

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

HOBBESIAN VARIATIONS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Introduction: Hobbes After Anarchy

Even his [Hobbes's] mistakes have contributed more to the advance of the human mind than a host of works strung together with commonplace knowledge

– Denis Diderot¹

The modern concept of the State – how it came into being, how it spread globally, and how it continues to animate our political existence today – has invariably been the central object of inquiry in the study of the history of modern political thought. As the multitude of sovereign states emerged from the former world of empires only to extend to every inhabitable corner of the globe, a common assumption has come to dominate the theory and practice of statehood: that the spheres of the domestic and the foreign are fundamentally distinct from each other. While the birth date of that distinction is still debated, what remains largely uncontested today is its radically binary nature. Historians of political thought and theorists of international relations have tended to sharpen the dichotomy between home and abroad, the internal and the external, the inside and the outside, the municipal and the international, the local and the cosmopolitan. The sovereign state has thus matured as Janus-faced, with one face looking inward, as a sovereign over its subjects, while the other face looking outward, as a sovereign among other sovereigns.

It has become customary to regard these two faces as coexisting in a tense relationship, and even incompatible in their scope: the internal creates peacefulness and order from within, whereas the external perpetuates warfare and anarchy from without. The name of Thomas Hobbes – and the “Hobbesian tradition” it generated – is commonly associated in support of this view. Rather than affirming the conventionally established rigidity between the domestic and the foreign, *Before Anarchy* focuses instead on their mutually reinforcing dynamic in arguing for an essential link and a symbiotic configuration

¹ Diderot (1992), p. 27.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

between the two. Scholars have paid insufficient attention to the salience of the symbiosis between “home” and “abroad,” and this book seeks to illuminate – through the arguments of Hobbes and his critics – how the two were closely linked in debates about international relations in the formation of modern theories of the state. This historiographical turn to the evolution of modern international thought will shed light on the birth of the normative architecture of the world order we have inherited over the past three and a half centuries. Without the theoretical foundations of the origins of statehood and its unprecedented global spread in shaping the modern political condition, the current practice of sovereignty and quest for a just global order would be punctuated by moral and intellectual paucity.

Between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, major European thinkers theorized for the first time a political universe of independent – and interdependent – sovereign states without a common superior over them. They did so by placing interstate relations at the very center of debates over the moral basis for international warfare, imperial expansion, and universal commitments to a single humanity. From Grotius, through Hobbes and Pufendorf, to Rousseau, Vattel, and Kant, the relations between states instantiated the rights and duties of the modern liberal agent writ large. Long regarded as formative to modern political theory, these thinkers used the interpersonal domain analogously in theorizing the interstate arena. Empirically observable and eminently accessible, the international realm manifests the interaction between sovereign and interdependent entities, except on a much larger scale. Such a blown-up picture of moral and political agency can then be used analogously to describe – rather than derive – the rights and duties of the individuals that comprise them. As a source for a normative construct, the domain of the foreign provides the domestic theory of the state with the best example available for how independent agents act interdependently and serves as the model for autonomous agency *par excellence*.

The formation of the sovereign state and the rise of the international sphere should be seen as coterminous in their evolution and theoretical construction. *Before Anarchy* explores the historical implications of that relationship and brings to the forefront the widely neglected international dimension of the history of political thought and the historical origins of international relations. The interpretation of texts and ideas adopted here is simultaneously linguistic and historical, and the term “modern international thought” – which has gained intellectual currency in recent scholarship – is used throughout the book to reflect the hybrid approach of integrating the contextualist method in the history of political thought and the historiographical method in international relations theory.²

² Armitage (2013). The term “international thought” appears as early as the 1920s – see Galsworthy (1923) and Stawell (1929).

Introduction: Hobbes After Anarchy

5

The period covered in this book spans the middle of the seventeenth – beginning with the publication of Thomas Hobbes’s first treatise of political philosophy in the early 1640s – to the middle of the eighteenth century, when two Swiss contemporaries, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emer de Vattel, debated the possibilities for establishing international peace. The outbreak of the English Civil War, pitting Royalists against Parliamentarians, and the onset of the Seven Years’ War, the first major global conflict waged across several continents and later described by Winston Churchill as the first “world war,” delineate the historical trajectory of the book. The standard reception of Hobbes both as a radical individualist and as a theorist of absolute sovereignty can be traced back as early as the second half of the seventeenth century with two key figures. The Prussian jurist Samuel Pufendorf, whose lip service to *socialitas* served as a fig leaf for his espousal of core elements of Hobbes’s theory, reinforced the perception of a radical departure from the Hobbesian solitary in the early 1670s. At the same time, his contemporary Richard Cumberland, the self-proclaimed English anti-Hobbes, facilitated the standard view of Hobbes as a proponent of anarchy outside the state, and such a view would come into full fruition only in the twentieth century.

Against the common equation of “Hobbes” and “international anarchy” – adopted almost three centuries after the publication of his main political works – *Before Anarchy* explores the mythical foundation of that equation and returns us to the authentic Hobbes, long before the twentieth-century discourse of anarchy adopted him as a theoretical straw man. In the Introduction I reach forward in time, exploring the reception of Hobbes’s international theory since the early decades of the twentieth century, only after a political discourse of international anarchy had already begun to emerge and whose architects would later unanimously co-opt Hobbes as their flagship spokesman.³ In the Epilogue, I prospectively turn to the future of International Political Theory in the twenty-first century by considering the implications of this Hobbesian turn for the history of modern international thought.

The remainder of this Introduction sets the scene for the following chapters. The next section explores the bifurcation of the disciplines of Political Theory and International Relations – or the Great Divide – which has widened over the last six decades, with some promising attempts at their reunification only in the last decade. The Great Divide has subsequently generated two distinct clusters of Hobbesian interpretations, and, as the following section shows, his afterlife in Political Theory was that of Hobbes as the proponent of the absolute state, whereas his afterlife in International Relations was that of Hobbes as the avatar of the anarchy among states. The following section examines the discourse of anarchy as it emerged in the twentieth century, which almost simultaneously co-opted Hobbes as its intellectual figurehead, and locates the book in relation to recent work in the history of political thought and international relations

³ Schmidt (1998), pp. 151–187.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

theory. The final section provides an outline of the arguments presented and a breakdown of the individual chapters.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Since the end of World War II the field of International Relations has been marked by a general lack of historical orientation and contextualization of ideas. Such an approach was accompanied by a parochial tendency in Political Theory to regard politics solely as the domestic governance of the state to the exclusion of the international sphere.⁴ The behavioral revolution and the rise of empirical methods of inquiry associated with the social sciences (particularly in the United States) and the parallel establishment of canonical political texts (centered on the formation of the domestic theory of the state) have further contributed to a distinct demarcation – a “Great Divide” – between International Relations and Political Theory.⁵ As early as the mid-1950s, when the social sciences were on the ascent, two of the most illustrious twentieth-century British historians, Martin Wight and Peter Laslett, pronounced – almost simultaneously – the “intellectual and moral poverty” of international theory, and bemoaned that “the tradition has been broken and . . . political theory is dead.”⁶ At the same time, a prominent American scholar of international affairs concurred with their diagnoses and made an urgent plea for the “remarriage, requiring the consent of both sides” of International Relations and Political Theory. The urgency of Arnold Wolfers’s plea was a testimony to, what then naturally seemed, an irreversible, though not accidental, divorce between the two academic disciplines. “[I]t is not a happy sign,” he lamented in 1956, “that much of what has been occurring in this [twentieth] century militates against the continued separation of the two fields [of International Relations and Political Theory].”⁷

Arnold Wolfers’s plea fell on deaf ears for almost two decades.⁸ It would take another generation, following controversial debates surrounding the legitimacy of American intervention in Vietnam, for a genuinely renewed interest in the international dimension of political theory to resurge. The publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, followed by Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* and Charles Beitz’s *Political Theory and International Relations*, all published in the 1970s, inaugurated a promising, but short-lived and little-noticed renaissance in the political and social

⁴ Throughout this study, “International Relations” and “Political Theory” refer to the established academic disciplines, whereas “international relations” and “political theory” describe the ideas associated with the general terms.

⁵ I adopt Ian Clark’s term of a “Great Divide” – see Clark (1998) and Clark (1999).

⁶ Wight (1966), p. 20 (originally delivered in 1956), and Peter Laslett (1956), p. vii, respectively. As early as 1951, a discourse on the “poverty of political theory” had already emerged – see Easton (1951).

⁷ Wolfers (1962), p. 240.

⁸ Gunnell (1993), pp. 199–220.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Hobbes After Anarchy*

7

theorizing of international relations.⁹ It was not until the end of the Cold War – which exposed the disciplinary limitations of International Relations reduced to great power politics and the inadequacy of Political Theory focused solely on the liberal state – that scholarship took close notice of the mutual neglect between the two disciplines and the need to reunite them. “The forty years detour” – a “bizarre detour” for some – as the anticipated end of that mutual neglect was described in the early 1990s, and “the fifty years’ rift,” as it was seen in the early 2000s, are all indicative of the sea changes that both disciplines have only recently begun to experience in an increasing awareness of each other’s methodology.¹⁰

The most prominent and promising change within the field of International Relations has been the growing tendency to move away from the historical vacuum within which world politics take place toward a “historical return” and a more serious engagement with the history of political thought within such a discourse.¹¹ In the familiar – and uncritically accepted – historical narrative of mainstream International Relations, variations of a “Realist tradition” emerged. On these accounts, Machiavelli’s *virtu* and *fortuna* are usually celebrated as the basis for the *raison d’état* doctrine, while Hobbes’s emphasis on the pursuit of glory transforms the international domain into a realm of power and competition, whereas Locke’s “agriculturalist” argument would be seen as a prescriptive policy of colonial expansion. At the same time, this “dawn of a historiographical turn” in International Relations has been recently accompanied by an equally powerful reassessment of the formative role of the international domain within the field of Political Theory.¹² Historians of political thought have expanded the boundaries of their field to include the relations between peoples, communities, and states, and such an “international turn” bodes well with emerging histories of globalization.¹³ International intellectual history, defined as both “the intellectual history of the international and an internationalized intellectual history,” has been steadily gaining intellectual currency over the last decade with some promising prospects for the disciplines of Political Theory and International Relations.¹⁴

In light of these recent disciplinary developments, it has been rightly suggested that current transformations in world politics necessitate the reconceptualization of the two fields, long autonomized as distinct intellectual projects, in the creation of a new hybrid discipline (or, for some others, the resurrection of an older

⁹ Rawls (1971); Walzer (1977); Beitz (1979). For an historical account of the period and the role of the Vietnam War in these debates, see Rengger (2000) and Forrester (2014).

¹⁰ Smith (1992) and Armitage (2004a), respectively.

¹¹ Hobden (2002), p. 56.

¹² Bell (2001). Teschke refers to a “historical turn” – see Teschke (2003), pp. 1–2. Some of the pioneering studies include Williams (1996); Boucher (1998); Tuck (1999); and Bobbitt (2002).

¹³ Bell (2007); Armitage (2004b). Some have distinguished a “global turn” from the “international turn” – see Armitage (2013), p. 172.

¹⁴ David Armitage (2015), p. 116 and Armitage (2014).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tradition).¹⁵ Such a new discipline, “International Political Theory,” integrates methods of political theorizing within International Relations and of internationalizing Political Theory. In our global world, where states are no longer the primary actors and the practice of statehood cannot be confined solely to its internal sovereignty, it increasingly seems to be the case that, as US Secretary of State John Kerry observes, “there is no longer anything foreign about foreign policy.”¹⁶ In following diplomatic practitioners, scholars similarly need to revisit the analytical boundaries between internal politics and world affairs. A return to Hobbes offers key insights into the symbiosis between the internal nature of a state and its external conduct, and brings him closer to some of the political values we normally associate with the liberal international relations theory of today.

While there is much to celebrate in these recent attempts to close the rift between Political Theory and International Relations after their half-a-century divorce, we also need to consider their divergent historical trajectories and show why they have tended to widen. We cannot fully appreciate the particular juncture of these two fields we are witnessing today without a comprehensive understanding of the ideas, methods, and practices that have shaped the lineage of each. Any discussion of the future of International Political Theory that does not attempt to repair the damages of this long-lasting divorce is doomed to commit grave intellectual errors. The prospects for their successful remarriage depend not only on the reconstruction of the reasons that led to their separation in the first place, but also on an examination of their common intellectual errors committed *in consequence of* that separation, so that we are clear about the feasibility of a new integrative undertaking.¹⁷

It was not always this way: prior to the early twentieth century, no analytical demarcation divided debates on international affairs from those on domestic politics. Beginning in the 1940s and the 1950s, however, the ascent of the social sciences and the “behavioral reformation” drove a wedge between the purportedly explanatory power of the scientific method (which would be appropriated later in the study of International Relations) and the theoretical approach to recovering the meaning of ideas (which would be adopted variously in Political Theory).¹⁸ These two methodological approaches grew increasingly apart, with the nascent field of International Relations effectively concentrating its attention on an ahistorical understanding of the foreign domain, whereas Political Theory evolved into a state-centric exploration into the origins of modern liberalism. The two disciplines subsequently developed almost independently of each other and, unsurprisingly, remained largely unaware of their respective methodological advances. Only within the last decade have

¹⁵ Schmidt (2000) and Rengger (1999). To my knowledge, RBJ Walker (1987) is the first scholar to use the term “International Political Theory” to indicate a separate discipline.

¹⁶ Kerry (2013).

¹⁷ Schmidt (2002).

¹⁸ Gunnell (1993), pp. 221–250.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Hobbes After Anarchy*

9

promising mutual strides been made to establish a common conversation between the two fields in an attempt to bridge their divide. Two distinct disciplinary developments have facilitated these efforts: within the study of the history of political thought, the “linguistic turn” introduced a contextualist approach to the meaning and understanding of ideas in Political Theory, whereas the “historiographical turn” in International Relations inserted historical interpretation among its methodological tools of inquiry.

The 1960s can be marked as the adolescence of the contextualist orientation in the history of political thought, when a number of historians – including Peter Laslett, JGA Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and John Dunn – reacted against the tradition of textualism. Such a tradition – associated with, among others, Leo Strauss and his followers – was based in methodological decontextualization of works and their interpretation in a largely nonhistorical manner. This novel approach of grounding the reading of a text in its historical environment, located within a specific time and place, and linguistic context of a particular political vocabulary was first blazed by JGA Pocock’s *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957) and Peter Laslett’s edition of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1960). Their use of linguistic contextualism would be emulated and further developed by Quentin Skinner, whose own methodology emerged out of the analytic tradition of the philosophy of language associated with RG Collingwood and Wittgenstein.¹⁹

In critically responding to textualist interpretations, whose concerns lie in an uninterrupted series of teleologically perennial questions with reference to timeless truth, the contextualist historians have argued that texts neither exist in historical vacuum, nor do they remain outside any temporal or spatial reference. In following Skinner’s philosophic stance and account of speech-act theory, the meaning of an utterance can be grasped properly not only by locating it within its specific terms of reference, but also by taking into account the intention of the author. In excavating such intentionality, J.L. Austin’s original theory of the “locutionary” and “illocutionary” aspect of words draws out the distinction between the meaning of words and concepts and the act of the author doing the uttering of those words. In short, the act of writing can be political and such a text written by an author long dead can be seen as a tool aimed at persuasion.

While the “linguistic turn” has tended to historicize the study of political thought for the benefit of Political Theory, it has remained largely unnoticed and unutilized in International Relations. This omission is unfortunate, and *Before Anarchy* focuses on the application of this important but neglected method to the study of International Relations. The “linguistic turn” has brought about numerous methodological virtues, including the capacity to deconstruct invented traditions across time and space. Contextualist interpretations effectively challenge ahistorical timeless constructions of

¹⁹ J.G.A. Pocock (1962), Dunn (1968), Skinner (1969). For a methodological critique of Skinner, see Tully (1987).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11453-1 - Before Anarchy: Hobbes and His Critics in Modern International Thought

Theodore Christov

Excerpt

[More information](#)

bodies of thought and ideas and undermine any intent of originality. For example, “liberalism,” widely regarded as a coherent body of concepts pertaining to the construction of modern political agency, with a normative set of values transcending the contingency of one’s experience, can be seriously challenged on account of its purported transhistoricism. Similarly, when a contextualist interpretation is employed critically in International Relations, any claim to a tradition of “Realism”, enshrined in a canon of works spanning across two millennia from Thucydides through Hobbes to Kissinger, can be rendered anachronistic, ahistorical, and incoherent.²⁰ Contextualism offers valuable lessons for the study of political change in world politics, and the method should be critically adopted in International Relations for a revisionist account of “traditions” of international thought.²¹

For all its methodological achievements, however, the “linguistic turn” of the contextualist historians has produced an intellectual distaste, if not an aversion, for international thought. The history of political thought is still being written largely as the history of sovereign actors acting independently of each other, whereas the history of international thought, concerned with their interdependence as much as their independence, still remains on the fringes of mainstream political thought. Quentin Skinner’s magisterial *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), which has influenced generations of formidable academics, has placed the concept of the State at the heart of scholarly attention and it now occupies a centerstage role in Political Theory. The recognizably modern concept of the state emerged in the early decades of the seventeenth century, particularly in the works of Thomas Hobbes, and since then it “had come to be regarded as the most important object of analysis in European political thought.”²² The state in its internal organization, as a sovereign authority over its subjects, has become virtually the matrix, which generates the discourse on the history of political thought and continues to frame current debates in the field.²³

Conversely, the international dimension of the state, in its capacity to engage with other states, is still largely absent from most discussions on the genealogy of sovereignty, particularly in its earliest evolution. This state-centric development of Political Theory – at a time when the aim was clearly to historicize the field, not internationalize it – should not surprise us, given the historical identification of interstate concerns with a much later period, beginning with the Seven Years’ War in the middle of the eighteenth century, and beyond. The major intellectual preoccupation in the seventeenth century, most historians of political thought concur, was the establishment of domestic peace, and it

²⁰ For a defense of a “Realist tradition” since Machiavelli, see Haslam (2002).

²¹ Martin Wight, for instance, identifies the Rationalist, the Realist, and the Revolutionist as the three major traditions of international theory – see Wight (1992).

²² Skinner (1978), p. 349.

²³ Brett and Tully, eds. (2006).