

# Tracing Hobbes in Realist International Relations Theory

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The realist school of international relations is known to draw heavily from the political thought of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli. While Machiavelli's contribution to realism is the dichotomy of politics and morality, Hobbes is credited for the relevance of his anarchic state of nature in the international realm. In this essay, I examine the criterion for interpreting Hobbesian political thought, specifically his work *Leviathan*, as a precursor to classical realism and neorealism. This essay proceeds in four sections. The first section compares the arguments in Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* and Hobbesian political thought with reference to the analogy of the state of nature. The second section emphasizes the ontology of the state in *Leviathan* and contrasts it with realist claims of the anarchic international system. The last section further differentiates between the positivism of neorealism and the rationalism of Hobbes to argue the incongruence of the Hobbesian state of nature with the international system. I conclude by arguing that both classical realists and neorealists fail to address the theoretical gaps in their appropriation of Hobbes.

### **Politics Among Nations and the State of Nature**

Hobbesian description of the state of nature has been termed as the bedrock of the realist theory. Sovereign individuals in their natural surroundings are in a perpetual 'state of war' against each other with the primal goal of self-preservation<sup>[1]</sup>. Hobbes depicts the state of nature as bereft of any culture or community that could provide a social framework of operation for humans. The state of nature is a logical postulation to determine the founding grounds of the body politic, instead of a historical observation. Prominent classical realists like Hans Morgenthau<sup>[2]</sup> and Micheal Smith<sup>[3]</sup> have cited it to be pertinent while theorising about international relations as well. The realist model has conspicuously adopted the analogy of the interpersonal state of nature to define its anarchic international state system. However, the realist school does not restrict its inspiration to the Hobbesian state of nature.

The influence of Hobbes can be traced to the structural understanding of the realist tradition, as laid out by Morgenthau. For Morgenthau, "politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature"<sup>[4]</sup>. Hobbes explains the emergence of the sovereign, the *Leviathan*, through the faculties that are natural to man. Humans are driven by desire (i.e., pleasurable endeavours) and aversion (i.e., endeavours that cause displeasure). Since all humans are incentivised by self-preservation as the absolute goal, all humans are self-interested and aim to maximise their capabilities for commodious living<sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, all individuals fear violent and sudden death at the hands of others in their self-centred pursuits. Morgenthau's characterisation of realism can be interpreted to have been built upon the features that regulate human behaviour in the state of nature.

Secondly, Morgenthau conceived realism as a rational theory of international politics. Rationalism in the works of Hobbes is evident in the description of human nature. Although individuals are primarily guided by passions, they cannot be categorised as beasts as they possess the capacity to reason. Hobbes<sup>[6]</sup> claims reason to be the arbiter between desire and aversion, and the determinant factor of human behaviour. The state is a product of the rational approach to the state of nature. The realist emphasis on determining self-interest through the means of reason depicts evident influence of Hobbesian thought.

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Thirdly, realism defines national interest in terms of power. According to Morgenthau, states can achieve their national interests only through the acquisition of power. For Hobbes, power is acquired by two actors: the individual and the state. Realists focus solely on interstate power relations, but the exposition and significance of the concept can be traced to Hobbes. In the Hobbesian state, individuals seek power to obtain their interests but more importantly to ensure their permanence<sup>[7]</sup>. Individuals may acquire resources in the state of nature, but its ephemerality ensues diffidence amongst them. The pursuit of power hence stems from human nature. The state requires power over the other to impose order and the compliance of law. Without its coercive power, or as Hobbes calls it the *Sword*, the state cannot enforce laws and fulfil its interests<sup>[8]</sup>. In the same breadth, Morgenthau dismisses motives and ideological preferences as analytical approaches to explain phenomena in international politics, owing to their misleading unknowability. Drawing upon rationalism, Morgenthau<sup>[9]</sup> argues that a struggle for power is a struggle to underpin the interests of the state. Albeit Hobbes in his works primarily considers power in relations between individual-individual and state-individual, realists locate accretion of power at the core of their framework of interstate relations.

## Ontology of the Hobbesian State and the Global *Leviathan*

Hobbes in *Leviathan* laid the ontological roots of the state or political society through the covenant of self-interested individuals. Hobbes notes that the primary factors that drive human behaviour, the fear of death and the desire for commodious living, are also responsible for pulling humans out of the state of nature through reason. In order to secure peaceful co-existence and self-preservation, sovereign individuals agree upon the 'Articles of Peace' that establish the laws of nature or *Lex Naturalis*<sup>[10]</sup>. Hobbes argues that a sovereign is created as a necessary fictitious corporation with powers of coercion as a means to ensure obedience to laws amongst individuals. In his limited attempts at commenting on relations between kingdoms, Hobbes clarified that sovereign kings exist in constant caution of their neighbours, armed with artillery and in a state which is "a posture of war"<sup>[11]</sup>. Realists cite this claim to argue that individuals in the state of nature are substituted by states in the international state of nature. The principles embedded in human nature are thus subsequently applicable to states and their behaviour. However, the implications of shifting the unit of analysis from individuals to states raise a few concerns. It must be noted that while Hobbesian interpersonal state of nature is an exercise in logical postulation, his remark on relations between kingdoms is an empirical observation. The worth of this difference in epistemological approach towards the ontology of the state and description of interstate relations will become clear as I expand upon the epistemology of Hobbes.

The parallel between the individual in the interpersonal state of nature and the state in the international state of nature requires a comparison from ontological perspectives. The individual in *Leviathan* ontologically precedes the state. The state is a fictitious corporation created by individuals to ensure peaceful coexistence. The state does not have a life of its own, its existence is determined by the efficacy of its coercion and acquiescence amongst individuals<sup>[12]</sup>. While Hobbes termed humans to be sovereign individuals, the concept is inconsistent with the sovereignty of a state. Individuals renounce their sovereignty for the foundation of the state, however, when states renounce their sovereignty they cease to exist. Thereby, sovereignty is indispensable for states, whereas for individuals, relinquishing sovereignty is critical for their self-preservation.

The rational conclusion to the international state of nature analogy results in the existence of a global *Leviathan*. Classical realists like Morgenthau, contrastingly to neorealists, have even chided Hobbes for not reaching the natural conclusion of the analogy<sup>[13]</sup> with the formation of an internationally dominant state. However, the absence of any overarching authority and the prevalence of perennial anarchy in international relations is the cornerstone of the neorealist school<sup>[14]</sup>. For the Hobbesian analogy to be incongruent with neorealism, classical realists had to justify the existence of a global state and vice versa. This displays a structural contradiction within classical realism and neorealism in their references to Hobbes.

Hobbes declared humans to have largely equal capabilities, which consequently implied that any human can cause debilitating injury to any other<sup>[15]</sup>. This does not hold true for states in international relations. States with disparaging military might and economic resources are in constant strife to accumulate power. In international relations, it is plausible for certain states to not be apprehensive of other states with lesser capabilities because they never pose a credible threat. Perhaps the inequality amongst states is ontologically responsible for the realist conceptions of power

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politics and balance of power. Weaker states form counter-alliances or defect as a response to the hegemonic state, only because individual states do not possess the material resources to independently protect their own interests<sup>[16]</sup>. Various neorealists decry the dominance of one state over others for the purpose of preserving international equilibrium and minimising possibilities of war.<sup>[17]</sup> The salient disapproval of a dominant state in neorealism leaves no space for conceiving a global *Leviathan*.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes states that no industry can develop in the state of nature because individuals are ruled by the constant fear of a violent and sudden death. Once the sovereign emerges, peace is instilled and individuals become capable of upholding culture. According to neorealists, a global sovereign violates the tenet of their anarchic international system. In Hobbesian political thought, the state is viewed as a means to the end of self-preservation of all and enforcement of laws. In the international system, since individual states already fulfil those conditions, the logical parallel to a global state never arises. Thus, in classical realism, international politics eliminates the requirement of a global behemoth because individuals can have prosperous industries within the boundaries of their states. Both classical realism and neorealism demonstrate disparate conditions of the international state of nature and hence, both remain incoherent with the Hobbesian state of nature due to their inability to construct a sovereign.

## Hobbesian Epistemology and Neorealist Positivism

Neorealism identifies the structure of the international system rather than human nature as the underpinnings of its principles<sup>[18]</sup>. The positivist turn in international relations is the foremost difference between the epistemological approaches of neorealism and classical realism. Waltz considers Hobbes a classical realist<sup>[19]</sup> precisely because his ostensible international state system is centred around human nature, whereas neorealists derive their theory from a structural and scientific understanding of the international system. Waltz's neorealism is based on the interpretation of empirical evidence regarding international relations as facts of the international system. Hobbes denies the credibility of empiricism in the construction of theories and calls them probabilistic at best<sup>[20]</sup>. In empiricism, Hobbes highlights the subjectivity of sensory experience in order to substantiate that no absolute and universal knowledge can exist due to differences in individual capabilities.

The nominalism in Hobbesian thought is shaped by his deep-rooted scepticism towards any claims of objective and universal knowledge, a principal feature of positivism<sup>[21]</sup>. Therefore, his construction of the *Lex Naturalis* might seem inconsistent with his epistemology, as it relies on collective comprehension by individuals. However, the acknowledgment of *Lex Naturalis* does not translate to epistemic agreement over its constitution. The individual indefiniteness regarding meanings<sup>[22]</sup> and facts in the state of nature produced chaos that impedes the pursuit of commodious living. Hobbes argued that the state acts as the source of epistemic authority to relieve the state of nature of its epistemological anarchy. The rationalism in Hobbesian political thought poses a determinate challenge to the positivist approach of neorealism.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that classifying Hobbes as a realist is an exercise in oversimplification. The first section expounds on the reflections of Hobbesian thought in the principles featured in Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*. While there are similarities between the state of nature and realist description of the international system, the perspectives around the ontology of the Hobbesian state in the second section show the essential characteristics associated with individuals become irrelevant when individuals are substituted with states. The consequences of changing the unit of analysis call for a realist defence of the Global *Leviathan* and the operational failure of civilisation in the international state of nature. Through epistemological differences in the last section, it becomes clear that the positivism of neorealism contrasts with the rationalism of Hobbes to construct knowledge. This essay concludes that a complete appropriation of the Hobbesian political thought necessitates justification and discursive engagement from realist scholars that has been hitherto lacking.

## End Notes

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[1] Thomas Hobbes, "Chapter 13," in *Leviathan* (1651; repr., New York: Penguin Classics, 2017), 76-79.<sup>[2]</sup> Hans J Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, ed. Kenneth W Thompson, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1978), 243.

[3] Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 13.

[4] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4.

[5] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 32.

[6] Hobbes, 26-31.

[7] Hobbes, 61.

[8] Hobbes, 103.

[9] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5.

[10] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 80.

[11] Hobbes, 79.

[12] Hobbes, 106.

[13] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 525.

[14] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 115.

[15] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 79.

[16] John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford University Press, 2007).

[17] See Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft*. (Greenwood Press, 1955); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 123-128.

[18] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 61.

[19] Waltz, 66.

[20] Michael C. Williams, "Hobbes and International Relations: A Reconsideration," *International Organization* 50, no. 2 (1996): 213-36.

[21] John H Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004).

[22] Williams, "Hobbes and International Relations: A Reconsideration," 218.

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