

The legacies of *raison d'état*: a brief commentary on R. Harrison Wagner's *War and the State*

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War and the State is a bracing and wide-ranging book. It is also a book that takes few prisoners. In R. Harrison Wagner's view, there is much wrong in the contemporary study of international politics. As a discipline (at least in the United States, which is the focus of the book), international relations (IR) is based on a strict analytic division between the domestic and the international that is debilitating. It is dominated by debates over 'structural realist' theories that are lacking in rigor and fundamentally flawed as a foundation for analysis. It searches in vain for foundations in the philosophy of science, where no such foundations are to be found. And it is undermined by 'the willingness of political scientists to tolerate incomplete arguments' rather than asking foundational questions and developing logically rigorous answers to them (Wagner, 2007).¹

To Wagner, the remedy for this baleful situation lies in a twofold strategy. First, we must reject structural realism's tendency to take states as the primary building block for analysis, as well as its tendency to see war as synonymous with interstate conflict. Instead, we need to recognize that the key to understanding international politics lies in the more elemental question of 'the relationship between organized violence and political order of any sort' (2007: x). This, he argues, was the question addressed by classical theorists of *raison d'état*, including Hobbes, Rousseau, and Clausewitz, and by rescuing their insights from their misuse by structural realists, and combining them with the tools of modern game theory, we can lay the foundations for a proper theory of international politics, one that allows us to explain the

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¹ These charges are concisely laid out in the Preface; the quote is from (Wagner, 2007: 2).

evolution of modern states, and to analyze the use of violence by any kind of actor, be they state or non-state.

Wagner advances this strategy by combining sophisticated readings of classic political theorists with contemporary bargaining theory. Sharp and telling critiques of the logic of structural realist theory – of its misuse of Hobbes' state of nature as a model of the 'anarchic' international system, and particularly of Kenneth Waltz's influential rendering of Rousseau's tale of the stag hunt as an illustration of the logic of international anarchy – are followed by reconstructions showing how the insights of these classical thinkers can be integrated into a more robust and insightful game-theoretic understanding of the political use of violence, and through it, a better foundation for thinking about politics and war.

Wagner explicitly casts his argument as an opening for debate and criticism, hoping that 'If a mistake that I have made motivates a reader to figure out exactly what the mistake that I have made is and to correct it, then my purpose will have been served' (2007: xi). In this short commentary, I would like to take up this offer. My goal, however, is less to locate where specific mistakes may lie (though inevitably there will be a bit of that!), than it is to suggest that taking some of Wagner's insights through to their logical conclusions actually pushes his arguments in directions quite different from those he proposes. To do so, it helps to return to the tradition of *raison d'état* that inspires Wagner, and particularly to the thinker who is in many ways the central figure in *War and the State*: Thomas Hobbes.

Wagner's Hobbes is an admirably complex figure, one certainly far distant from the facile caricature so often reproduced in IR.² Rooted in skepticism and struggling with the construction of political order in a period of endemic strife, Hobbes provides a powerful example of the concern with the relationship between violence and order that Wagner identifies at the heart of *raison d'état*. Equally significantly, he notes, Hobbes' commitment to rationality was not an unreflective assumption. From the start it 'always had both a descriptive and a normative component', and its attraction in the latter sense arose from its potential as an alternative to early modern European conflicts in which 'norms and ethical standards came to be seen as part of the problem rather than the solution to it' (2007: 64). The key issue for Hobbes, therefore, was how a political order was to be constructed, and the role of fear and violence in that process. The question of how political orders are related to one another – the domain of international politics – could not be understood

² His reading of Hobbes is deeply influenced by Richard Tuck.

outside this more basic problem. This, in Wagner's view, is the true significance of Hobbes for the tradition of *raison d'état*³; and it, and not some mythical Westphalian moment and a resulting logic of interstate 'anarchy', must be the starting point for any rigorous and realistic understanding of international politics.

If Hobbes stated the basic problem, then for Wagner it is Rousseau, who helps provide an answer. As a result of its prominent place in Waltz's *Man, the State, and War*, Rousseau's tale of the stag hunt is routinely identified in IR as one of the clearest expressions of the international 'logic of anarchy' that makes cooperation nearly impossible. For Wagner, this widespread view once again reflects a basic misunderstanding of *raison d'état*. Instead of an illustration of why already existing states-as-actors cannot cooperate under anarchy, he argues that Rousseau's fable helps explain the logic of violence underpinning state formation, as well as the logic of force in interstate relations. In contrast to Waltz, Wagner contends that the cooperative behavior in the stag hunt would be possible – not because of altruism, but as a result of rational calculation. The members of the hunt, he argues, would recognize the benefits of acting together, and they would also possess the ability to coerce potentially recalcitrant members into cooperating – or at least to convince them that the risks of direct punishment by the group and indirect uncertainty about the future are greater than the benefits of defection. As he tellingly notes, 'Every effective military organization knows how to make use of the mechanisms just described to make soldiers willing to risk their lives in combat ...' (2007: 117).

In direct contrast to the Waltzian view, therefore, Wagner claims that the stag hunt illustrates how the relationship between rationality, violence, and economic predation can explain both state formation and state action. Violence and war are not mindless destruction; they are strategies whereby economic predators seek to extract on-going benefits from others by controlling their actions through the threat and exercise of violence. Predatory organizations stay together because of the benefits they can gain from predation, from the fear of losing those benefits and becoming the prey of another organization, and because individual members fear punishment by their own organization if they defect.

These predatory activities can also have unforeseen consequences. In an analysis that echoes Charles Tilly's well-known account of 'State Making as Organized Crime', Wagner argues that predators eventually become dependent upon the welfare of their prey. Since their own strength

³ A point on which we are in agreement; for my own account see Williams (2005: 19–51).

is tied up with that of those they exploit, their interest lies to some degree in tending to the interests of these others – a dynamic enhanced by the existence of other predatory groups who seek to acquire the prey by offering more attractive terms, as well as through direct violent acquisition. In this way, he suggests, one can develop a rational theory of organized violence even in so-called failed states.⁴ The concerns of *raison d'etat* and techniques of game theory are thus combined to answer questions that structural realism cannot, including the process of state formation, state failure, the causes of war, and the structure of bargaining under conditions of potential violence. Developing the implications of this claim for understanding war is then the focus of the rest of the book.

This is an important and incisive argument and, to put my cards on the table, I agree with much of it. The claim that the tradition of *raison d'etat* contains resources for thinking beyond the confines of contemporary structural realism (and much of IR theory) is a crucially important insight. There is equally little doubt that placing the relationship between order and violence at the heart of all political analysis is essential. And there is certainly much to be gained by looking at the rationality of economic predation, violence, and collective action. Wagner's discussions of war and bargaining provide powerful illustrations of one direction in which this can lead. Others have used similar perspectives – although in a less formally modelled way – to tremendous effect, including Charles Tilly's famous contributions, Vadim Volkov's (2002) fascinating account of the economy of violence in post-Soviet Russia (which Wagner notes), and William Reno's (1999) superb assessments of 'warlord politics' in Africa (which he rather strangely does not). The question, then, is: what are the limits of such an analysis? To explore these, it is helpful to return to where Wagner himself begins – the figure of Thomas Hobbes and the logic of *raison d'etat*.

Restating the Hobbesian puzzle

Few thinkers have examined the relationship between violence and political order in the depth of Hobbes, and for this reason he fully merits the prominent place that Wagner gives him in his reconstruction of *raison d'etat*. Yet for all the sophistication with which he treats Hobbes, Wagner also provides a curiously and importantly truncated account of his significance, one that holds important implications for his reading of *raison d'etat* and his attempt to reformulate IR theory.

⁴ As he nicely points out, the early modern Europe confronting Hobbes often bore closer resemblance to one of the 'failed' states than it did to the interstate system hypothesized by structural realists, which is yet another reason to look again at the logic of *Leviathan*.

It is often claimed that for all his genius, Hobbes' theory contains a simple, and rather obvious (indeed, too obvious) flaw concerning the creation of political order. The Hobbesian state of nature is a condition in which there is no natural order, where no individual is strong enough to impose his will on others. Differences in intellect compensate for divergence in physical strength, and even the strongest must sleep sometime, which makes continuing domination impossible in the state of nature – and would seem to leave us with no logical escape from it. If the solution to this problem is the essence of a game-theoretic reconstruction of the tradition of *raison d'état*, then answering it is a logical necessity. It cannot be skirted without falling prey to the tendency to 'tolerate incomplete arguments' that Wagner sees as one of political scientists' greatest failings.

Unfortunately, Wagner does not himself confront this puzzle or the difficulties it presents for a game-theoretical account of the origins of political order. Instead, he develops his argument by shifting the focus to Rousseau and the stag hunt. This may seem like the kind of textual quibble that only political theorists care about, but it is not. The stag hunt is about the social logics prevailing *in an already existing group*. The coercive capacity of the group (the logic of calculation that, within strategic limits, will keep recalcitrant members in it and gives it extractive power over outsiders) upon which Wagner builds a logic of predation and state formation assumes and depends upon the existence of the group. But where, within a rationalist rendition of the Hobbesian state of nature, could this group have come from? If we are to demand complete and rigorous arguments, and take the Hobbesian puzzle as the essence of *raison d'état*, then we cannot simply set aside the question of group formation posed by Hobbes' state of nature, and move to develop a model that presumes its resolution. This, however, is what Wagner does.

Two difficulties arise. The first is a logical gap in Wagner's account of rational coercion and the role of predation in state formation – and since this is the basis upon which he builds a model of state action, the entire edifice becomes unstable as a foundational theory of war (which is not to say that it is not an illuminating model of some of its potential logics). The second, and to my mind more interesting, is that this move marginalizes a different understanding of *raison d'état* and its place in IR theory: a murkier and darker tradition, with crucial connections to classical realism. It is the latter I would now like to briefly explore.

Critics of Hobbes have long argued that from a perspective of purely strategic calculation he has no logical account of how individuals could ever escape from the state of nature. This misunderstands his position. For Hobbes, societies were not initially founded upon the logic of rational coercion, but upon fundamentally irrational beliefs. He does not address

the problem of how rational agents could logically have left the state of nature for the simple reason that the initial source of order was not rational calculation in a materially delimited universe, but *error* and an irrational belief in 'powers invisible'. For Hobbes, 'the actions of men proceedth from their Opinions' (1993: 233), and it was opinion – or, more specifically, myth, religion, and superstition – that allowed some agents to exercise power over others. In short, it was *belief* and not reason, that founded societies, and that provided the basis for collective coercion, which then became part of the equation.⁵

As Wagner insightfully notes, the difficulty was that in Hobbes' time these beliefs had gone from being foundations of order to sources of conflict. Clashing beliefs about religion and rights were rife and conflict endemic. For Hobbes, the solution was to get already sociable agents to reject their mistaken ideas, and to order their 'opinions' in line with right reason. To this end, he sought to convince agents to act not on the basis of belief, but on that of reasoned fear. As Wagner explains, this view of order relied upon agents' fear of the disorder represented by the state of nature, fear of the collective power of the sovereign leviathan, and fear of external powers that it defended them against. But to make this political project work, Hobbes also engaged in a more fundamental reconstruction involving the nature of knowledge, belief, and rational agency itself. This entailed, among other things, determining the nature of knowledge, including what exists and what does not (the realm of 'ontology' that Wagner rather unnecessarily dismisses) in order to undermine the destructive influence of belief in 'powers invisible' that underpinned religious conflict and supported a belief in martyrdom that undermined the fear of death on which Hobbes pins his hopes.⁶ He also sought to develop a mobilizing rhetoric that could convince individuals of the need to act in the ways that he viewed as reasonable, even though they were not in any straightforward way naturally inclined to do so.⁷ What Hobbes sought to do, in short, was to refashion people's understandings of themselves so that they would act in ways dominated by material calculation and physical fear. *Raison d'etat* was thus from the start a cultural and political project: an attempt to *construct* agency and order. And at the very moment of its founding, the Hobbesian order was an uneasy combination of myth and reason, of rhetoric, belief and calculation, and of Leviathan and logic.

⁵ For an extended discussion of the significance of religion in this regard, see Strack (2010).

⁶ See Blits (1989).

⁷ For two overlapping but interestingly different views see Johnston (1986) and Skinner (1996).

It is now possible to tease out some of the implications of this alternative genealogy of *raison d'état* for appraising *War and the State* and its broader relationship to IR theory. To begin with the status of current theoretical encampments, the obvious 'meta-theoretical' point is that although Wagner dismisses the contributions of 'Constructivism' and its concerns with 'identity' and 'ontology', these questions are in fact central to the theoretical project he seeks to resurrect. Indeed, one could argue that the analytic foundation of Wagner's model is dependent upon the success of this quintessentially Hobbesian political project; only on its basis could an agential calculus of fear and a calibration of collective violence along the lines suggested by Wagner actually succeed. Be this as it may, the wider point is that far from being irrelevant to the argument in *War and the State* and the tradition of *raison d'état*, as Wagner unfortunately suggests, the concerns of constructivism broadly conceived are central to it.⁸ In fact, one of the key lessons of the tradition of *raison d'état* was that the consolidation of political order was a threefold process involving the consolidation of coercive, economic, and *symbolic* power and violence.⁹ What we need, therefore, is not only a theory of coercive logics, but also one of symbolic logics. The challenge is that the latter may not (indeed most often will not) conform to the same logic as one based on material fear and coercion, and concrete practices will inevitably reflect this.

A different set of implications also connects Wagner's analysis to older but recently resurgent themes in classical realism. Here, the most interesting connections arise from seeing how classical realists drew radically different conclusions about the attempt to find political order upon rational coercion. Unlike Wagner, this tradition sees this as the central *dilemma* of modern politics, not as its explanation and resolution. Briefly put, their argument was that if obligation is reduced to nothing more than calculations of individual costs and benefits, the state will become hollowed out from within and incapable of resisting domestic or international challengers – particularly those who do believe in ultimate values and who are willing to risk their lives for them. Unable to generate commitment to its survival from agents who view it wholly as a vehicle to advance their subjective preferences, and who support it solely on the grounds of rational fear and predation, this tradition of thought believed that pure *raison d'état* was doomed to failure.

⁸ There is no doubt that the tendency of many contemporary constructivists (in the United States in particular) to misrecognize this legacy by reducing the issues at stake largely to questions of 'method' also does not help matters. But by drawing too stark a division, Wagner risks contributing to the sterile proliferation of 'isms' and camps that he so rightly bemoans.

⁹ For an argument along these lines, see Bourdieu (1999).

This provides a very different appreciation of yet another of the key figures in *War and the State*: Clausewitz. As Wagner compellingly illustrates, Clausewitz produced key insights into understanding war as a process of bargaining and coercion. Yet he is also significant as a theorist of the limits of this way of thinking about war – a way of thinking that he associated with the classical European state system, and that he perceived as being swept away by Napoleon.¹⁰ Absolutist militaries functioned very much along the lines that Wagner outlines – professional armies, motivated by a combination of pay, the promise of booty, fear of starvation through unemployment, and fear of harsh corporal or capital punishment in the ranks. Yet the Napoleonic armies, Clausewitz recognized, fundamentally changed the strategic equation. Nationalism meant that greater social resources could be mobilized; troops could be deployed in novel ways as their (at least initial) greater commitment meant that they did not require the constant surveillance and discipline without which the absolutist troops almost certainly would desert.¹¹ As a consequence, Clausewitz saw, forces based solely upon logics of economic predation were unlikely to survive against those based on new principles of (national) political identity, and the vastly expanded social power they mobilized and represented. This meant that the Prussian state itself would have to change, if it was to compete in the new European system that Clausewitz saw emerging. Changes in motivation – in what people would go to war for, what they would risk dying for, and how they could be organized as a consequence – changed the nature of state–society relations and military power, with massive consequences for the conduct of war.¹²

Part of the ‘tragic vision of politics’ found in realists like Meinecke and Morgenthau lay in their regret that the form of rational order exemplified in the absolutist states system and the logic of *raison d’etat* had been swept away. But they were steadfast in their insistence that its principles were now profoundly unrealistic as a means of ordering politics, domestically and internationally.¹³ In its place, they saw instead an

¹⁰ A classic brief survey remains Howard (1976).

¹¹ See Lynn (1996).

¹² For an important reading of Clausewitz along these lines, and in the wider context of IR theory, see Lebow (2003: 201–215 especially).

¹³ Seeing Meinecke in this context again contrasts starkly with Wagner’s view, though his stress on this now often neglected figure is certainly welcome. Meinecke’s pessimistic assessment of the ‘severe crisis’ arising from *raison d’etat*’s ‘contact with forces it is no longer capable of controlling’ is particularly clear in the conclusion to his classic study (1998: 423–433). Morgenthau (who gave up his plans to write a history of *realpolitik* once he had discovered Meinecke’s) makes very similar observations; see particularly Morgenthau (1946, 1951).

intolerant nationalism and crusading universalism that overwhelmed narrowly rational policy and calculation, and that gave us a world not of limits, calculation, bargains, and rational predation, but one of absolute war, mass slaughter and crusading universal ideologies.

In sum, although Wagner rightly stresses that *raison d'état* was as much a principle of domestic politics as of foreign policy, the insight (and, to a degree, the pessimism) of some of the best classical realists was that the system of *raison d'état* depended upon a *culture* of *raison d'état*, both inside the state and between states. Actors who failed to conform to its requirements posed a continual threat. As Hobbes recognized, for instance, if individuals failed to view fear of physical pain and death as the ultimate evils – as a result, say, of religious belief in the ultimate value of martyrdom and the hereafter – then they would not respond to the calculation and control that Wagner's game-theoretic resolution suggests. The costs and benefits of rational predation will be largely irrelevant to such actors, and coercion alone cannot control this. These concerns are clearly far from being inconsequential today. The extensive efforts by Western states to inculcate liberal cultures in their citizenry under the rubric of security policy, their difficulties in grappling with the strategic logic of suicide bombers, and their extensive campaigns trying to win hearts and minds in far-flung corners of the world would have been recognizable to Hobbes as essential elements not only in the policy of *raison d'état*, but in the production of its very possibility. Making the world safe for a particular kind of order thus becomes the logic of *raison d'état* well beyond the calculation of predation. The actions this entails also, perhaps, undermine its very viability.

A further development of these themes can be found in the writings of Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt (and he was not alone; the intuition can be found in Max Weber and many others), the reduction of politics to a calculation of preferences left such polities lacking in social commitment to the state, and thus vulnerable to internal as well as external threats. Again, Hobbes provides an instructive formulation. As noted earlier, for Wagner military discipline provides a good illustration of the logic of coercion and bargaining in the creation and maintenance of political order. For Hobbes, by contrast, coercive power and the ability to wield it is dependent at least in part upon the prior and continuing belief in Sovereign's authority in the eyes of those who will act on its behalf. As he pointedly phrases it in *Behemoth*, 'if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army you will say. But what shall force the army?' (Hobbes, 1969: 59). In this view, a center of coercion cannot be based on coercion alone. Nor can it be the result solely of a division of the spoils. Whether it can be based on a combination of

these factors along with multiple and sophisticated forms of fear, as Wagner's argument might seem to suggest, is certainly a key question.¹⁴ Asking it, however, also opens connections to some of the darkest trajectories within the tradition of *raison d'état* – those stemming from the belief that a political order as a model of coercion and calculation cannot be sustained. This was, for example, the road travelled by Schmitt, who sought the answer in a mythological politics of enmity,¹⁵ and whose ideas were responded to by figures like Hans Morgenthau, who desperately sought an alternative in an uneasy combination of the national interest, republican politics, and transcendent ethics.¹⁶

Taking the logic of *raison d'état* to its foundations unavoidably means taking on these questions. The path that Wagner chooses – the rationalities of violence in the creation of political order – is certainly an important and grievously neglected one in IR. By opening it up, he reconnects the field both to key issues in political theory, and to wider currents in comparative politics and other parts of political studies from which it has for too long been severed. This cannot but be applauded. Yet the path he chooses is not the only one. Like all paths, it has limits and comes with costs. I have tried to show here how this path can – and in my view must – also lead in other directions, directions that Wagner sometimes seems to acknowledge obliquely but chooses not to pursue. Failing to do so is a failure to think through fully both the logic of explanation and the political entailments of *raison d'état*. Wagner is correct to accuse political scientists of too great a willingness to accept incomplete arguments. It is thus all the more important that his attempt to redress it does not ironically fall prey to the same failing and lead the field yet again down a narrow path toward yet another set of unnecessary closures, theoretical encampments, and sterile debates. *Raison d'état* is indeed a tradition whose richness has been lost in most of IR; it poses challenges that only the kind of engagement that Wagner calls

¹⁴ An attempt that could be brought into very interesting dialogue with Wagner's is Judith Shklar's attempt to outline a 'liberalism of fear'. A different and equally intriguing set of options is proposed in (Oakshott, 1975).

¹⁵ Tellingly, in Schmitt's view, the crucial figure here is Hobbes: if the state was reduced to a mechanism for gaining benefits and avoiding costs, and if defense of it was only by a coordination of rewards and threats, it would be inherently unstable – too intrusive at times, too neutral at others. Ultimately, individuals would not really *believe* in the state as the site of ultimate values, and the state it would fall prey to internal or external forces that did. Hobbes' essential failing, in this analysis, lay in his ambivalence over whether the Leviathan was a monster or a machine – a myth or a neutral political device. See particularly, Schmitt (2007). I attempt to trace some of these trajectories and their implications for IR theory in Williams (forthcoming).

¹⁶ For a recent exploration, see Scheurman (2009).

for – between the domestic and the international in its broadest theoretical, normative, and sociological forms – can meet.

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