

Hobbes and Thucydides: How the fathers of Realism differ from their offspring

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LEA WISKEN, JUL 1 2010

If the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes has been called a “father of Realism”, then the Greek historian Thucydides must surely be its forefather. Just like modern Realist scholars have been influenced by Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian War”, the work exerted considerable influence on Hobbes who translated it into English in the early 17th century. In many ways, Hobbes has taken ideas of Thucydides, and arranged them in the highly structured framework of the first social contract theory. Certainly, Hobbes’ main work “Leviathan” concentrates a lot less on interstate behaviour than Thucydides’ “History”, which gives an account of the Peloponnesian war between the leagues led by Sparta and Athens. Instead, Hobbes describes a hypothetical state of nature, explains why this is in fact a state of war, and how it can be overcome if individuals give up their rights to an all-powerful sovereign. Despite these different focal points, however, both writers present strikingly similar views on many of the key themes of Political Realism. This essay is going to compare Hobbes’ and Thucydides’ opinions on the sources of state-behaviour with respect to Realist standpoints, questioning whether they can justifiably be classified as belonging to this school of thought.

The main analysis will in two steps examine what Kenneth Waltz described as second- and third-image variables, i.e. the impact of domestic sources on the one hand, and sources lying in the nature of the international system on the other hand. It will become clear that while both thinkers take similar, and predominantly Realist, stances towards the international field, they deviate from other Realists and also partly from each other in their views on the impact of state-level variables. Before proceeding to this two-fold analysis, a quick outline of the core assumptions of Political Realism will be given to provide a background against which Hobbes and Thucydides can be compared.

Within the Realist school of thought, disagreement is often just as prevalent as agreement. However, for the purpose of this essay and acknowledging the danger of oversimplification, five core assumptions will be outlined to which later references to Realist standpoints refer. First, Realism characterises the international system as anarchical,[1] i.e. without government or rule above states.[2] A second assumption is captured by Hans Morgenthau’s idea that states pursue interests defined in terms of power.[3] Thirdly, power is treated as a relative concept, so that gains for one state represent losses for other states.[4] Furthermore, states are expected to ally against superior (groups of) states so that a balance of power emerges. [5] Lastly, the majority of (but certainly not all) Realist writers abstract state behaviour from unit level explanations like the domestic constitution. It is viewed as stemming to an overwhelming extent from imperatives originating in the international system, which are the subject of the subsequent part of the analysis. In order to be able to appraise the impact assigned to these imperatives, Hobbes’ and Thucydides’ respective descriptions of the international level as anarchical and their derivations of the security dilemma will be examined in a first step.

Anarchy, defined as the absence of authority, describes the situation of the international system depicted by Hobbes well. He argues that above commonwealths, there is “no court of natural justice”, except for conscience where “god reigneth” [6] who is only a “first mover” [7] and does not directly interfere with human affairs. This lack of a pro-active authority is the reason why actors have to provide for their own security and in so-doing create amongst themselves a security dilemma. This comes about because Hobbes in line with Realist ideas regards power as relative, a stance exemplified in his prediction that commonwealths will “let slip few occasions to weaken the estate of their

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neighbours”.[8] This behaviour produces suspicion and fear, from which there is “no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation.”[9] If everyone anticipates, the result will be a race for power, increased likelihood of conflicts and decreasing security for each individual actor. “Kings and persons of sovereign authority [...] are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another”.[10] Anarchy thus underlies a security dilemma which implies a constant predisposition to fight; Hobbes’ definition of a state of war.[11]

In Thucydides as in Hobbes, the potential bearers of supranational authority, gods, are not seen as getting involved with human politics. After their defeat, the Melians have to pay a high price for their belief that the gods will support them in their defence against Athens.[12] Similarly, a concern about relative power is spelled out in Thucydides’ “History” by the Athenian delegates at Sparta, saying that “all who left us would fall to you”.[13] According to Clifford W. Brown, Thucydides not only observes anticipation of attack as does Hobbes, but goes as far as describing anticipation of anticipation.[14] For example, Athens is in haste to build its city walls, being afraid that Spartan fear of a later Athenian immunity against attack might provoke a first strike response.[15] Just like in Hobbes, this anticipation results in a security dilemma, spelled out by the Corinthians at Sparta: “Neither do any harm to others, nor receive it... is a thing you hardly could attain, though the states about you were of the same conditions.”[16] With Athens regarding it as unsafe to give up its empire, once acquired, the two contending powers are caught up in a classical security dilemma.

Hobbes assigns a strong impact to the insecurity experienced in the international system by states on their behaviour, expecting them to build alliances against superior powers, which disintegrate as soon as they no longer serve the interests of a state. According to Hobbes, actors make war upon each other “when there is no common enemy”.[17] If on the contrary, they have become allies and defeated their common enemy, they must “dissolve, and fall again into a war amongst themselves”.[18] This effectively means that Hobbes predicts that weaker states unite against stronger (groups of) states. Hobbes does not develop a balance of power theory out of this, but his writings contain all the ingredients to build one upon.

Investigating the effects of the security dilemma, one finds that Thucydides’ “History” seems to represent a catalogue of examples to illustrate Hobbes’ theory. The enmity between Sparta and Athens after their common victory over Persia mirrors Hobbes’ prediction that state-alliances only hold if there is a common enemy. Equally, there are prominent examples of power balancing in the “History”. Thucydides for instance describes the bipolarity developing between Athens and Sparta as a “duel into which all the Hellenes sooner or later were drawn”.[19] He further described it as “only too evident” that Tissaphernes “wished to keep them (Athens and Sparta) evenly balanced”.[20]

Summarizing the effects of system-level variables, one finds in Hobbes and Thucydides a strong conformity with the assumptions of Realists concerning anarchy, power as a relative concept, and power-balancing. However, it shall become clear that neither Thucydides nor Hobbes would agree with Morgenthau that balances of power must *necessarily* develop.[21] State behaviour can deviate from the predictions of balance of power theories because system-level imperatives are interfered with by factors stemming from within the state. These factors are the subject of the following part of the analysis.

If only third-image factors were of importance, then the frequent criticism of Hobbes as not following through his logic and advocating a global social contract would be justified.[22] However, the significance he assigns to domestic processes within the state explains why the security of states is less compromised than would be that of individuals in the original state of nature. Unlike individuals, states are constrained in their commitment to the race for power, because sovereigns have to “uphold thereby the industry of their subjects”.[23] External power maximization would require that citizens risk their lives in war and pay exorbitantly high taxes. That would threaten their security and thereby compromise the foundation of the sovereign’s authority.[24] Accordingly, a state cannot focus exclusively on external threats without compromising its security from within.

It is at this point that Thucydides’ observations differ most decidedly from Hobbes’. His conception of the state is different from that of Hobbes, and so is therefore his evaluation of the second-level variable. Hobbes regards the sovereign as representing all subjects and concentrating all power.[25] What Max Weber defined in “Politics as a

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Vocation” as the monopoly of legitimate violence did not exist in the Greek city states described by Thucydides, where there was usually no considerable police force.[26] It was not the concentration of power, but the shared national character which united citizens. Thus, national character plays a much larger role for Thucydides than for Hobbes. Certainly, Athenian daring influenced their imperialism, a view expressed by the Corinthians at Lacedaemon[27] and their moral ideals led them to reconsider the cruel punishment of Mytilene.[28] However, the fact that the conservative Spartans went to war shows that just like the state-level variable interferes with Hobbes’ third-image analysis, so the third-image variable can outplay the effects of national character in Thucydides.

There is a further influential second-image variable besides the security of citizens noted by Hobbes and their national character focussed on by Thucydides: The regime-type. For Hobbes, the sovereign has the complete authority to decide “means [...] he shall think most fit for [the end, which is the common peace and defence]”. [29] However, he can misuse his authority to further his private interest.[30] The larger the difference between the sovereign’s private and the public interest, the less will the latter be pursued in foreign policies. Hobbes argues that this difference is smaller in monarchies than in democracies, who need the “reputation of some one eminent man” to keep them up.[31]

This description of a good leader applies perfectly to Pericles, “the first man [...] at Athens”, [32] whose rule is presented by Thucydides in positive terms.[33] Hobbes himself sees his opinions represented by the historian: “There’s none that pleas’d me like Thucydides. He says Democracy’s a Foolish Thing...” [34] Although “foolish” may overstate Thucydides’ opinion, the chronicler of the Peloponnesian war describes Pericles’ death and the resultant internal struggle for power as having a negative impact on Athens’ policies.[35] This suggests that Thucydides agrees with Hobbes that the form of leadership has a stronger impact than Political Realism would account for, which in the case of democracy is likely to be negative.

To sum up, one can assert that – at least in the examined aspects – Hobbes’ and Thucydides’ views on the sources of state behaviour are strikingly similar; given that they were a philosopher and a historian whose writings lie circa 2000 years apart. Both agree with the same core Realist assumptions, explaining the persistence of conflict by a security dilemma resulting from anticipation in anarchy, and agreeing that states pursue relative power. Together, they deviate from other Realists in their shared opinion that state behaviour can be simultaneously pushed in different directions by influences from at least two levels. Both disagree with Realism by assigning an influence to the regime-type, holding that democracies tend to have negative impacts. The effect assigned to society is the only point where Hobbes and Thucydides decidedly disagree not only from Realism but also from each other. Here, Thucydides’ allows for a larger impact of the national character. Hobbes, on the contrary, points to the state-level as presenting a practical constraint on state-behaviour which is mostly not taken into account by Realists. While the impacts of these differences should not be neglected, one finds a surprisingly strong correlation between the views of the philosopher and the ancient scholar on the origins of state behaviour.

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[2] Jack Donnelly, "Realism and International Relations" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.81

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[4] Donnelly, p.18, Op.Cit

[5] Brown, p.100, Op.Cit.

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[7] Ibid

[8] Hobbes, XXIX, Op.Cit.

[9] Ibid, XIII

[10] See 9

[11] Ibid

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[12] See Jonathan Monten, "Thucydides and Modern Realism", Article in "International Studies Quarterly" Vol 50, No 1, 2006, p.3-25

[13] Thucydides, I:75, Op.Cit.

[14] Clifford W. Brown, "Thucydides, Hobbes and the derivation of anarchy" in History of Political Thought Volume VIII, spring 1978

[15] Thucydides, I:93, Op.Cit.

[16] Gabriella Slomp, "Thomas Hobbes and the political philosophy of glory" (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p.52 - 53

[17] Hobbes, XVII, Op.Cit.

[18] Ibid

[19] Thucydides, I:18, Op.Cit.

[20] Thucydides, VIII:87, Op.Cit.

[21] Brown, p.100, Op.Cit.

[22] Vincent, John, "The Hobbesian tradition in twentieth-century international thought", Millennium 10:91-101, 1981, p. 85; See also Michael C. Williams, "Hobbes and international relations: a reconsideration", International Organization, Vol 50, Issue 2 (Spring 1996)

[23] See 9

[24] See Michael C. Williams, Op.Cit; Michael W. Doyle, "Ways of War and Peace" ((New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p.116

[25] See 16

[26] Richard Ned Lebow, "The tragic vision of politics" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.259

[27] Thucydides, I:70, Op.Cit.

[28] Ibid, III:36

[29] Hobbes, XVIII, Op.Cit.

[30] Ibid, XIX

[31] Ibid, XXV

[32] Ibid, I:139

[33] Thucydides, II:65, Op.Cit

[34] Hobbes in J.C.A.Gaskin ed., "The Elements of Law" (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), p.256

[35] See 31

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