“How can an alternative interpretation of Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ be of relevance to IR theory today?”

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“The average citizen of Oceania never sets eyes on a citizen of either Eurasiaor Eastasia, and he is forbidden the knowledge of foreign languages. If he were allowed contact with foreigners he would discover that they are creatures similar to himself and that most of what he has been told about them is lies… The main frontiers must never be crossed by anything except bombs.” George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*

The anarchical Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ is a commonly used paradigm in IR theory, and yet alternative understandings of Hobbes’ work call into question the degree to which he himself could be accurately described as ‘Hobbesian’. This essay examines the reinterpretation of the state of nature concept as *epistemic* anarchy, arguing that this is in fact more faithful to Hobbes’ ideas than the concept’s appropriation by the Realist tradition, and that it generates an understanding of human nature and authority which is highly relevant to contemporary ideas about value pluralism and cultural relativism. It then explores this unresolved paradox in Hobbes’ work: namely the application of notions of equality and anarchy to the international realm, and how these can be reconciled with a stable and peaceful system in the absence of a global Leviathan. Finally, this essay considers the role of IR theory in developing and legitimising the dominant (Realist) conceptualisation in IR of other-as-enemy, arguing that IR theory is limited as an analytical discipline, given that its particularist worldview contradicts the idea of value pluralism present in Hobbes’ writings.

HOBBES AND THE STATE OF NATURE

In the Realist dogma Hobbes is used as an ideological cornerstone. Much has been made of his description of mankind’s natural condition as a “warre of every man against every man”, and the logical consequence of this being that “nothing can be unjust… Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues” (Hobbes 1977: 90). He has thus been taken to describe the world as an anarchic system in which strength rules, and there exists no higher moral framework within which the struggle for power is played out. The Leviathan’s purpose is to provide stability, on the condition that citizens surrender to it their right to exercise power. This is used in Realism to justify the trinity of state, security and self-interest, and this position has come to be called ‘Hobbesian’. However this application of Hobbes’ writings to international relations theory is highly unsatisfactory. Without giving an exhaustive explanation of all the ways in which the Realist school takes Hobbes’ words entirely out of context, it is nevertheless quite clear that Hobbes was “attempting to create a new political understanding and with it, new political practices,*not describe an existing state of affairs* between Hobbesian Leviathans” (Williams 1996: 232; my emphasis). Therefore the use of his theory as a *justification* of power politics is not only to ignore the complexities of his characterisation of state and society, but also to fundamentally misinterpret the normative quality of his writings.

Furthermore, the Realist claims objectivity – he claims to know and represent the world as it 'really' is, however unpleasant to our moral sensibilities that may be. However, as Michael Williams and Richard Tuck argue, the influence of the Sceptical movement on Hobbes actually led him to regard as impossible such essentialistic assertions of objective knowledge. His was a certain nominalism – for example, in *Leviathan* he writes, "…these words of good, evil, and contemptibel are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so" (cited in Williams 1996: 217). Certain natural conditions, such as his declaration of the fundamental equality of men (1977: 86), mean that no individual can legitimately claim authority over others. For Hobbes, there was no universal moral framework. In challenging the Realists' exclusive rights to Hobbes, we can dispute the idea that this absence of natural moral authority creates a condition of literal anarchy, reinterpreting it as an "epistemic and ethical anarchy" (Williams 1996: 219) in which uncertainty is created by the *potential* for conflict. Indeed, Hobbes' constant condition of war is manifested "not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto" (1977: 89).

This generates a significantly different characterisation of human nature. Unlike the conventional interpretation, which makes competition and security central to the individual's motivation behind antagonistic behaviour, we can now see that Hobbes finds the root of such behaviour in this general condition of epistemic uncertainty. This removes the aggressive trait from Hobbes' conception of human nature, instead locating it in "the social construction of action" (Williams 1996: 215). However, the observation that this disposition naturally derives from the problematic of man's sociability is not to be treated as justification of aggression. Despite the absence of a higher, common notion of what is right and what is good, one qualitative distinction can be made: that which differentiates between those particular actions or judgements which contribute to the maintenance of peace, and those which do not. Peace is in the interest of the self-preservation of all – thus it is "Hobbes' minimal moral consensus" (Lister 1998: 51).

For Hobbes, then, conflict arises not from the essentially competitive nature of human beings, but from the uncertain nature of a society in which different truths and different epistemologies compete for legitimacy. Conflict is rooted in the encounter with the Other. Thus the function of the sovereign power is to fix meanings, in the interest of maintaining periods of peace and epistemic stability. It is important to note that this conceives of state authority as a *function*, unlike the Realist characterisation of power as "an objective capability" (Williams 1996: 223). The absolute authority of Hobbes' Leviathan – and by implication, the epistemic harmony it maintains – is undermined if ideologically challenged and, as Lister notes, it is therefore necessary for the Leviathan to regulate opinion (1998: 56). This does not necessarily justify totalitarianism and the repression of dissent; but rather is seen as a process of educating and creating acceptance and support among the population, in order "to legitimise and strengthen the political order of the state" (Williams 1996: 220). It is clear from this understanding that for Hobbes, epistemic stability and political stability are mutually constitutive and interdependent. Furthermore, there is evidently a strong normative emphasis to his work, in the interest of maintaining peace.

BEYOND HOBBES

The Leviathan, acting to provide ideological stability in a condition of uncertainty, is a mechanism of state or domestic authority. However Hobbes does not explicitly apply his model to the international realm. Yet we can see that Hobbes' acceptance of diversity, and of the equality of different epistemologies and different claims to truth, reflect current debates around pluralism and cultural relativism. The problem occurs when we attempt to reconcile these concepts with a system of peaceful coexistence in the absence of common moral or ideological ground – and, as Lister notes, this contradiction is far from adequately resolved in Hobbes' writings (Lister 1998: 58). The Leviathan

model may present a domestic solution, but the degree of cultural difference between actors in the international sphere is such that “there will be no agreement about what should be done, and everyone will act on the basis of their own different assessments of the situation” (Tuck 1989: 64). The focus of analysis is therefore located in the encounter between self and Other.

Many Realist and neo-Realist explorations of this issue seem unable to escape the assumptions that interaction means competition, or that individual self-interest inevitably prevails (see for example Waltz 1959: 167-8). Contrastingly, many writers on the colonial encounter, as well as anthropologists concerned with the construction of community, understand the principle function of intercultural interaction to be its defining role in the conception of the Self. Todorov (1984: 42-3) uses Columbus as an example of the “double movement” – the double response to the Amerindian Other as either a human being with equal rights (the ‘noble savage’), or as an fundamentally different and inevitably inferior creature (the ‘dirty dog’). The important point is that in either case, the encounter is entirely egocentric, since it consists of a projection of culturally specific values onto the Other, a universalisation that denies “the existence of a human substance *truly other*” (1984: 42-3, my emphasis) – a denial that there can be an Other both equal *and* different. The paradox is identical to that present in Hobbes’ theorisation: how do we reconcile the fundamental equality of human beings, and of their different cultures/epistemologies/value systems, with the epistemic and ethical anarchy this principle necessarily creates? There has been no satisfactory solution to this paradox. We can see examples of Todorov’s ‘double movement’ all the way from Columbus to current discourses around ‘development’, ‘universal’ human rights, or the supposedly universal applicability of the Anglo-American liberal democratic model – all of which presume Other societies either to be comparable to the West in some earlier stage of its historical development, or capable and desirable of assimilation into a Western-led global system.

This seems reasonable grounds for a degree of pessimism about the prospects of resolving this paradox. However, Todorov also notes that certain Spaniards did oppose the colonising mission, either because as individuals they managed to understand the Amerindians as both equal *and* different, or because through spending time in these societies they grew to attain this understanding (1984: 188-9; 237-8). This suggests that there is no fixed or universal rule that determines the international/intercultural encounter as necessarily conflictual; rather, as agents it *is* possible for us to relativise our cultural parochialism through dialogue with the Other – “cultural interactions admit of growth, the creation of new structures of self-other relations” (Inayatullah and Blaney 1997: 80). Furthermore, as Ashis Nandy argues, the assertion of cultural relativism does not necessarily exclude the possibility of locating shared and therefore universalisable values, since many of man’s basic values “derive from man’s biological self and social experience” (1987: 17; 22; 54-5).

IR THEORY: FUNCTIONS AND FOUNDATIONS

Accepting, then, that this form of encounter may provide a different way of dealing with the problem of Other epistemologies and cultural relativism, we can make a case for normative IR theory to address this same concern. Unfortunately, the evaluative premise of normative theory presents us with another, related paradox: the norms and value systems of each state differ, and we must accept each as being valid as our own. In the context of this ‘value pluralism’ any interaction, if it fails to first identify truly common ground, “runs the danger of simply reflecting existing power structures” (Lensu 2000: xii) – and this can certainly be observed in IR theory. Mainstream IR is premised on the assumption of objectivity; however, as Robert Cox warns, where knowledge claims to be impartial “it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective” (1986: 207). In fact, our hegemonic IR theory does not suffer this examination well. The concept of the state of nature as a *contemporary* condition arose out

of the European discourses that ultimately served to legitimise the actions of the Spaniards in their encounter with the Amerindians, by constructing a contemporary Other as both wholly external and qualitatively different. In Beate Jahn's analysis this understanding of the international realm as the state of nature becomes "the defining claim of IR, its very raison d'ètre" (1999: 411) – since it provided an ideological foundation for the universalisation of European theory and European political models, for the justification of the Realist notion of 'might is right', and for the separation of domestic and external affairs (1999: 412-3). In this sense, IR theory can be seen as a product of the political and social developments taking place during the early modern period.

This has two important implications. Firstly, the state of nature paradigm under which IR theory operates was established as (and remains) an "ethos of survival", in which the encounter with the Other is constructed as an encounter with the enemy (Odysseos 2002: 403). That this ethos is partly derived from Hobbes, and his impression of the need for sovereign authority, is paradoxical because his state of nature thesis (as this essay has demonstrated) *can* be interpreted in a way that necessitates a recognition of Other as equal *and* different. Secondly, IR theory is the universalisation of a profoundly Eurocentric methodology, which suggests that its *function* far outweighs its analytical value – indeed, Rob Walker argues that IR theory should be understood "as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained [rather] than as explanations of contemporary world politics" (1995: 6). Walker, however, is sceptical about the prospect of a new paradigm that takes "humanity" as a meaningful political category (1995:6). Yet it is arguable, as Stephen Chan suggests, that there *is* hope for International Relations to become international in its methodology too – for a "meaningful project of rough compound universals, awkward syntheses" between different value systems and epistemologies (2000: 73) to be attempted, as already discussed. It is essential, however, first to reject the realist state of nature paradigm which frames the self/Other relationship as self/enemy; and second, to relativise IR theory acknowledging both the particularity of its world view and its historical and political function in defining the Other.

"Hobbes believed that peace required a substantial change in people's self-understanding – a Hobbesian reformulation of the evaluative vocabularies in which individuals grasp the social world" (Lister 1998: 55). In attempting to overcome the unresolved paradoxes of 'Hobbesianism', namely the contradiction between understanding Other epistemologies as equally valid as one's own and the 'epistemic anarchy' this understanding produces, I argue that a fundamental change is necessary both in the approach with which we engage in the international/intercultural encounter, *and* in the theorisation of such encounters. Such a change would be closer in spirit to Hobbes' original prescription for society and, more importantly, it would revolutionise IR theory itself – a revolution which is absolutely crucial if IR is to properly make sense of the world in all its diversity, instead of merely making sense of hegemonic cultures and dominant paradigms.

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