Theodore Christov


This is a scholarly, interesting and worthwhile analysis of the international dimension of Hobbes’s political thought. It explores its afterlife through such luminaries as Pufendorf, Rousseau and Vattel, and the subsequent valorisation of Hobbes as the doyen of political realism and international anarchy. The discussion of Vattel’s departure from Hobbes, and response to Rousseau is particularly interesting. In this respect Wolff’s exploration of the grounds of obligation in international relations, particularly the ‘useful fiction’ of a ‘supreme sovereign’ of the Civitas Maxima would have reinforced the theme that permeates the book, namely the pervasive contagion of sovereignty (224). Wolff seemed unable to think of obligation other than in terms of sovereignty, therefore even an agreement between sovereigns required a fictional supreme sovereign to give it force.

The author makes a number of bold claims that are sometimes expressed in an adversarial manner. First, he purports to subscribe to the principles that underpin what recently goes under the name of modern international thought, or international theory. His methodological claim is that it integrates the contextualist method associated with the Cambridge School and the historiographical method in international history. The merit of the methodological manner of enquiring into past thought, it is claimed, allows us to retrieve the ‘authentic’, or ‘true’ meaning of texts (5, 21, 27, 149), and expose misappropriations (20, 33). This manifests itself in the pursuit of what Hobbes ‘really’ (27) had to say about the relationships between the state of nature and civil society; the domestic and foreign dimensions of his thought; and, how he was perceived before he became misappropriated as an exponent of international anarchy. This set of claims implicitly assumes a ‘realist’ conception of history, and denial of both ontological and critical hermeneutics. It is an affirmation of epistemological hermeneutics, that is, the belief that there is a ‘text’ independent of its interpretations, the meaning of which is revealed by privileged access to the psychology of the author.

The author leans towards Skinner for authoritative comfort, invoking his reliance on Collingwood and J.L. Austin (9, 10, 11). J.G.A. Pocock is mentioned (9, 177, 229), in the context of the Cambridge School, but not the fact that Pocock is very different from Skinner, taking his inspiration from Oakeshott rather than Collingwood. Pocock is less enamoured than Skinner by authorial intentions, preferring instead to emphasise the different levels of abstraction at which a text may take on multiple meanings, giving priority to paradigms,
which assume lives of their own. Pocock is prepared to concede, following Oakeshott, that it is perfectly legitimate to understand philosophical texts philosophically. Skinner, on the other hand is concerned with the context of conventions, or the ideological context of a text, in order to discern the meaning that the author intended it to have. Skinner’s fundamental presupposition is that each text of political philosophy must be understood as an ideological intervention into a current controversy.\(^1\) Cristov’s interpretations, however, rely very little on the construction of contexts of conventions, nor on discussions of the ideological context of England and France at the time Hobbes wrote. In practice the method is much closer to that of Leo Strauss who contended that philosophers have exoteric and esoteric meanings to their texts.\(^2\) Hence we are told what Hobbes, Pufendorf, Vattel and Rousseau really thought, as opposed to what the lesser interpreters think that they thought.

Second, Cristov claims that the rapprochement between political theory and international relations is a phenomenon that has taken place over the last decade, leading to a partial breaking down of the barrier between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ division of sovereignty (277). The linguistic turn associated with contextualism in the history of political thought is said to have gone largely unnoticed among international relations scholars (9), a claim that may have been sustainable twenty years ago or so, but is far less so now. The author tells us he is going to rectify this alleged serious omission. International relations theorists have ‘misappropriated’ Hobbes and perpetrated ‘several grave misconceptions’ (267) in their deluded and ‘unfortunate’ (278) attempts to construct an ‘imaginary’ tradition that is wholly a twentieth-century invention. Among the ‘historically uninformed and theoretically inaccurate’ subversions of the ‘authentic Hobbesian project’ (276) is the delusion that he was the theorist of anarchy, and posited a radical division between the state of nature and civil society. Instead, and few commentators would dispute it, Hobbes wanted to warn of the overlap, and the perpetual danger of lapsing back into a pre-civil condition.

The principal claim is that the modern association of Hobbes with international anarchy rests on a mythical foundation, and postdates Hobbes by some three centuries or more (105). It is not in itself an original conclusion; it is a common lament among revisionists in international theory. Modern theorists are charged with anachronism, reading the present into the past. If we are to  

---

1. Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xv: ‘My governing assumption is that even the most abstract works of political theory are never above the battle; they are always part of the battle.’