discipline of International Relations addresses certain fairly 'timeless' issues – such as war and peace – which have been reflected upon by scholars over time.[10] The construction of traditions of thought on these issues, then, identifies 'certain permanent normative orientations'.[11] Stressing such continuity is seen 'as a potent safeguard against the *hubris* of the present'. It also provides 'a constant point of reference against which change can be measured' and an opening for the question why certain traditions have developed and become important.[12]

And yet, it is precisely the present intellectual and political context which provides the starting point for establishing such traditions. That is, the disciplinary definition of International Relations and its concerns – war and peace, for instance – acts as a guide for selecting certain authors and texts as relevant. It is the issue of war which unites Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and contemporary Realists over time just as it is the search for a road to peace which makes Kant attractive to Liberals. A closer look at the use of these classical authors in Realism and Liberalism, however, reveals a curious contradiction. On the one hand, the issues of war and peace provide a basis for continuity while, on the other, these authors are used to furnish contemporary theories with philosophical roots that lie outside the definition of the discipline. That is, Hobbes provides a theory of human nature and the state which underpin contemporary theories of power politics between states. Similarly, Liberals use the work of Kant to underline the domestic bases of international conflict and cooperation. In both cases, the attraction of the classics seems to lie in their holistic – or interdisciplinary – approach to social and political life which denotes a fundamental difference in the intellectual context of classical and contemporary theory.

The significance of this difference, however, is not specified and explored. The search for dimensions of social and political life which fall outside the purview of the discipline of International Relations implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that the modern division of knowledge has bequeathed to each of the resultant disciplines a common legacy: the

[10] Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 9.
[11] Clark, 'Traditions', p. 6. [12] Clark, 'Traditions', p. 7.

need for philosophical reflection. The much invoked but rarely practised interdisciplinarity is itself an expression of this need – the recognition of the ultimate totality of social life inaccessible to individual modern disciplines. Since, however, contemporary philosophy is as much a victim of this legacy as are the other social and political sciences and since all of them operate according to specific and at times seemingly incompatible methods, simply adding up different disciplines proves not only very difficult but, arguably, does not address the problem. This is not to say that different disciplines cannot enrich or even inspire each other. But reflection on the totality of social and political life is characterized by theorizing the nature of the relationship between its constitutive parts. However, if the reflection on the nature of these relationships is what is lacking in the contemporary social and political sciences, it can still be found in classical authors who wrote either before or during that (in)famous revolution of the sciences.

Arguably, it is this quality of classical writings – more than the assumed continuities – which makes them attractive to contemporary social and political thought and which explains why there is no modern discipline which does not provide, to a greater or lesser extent, an account of its own 'origins' in classical theory as well as some 'applications' of classical writers to its contemporary problems. Indeed, providing the necessary 'non-international' foundations for contemporary theories – the way in which 'descriptive claims about human nature, domestic politics, and world politics are related to one another'[13] – is precisely the function of Hobbes and Kant in contemporary theories of International Relations.

And yet, the philosophical and domestic reflections of Kant and Hobbes are just added onto the contemporary definition of International Relations. Hobbes provides a basis for Realist thought in human nature and Kant's republican constitutions underpin peace. The different spheres of social and political life are here constructed in a hierarchical and linear way; the discipline of International Relations is simply conceived as the study of a specific level or 'image' of social and political life, as Waltz famously put it.[14] What is lacking here is an analysis of the historically specific way in which Kant and Hobbes reflected on the interaction and mutual constitution of different spheres of social and political life. Instead, contemporary definitions of the international, the domestic and their relationship are read back into classical authors

[13] Doyle, *War and Peace*, p. 36. [14] Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*.

thus excluding from the pantheon of relevant authors and texts those which do not readily appear to address international issues as defined by the contemporary discipline and precluding the opportunity to overcome the disciplinary distinctions shaping contemporary debates which appeared to provide the attraction of reading Kant and Hobbes in the first place. Last, but by no means least, due to the 'contemporary' construction of the relationship between different spheres of social and political life, Kant's and Hobbes' conception of peace and war are in danger of being misrepresented.

Establishing the concrete nature of the intellectual context of classical texts is, thus, important for any conscious reflection on the limits and possibilities of the definition of International Relations and its core concerns. Beyond this, however, the recovery of the intellectual context can also illuminate the internal structure of the discipline. And here again we find that the invention and use of classical traditions for the purpose of defining and structuring contemporary theoretical as well as political debates is often characterized by a lack of attention to specific historical continuities and discontinuities. To stick with the examples of Hobbes and Kant, by tracing Realism back to the former and Liberalism to the latter, contemporary theoretical debates between these approaches are themselves presented as 'timeless'. Equally, the characterization of a contemporary European approach to international politics as 'Kantian' and an equivalent American position as 'Hobbesian' stresses the permanency of normative and political orientations without regard to the fact that these categories do not appropriately grasp the intellectual debates and political contexts in which Hobbes and Kant wrote. Is it irrelevant for International Relations scholars that outside the discipline Hobbes is often included into – or even presented as a founder of – the 'liberal' tradition while Kant based his theory on the Hobbesian state of nature?[15]

Hence, if this primacy of contemporary classifications and juxtapositions is not relativized by a more thorough recovery of the intellectual context of the classical texts themselves, it entails the danger of a selective reading of the classics on the one hand and a waste of their potential on the other. In the first instance, those aspects of a particular author's work which do not fit the paradigm are in danger of being left out or marginalized. And so are authors and texts

[15] Andrezj Rapaczynski, *Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophy of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 10.

which do not appear to fit the contemporary classifications readily. Furthermore, the relationship between classical authors may be seriously misconstrued. Contemporary theorists recognize the limitations and dangers of reading these divisions back into classical authors. Such procedures are 'insensitive to the nuances of the distinctive ages and concerns', as mentioned above; they also encourage 'intellectual conservatism' and close down the agenda by providing a framework which itself is not open to reflection and revision.[16] And yet, this approach is defended with the argument that such invented traditions provide the foundations of a dialogue between alternative voices in International Relations with the 'potential for creative synthesis' rather than fixed classifications.[17]

This positive potential of inventing traditions nonetheless fails to address the requirements for a constructive role of classical authors in two ways. The shortcomings of these assumptions which Brown, Nardin and Rengger have identified in the case of the 'timelessness' of the Realist approach, also hold for the dialogue between different 'traditions'. Namely that the tenets of a particular theory 'can be illustrated by texts drawn from any period past or present' and that 'all of these texts can be treated as though they were written by our contemporaries'.[18] The dialogue made possible by reading contemporary intellectual and political distinctions back into history is, at best, a contemporary dialogue in which the classical writers might as well be left out. Their inclusion, however, suggests that we are confronted with a worst case scenario, namely a contemporary dialogue in which classical authors are simply coopted in support of the one or the other position. Apart from the fact that in this scenario, just as in the previous one, classical texts do not add anything to our understanding of today's international affairs – after all, they are just made to fit into contemporary preconceptions – this cooptation is almost certainly accompanied by serious misinterpretation and it hides the critical and constructive potential of classical texts.

The selective and instrumental reading necessary for fitting classical authors into contemporary intellectual frameworks hides the breadth and depth of their writings as well as the historical specificity of their and our debates. And the dialogue itself, in whose name this approach

[16] Clark, 'Traditions', p. 8. [17] Clark and Neumann (eds.), *Classical Theories*, p. 257.
[18] Brown et al. (eds.), *International Relations*, p. 3.