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Contents

Introduction

In their first forays into the field, international relations (IR) undergraduates are taught that Kant's argument for peace among democracies marks him out as an early exponent of IR liberalism and that Thucydides, Rousseau and Hobbes – proponents of anarchical power politics as they were – can be considered forefathers of IR realism (Bain & Nardin, 2017). This appropriation of 'great thinkers' continues to be an integral part of IR scholarship and teaching. Yet the interpretations of these canonical thinkers frequently do not stand up to what these thinkers sought to argue through their texts. Indeed, as Duncan Bell (2001) observes, IR theorists often 'appear to be content with unproblematically pigeon-holing writers into simplistic 'traditions', often on the basis of a couple of quotes pulled from their works' (p. 118). So how did these misreadings gain traction in IR scholarship? Who were the intermediaries that recalled these classical thinkers into contemporary IR debates? And what factors can explain why they misread these thinkers in the first place? This thesis follows these lines of inquiry into the case of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).

Today, invoking Hobbes in IR conversations brings forth an image of war-locked states operating in a condition of anarchy. But this interpretation of Hobbes does not hold up with what he actually argued in the pages of *Leviathan*. As Noel Malcolm (2002) puts it, 'the interpretation of Hobbes put forward by modern international relations theorists … has become fixed and ossified, functioning at best as an 'ideal type' and at worst as a caricature' (p. 433). Although there is a wealth of literature that has called this misreading of Hobbes into question, there has not yet been an attempt to step back and ask why this misreading became so prevalent in IR circles. In this thesis, therefore, I ask *how* and *why* Hobbes came to be misread by theorists of international relations. I claim that although the seeds of this misreading appeared in the work of scholars writing before World War I, it was only during the 1960s to 80s that Hobbes was revived by neorealist scholars to support the axiom of international anarchy on which they sought to build a 'scientific' theory of politics.

My thesis proceeds in two parts. The first part – the literature review – sets the frame for my argument. I begin this part by showing how my work contributes to the conversation among scholars who seek to understand how 'great thinkers' came to be misread in IR scholarship. Then, I sketch a picture of the standard reading of Hobbes in IR theory and survey key arguments that demonstrate how this reading falls short. In the second part of my thesis – the argument – I move on to advance my claims. First, I retrace the genesis and development of the Hobbesian misreading in IR theory. Then, I investigate the factors that led neorealists to misread Hobbes in the first place. I conclude by reflecting on how my findings change our understanding of both Hobbes and neorealist theory.

I

This literature review comprises two sections. First, I situate my thesis within a conversation among scholars who seek to investigate how 'great thinkers' have come to be misread in IR scholarship. Second, I paint a picture of what the standard IR reading of Hobbes looks like before surveying key arguments that show how this interpretation does not stand up to a close reading of Hobbes's work.

Misreading 'Great Thinkers' in IR Theory

Why are 'great thinkers' – Hobbes, Machiavelli, Thucydides et al – so often misread in contemporary IR scholarship? One possible reason is that reading one's arguments back into the work of a long-dead thinker has been (and continues to be) a tempting way to give those ideas the weight of historical authority (Bell, 2016; Vergerio, 2018). Another potential explanation is that enlisting a 'Hobbes' or a 'Kant' as an ideological ally has proven to be a powerful way to legitimise one's political objectives (Bain & Nardin, 2017; Amorosa & Vergerio, 2022). Still more, in their attempts to extract 'perennial insights' from texts in the history of political thought (HPT) to shed light on contemporary questions, scholars often run the risk of stretching the ideas of historical

thinkers to include meanings they simply did not intend to convey (Skinner, 2002b). It is finally also plausible that in some cases, these canonical thinkers were just unintentionally misunderstood by IR theorists (for this argument, see Blau, 2017). Simply put, the possible roots of misreading in IR theory are plenty.

Recently, critical voices have begun to investigate how the interpretations of IR's canonical thinkers came to be so far removed from what these thinkers sought to argue in their work (Vigneswaran & Quirk, 2010; Bain & Nardin, 2017). A common thread in these investigations is the attention paid to the agency of 'intermediaries' who recall these thinkers into the contemporary fray. As Claire Vergerio (2018) puts it, '[w]hen great thinkers are used as weapons to defend particular projects or ideologies over others, the agency lies with those who wield their name, and the intellectual force of a Hobbes or a Grotius comes to be heavily mediated through the minds of those who claim these authors' legacy for themselves' (p. 132). Thus, uncovering how the misreadings of 'great thinkers' became prevalent in IR theory requires us to observe how these thinkers were received – by different sets of intermediaries – in IR scholarship through time. Put another way, it is only through studying the context(s) of a great thinker's reception(s) that we can find out 'the types of interests [that] shaped their legacies and gave us our contemporary interpretations of their works in the discipline' (Vergerio, 2018, p. 131).

There is a nascent body of literature that examines the reception of IR's 'great thinkers' in this way. In their work, Easley (2004), Behr and Heath (2009), Keene (2015) and Guilhot (2016) investigate the historical processes through which Kant, Rousseau, Thucydides and Machiavelli came to be misread by international relations theorists. But a comparable account of the misreading of Hobbes has yet to be written. To be sure, there are studies that examine how Hobbes has been received by IR scholars through time, but none of them aim to track down the roots of the realist (mis)interpretation of Hobbes that prevails in IR scholarship. In their discussion of the misreading of classical thinkers by neorealists in the mid-twentieth century, for example, Behr and Heath (2009) assign a small number of paragraphs to Hobbes but quickly turn their attention back

to the central subject of their essay – Rousseau. Similarly, in his book *Before Anarchy,* Theodore Christov (2016) briefly touches on the realist reception of Hobbes in the twentieth century but soon returns to retracing how he was received by international theorists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – more than three hundred years before he was christened (on the back of a misreading) as a father of IR realism. Thus, the story of how and why Hobbes first came to be misread by proponents of realist IR theory is one that remains to be told. It is this story that my thesis seeks to retrace and reveal.

Before tracing how the Hobbesian misreading first appeared in IR scholarship, however, we must first equip ourselves with a clear picture of what this misreading *is*. In the following section, I will sketch the standard 'realist' model of Hobbes before considering a critical body of literature that shows how this standard model does not stand up to a closer reading of Hobbes's work.

Misreading Hobbes

The Standard Model

What exactly does the IR-realist misreading of Hobbes look like? In 'Hobbes and the International Anarchy', Hedley Bull (1981) presents the Hobbesian logic of anarchy that has led IR realists to crown him as a father of their tradition. The realist interpretation of Hobbes, Bull writes, rests on the premise that international relations are an *instantiation* of the state of nature (which, in Hobbes's view, is a state of war). This premise, in turn, is derived from the following passage in chapter XIII of Hobbes's *Leviathan*:

> But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators; having their weapons pointing, their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons

> and guns upon the frontiers of their Kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours; which is a posture of war (Hobbes, 1651 [1991], p. 90).

In this passage, Hobbes uses international relations as an analogy for how individuals in a state of nature would interact with each other without a common power to keep them in check. From this passage, Bull (1981) concludes, 'we are entitled to infer that all of what Hobbes says about the life of individual men in the state of nature may be read as a description of the relation of states in relation to one another' (pp. 720-721). It is this equivalence between the international system and the anarchical state of nature that underpins the realist interpretation of Hobbes's thought.

From this premise, it follows that states are in a condition of war – not in the sense that they are always fighting, but rather in the sense that among states not in thrall of a common power, it is always *conceivable* and *likely* that fighting will break out. As long as this condition persists, Bull tells us, it is impossible for security communities to form. For although 'there might be relations of alliance or indifference between particular states ... over a long enough stretch of time every state will display its disposition to fight every other' (p. 721). This constant vigilance, Bull continues, is driven by *fear* – 'not in the sense of an unreasoning emotion, but rather in the sense of the rational apprehension of future insecurity' (p. 721). Because states in the international system can never be certain about the intentions of other states, they will seek to protect themselves by increasing their military strength. Indeed, Bull writes, it is this 'search for security through superior power, which, more than competition for material goods or clashes of ideology, which brings states into conflict with one another, for two contending states seeking security in this way cannot both be superior' (p. 722).

To reiterate: the realist reading of Hobbes turns on the assumption that the Hobbesian state of nature matches the international realm (which is a state of *anarchy*). Building on this premise, realists argue that the motives of fear and insecurity inherent to Hobbes's 'state of nature' can also be applied to relations among states. Hence, states are caught in a constant struggle to

secure themselves through superior military strength – 'a perpetual desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death' (Hobbes, 1651 [1991], p. 90). This, in short, is the standard model of Hobbes that prevails in IR theory.

The influence of this model runs deep. In Michele Chiaruzzi's (2011) chapter on realism in *An Introduction to International Relations* (a standard textbook used in undergraduate IR courses), Hobbes is credited with 'provid[ing] the realist tradition with perhaps its most fundamental idea ... that international life is a miserable condition because it is a state of war' (p. 54). According to Chiaruzzi, Hobbes argues that in their natural condition,

> individuals exist in a lawless or ungoverned environment, 'without a common power to keep them all in awe'. Hobbes equates this state of nature … with a state of war … But although individuals may escape this state of war, the states they form do not, Hobbes suggests; international relations are thus a state of war.

Chiaruzzi's chapter is not an isolated case. In a textbook introduction to IR realism in *The Globalization of World Politics* (Dunne & Schmidt, 2020), Hobbes is portrayed to have suggested that 'the condition of international politics closely resembles a state of war' and to have claimed that 'world politics is analogous to the life of human beings in a hypothetical state of nature' (p. 146). Further, under the entry for 'anarchy' in one popular encyclopaedia of IR concepts, Hobbes is said to have been 'the first modern political philosopher to describe international relations as anarchical' (Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 8). These are but a few examples that demonstrate the power that the standard model of Hobbes continues to hold in IR circles.

Objections to the Standard Model

Recently, however, this interpretation has come under fire. Though varied, critiques of this standard model share a common thread: they invariably take aim at the premise – underpinning

the realist interpretation of Hobbes – that international relations take place in a state of nature. In what follows I discuss two such critiques in turn.

The first is what I call the *equal vulnerability* objection. According to proponents of this critique, international relations do not resemble the Hobbesian state of nature because unlike men in their natural condition, states are not – and have never been – equally vulnerable to death. In chapter XIII of *Leviathan*, Hobbes derives his analysis of the state of nature from the premise that men, despite marginal differences in strength, are equally capable of being a threat to one another. The weakest man, in Hobbes's view, has the capacity to kill the strongest either through 'secret machination' (say, slipping poison into his tea) or by banding together with other people who also see him as a threat. It is this equal vulnerability, coupled with the fact of scarcity, that leads to the deadly competition which characterises Hobbes's state of nature.

'But this Hobbesian equality', Mark Heller (1980) writes, 'has never existed among states'. To satisfy Hobbes's premise of equal vulnerability, it must be true that the weakest state has the capacity to inflict a critical blow to the strongest. However, Heller argues, the disparities between states in the international arena 'have been too great for any organization, leadership, morale, or conventional military strategies to overcome' (p. 25). He thus concludes that the universal insecurity of individuals that forms the basis of Hobbes's state of nature has never been present in international relations.

Some scholars have pushed back against this argument, claiming that the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons has closed the gap in military capacity among states and turned the international system into more of a Hobbesian state of nature than it was before (Boucher, 2018; Gauthier, 1969). However, as Charles Beitz (1979) points out, this objection only holds if states are indeed equally vulnerable to nuclear attack. This, he argues, is untrue, for 'as long as the deterrence system works, conventional force imbalances – which are often substantial – will continue to differentiate strong states from weak ones (p. 42).

Moreover, Heller adds, this objection stems from a faulty understanding of what Hobbes means by the 'life' and 'death' of states. Heller writes that in Hobbes's philosophy:

> 'life' for states has a very precise meaning. It is the maintenance of sovereignty, the 'artificial soul', which gives 'life and motion to the whole body'. A state is killed, not when some critical proportion of its population or infrastructure is destroyed, but when force dissolves the commonwealth and 'there is no further protection of subjects in their loyalty'. In other words, a state loses its sovereignty when it is deprived of the final authority over its law-giving and law-enforcing activities (Heller, 1980, pp. 25-26).

Hence, Heller continues, we must understand Hobbes to mean that even in a situation of (nuclear) war, 'the state remains alive so long as the government is able to maintain its authority over its citizens and its ability to protect them more effectively than any alternative government … can do' (p. 26). Put another way, Hobbes's condition of equality can only be satisfied if, say, North Korea or Nepal can frighten the United States or Russia to the extent that 'they would lay down their right of nature in exchange for the freedom from fear that the world Leviathan promises' (p. 26). Because this condition does not obtain, it thus follows that – contrary to the prevalent realist reading of Hobbes – the international system is *not* an instantiation of the state of nature.

Another critique of the standard model is the *practical limits* objection. Simply put, this objection runs as follows: Unlike individuals in the state of nature, Hobbesian sovereigns face 'practical limits' on their behaviour that constrain the way they interact with each other in the international arena. The cornerstone of this argument is taken from the following passage in *Leviathan* chapter XXI:

> The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no covenant be relinquished ... The end of obedience is protection, which, wheresoever a man seeth it,

> either in his own or in another's sword, nature applieth his obedience to it, and his endeavour to maintain it (Hobbes, 1651[1991], p. 153).

The authority of sovereigns, this passage makes clear, is grounded on their ability to protect their citizens. In Hobbes's view, individuals retain the capacity to rebel against a sovereign if they feel that their lives are not protected adequately. Equally, if a group comes to feel that 'obedience to the state [is] a greater threat to their survival than disobedience', that group has the right 'to band together in mutual defence' against the sovereign (Williams, 2009, p. 264). 'Rational beings should not challenge the sovereign', Williams (2009) writes, 'but this does not mean they will not, and the 'Negligent government of Princes', [Hobbes argues] is naturally attended by 'Rebellion; and Rebellion, with Slaughter' (p. 264). Thus, while states can *in theory* treat their citizens any way they see fit, the necessity to preserve trust creates 'practical limits' that constrain their behaviour.

This has important implications for the way states interact with each other in the international arena. Because the authority of sovereigns derives from their ability to keep their subjects safe, it would be unwise for sovereigns to enter into frequent wars with other states. Besides endangering the lives of their subjects directly, adopting a posture of belligerence will erode the trust that citizens have in the sovereign's ability to assess (and respond properly to) threats. As Williams explains, the consequences of this loss of trust are fatal:

> For since the Sovereign may be asking (and potentially compelling) the citizens to put their lives at risk in war (and thus potentially allowing them to rebel on the grounds of self-preservation which is their right of nature) it can only do so if the vast majority of the population continues to trust in its adjudication of the situation (threat) and the necessity of risking their lives (Williams, 2009, p. 266).

Indeed, Williams continues, '[i]t is in war that the continuance of the sovereign's rule is potentially most in jeopardy, not just from the power of other sovereigns, but from domestic dissension' (p.

266). Thus, unlike individuals in the Hobbesian state of nature, sovereigns are bound by practical considerations that discourage belligerence in their external relations.

Both of the objections discussed above show that the standard model of Hobbes does not square with other crucial components of his political theory. These are certainly not the only objections that have been lodged against the standard model. Boucher (2018), for example, contends that Hobbes's universal principles of equity and reason provide 'moral constraints' that regulate the way states behave in the international sphere. Further, Vincent (1981) argues against the realist model by pointing to the absence in Hobbes's work of a 'global' Leviathan – asking 'why, if Hobbes' view of international politics was really as the Realists take it to be, he did not seek to bring the international anarchy to an end in the same way as *Leviathan* ordered relations among individuals' (Vincent, 1981, p. 85). Charting the full breadth of this critical literature, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is enough for our purposes to note that the claim at the heart of the realist interpretation of Hobbes – that international relations take place in an anarchical state of nature – rests on an erroneous reading of Hobbes's work.

II

Armed with a clear picture of what the Hobbesian misreading looks like, we can now proceed to retrace how and why Hobbes came to be misread in this way. In what follows I will answer this question by charting how this misreading of Hobbes became prevalent in IR scholarship before considering a possible explanation for why realists were inclined to read the erroneous image of international anarchy into Hobbes's work.

The Afterlives of Anarchy: Retracing the Misreading of Hobbes in IR Theory

The Seeds of Anarchy (1896 – 1916)

The story of Hobbes's misreading begins at the turn of the twentieth century, when a group of scholars (who espoused what they called the 'juristic conception of sovereignty') called Hobbes

forth to support their argument that legal norms do not apply to international relations (Schmidt, 1998). The most notable of these scholars was W.W. Willoughby, a theorist who is credited with helping establish international relations as a professional discipline. In his *Examination of the Nature of the State* (1896), Willoughby used the concept of sovereignty (the main concept around which the political science of his time revolved) to extend the boundaries of political scholarship to include the study of states' external relations. Whereas internal sovereignty (within the state) entails absolute *authority* to establish laws, external sovereignty (in relations with other states) entails absolute *independence* from any supranational authority. Hence, Willoughby claimed, the legal norms that bind citizens within states *do not* apply to countries operating in the international arena. Willoughby then called upon Hobbes's description of individuals in his state of nature – whose lives were 'solitary, nasty, poor, brutish and short' – to illustrate the 'atomistic, non-civic, [and] individualistic' lives of independent states (Willoughby, 1896, p. 161). '[F]rom this point of view', he argued, 'nations are, as individuals, in that 'state of nature' in which Hobbes … placed primitive man' (Willoughby, 1896, p. 162). Thus was Hobbes the international anarchist born.

This analogy between international relations and Hobbes's state of nature was developed further by Willoughby's contemporaries. In *Elements of Political Science* (1906), one of the first textbooks to lay out 'the definition and scope of political science', Stephen Leacock opens his section on the 'Relation of States to one Another' as follows:

> Viewed in a purely theoretical light, every state is an absolutely independent unit. Its sovereignty is unlimited, and it renders political obedience to no outside authority; it has no organized coercive relation with any other political body. Such theoretical isolation is the prime condition of its existence as a state, and its political independence is one of its essential attributes. This is what Hobbes meant in saying that, in regard to one another, separate states are to be viewed as in a "state of nature" (Leacock, 1906, p. 89).

Echoing Willoughby, Leacock used Hobbes to illustrate his portrayal of the international system as a condition of anarchy. He does go on to argue that although this condition of anarchy 'is true in a formal and legal sense', different states do in fact 'stand in close contact with one another in a variety of ways' (p. 89). But as we will see, his portrayal of Hobbes as a prophet of international anarchy would prove difficult to shake from the discourse of IR theory.

Another work that planted the seed of the Hobbesian caricature in this period was G. Lowes Dickinson's *The European Anarchy* (1916). Writing in the thick of war, Dickinson reached for Hobbes to make sense of the anarchy that was tearing Europe apart at the seams. The outbreak of conflict in Europe, Dickinson warned, 'is a turning-point that marks the defeat of the ideal of a world order and the definite acceptance of international anarchy … Mutual fear and mutual suspicion, aggression masquerading as defence and defence masquerading as aggression, will be the protagonists in the bloody drama; and there will be, what Hobbes truly asserted to be the essence of such a situation, a chronic state of war'. (Dickinson, 1916, p. i).

Together, Willoughby, Leacock and Dickinson planted the seeds of what would later come to be known as the realist caricature of Hobbes. Notably, however, none of these scholars were themselves 'realists'. Nor were they IR scholars in a professional sense, for international relations would only emerge as a distinct discipline after the dust had settled from the First World War. It is to this first generation of IR scholars that we turn next.

The Escape from Anarchy (1941-1951)

During the interwar years, the nascent discipline of international relations was dominated by 'liberal internationalists' who saw war and conflict as a consequence of bad government: a challenge, in their eyes, to be overcome by 'democracy, rational policies and goodwill' (Menand, 2021, p. 31). The work of these liberal internationalists saw little engagement with Hobbes, and it is only in the early 1940s, with the emergence of the first 'realist' thinkers, that Hobbes was once again called into the conversation of international relations (Schmidt, 1998).

A keystone text of this new movement was Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948). In this book, Morgenthau formulated the principles of what he termed a 'realist' vision of international politics. Morgenthau's vision, conceived in response to the 'idealism' of the liberal internationalists, was grounded in his conviction that 'politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their root in human nature' and that the key to understanding international politics is 'the concept of interest defined in terms of power' (pp. 4-5). 'Morgenthau's work', Donnelly (2000, p. 15) writes, 'was the single most important vehicle for establishing the dominance of the realist paradigm in the study of international relations'.

Importantly, however, the misreading of Hobbes as an international anarchist was to be found nowhere in Morgenthau's work. In fact, in his discussion of 'Morality, Mores, and Law as Restraints on Power', Morgenthau rejected the idea that the international realm is identical to a Hobbesian state of nature:

> If the motivations behind the struggle for power and the mechanisms through which it operates were all that needed to be known about international politics, the international scene would indeed resemble the state of nature described by Hobbes as a 'war of every man against every man (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 243).

Yet, Morgenthau continued, '[i]f we ask ourselves what statesmen and diplomats are capable of doing to further the power objectives of their respective nations and what they actually do, we realise that they do *less* than they probably could' (p. 248). In Morgenthau's view, the power objectives of states are always constrained by 'normative systems' – such as Christian ethics or the constitutional arrangements of democracy – that keep these aspirations 'within socially tolerable bounds' (Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 243-244). Hence, Morgenthau suggested, Hobbes's description of the anarchical state of nature simply cannot be used to make sense of the international system. As Behr and Heath (2009) observe, 'the term anarchy is mentioned in *Politics Among Nations* only

three times; and when Morgenthau does refer to it, it is in a critical disassociation to Hobbes (from which such an outlook on international politics is most commonly derived)' (p. 332). The quintessential 'realist' image of Hobbes as an international anarchist, therefore, is nowhere present in Morgenthau's work.

To be sure, Morgenthau did believe – like Willoughby and his peers – that Hobbes's philosophy entails a world where the ethical standards that apply to individuals *within* states do not apply to relations *among* states. Indeed, in his *Defense of the National Interest* (1951), Morgenthau writes that it is 'Hobbes's extreme dictum that the state creates morality as well as law and that there is neither morality nor law outside the state' (p. 34). However, Morgenthau has made clear that this is not a view to which he himself subscribes. In his own words: 'I have always maintained that the actions of states are subject to universal moral principles, and I have been careful to differentiate my position in this respect from that of Hobbes' (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 106).

Morgenthau's understanding of Hobbes as saying that 'the state creates morality as well as law' was a view shared by E.H. Carr, a contemporary of Morgenthau also considered a progenitor of the realist tradition. Discussing the place of morality in international politics, E.H. Carr writes in his *Twenty Years' Crisis* (1941) that 'the view that no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states can be traced from Machiavelli through Spinoza and Hobbes to Hegel, in whom it found its most finished and thorough-going expression' (p. 140). As was the case with Morgenthau, Carr made sure to distance himself from Hobbes's position, devoting a whole section of his *Twenty Years' Crisis* to discussing how moral standards have shaped international politics. But importantly for our purposes, and again like Morgenthau, nowhere in his work does Carr read into Hobbes the idea that international relations take place in a state of nature (see Carr, 1941).

In their understanding that Hobbes conceives a world where domestic moral standards do not carry over to relations among states, Morgenthau and Carr followed in the footsteps of the proponents of 'juristic sovereignty' discussed in the previous section. But unlike Willoughby and his contemporaries, Morgenthau and Carr did not stretch this reading to the untenable conclusion

that international relations are *equivalent* to the Hobbesian state of nature. As such, the image of Hobbes as an international anarchist – an image that would lead to the crowning of Hobbes as a father of IR realism – was strikingly absent from the foundational works of realist IR theory. This observation is crucial, for it goes against the common belief that the interpretation of Hobbes as an international anarchist was an integral part of realist theory from its inception (see for example Behr & Heath, 2009 and Dunne & Schmidt, 2020). In what follows we turn to the scholars who first introduced this misreading of Hobbes into the conversation of contemporary IR.

The Return to Anarchy (1959 – present)

The 1950s saw realism come under attack from multiple directions. This flurry of criticism was directed primarily at Hans Morgenthau, who 'made claims for realism that can only be described as wildly extravagant' (Donnelly, 2000, p. 28). Morgenthau's maxim that international conflict occurs as a consequence of man's 'elemental, bio-psychological drives … to live, to propagate and to dominate' was shown by his critics to rely on 'an exaggerated emphasis on a one-sided account of human nature' (Donnelly, 2000, p. 47). Meanwhile, a group of scholars – led by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye – developed a theory which rejected realism's vision of war-locked autonomous states and presented a world of multiple actors bound together in a web of 'complex independence'. It thus seemed like the realist movement was losing momentum (Donnelly, 2000).

But that momentum would soon return. In April 1952, Kenneth Waltz – a young doctoral candidate hunched over a desk at Columbia's Butler Library – 'hastily wrote what [he] thought of as three levels of analysis employed in the study of international politics' (Waltz, 1959, vii.). Seven years later, Waltz would publish this dissertation as *Man, the State and War* (1959): a study of international politics that would help re-establish realism as a dominant theory of IR. In his book, Waltz classified three levels of analysis – what he called 'images' – that scholars have used to identify the causes of war. The first image locates the cause of conflict in human nature, the second in the internal organization of states, and the third in the anarchical structure of the international

system. Waltz argued that despite the first and second-image differences that states (and their leaders) may have, they will act predictably when they find themselves in a condition of anarchy. 'Reductionist' theories, such as Morgenthau's, make the mistake of looking *inside* states to explain the causes of war; Waltz's own version of realism – what would come to be known as 'neorealism' – looked instead at the *structure* of anarchy to explain the behaviour of states in the international arena (Waltz, 1979).

Given the nature of Waltz's project, it is clear why Hobbes appeared to him a valuable ally. When introducing the axiom of international anarchy in *Man, the State and War*, Waltz writes that Hobbes

> compares the behavior of states in the world to that of men in the state of nature. By defining the state of nature as a condition in which acting units, whether men or states, coexist without an authority above them, the phrase can be applied to states in the modern world just as to men living outside a civil state (Waltz, 1959, pp. 172-173).

With this, Waltz infused this image of Hobbes as an international anarchist, first found in the work of Willoughby and his peers, with a realist flavour – linking this misreading, from then on, with the precepts of neorealism he would advance. Indeed, as one of Waltz's contemporaries would later remark, 'Hobbes showed himself to be the father of what Kenneth Waltz has called the 'third image' (Vincent, 1981, p. 93). However, despite the similarities between Waltz's reading of Hobbes and that of early juristic theorists, nowhere in Waltz's work does he cite Willoughby or his contemporaries (see Waltz, 1959, 1979). Perhaps this is understandable, given that Waltz's self-proclaimed objective in writing his books was to develop his own independent and original readings of classical authors that could help throw light on the international relations of his day (Waltz, 1959, p. xiii; Mackay, 2020). Hence, though similar to that found in the work of Willoughby

and co., Waltz's interpretation of Hobbes was nevertheless one that he claims to have developed on his own.

This misreading would become a key precept of neorealist scholarship. In his 'Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism' (1984), Robert Gilpin attempted to identify the common threads that ran through the work of realists of his generation. The most important of these unifying threads, Gilpin wrote, was their view that international relations is a realm of Hobbesian anarchy. In his own words:

> The first [shared assumption among neorealist writers] is the conflictual nature of international affairs. As Thomas Hobbes told his patron, the 2nd earl of Devonshire, and realist writers have always attempted to tell those who would listen, "it's a jungle out there." Anarchy is the rule; order, justice, and morality are the exceptions (Gilpin, 1984, p. 290).

It was thus the neorealists of Waltz and Gilpin's generation – operating in the 1960s to 80s – who plunged the image of Hobbes as an international anarchist back into the discourse of IR theory. It was the work of these neorealists, in other words, that would lead Hobbes to be associated with a picture of warring states locked in an anarchical struggle for power: a misinterpretation of Hobbes (one that is 'perilously close to caricature') that remains commonplace in IR scholarship and teaching to this day (Bain & Nardin, 2017, p. 215).

The Motivation behind the Misreading

In this section I will explore why neorealists were inclined to misread the idea of international anarchy back into Hobbes's work (a road not taken by Morgenthau and other classical realists). To this end, I will situate neorealist thinkers – the 'intermediaries' who introduced the Hobbesian misreading back into IR – within the intellectual and historical context in which they were

embedded (Vergerio, 2018). By observing the broader environment in which neorealists composed their work – focusing especially on what was demanded of Waltz and his peers during this time – I hope to tease out possible influences that led them to misinterpret Hobbes. I submit that the main context in which to consider the work of neorealists is the wave of 'scientization' that swept American social science in the decades following the end of World War II. In light of this context, I propose that neorealists saw Hobbes's supposed argument for international anarchy to be an attractive axiom on which to ground a 'scientific' theory of international politics.

In the wake of the Second World War (and the central role that scientific discoveries played in the Allied victory), American social scientists faced mounting pressure to prove that their scholarly enterprises were just as 'scientific' as those of natural scientists (see Haney, 2008). 'Philanthropic foundations, like the Rockefeller and the Ford foundations, invested their munificent resources in an effort to establish the social sciences on par with the natural sciences'; and, as a result, '[t]he social sciences thought of themselves as 'social physics' and approached society as a second Nature, yet to be charted by explorers of the modern times, its vast resources lying untapped under the familiar landscape of everyday life' (Guilhot, 2011, p. 9).

Early realists of Morgenthau and Carr's generation rejected this impulse towards scientization, arguing that the 'rationalization of political life' was nothing less than 'an exercise in self-delusion' (Guilhot, 2011, p. 10). Indeed, as Morgenthau explained in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (1946), when political scientists adopt the explanatory models of natural science, they deceive themselves into thinking that they can provide 'scientific solutions' to moral dilemmas of politics that, in fact, cannot be solved by scientific inquiry alone (p. vi). Thus during the 1954 Conference on International Politics – a forum where early IR theorists attempted to establish a 'theoretical core' for the discipline of IR – Morgenthau made sure to identify and denounce the 'social scientific tendency' as the primary obstacle facing the nascent discipline of international relations (Guilhot, 2011).

But the next generation of realists took a different tack. Indeed, a central objective of Waltz's neorealist project was to reformulate the classical realism of Morgenthau and his peers into a positivist and explanatory social science, thereby establishing its credentials as a properly 'scientific' theory (Behr & Heath, 2009). In order to place realism on sound scientific footing, Waltz and his contemporaries sought out scientific 'laws' – of the kind usually found in natural sciences – on which they could ground their theories of international politics. As Behr and Heath observe:

> In an emerging epoch of scientism when political science in general and international relations in particular have borrowed their epistemologies from positivistic natural sciences and economy (Waltz is an outstanding example of this) … neo-realist theorems have become perceived as scientific laws in order to deduce axioms for political conduct as well as strategic predictions of future developments (Behr & Heath, 2009, p. 345).

In their search to identify these axiomatic laws, neorealists turned to classical texts in the history of political thought. Edward Keene (2015, p. 360) has shown that in the 1970s and 80s, neorealists enlisted Thucydides as an 'exemplar of realism' for his supposed idea that the prevalent logic of international relations was that of competitive power politics (an interpretation that, as Keene tells us, has now been called into question). In Keene's view, neorealists' misreading of Thucydides 'was an important element of the case that these thinkers were trying to construct for the scientific credentials of their realist theory, which they understood in terms of the development of lawlike generalizations about the international system' (p. 360). I suggest that the neorealist misreading of Hobbes can be understood in much the same way. In neorealist scholarship, the concept of international anarchy (Waltz's 'third image') is an *axiom* – a self-evident 'law', in other words – from which their analyses of the international system derive (Behr & Heath, 2009; see also Waltz, 1979). Reading an international 'state of nature' back into *Leviathan,* in this light, can thus be seen

as an attempt to lend historical legitimacy to the axiom of international anarchy – an axiom on which neorealists sought to build a 'scientific' theory of politics.

Concluding Reflections: A Different *Kind* of Anarchy?

How and why did Hobbes come to be misread in IR theory? My thesis has shown that although the seeds of the Hobbesian misreading appeared in the work of juristic theorists writing before the First World War, the erroneous interpretation of Hobbes as an international anarchist was only introduced into contemporary IR scholarship by neorealist thinkers in the 1960s to 80s. This, in essence, was the *how*. To understand *why* neorealists were inclined to misread Hobbes in this way, I turned to the mid-twentieth century context of 'scientization' in which neorealists found themselves, suggesting that the misreading of Hobbes appeared to be a way for neorealists to legitimise the axiom of international anarchy on which they grounded their 'scientific' theory of global politics. To bring my thesis to a close, I would like to consider the impact of these conclusions on two things: firstly, our understanding of Hobbes; secondly, our understanding of neorealist theory.

This thesis has demonstrated that the standard IR interpretation of Hobbes, aside from being incongruent with what Hobbes actually argued in *Leviathan*, was also a contingent historical product born out of a series of deliberate personal decisions. Thus we have little reason to cling to this model. But what would a better interpretation of Hobbes's international thinking be? Reconstructing this dimension of Hobbes's thought is notoriously difficult, for in his work, Hobbes only dealt with international relations in passing (Bull, 1981). With this in mind, I follow Michael Williams's (2005, p. 21) suggestion that '[t]o unravel Hobbes' vision of international politics, it makes sense to begin where he himself begins: with the problem of knowledge'. Here, I propose an alternative reading of Hobbes's international theory that is sensitive to the foundations of his broader intellectual project.

The primary intellectual context in which to understand Hobbes's thinking is the 'crisis of scepticism' that took root in Europe during the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries (Tuck, 1988; Popkin, 2003). The essence of this sceptical movement, led by figures like Montaigne, lay in the claim that knowledge could not be grounded on the evidence of sense-perception (Popkin, 2003). A straight stick, for instance, appears bent when seen through water, and one's perception of the world will change due to shifts in health and age. Thus, sceptics argued, the validity of competing perceptions cannot be resolved by evidence from senses alone. This sceptical background is key to understanding Hobbes's thinking. Indeed, as Williams (2005) notes, 'knowledge of the truth about empirical and moral questions, [Hobbes] argued, is purely knowledge of things as they *appear* to us as conditioned by our individual appetites and aversions' (p. 22). Hobbes himself expresses this idea in *Leviathan* chapter VI, writing that

> whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth *good*; and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*; and of his contempt, *vile* and *inconsiderable*. For 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, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves (Hobbes, 1651 [1991], p. 39).

In Hobbes's view, therefore, men in their natural condition have no means for agreeing on what is empirically and morally true.

This foundation of Hobbes's thinking, I argue, is key to understanding the Hobbesian state of nature. In *De Cive*, Hobbes writes that 'wherever good and evil are measured by the mere diversity of present desires, and hence by a corresponding diversity of yardsticks, those who act in this way will find themselves still in a state of war' (Hobbes, quoted in Skinner, 2002a). With this in mind, the source of Hobbes's state of nature is not that men compete for the same scarce goods

(in a condition of epistemic agreement) but rather that men have no natural means of agreeing on what things are – in Williams's (2005, p. 39) words, 'what the nature of the world *is*' – in an empirical or moral sense (Skinner, 2002a; Williams, 2005). Seen in this light, the state of nature is anarchical not only because authority or coordination is lacking. Rather, it is anarchical because *truth* is absent (Williams, 2005).

The establishment of a sovereign resolves this absence of truth, for a sovereign, in Hobbes's formulation, 'provides stability in conditions of epistemic disagreement, underpins social structures of epistemic concord, [and] provides authoritative (and enforceable) interpretations and decisions in contested cases' (Williams, 2005, p. 40). As Hobbes (1651[1991]) himself puts it, because men fundamentally disagree about moral truths, the 'common rule of good and evil [is] to be taken … (in a Commonwealth), from the Person that representeth it … whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the rule thereof'. (p. 39). In short, what is granted to the sovereign in man's escape from the state of nature is the fundamental right to resolve contested truths.

On this reading, it is the lack of such an arbiter of truth *among* sovereigns that makes the international system a condition of anarchy. The international system, in other words, is a condition where states are in fundamental disagreement over what is empirically and morally true. This reading aligns with the findings of scholars who argue that the age of 'post-truth' international relations – in which countries disagree over such fundamental matters as whether or not a war is being fought – has in fact been a mainstay throughout the history of interstate relations (see Michelsen & Tallis, 2018). But if this is indeed a better reading of Hobbes, then where does that leave neorealist theory?

To be sure, this new reading runs counter to the standard neorealist interpretation of Hobbesian anarchy. In the neorealist model, international relations are anarchic because states compete to advance their power objectives without a common power to keep them in awe. In this new reading, on the other hand, relations between states are anarchic because there is no

supranational power that gets to decide on what fundamentally true. If this second interpretation of Hobbesian international anarchy is indeed more accurate, then neorealist theory is left with two options.

First, neorealists could keep their vision of anarchy but let go of Hobbes. As we have seen, neorealists found support for their axiom of international anarchy by linking it (though problematically) to Hobbes. But it is important to realise that the neorealist premise of international anarchy does not *need* Hobbes to be valid. Indeed, the cogency of Waltz's theoretical claim – that the absence of an overarching authority is a primary driver of state behaviour – does not depend on whether his reading of Hobbes is correct (see Blau, 2017). What my analysis has shown, however, is that the Hobbesian state of nature is not the right analogue for the neorealist vision of international anarchy. It thus follows that if neorealists are to retain their current understanding of the international system, they must also disassociate their argument from the work of Hobbes.

A second option for neorealists, however, would be to keep Hobbes but modify their vision of anarchy. Put simply, it *is* possible for neorealists to continue claiming Hobbes as an intellectual forefather. But this then means that they must revise their understanding of international anarchy to match that of Hobbes. What would follow, then, is a neorealist theory that explores the implications of a condition where states hold contesting and irreconcilable understandings of the basic facts of the international system – a condition, in other words, of Hobbesian anarchy. In this way, neorealist theory can maintain its analytical emphasis on the *structure* of the international system (recall Waltz's 'third image'); equip itself with the conceptual tools to explain a world of 'post-truth' international relations (Crilley, 2018); and, finally, retain an intellectual link – indeed, one that is now deeper and more accurate – to the international thought of Thomas Hobbes.

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