Grotius and the Development of International Relations Theory
The ‘Long Seventeenth Century’ and the Elaboration of a European States System*

CORNELIS G. ROELOFSEN

1. Introduction

This essay is an attempt to analyse Grotius’ role in the elaboration of International Relations Theory. Since this description of our purpose lends itself to a variety of interpretations we will start with some necessary clarifications. Indeed, the very title of this essay contains three elements which need definition. To start with the eponymous hero, what do we mean in this context when we write down ‘Grotius’? The name is one of a seminal figure in European intellectual history, who was also a Latin author, a Dutch politician and a diplomat in Swedish service. Both the man and his works have been interpreted in many different senses by contemporaries as well as by posterity. As a result, we cannot simply refer to ‘Grotius’ and/or ‘Grotian’ ideas without defining the meaning of the terms. When we speak of ‘Grotius’ do we for instance mean Grotius, the author of De iure belli ac pacis, Grotius the politician and diplomat, Grotius the propounder of the ‘Batavian’/aristocratic interpretation of the constitution of Holland, Grotius the seventeenth-century figure to whom a certain characteristic ‘Grotian’ train of thought is to be attributed, or even: Grotius, the intellectual ancestor of a certain ‘Grotian’ approach to international relations? All these and many more figures can be detected in the rich literature touching upon subjects which are germane to Grotius’ pursuits1.

* The text of this essay has been published in Quinnipiac Law Review 1997, issue 3. It was a contribution to the Grotius symposium on International Law and International Relations, organised in November 1995 by Quinnipiac Law School (Hamden, Connecticut). We thank Quinnipiac Law School for their permission to publish this text in Grotiana in a revised version. The origin of this text, written for a public of American students, is responsible for a number of explanations on the European and Dutch background which otherwise would not have been included. The author decided to leave them in the text rather than proceed to a complete redrafting of the essay.
1 C. G. Roelofsen, ‘Grotius and the “Grotian heritage” in international law and international relations; the quatercentenary and its aftermath (ca. 1980–1990),’ Grotiana, New
The third term figuring in our title: ‘International Relations Theory’ is, to say the least, ambivalent. Do we mean to refer to such a theory in so far as it may be argued to have existed in the seventeenth century? And do we consider it to have been a branch of the science of Politics, or perhaps in the context of that time better called: *Politica*? Or, in the alternative that we do not wish to restrict the field of enquiry to the seventeenth century, do we wish to consider Grotius as a figure in the elaboration of the paradigm of ‘international’ relations in general? This was eminently the role in which he was cast by H. Bull, and by many others. The stock phrase ‘Grotius, the founder of the Westphalian States system’ reflects a fairly wide-spread conviction. Here, and indeed throughout this essay, we have to come to terms with the many often contradictory views of Grotius which taken together may be called the ‘Grotian Myth,’ a potent mix of convictions about Grotius’ historical role in his own lifetime and beliefs about the necessary development of a planetary order in our own days. In view of the importance of this ‘Grotian myth,’ I considered it necessary to deal with it at some length in this introduction.

What I set out to do here is to analyse Grotius’—alleged—contribution to the theory of international relations against the backdrop of 16th and 17th century current conceptions of international politics. Grotius as an international lawyer yields pride of place to Grotius the theorist of international relations, or in other words: his legal works are here considered for the perspective they offer of Grotius as a theorist of the European states system. This will inevitably

*Series 11* (1990), 6–29. A bibliography of current publications on Grotius is to be found in all issues of *Grotiana*.

2 H. W. Blom, *Causality and Morality in Politics: The Rise of Naturalism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Political Thought* (1995), 187–190. Of this science of politics Justus Lipsius’ *Politicorum libri sex* (1589) is the outstanding example. Lipsius’ basic position is described by Blom: ‘The stability of the state as far as that can be realised, was the central point of reference for him.... As for religion, Lipsius believed that the power of the state depends on religious peace, to be had only if there is but one religion and only if that religion is subjected to the jurisdiction of the prince.’ An English translation of Lipsius: *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine* (1594, 1970).


4 It ought to become clear from my analysis of Grotius’ works that in my opinion this association is mistaken.