

Should Martin Wight be so pessimistic about IR?

Written by James Sloan

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JAMES SLOAN, MAR 7 2011

The aim of this essay is to analyse the reasoning behind Martin Wight's fears that International Relations, as an academic subject, does not contain a sufficiently large enough philosophical background, which he may have feared prevented the study of the subject from being taken seriously, and also, prevented IR as a discipline from sufficiently framing the philosophical nature of interactions that nation-states undertake on the international arena. Wight's principle piece of work on this matter is entitled 'Why is there no International Theory?' published in 'Diplomatic Investigations' which contains a compendium of essays all discussing elements of IR theory. His introductory essay aims at reasoning why, in his own view, IR theory is a sparse field, and why IR as a distinct discipline cannot be codified into theory with the same ease that domestic politics can be. This essay shall base its findings upon Wight's essay, taking key considerations from his text and arguing either, why he is right, as Wight often can be, over the reasons for so little theory existing, and also why on occasion he is wide of the mark and should not be so pessimistic of IR having so little theory. Indeed, perhaps world affairs is a more exciting place without any prerequisite ideas as to what it should be, thus, this essay shall explore his meaning and conclude accordingly. As an aside, when discussing the theory of International Relations, capital letters shall indicate this, most likely abbreviated to IR. When state behaviour is discussed, such as relationships between sovereign states, international relations in lower case shall be used; it is worth pointing out such distinctions to ensure there is no confusion amongst the two format uses, both with slightly differing meanings.

As a starting point, it must be noted that the primary essay being analysed, written by Wight, was published in 1966, with original parts of it clearly written in the 1950s. Indeed, of particular note is of Wight's speculation on the future retirement of the former UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, who by the time of publishing had died, whilst still in office, yet Wight stubbornly retains the sentence, refusing to remove his argument from the text, but covers his statement by adding the caveat that the particular sentence was written in 1958.[1] To analyse his musings with a view taken 50 years later, where the field of international relations has developed at an almighty pace, it can thus make his assumptions, at times, appear quaint, whilst concurrently making the reader aware that although the world has moved apace since this publication, certain elements of his arguments remain pertinent to this day. The pace at which international relations has moved, that were Wight around today, he may not have recognised the change in IR theory following the almighty shift in international politics, which saw certain foundations of the global system alter towards the end of the 1980s, following the collapse of the bi-polar world order. Yet, at the same time, nation-states still retain the sovereign powers that they held in the 1960s, but, from his text, it appears that what was rather underestimated in Wight's thinking was the role that international and trans-regional groupings, such as the UN, NATO, European Union, African Union and such like, would take in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. The emergence of such bodies has to be taken into consideration when discussing International Relations theory, as they have an increasing and important role to play in the shaping of IR theory in the present day. Most such bodies, bar the UN had a much more primitive existence (if at all) when Wight was looking to confer a theory.

'By "international theory" is meant a tradition of speculation about relations between states, a tradition imagined as the twin of speculation about the state to which the name "political theory" is appropriated. And international theory in this sense does not, at first sight, exist.'[2] What Wight infers from this passage is that the political theories used to analyse how states work, and the political systems that inhibit them, has an inappropriate methodology to be applied within a larger context. In one respect, he is right with this view. The implication being that relationships between states do not operate upon the same level that domestic politics operates, and crucially, how domestic politics is

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viewed. Thus any attempt to create an international 'vision' from a theory of domestic politics would be an inappropriate cause of action. He goes on to surmise that 'Neither Marx, Lenin nor Stalin made any systematic contribution to international theory...'[3] Of course, today in IR theory there exists a Marxist school of thought; yet the idea that this would come about was not contemplated by Wight.

Wight seems to take an almost snobbish view of the then existing literature that had been written on international relations. The claim that '...it is difficult to say that any of them has the status of a political classic' is a sweeping statement to make without delving into the literature he deems so uninspiring.[4] He mentions theorists, but fails to fully examine the existing literature in a deep enough manner to back up his pessimistic viewpoint. '...international theory...is scattered, unsystematic, and mostly inaccessible to the layman.'[5] Today, this is arguably still the case. This pessimism seems rightly placed, as what Wight seems to understand is that no theory of IR has come around that has inspired the public imagination at large; whilst Machiavelli or Hobbes may not exactly be found on every individual's bookshelf, their names may spark at least a vague sense of recognition, something that cannot be argued for any theorist of international relations.

Wight blames the lack of any appropriate theory upon the disciplines apparent survival upon historical analysis. The ordering of nations based upon the principle of state-sovereignty has, he believes, caused the vacuum in IR theory. [6] Yet, this apparently negative view, that Wight takes, believing that the use of historical assumptions in IR creates an intellectual space, whereby theory should be filled, perhaps misses the point of the development of modern IR theory. Realist and liberal schools of thought have dominated modern IR thinking; both theories have found proponents in governments around the world. Yet, in spite of the growth of the use of such theories, it would appear to suggest that their growth has been sparked by the need of states to articulate their relations with other members of the international community. This coincidentally seemed to arise from the period in which foreign policy analysis became an independent area of study, distinct from general IR.[7] Thus it could be said that Wight's determination in trying to find areas of international relations to theorise meant that he was simply ahead of his time, and the growth in IR theory to follow, was an attempt to try and categorise the relationships between states during the later part of the Cold War era. Coinciding with the need of states to recognise a theoretical element to their international relationships, is the understanding that perhaps only history will be able to truly offer a reflection as to what theory an individual state, or indeed a group of states, undertook in international affairs.

The use of history to frame debates in IR is an essential element to ensure not only to give theory a perspective, but also to guide future theorising of international relations behaviour. There is an incomprehensible nature for Wight's use of historical examples whilst discussing international relations, yet his apparent dislike of history as a guide to theorise the nature of IR. History as an independent area of study should not be jettisoned in order to project a purely theoretical-based approach to the study of international relations. It surely adds a richness of examples to add to any theoretical framework. However, to defend Wight on this point, there was so little international theory around when he was a proponent of this argument that it is, to an extent, understandable to see why he was perhaps so belittling of the role of history in the formulation of IR theory. Trying to place political thinking into an equation may seem to be a little odd when trying to analyse why no theory exists. Wight somehow manages to succeed with his equation whereby 'Politics: International Politics = Political Theory: Historical Interpretation.'[8] This seems to sum up his view that IR is littered with historical comparisons rather than political assumptions.

It has been acknowledged that Wight himself contributed to the theorising of IR studies, particularly in his seminal 'System of States' publication. Indeed Ian Clark calls it '...one of the great paradoxes...' that Wight takes such a stance on the state of IR theory literature.[9] Perhaps it was Wight's own refusal to himself be pinned to any particular school of thought that allowed his own judgements to be clouded into believing that there could not exist a deep enough philosophy of international relations. Yet, the publication of 'System of States' may not have been possible without Wight holding the view that IR theory was so lacking in available literature.

The passing of time has a great effect upon judgements and how views can be interpreted. One suggestion would be that international problems that were theoretical when Wight was actively interested in the field, have now become real-life issues.[10] Again, such a conclusion can be made, with 50 years hindsight (perhaps an irony that would not be lost on Wight, were he around today).

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His dismissal of international law as a source of an intellectual starting point for IR was determined because '...international law seems to follow as an inverse movement to that of international politics.' [11] Again, the passing of time allows different reflections to be made upon such criticisms. The development of international law, alongside international relations in the past five decades has seen the merging of ideas and theories due to the ever complicit nature of the two entities. It would be impossible to analyse international law without any understanding of issues in the international community. Yet, at the same time, the ideas of international law are often more theoretical than practical measures, despite the need for law to be workable in practice. Thus, to ignore the basis of international law as a basic grounding for IR theory is again on Wight's part, a misdemeanour of his thinking, where theoretical arguments potentially already existed.

It can be said that '...“theory” can be tested against a “reality” which is already “out there”...' [12] thus, it is perhaps Wight's ideal that by having a theory of IR, it could be analysed, or indeed 'tested' by the physical actions of states. This way of thinking can be attributed to the later successes of realist and liberal thought, whereby the standard practices of the political theories can be taken and examined with regard to state behaviour. Yet, perhaps a caveat should be inserted here; it may be possible to pigeon-hole state action into a certain ideological framework, but surely state action, in international terms, is more often than no, a unique act that cannot be neatly described by a theory, but upon some reflection can be analysed, and thus placed into a certain strand of theory.

Wight's grievances that there is no theory can in part be placated by the questions over what IR should be a study about. International Relations as a field is as broad or as narrow as the individual may wish it to be; should it be about the diplomatic and political relations between states, or the relationships between trans-national bodies? It could be suggested that Martin Wight is simply so aggrieved because IR is not a singular discipline, but one that crosses academic discourse. [13] Wight clearly understands the existence of academic literature in the fields of history, law and philosophy, but perhaps it is a fact of the matter, that he cannot accept that IR is just that – a cross section of disciplines, that is richer for having numerous schools of thought being applied to it, thus adding a dynamic that is more alien to the study of domestic political science.

'...international theory may be supposed to be a...speculation about the society of states, or the family of nations, or the international community.' [14] Thus, could it be said that in this respect, Wight had found the area where IR theory could be best theorised. The problem facing Wight was that he was simply ahead of his time, and could not realise the impact that he himself would have on the study of IR. The institutions that bind the sovereignty of states together, such as the EU as mentioned, did not truly find a significant role in the international order until the expansion of globalisation – another conception that was little heard of in Wight's time. Indeed, today, theorists that involve international relations are much more concerned with the concept of governance and the future of the nation-state, with the likes of David Held as a prominent contemporary example of such theory.

Having taken Martin Wight's essay entitled 'Why is there no International Theory', and performed a critical evaluation of it, conclusions can be drawn about his fears that International Relations has no distinct theory that can be uniquely applied to the subject area. It is pertinent that Wight believes there must be an academic study of IR, and seems unable to justify the separate schools of thought, through historical, legal and philosophical as acceptable for the subject. This is an unnecessarily negative view upon the subject area, and surely the richness in variety of backgrounds adds to the understanding of international relations, rather than detracting from it. But perhaps the slightly ironic aspect to this apparent pessimism towards IR theory, by Wight himself, is his own contribution to the subject area! His 'System of States' publication provides a form of theoretical framework to IR, that still has the ability to stand up to scrutiny in the early 21st Century, despite, as mentioned, the considerably changed international relations landscape.

Perhaps underestimated by Wight is the possibility that history can provide a link to the creation of a theoretical framework in which international relations can be understood. It would seem to be, that Wight was simply ahead of his time, and that the theorising of International Relations was already in existence, but that it was simply too obtuse in nature, and thus not a simple consideration of the international system meeting a set of political criteria

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- [1] Wight, Martin 'Why is there no International Theory in Butterfield, Herbert and Wight, Martin (Eds) *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: George Allan and Unwin Ltd) 1966, p 21

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- [2] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 17
- [3] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 25
- [4] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 17
- [5] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 20
- [6] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 32
- [7] Burchill and Linklater *Theories of International Relations* p 10
- [8] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 33
- [9] Clark, Ian 'Traditions of Thought and Classical Theories of International Relations' in Clark, Ian and Neumann, Iver B. (Eds) *Classical Theories of International Relations* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd) 1999, p1
- [10] Leggold, Joseph 'Is Anyone Listening?: International Relations Theory and the Problem of Policy Relevance' 113/1 *Political Science Quarterly*, p 45
- [11] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 29
- [12] Burchill, Scott and Linklater, Andrew in Burchill, Linklater et al *Theories of International Relations* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan) 2009, p 4
- [13] Burchill and Linklater *Theories of International Relations* p 6
- [14] Wight, Martin *Diplomatic Investigations* p 18

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