From Hobbes to Mearsheimer, how structure influences actors' behaviour

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The Return of Power Politics

With the "return" of power politics in Europe, marked by the Russian aggression of Ukraine in February 2022, public opinions of western societies, especially the European Union ones, have seen a strong reaction with feelings ranging from confusion and panic to anger and surprise; since the end of World War II, Western Europe has lived in a bubble of peace, first guaranteed by the bipolar structure of the Cold War and later by American unipolarity, mistaking the cause of this privileged situation, actually caused by the prevailing distribution of power, for international institutions and international law; with the crisis of American global leadership now having become a reality, it is clear that war and conflicts will once again take centre stage in the century to come, but why do human societies behave like this? Is it impossible for us as species to emancipate from violence? In this essay I will argue that the answer does lie in the structuralist approach of looking at individuals and states by re-examining in a comparative view Hobbes' Leviathan argument and Mearsheimer's offensive realism, including the historical setting in which the two theories were ideated and created.

Hobbes and its State of Nature

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes described in the 13th chapter of his magnum opus, the Leviathan, how human beings behave in the so-called "state of nature": he argues that human beings do not act aggressively because of their inner vocation, instead they act as rational actors in a situation of uncertainty.[1] This situation of constant uncertainty and mutual vulnerability is given by two factors: the rough equality in physical and intellectual capabilities between human individuals and the absence of a Leviathan (a ruler) able to enforce rules and guarantee order. This situation leads to a state of constant war and fear, which according to Hobbes is caused by three factors:

1) Competition

2) Mistrust

3) Glory

In Hobbes' vision, competition forces men to invade to gain advantage, mistrust to do it for security, and the glory for the reputation, so war doesn't concern just fighting, rather is the expression of an infamous natural inclination to conflict, and life under this condition results to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[2]

Since human beings are rational entities, they decided to exit from this natural anarchy and, in Chapter XIV, Hobbes explained how: individuals decided to renounce a part of their natural

[1]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 13.
[2]Ibid.

freedom to organize themselves into societies, with a Leviathan that guarantees the respect of law through the use of force[3]; this is, according to Hobbes, how human societies created the political entities that nowadays we call states, defined by the German sociologist Max Weber in his book "Politics as a Vocation" as "a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory".[4]

Unfortunately, the international society failed in exiting from the natural anarchy because the United Nations, since its creation in 1945, failed in fulfilling their role of international Leviathan, fundamentally because of the lack of force necessary to enforce international law on the sovereign states, since the Organization does not have any effective army or police force. Hobbes himself realized the problem without formalizing it in a theory of International Relations: sovereigns, because of their independence, stand toward one another "in the state and posture of gladiators".[5]

The Leviathan Historical Setting

Hobbes did not cover abstract philosophy in his books, since The Leviathan was published in 1651, so can be considered a cultural product of a decade in which the English state fell off due to the civil war erupted in 1642, which brought to the execution of King Charles I in 1649; Hobbes observed this chaos from his exile in Paris; is also important to remember that the Thirty Years' War, which gave the birth to the concept of nation-state, ended just in 1648.[6] So the state of nature is not a description of the primitive human being, but an explanation of what happens when the referee is removed or not created yet: fear doesn't need evil people, just the absence of a shared power.

Offensive Realism

Hobbes' logic found his modern expression in structural realism, theorized by Kenneth Waltz in his opera "Theory of International Relations" in which he argues that is the anarchical structure of the system, and not states' nature, to explain their behaviour; states, according to Waltz, do seek just an appropriate amount of power,[7] a claim refused by John Mearsheimer and

[3]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14.

[4]Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78.

[5]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13. On Hobbes and international relations, see Hedley Bull, "Hobbes and the International Anarchy," *Social Research* 48, no. 4 (1981): 717–38.

[6]On the context, see Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years' War*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1997).

[7]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

his Offensive Realism doctrine, proposed to analyse international relations in his acclaimed book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" published in 2001.

The Offensive Realism doctrine is based on five bedrock assumptions:[8]

> 1st assumption: the international system is anarchic, just like the state of nature described in the Leviathan, since the system comprises independent states that have no superior authority above them;
>
> 2nd assumption: great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other, similarly to the equality in human capabilities described in the Leviathan;
>
> 3rd assumption: states can never be certain about other states' intentions; specifically, no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state, concept already described as mistrust by Thomas Hobbes;
>
> 4th assumption: survival is the primary goal of great powers; specifically, states seek to maintain their national integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order; survival dominates other motives because if a state is conquered it would be in an unlikely position to pursue its other goals;
>
> 5th assumption: great powers are rational actors like the human beings described in the Leviathan; this means that they are aware of their external environment, and they think strategically about how to survive in it.

None of these assumptions alone dictates that great powers should behave aggressively toward each other, however, when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard of each other; in particular, three general patterns of behaviour result:

- Fear: since there is no central authority enforcing rules and order in the anarchical international system, states regard each other with suspicion, not only seeing each other as competitors but as potentially deadly enemies;
- Self-help: since no higher authority can guarantee protection, states must rely on themselves to ensure survival; this dynamic encourages the tragic security dilemma;[9]

[8]John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), chap. 2.

[9]John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 157–80; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

- Power maximization: unlike defensive realists, Mearsheimer argues that states naturally seek as much power as possible, ideally to become regional hegemons to increase their chances of survival.

Since the stopping power of water makes global hegemony impossible to achieve, the most a great power can obtain is regional hegemony, as the United States did in the Western Hemisphere.

Hobbes described a similar concept in the 13th Chapter of the Leviathan: "And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: and this is no more than his own conservation required, and is generally allowed".[10]

Mearsheimer's Historical Setting

Mearsheimer wrote his magnus opus in a complete different setting if compared to the Hobbes' one: the book was published in 2001 but was conceived in 1990s, the unipolar decade; URSS had collapsed, USA were the only superpower and the western societies had a shared liberal optimism: Fukuyama announced "the end of history" in his infamous book,[11] Krauthammer announced "the unipolar moment"[12] and Wohlforth argued that the latter was destined to bring peace and stability on a global scale;[13] however, Mearsheimer went in the opposite direction, announcing that the end of Cold War would have brought less stability in Europe and arguing that International Organizations did not have any independent effect on states' behaviour.[14]

His forecast on the upcoming clash with China[15] was published in 2001, the same year of 9/11, an event which took away power competition from the public debate in favour of terrorism; then he applied his theory on the controversial Russo-Ukrainian conflict, cited in the beginning of this paper, arguing that Russia invaded Ukraine because of the NATO expansion toward East, recalling the realist patterns of fear, self-help and power maximization.[16]

[10]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

[11]Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

[12]Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/91): 23–33.

[13]William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5–41.

[14]John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56; Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994/95): 5–49.

[15]Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*.

[16]John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89.

Structure, not nature

Despite almost four centuries separating these two authors, they both try to explain the violence of the actors starting from their structural condition rather than with their inner temperament; for Hobbes, human passions are "in themselves no sin" and war is originated from the absence of a central power;[17] Mearsheimer results to be equally explicit: taking the distance from Morgenthau, who addressed the causes of violence in the inner will of power of human beings, he argues that states would behave aggressively even if all the leaders were benevolent because the system rewards that behaviour;[18] both interpretations are tragic: rational actors produce an outcome none of them wants (Table 1).

Hobbes's state of nature	**Mearsheimer's assumptions**
Absence of a common power	Anarchic international system (1st)
Rough equality of vulnerability	Offensive military capability (2nd)
Mistrust (diffidence)	Uncertainty about intentions (3rd)
Self-preservation	Survival as primary goal (4th)
Reason and "anticipation"	Rational actors (5th)

Table 1. Hobbesian premises and the assumptions of offensive realism.

The limits of the analogy

Transplanting the argument from individuals to states shows its own constraints: the first one is equality, since Hobbes starts from the assumption that even the weakest person as the capability to kill the strongest, while states differ enormously in power between them, resulting in the Mearsheimer conclusion which argues that a state with no equals in power is completely safe; second the exit from the tragic anarchical situation: individuals decided to abandon the state of nature to have a sovereign power to protect them, but no state can follow this path without making one of them the hegemon which that system requires; as said before, UN and its Security Council lack of the necessary force, therefore they do function only when great powers agree;

Third, the stakes: Hobbes thought the condition of sovereigns was less miserable than the one of individuals, because they uphold the industry of their subjects[19], while nuclear weapons, which Waltz considered an instrument of stability,[20] incredibly raise the price of any failure of deterrence; finally, the "domestic analogy"[21] has been criticized by Hedley Bull, who argued

[17]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

[18]Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, chap. 2.

[19]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

[20]Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Papers 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

[21]Hidemi Suganami, *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

that states formed a stable society without a world government,[22] receiving the reply from Offensive Realism which states that this stability was based upon distribution of power.

Conclusion

This demonstrates why there was a natural post 1991 order: the unipolar order was like a Leviathan; however, it was not a social contract but an historically contingent concentration of power.

In conclusion, remembering that nation-states are made up by humans helps us understand why if nation-states are put into an anarchical situation they will act in the same way that humans described by Hobbes in the Leviathan acted to ensure their own survival.

This is not due to citizens being inherently evil, but because if they don't act in this way in anarchy, they will be punished.

Peace is not inevitable but any lasting peace must be based upon a believable balance of power.

[22]Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

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