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INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY AFTER HOBBES
Analysis, Interpretation and Orientation
International Political Theory after Hobbes
Analysis, Interpretation and Orientation

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Introduction

Raia Prokhovnik and Gabriella Slomp

The theme of ‘international political theory after Hobbes’ is a timely focus, which allows us to set up dialogues about the legacy of Hobbes in international politics and to raise key questions about international politics in general.

This volume brings together theorists of international relations and political philosophy to discuss a key thinker and engage with some important issues in the current international order. The move by political theorists towards consideration of the international realm, the growth in the attention paid by International Relations (IR) scholars to theorising international politics and acknowledging the role played by a canon of theorists in thinking about international relations, and the consequent blurring of the distinction between domestic and international politics over recent years, have been marked. Political theorists and historians of political thought, as well as IR scholars, have a great deal to offer to the resulting reconceptualisation of international politics. An analysis of the developing links between political theory and international theory, refracted through the lens of Hobbes – a key theorist for both areas of politics – can promote a fruitful dialogue between the two areas.

In the light of these recent developments, a focus on ‘international political theory after Hobbes’ provides a useful vehicle for examining such central problems of international relations as war and intervention, how the tradition of Realism has been and can be interpreted, how Hobbes’s international theory can be understood, and how international politics can be conceptualised. This book develops a dialectical strategy, showing that interpretations of Hobbes, the
history of international political theory, and international theory
today are all subject to revision in light of a more focused and refined
understanding of Hobbes. Indeed, the book challenges the very
notion of a gap between political theory and international theory,
and highlights the debate about connections between them by focus-
ing on a theorist taken as pivotal in both traditions.

By re-evaluating Hobbes’s international theory – by returning to
the texts of his theory, by re-assessing how he was understood by
later theorists, by reflecting upon his role in the dominant Realist
theory of International Relations, and by discussing the sources in
his writings of our ways of conceiving of international politics – we
find a rich interpretive field of research on Hobbes. Although the
dominant IR reading\(^1\) of Hobbes has been increasingly challenged,\(^2\)
to our knowledge no previous work has attempted to pursue the tri-
ple aim of this volume: to subject the dominant IR reading of Hobbes
to close scrutiny; to propose new ways of interpreting and evaluat-
ing Hobbes’s contribution to the understanding of international
politics; and to offer an exploration of the questions and issues that
international political theory ought to address, taking inspiration
from Hobbes and at the same time facing the challenges of a post-
Westphalian world.

Given these reference points, the book argues that international
political theory both has and has not ‘gone beyond Hobbes’. The
volume makes an important and distinctive contribution to the argu-
ment that international political theory is moving beyond the read-
ing of Hobbes maintained by the orthodox International Relations
discourse. That discourse has limited Hobbes’s contribution to that
of a founding theorist of the modern state in a modern inter-state
system. Hobbes need not be seen in such a one-dimensional way,
and re-reading Hobbes provides a distinctive lens through which to
interpret international political theory today. At the same time this
book demonstrates that international political theory has not gone
beyond Hobbes, in the sense that his writings are still important
resources for imagining and re-imagining international politics.

Specifically we bring together a set of scholars with expertise on
Hobbes's views on international relations in the context of the his-
tory of political thought, on Hobbesian Realism, and on the place of
Hobbes in contemporary international political theory. The chapters
deliberately avoid a unilinear approach, and contribute in a range of
ways to opening up a dialogue about the different ways international political theory has and has not ‘gone beyond Hobbes’.

We are keen to interpret the title of the book broadly, in order to capture the wide and fertile scope of the project. The book works at several levels: it highlights the overlapping and different methodological issues at stake for political theorists, historians of political thought, and international theorists; it addresses the politics of multiple and competing interpretations; it considers the question of readings, misreadings and re-readings of Hobbes; and it reflects on the reconceptualisation of international politics. The underlying premise is that reading political and international theory requires a flexible set of interpretive tools. The range of approaches taken in the chapters adds to the liveliness of the collection and underscores relevance of the material discussed.

The structure of the book reflects its central aims, which are to analyse, interpret, and consider contemporary orientations. The book is thus divided, after the introduction into three parts of three chapters each. Themes that drive all of the parts and chapters are a concern to address in different ways the questions of the misrepresentation or misappropriation of Hobbes; international theory beyond Hobbes; and new ways of using Hobbes in IR theory.

Each chapter offers an analysis of Hobbes, advances an interpretation of his understanding of the ‘international’ and contributes to an orientation in conceptualising international political theory. All three of the parts are open in interpreting and destabilising the line between domestic and international politics. Hobbes’s is a rich and dense international theory, which can be interpreted in multiple ways.

The balance of the three ingredients – analysis, interpretation and orientation – varies among the three parts of the book. Part I emphasises textual analysis, and proposes new ways of interpreting and evaluating Hobbes’s contribution to the understanding of the ‘international’. This part sets out the crucial textual basis, in the corpus of Hobbes’s work, for debate and interpretation. Directly or indirectly, the three chapters challenge the dominant IR interpretation of Hobbes. The concepts of international political theory highlighted in Part I include self-preservation, anarchy, public safety, the ‘common good’, cooperation between states, the state of nature, the domestic analogy, and pre-emptive aggression. Slomp shows
that, if we look beyond the fragmentation of his thinking that is a feature of scholarship on Hobbes, we find that his work contains an international theory as well as a domestic one and that neither is one-dimensional. Hobbes's work lends itself to a questioning of the rigid divide between political theory and international theory. Slomp and Sorell demonstrate in different ways that Hobbes has an international theory in its own right, and one that is much richer than the extension of domestic politics that is often attributed to him. Sorell indicates the narrowness of the Realist reading of Hobbes's international theory, and highlights the importance of economic considerations in the duties of sovereigns in an international context. Newey develops a qualified classical Realist interpretation of Hobbes's international theory, renouncing any full analogy between the state of nature and international politics, and rejecting the argument for a universal sanction for pre-emptive aggression by states. Newey's defence of a modified classical Realist reading of Hobbes is strengthened by its engagement with critics of Realism, and thus it recognises the openness of Hobbes's international theory.

Part II engages with significant past, and recent mainstream and post-modern, interpretations and develops insights into uses of Hobbes across the canon of later political theorists. The chapters in this part demonstrate the ways in which later scholars' understanding of Hobbes is open to debate. Concepts central to international theory examined in this part include natural law and the law of nations, the personification of the state, the Westphalian order, international intervention, and the state of nature as the epitome of the political. Boisen and Boucher explore the readings of Hobbes's international theory by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century international jurists, and demonstrate that their preoccupations were very different from those taken as essential to Realism. Like Boisen and Boucher, Howard Williams shows how rigid readings of Hobbes can effectively be destabilised. He indicates Kant's indebtedness to Hobbes, showing how Kant identified features of Hobbes's theory to build his critique of the Westphalian system. Williams's argument shows that it is a mistake to imprison Hobbes in a one-dimensional view, and to see Kant's interpretation as insular and fixed. He demonstrates that our understanding of Kant's international theory gains from a reassessment of Hobbes. Sergei Prozorov traces Agamben's engagement with Schmitt's understanding of Hobbes, so as to endorse a post-sovereign
politics centred on a conception of the state of nature stripped of its transcendence.

Part III addresses central concerns within the reconceptualisation of the ‘international’ by enlarging the horizons of the Hobbesian imaginary. Two leading IR theorists and a political theorist converge to demonstrate that just as Hobbes and his relation to later scholars in international theory disclose a rich interpretive field, so contemporary international theory is also subject to debate. The concepts of international political theory central to the chapters in this part include war, political modernity, the politics of liberal states, a temporal and historical rather than a spatialised account of international politics, and sovereignty. While acknowledging that the readings of Hobbes by Strauss and Schmitt have important implications for international theory, Michael Williams suggests a reading of Hobbes, via an alternative Oakeshottian lineage, that discloses his wider legacy for international politics. This Hobbesian perspective on international politics recognises state power but also a socially reflexive conception of social action. Rob Walker reflects upon what is at stake if contemporary international political theory makes explicit the character of the modern political order – ‘constructed with its own externality’ – which has been used to underpin the Realist understanding of international relations, and which Hobbes is understood to have helped to create. Finally, Raia Prokhovnik finds support in Hobbes for an argument for the inter-constitution of the concepts of sovereignty and politics. Prokhovnik makes the case that this insight into Hobbes’s theory helps advance the idea of the domestic and international realms as both primarily spheres of politics.

The nine chapters of this work address a number of debates that have attracted the attention of political theorists and international theorists. The book challenges the idea of a one-dimensional and single exemplary explanation of Hobbes’s international theory, and instead presents a set of alternative readings of how Hobbes contributes to new ways of understanding international politics. The debates discussed in the nine chapters can be summed up as addressing a number of key questions:

1. How has Hobbes been misinterpreted in mainstream IR? What have international theorists traditionally neglected of Hobbes’s
argument that is important to understanding his views on the relationship between national and international politics?

2. In the light of the critique of the narrow stereotype of Hobbes’s international theory, and of later phases of the Realist tradition, how does a more accurate reading of Hobbes enrich rather than undermine our understanding of Realism?

3. How has Hobbes been used by later theorists such as Pufendorf, Kant, Schmitt, and Agamben, to conceptualise international politics?

4. What are we to make of international political theory if we supersede Hobbes by moving beyond the sovereign state? What role is there for Hobbes in international theory today? Is Hobbes irrelevant to contemporary international politics?

5. If we have ‘gone beyond Hobbes’, what is the way forward for international theory? How can international politics best be conceived of under current conditions and current ideas?

Part I: Analysis

In Chapter 2, ‘The Politics of Motion and the Motion of Politics’, Gabriella Slomp argues that the dominant IR reading of Hobbes must be seen in the context of the ‘fragmentation’ of Hobbes studies that took place in the twentieth century, namely the tendency to engage with smaller and smaller parts of Hobbes’s philosophy and to disregard the rest of his grand theory. According to Slomp, international theorists contributed to the fragmentation of Hobbes by excavating from his theory a selection of his statements and remarks, and disregarding the rest. Slomp claims that if one resists the process of fragmentation, one can recover a notion of the ‘international’ in Hobbes that is complex and thought provoking. If, for instance, we interpret Hobbes’s notion of self-preservation and anarchy in relation to his theory of motion (as developed in the Elements of Philosophy), it is possible to trace an argument that challenges the textbook association of Hobbes with Realism. Rather than being a champion of the state, Slomp sees in Hobbes a defender of the individual; rather than pessimism and tragedy, she finds Enlightenment assurance; rather than eternal human nature, she finds belief in the ability of man to develop his future and modify the content of his desires; rather than discrete notions of internal and external, domestic and international,
she finds in Hobbes’s argument sophisticated interconnectedness; and rather than an obsession with security, she finds an expansive concern for commodious living.

In Chapter 3, ‘Hobbes, Public Safety and Political Economy’, Tom Sorell reviews the concept of public safety that is central to Hobbes’s civil science and demonstrates that it has a significant economic content, as do Hobbes’s theories of war and peace. Sorell maintains that such an insight into Hobbes’s theory is only possible when Hobbes’s texts are given ‘a reading that de-emphasises local and international aggression as well as the ruthless pursuit of short-term self-interest’. By concentrating on three corresponding chapters in *The Elements of Law, De cive, and Leviathan*, where Hobbes discusses the duties of sovereigns, Sorell shows that, for Hobbes, public safety is not to be construed narrowly as mere survival. According to Sorell, the chapters where Hobbes discusses trade, work, consumption, and tax reveal an important economic component to complement a concern with survival and public safety. Sorell argues that, for Hobbes, part of what it is to rule well is to guarantee wealth-creation, and part of being a good citizen is being willing to undertake productive work and not over-consume. Wealth-creation and reasonable consumption, Sorell adds, are not matters of domestic politics alone: they have an irreducibly international aspect. Sorell argues that ‘Hobbes’s politics is much more essentially political economy, than is usually supposed’ and brings to light in Hobbes’s discourse the concept of international interdependence and limits within co-operation between states. Sorell’s textual analysis demonstrates that Hobbes’s politics is not simply a normative politico-economic theory; it is also a kind of *transnational*, normative politico-economic theory – one that emphasises the importance of peaceful trade between nations.

In Chapter 4, “‘Leviathan’ and Liberal Moralism in International Theory”, Glen Newey examines the difficulties facing a Realist reading of Hobbes’s views on international relations. The first part, while emphasising that certain difficulties attend the wholesale transposition of the state of nature as *bellum omnium contra omnes* to the international sphere, demurs to follow the recent trend among readers of Hobbes such as Noel Malcolm and others and distances his position from classical Realism in international theory. Newey argues that the revisionist readings overstate the constraints imposed on rational actors in the international sphere by the law of nature as Hobbes understands it.
The ‘soft power’ limits on their freedom of action are not to be explained by their heeding real normative constraints as embodied in natural law. This does not preclude unprovoked aggression, particularly of a pre-emptive kind. Newey denies that for Hobbes natural law would preclude such aggression or impose more generally moral constraints on international actors’ freedom of action. At the same time, according to Newey, some of the structural postulates which Hobbes imposes on the state of nature seem clearly violated by ‘international anarchy’, in particular that of equality or near-equality. For Newey, the equality postulate must be qualified in order to provide a credible account of sovereign states’ behaviour as international actors. At the same time, pragmatic curbs on external belligerence level out these inequalities so that aggression is no longer warranted by the ‘pre-emption’ argument of *Leviathan* chapter 13. Newey supports this reading by contextual analysis and a comparative reading of such Hobbes texts as *De cive* and the *Dialogue of the Common Laws*. The chapter concludes by doubting whether the version of Realism ascribed here to Hobbes supports recent western foreign policy adventures such as the 2003 Iraq invasion, and liberal internationalism more generally.

Newey’s chapter provides a bridge to the second part of the volume, which explores different trends in the interpretation of Hobbes over the centuries.

**Part II: Interpretation**

In Chapter 5, ‘Hobbes and the Subjection of International Relations to Law and Morality’, Camilla Boisen and David Boucher identify the source of the Realist ‘predominant caricature of Hobbes’s international theory’ and provide an insight into Hobbes’s theory of natural law, the law of nations, and international law by setting him in the historical context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century international jurists. Specifically they argue that ‘the modern predilection to ally Hobbes closely with Grotius is ill-conceived’, and that the international jurists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ‘reject those very features that modern interpreters highlight as quintessentially Realist’, such as the state of nature and the natural condition of man. Boisen and Boucher aim at refocusing the dominant reading of Hobbes, and propose a different and less anachronistic way of evaluating his thought, which they argue takes on a different complexion ‘when viewed
through the prism of the classic international relations jurists’ of this period. Their argument proceeds in steps. To begin with, they evaluate affinities and differences between Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf on questions of natural law and natural rights. For instance they note that Pufendorf’s natural law theory had ‘dual foundations, the Hobbesian idea of man’s self-preservation, and the Grotian idea of man’s social nature’. They then look in more detail at features of Hobbes’s work which contemporaries ‘deemed highly original’ and which ‘caught the imagination of jurists’ – features such as the relation between natural law and the law of nations, and the personification of the Leviathan. Later scholars drew upon the clarity of Hobbes’s distinction between natural law and the law of nations in the face of the conflation of the two concepts, while Pufendorf and later theorists took up Hobbes’s application of the ‘idea of the juristic moral person to the state’.

In Chapter 6, ‘Kantian Perspectives on Intervention: Transcending Rather than Rejecting Hobbes’, Howard Williams shows that those aspects of Hobbes’s theory that one associates with Realism were in fact of great interest to Immanuel Kant, and that Kant is ‘heavily indebted’ and ‘plays close attention to Hobbes’s work’. Williams suggests that the association of Hobbes’s political philosophy with the Westphalian political order was assumed by Kant. Although Kant was very critical of the Westphalian system, his aim was not to destroy the Hobbesian model of politics but rather to transform and transcend it. According to Williams, Kant ‘worked with the model of the Hobbesian state that had shaped the Westphalian international political order of his time’, and ‘greatly appreciated the contribution of the idea of a fully sovereign national state that held sway over religious dissent to political and legal philosophy’. For Williams, although Kant ended up adopting a cosmopolitan perspective, his cosmopolitanism does not imply the abolition of the civil commonwealth of Hobbes’s political philosophy but ‘is rather subtly grafted on to it’. In order to develop this argument, Williams focuses his attention on ‘the responsibility to protect’, a concept introduced by the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and examines in some detail three recent accounts of intervention (by Roger Scruton, Fernando Teson and Juergen Habermas) which claim to draw on Kant for their inspiration in justifying an activist approach from ‘confrontational’, ‘hyper-interventionist’, and ‘moderate interventionist’ positions. Williams questions the Kantian