The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy

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For a student of International Relations, Martin Wight comes across as an enigma.

His disciples and collaborators who include notable names such as Hedley Bull, Robert Jackson or Brian Porter speak of a seminal thinker and erudite scholar while others such as Alan James claim that his influence on the discipline is limited.[1]

Given the conflicting considerations, this paper proposes to assess Wight's impact on the study of International Relations, weighing his legacy against the critique that has been levelled at his work.

No analysis of Wight's international thought can overlook his preoccupation with classical diplomacy understood as the cornerstone of international relations.

The first part of this essay will therefore examine the importance of classical diplomacy as a 'civilising activity', in Wight's own words, deeply steeped in European traditions which trace their origins to Christian ideals. The discussion will seek to explain how Wight's personal convictions and academic background influenced his thought and led him to organise the principles of classical diplomacy around three major traditions: Realists, Rationalists and Revolutionists.

The second part of the debate will explore critics' claims regarding his inability to answer questions that his enquiry provokes, his classification of the three traditions mentioned above, his Eurocentric approach to international relations and finally criticism regarding the purported separation of international theory from political theory. The conclusion will briefly review the main strands of the discussion and assess the place of Wight's work in the wider context of International Relations studies.

WIGHT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO INTERNATIONAL THEORY

When analysing Wight's works one has to be constantly reminded of the three elements that shaped his international thought: a passionate love of history, his staunch Christian faith and a vivid interest in political philosophy.

As one of the founding members of the 'English School'- a sophisticated form of realism which emphasises the existence of a society of states at the international level, despite the existing conditions of anarchy, and which is regulated by key institutions such as (classical) diplomacy, international law, war and the balance of power, he drew on all three strands to propound and defend his theories. Opinion has been divided within the School regarding the origins of these institutions, some notable figures such as Hedley Bull contending that they have appeared as a result of states' interest in safeguarding their survival, while others, of which Wight is the main apologist, argue that they are deeply embedded in the ideas disseminated by the mediaeval Respublica Christiana.

In his view, classical diplomacy evolved out of the remnants of the mediaeval ecclesiastical exchanges[2] to become an institution in its own right understood as 'the management of international relations by negotiations'[3] by the late

The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy
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18th century. But Wight, just like Morgenthau, argues that diplomats are not missionaries and diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit,[4] as they aim to reconcile interests involved in the relations of governments of sovereign states.[5]

Jackson contends that when interpreting diplomacy as a political and philosophical thought, Wight raises normative and ethical questions which can only be understood through his sophisticated interpretation of Christian theology.[6]

As a fresh Oxford graduate, Wight came under the influence of the Revd Dick Sheppard, the charismatic vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and later canon at St Paul's Cathedral.

The latter's convictions made an impact upon the young philosopher, helping to channel Wight's interest in the idealist internationalism of the League of Nations based on faith in public opinion, international law and institutions[7] towards pacifism seen as the condemnation of violence and opposition to the institutions of the military and war. However, by the end of the Second World War, Wight makes a surprising volte-face, swapping the pacifist pulpit with the realist camp from where he would profess his scepticism about the progress and perfection of humankind. With *Power Politics* first published as a pamphlet in 1946, his views become permanently associated with the realist school of thought as he underlines powers' concerns to 'seek security without reference to justice and to pursue their vital interests irrespective of common interests'.[8]

Wight's intellectual transformation cannot be understood unless one digs deep at his religious roots shaped in the Augustinian tradition which recognises the permanent place of sin and grace in human affairs.[9] As such, although individuals, and at a higher level, nations, can advance in both culture and technology, they cannot progress at a moral level.

Wight strongly rejects the perfectionism of the Pelagians, a Christian school of thought which professes hope and argues that humans are capable of redeeming themselves. [10] Instead, he settles for the politics of scepticism and traditional Christianity which argue that human beings and nations should admit their inability to progress and therefore ought to make the best of a flawed world.

Following on from this basic idea, he maintains that even though states will always pursue their (selfish) interests, they ought to uphold a series of principles which will bring a minimum of human decency to their interaction. These are found in the diplomatic interactions between the parties and can be summed up as follows: honesty or truthfulness, moderation and restraint, courtesy and respect for the other side. [11]

The principles proposed by Wight are thus coherent not only with the Augustinian tradition but also with the philosophy of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, a staunch advocate of the golden middle way between the power politics of Realism and the utopian ideas of the Revolutionists.

However, as a traditional Christian, Wight concedes that there will always be states which will either exploit or disregard these principles and he identifies the former as Machiavellian and the later as Kantian.

Thus, Machiavellians, also known as Realists, will insist that only the naive would take these principles seriously as states have to follow their goals irrespective of the means pursued.

On the other hand, Kantians or Revolutionists, run in the opposite direction, rejecting the practices and ideas of classical diplomacy altogether. Wight calls this style of thinking inspired by Kant as 'the armchair philosopher's'[12] and argues that the Kantian sees political change as 'an ebb and flow of pointless rivalries'.[13]

Although Wight sought to keep himself aloof from the subject he studied, he confessed nonetheless his belief in the ethical principles inspired by Grotius which he called Rationalist.[14]

The classification of the three traditions based on the philosophical archetypes – Machiavelli, Grotius and Kant – and revolving around moral principles, as well as Wight's own philosophical thought influenced by traditional Christianity

The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy
Written by Aura Sabadus

that ran counter to the hitherto American-dominated positivist and atheist thinking marked the beginning of a new era in international theory.[15] These contributions sparked new debates which could no longer ignore the ethical dimension of International Relations. On the other hand, the same contributions need to be balanced against the subsequent critical work on his reflections and which raises many difficult questions.

CRITIQUE OF WIGHT'S INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT

The criticism levelled at Martin Wight and his body of work ranges from comments regarding the 'thickets of his prose' where 'the branches are so weighted down with foliage that it is difficult to find the trunk',[16] to observations regarding his separation of international theory from political theory.

It is indeed a difficult task to find one's way through the heavily-detailed pages of Wight's books. The scope of his discussion is so broad that a reluctant student may easily wander off to lighter readings. Personally, I do not see why Martin Wight should be held responsible if those less prepared to follow his arguments abandon too quickly. His immense erudition, indeed his ability to apply historical insight to the most difficult philosophical concepts as well as his perfectionism ought to be commended and not dismissed.

A general criticism that was brought against Wight's philosophy refers to inconsistency whether this is reflected in his failure to elaborate on the concepts he enunciates or in his theory of international relations.

Wight was criticised for breaking off prematurely from attempts to answer questions that his enquiry provokes. For instance, Jackson points out that although Wight wrote extensively on empires – the Roman Empire, the mediaeval Respublica Christiana and most importantly on the British Empire – imperialism does not feature as a 'systematic category in his international theory'.[17] Jackson further contends that Wight's work never explored the distinction between authentic international relations and quasi-international relations which would have given him the chance to explain the differences between a modern international world of sovereign states and a mediaeval imperial theocracy.[18]

Wight's failure to discuss the notion of empire as well as his interpretation of international theory in terms of Western traditions and more specifically in terms of the practices characteristic of British diplomacy have led to further criticism that his principles are not truly universal and therefore cannot be recommended to other governments.[19]

However, in a curious twist of fortune, Wight's Western-influenced reflections on the great transformation from Western imperialism to sovereign states in Africa became a self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that the new African states remained on the map as they had been at the time of European rule.[20] As Jackson further contends, they did not dissolve into the indigenous social structure, but retained the characteristics infused by European colonialism.[21] It is interesting to note here Bull's remarks that 'states of all regions, cultures, persuasions and stages of development [are willing] to embrace often strange and archaic diplomatic procedures that arose in Europe in another age' and which 'is today one of the few visible indications of universal acceptance of the idea of international society'.[22]

There is further criticism regarding Wight's inconsistency in terms of the views he held. According to Michael Nicolson, there is a 'problem' with reconciling 'Wight the power politician with Wight the pacifist'.[23] However, to make an assertion in such clear-cut terms, without attempting to seek the roots of Wight's thinking is to miss the point completely when analysing his contribution to international theory.

As argued in the previous section, the two concepts can find common ground thanks to Wight's pessimist Christian beliefs which dismiss the idea that humans are capable of achieving moral perfection. At system level, Wight recognises the imperfection of states which are seen in realist terms as selfish entities, interested in pursuing 'their vital interests irrespective of common interests',[24] but which can maintain a modicum of peaceful relations providing they follow a set of principles based on a sense of decency.

To try to remove one at the expense of the other would mean to unravel an important dimension which takes into

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consideration these elements when discussing the three traditions of political thinking – Realism, Rationalism and Revolutionist.

There is no question whether he should be seen in simplistic black and white terms, for Wight is a Christian and a power politician as well as a historian and a philosopher and he successfully dovetails these seemingly conflicting strands in his work.

One criticism which cannot be refuted though raises the question whether the three *Rs* exhaust the leading ideas of international thought and whether an account of the three traditions really advances our understanding of international politics.[25] This is why James claimed that Wight's contribution to international theory is limited, insisting that a scholar who does not invoke the three traditions should not be seen 'as second-class'.[26]

Bull believes that Wight was 'too ambitious' in attributing to the Machiavellians, Grotians and Kantians distinctive views not only about war, peace, diplomacy, but also about 'psychology, irony, tragedy, methodology and epistemology'.[27] He criticises Wight for following in the footsteps of his mentor at Chatham House, Arnold Toynbee, in believing that there is a rhythm in the history of ideas which somehow needs to be established. Bull acknowledges Wight's originality nonetheless and insists that his approach 'provides an antidote […] to the in-breeding and self-absorption of academic textbooks and journals', opening it out to wider intellectual horizons.[28]

Yet Bull and more recently Nicholson have deplored Wight's refusal to take an active part in the theories he propounds, insisting that the purpose of the studies of International Relations is to improve the human condition and not to stand as 'passive spectators'.[29] But Wight, for all his professed aloofness and detachment from any political commitment confesses to his Grotian 'prejudices' which he claims encapsulate a 'civilising factor'.[30]

The most powerful criticism against Wight's international thought refers to the 'simplifying distinction'[31] he makes between political theory as a 'theory of the good life' and international theory as a 'residual theory of survival'.[32]

These comments cannot be understood unless we take a step back and define political theory as a systematic reflection on the relations between states and citizens. [33] Wight argues that if we were ever to acquire a good life in a mortal world, then it can only be through the framework of the state.

By contrast with political theory, international theory is merely a theory of survival at the level of systems of states described by Wight as groups of sovereign states which recognise no political superior and which seek to uphold permanent relations. Since there is no overarching authority to regulate these relations, states struggle to pursue their own interests and hence to ensure their survival.

In his essay '*Why is there no International Theory?*' Wight argues that what is now known as international theory is but 'a tradition of speculation about relations between states, a tradition imagined as the twin of speculation about the state to which the name of political theory is appropriated'.[34] Again, by contrast with political theory, international theory is not a self-standing discipline and as such, Wight argues, it had no real proponent, apart from Edmund Burke who, he said, 'switched from political theory to international theory'.[35]

Jackson admits that the two diverge at certain points, but insists that they are 'branches of one overall modern theory of the modern state and state system'.[36]

In Jackson's view states are Janus-faced, simultaneously looking inward at their subjects and outwardly at other states. He contends that there is not 'the state' on the one hand and on the other 'the state system', but just states whose actions can be analysed from both perspectives.[37]

Wight's contention that political theory is essentially the theory of good life pursued inside the framework of the state can be easily turned on its head when considering totalitarian and failed states which offer anything but a good life to their citizens.

The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy
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On the other hand, it can be equally argued that international theory is not merely a theory of survival since issues of global concern such as the spread of nuclear weapons, climate change, terrorism, and more recently the economic downturn do not concern states in isolation but are issues on whose resolution depends our general good and ultimately our survival.

And finally, Bull raises the question whether the unity of the system of states relies on a common morality and code which create the basic rules of coexistence among states or whether it requires 'common assumptions of a deeper kind – religious or ideological'.[38] If we were to accept Wight's point of view here, we would be reaching a dead end since the idea of religion or ideology as a linchpin of the system of states cannot be extended to the 'breadth and length' of the same system.[39]

CONCLUSION

I argued at the beginning of this essay that Martin Wight comes across as an enigma to students of International Relations who may feel puzzled at the conflicting opinions regarding his contribution to the discipline.

The debate set out to examine whether he was indeed the seminal thinker praised by disciples and collaborators or just a historian of ideas whose influence was limited, as argued by James.[40]

Although it can be contended that Wight's classification of the three traditions – Realism, Rationalism and Revolutionism – does not exhaust the leading ideas of international theory, and that the discipline cannot be boxed into patterns, his work opens new intellectual horizons which take in consideration ethical and normative dimensions. By asking questions about states and systems of states Wight prepared the ground for concepts such as culture and identity to enter mainstream International Relations through the works of his disciples or critics.[41]

Wight's legacy refers not just to his contribution in laying the foundations of the English School, his analytical interest in classical diplomacy as the cornerstone of international relations, but also to his originality and depth of thought and his courage to profess Christian-influenced ideas in a preponderantly atheist academic world.

Writing the foreword to Wight's '*Power Politics'*, Spence sums up the historian's contribution to IR:

'To those brought up on a diet of post-modernism, Wight's intellectual concerns may seem old-fashioned. Yet for those who recognise the importance of closely reasoned historical analysis combined with theoretical perception of considerable subtlety, Martin Wight's writings […] provide a secure foundation for serious debate on the nature and scope of the theory and practice of International Relations'.[42]

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The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy
Written by Aura Sabadus

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[4] Morgenthau, H., (2005, 7[th]ed) p.559

[5] Jackson, R., (2005) p.53

[6] Ibid. p56

[7] Thomas, S.M., (2001) in International Affairs, Vol.77, Issue 4

[8] Wight, M., (1978) p.66

[9] Jackson, R., (2005) p.55

[10] Id. p.57

[11] Wight, M.,(1991) pp.180-188

[12] Wight, M., (1991) p.196

[13] Id. p.197

[14] Id. p.268

[15] Porter, B., (2007) in 'The international political thought of Martin Wight'

[16] Bull, H., (1991) in 'International Theory' p.xxii

[17] Jackson, R., (2008) 'From colonialism to theology: an encounter with Martin Wight's international thought'

[18] Id.

[19] Bull, H., (1991) loc.cit.

[20] Jackson, R., (2008) loc.cit

[21] Id.

The Politics of Power and the Power of Faith: Retracing Martin Wight's Legacy
Written by Aura Sabadus

[22] Bull, (2002), pp.176-77

[23] Nicholson, M., (1981) 'The enigma of Martin Wight'

[24] Wight, M., (1978), p.66

[25] Bull, H.,(1991) in 'International Theory', p.xviii

[26] Dunne, T., (1998), p.54

[27] Bull, H., (1991) loc.cit

[28] Id.

[29] Nicholson, M., (1981) loc.cit

[30] Wight, M., (1991) p.268

[31] Jackson, R., (2005) p. 39

[32] Wight, M., (1966) p.33

[33] Jackson, R., (2005) p.40

[34] Wight, M., (1966) p40

[35] Id

[36] Jackson, R., (2005) p.39

[37] Id

[38] Bull, H., (1977) in 'Systems of States' p.18

[39] Jackson, R., (2005) p.61

[40] Dunne, T., (1998) p.54

[41] Id. p.63

[42] Spence, J., (1978) in 'Power Politics' p.7

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