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# The Realist Logic of International Society

SEÁN MOLLOY

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this article is to reassert the importance of realist thought in the international theory of Martin Wight. Following Hedley Bull, it has become prevalent in international relations theory to present Wight as a rationalist thinker, and international society as a rationalist principle that offers an alternative or third way in international relations. I argue that international society is actually Wight's attempt to integrate two perspectives on international relations — the Realist and the Rationalist. I argue that this relationship is asymmetric — that international society is the product of realist impulses and logic which force the creation of a series of secondary institutional and legal mechanisms that can channel but not control the desire for power in international relations.

*Keywords:* balance of power; Christianity; English School; international society; rationalism; realism

The purpose of this article is to examine the international theory of Martin Wight. The depictions of Wight as a Grotian (Bull and Dunne) or as a Christian moralist (Epp) are contrasted with an alternative reading of the Wightian tradition. I suggest that the foundation of Wight's theory of international society is essentially realist. The article does not claim that Wight was a realist *tout court*, but that his theory of an international society rests on a realist foundation. As Wight was anxious to stress, the three traditions that he used to navigate the international, were distinct but interweaving; none the less, it is possible to look at the play of ideas in Wight's theory scheme, and to argue that realist logic predominates within the three traditions, at least in how they apply to the balance of power and the nature of international society.

This is not to say that Wight was exclusively realist, in the way that Morgenthau deliberately proposed a theory of international politics that was intended to present a solely realist position. Wight's technique was to create a hermeneutic circle (or perhaps spiral) in which the three traditions represented various attitudes to international politics. Yet this representation of three traditions does not necessarily imply that the three traditions were of equal importance: the current generation of English School theorists largely share the opinion that rationalism is the key theory of the three



traditions — a *via media* between the cynicism of realism and the impracticalities of revolutionism (Bull, 1991: ix–xxiii; Dunne, 1998: 47–71). I believe that this approach is mistaken in that Martin Wight’s professed personal ‘prejudices’ towards the rationalist stream within the theory of international relations do not determine the relationship between realism, rationalism and revolutionism. Rather, I propose that there is an internal logic in the relationship that is predominantly realist, albeit a realist logic penetrated and contextualized by its coexistence with the other traditions.

The first task of the article, therefore, is to reassess the role of realism within the three traditions. I argue that the centrality of realism in the three traditions is due to Wight’s Christianity — by tapping into 2000 years’ worth of Christian/Augustinian notions of sin and imperfection as the inheritance of Man, Wight could not but favour realism as a political philosophy of international relations. The second task is to assess the realist nature of modern international society, an international society that owes its origins and its operation to the balance of power that was created in order to allow the contest for power within an agreed framework in preference to the untrammelled anarchy of pure power politics. This does not mean that international society is not an arena of power politics, merely that international society is a more complex arena than the Hobbesian war of all against all. The balance of power in Wight’s theory again displays aspects of the different traditions, but again the predominant role is accorded to the realist interpretation. The presence of both rationalist and realist elements within his analysis of the balance of power provides further evidence of the intentionally unresolved nature of Wight’s theory of international politics as a dialogue between the Machiavellian and Grotian standpoints (with the Kantians standing outside as occasional conversational partners). The asymmetry of the relationship is also clear in that it is the pursuit of power that creates anarchy, but ultimately the development of order is seen as in the perceived interest of all powers concerned — Grotian institutions such as law and diplomacy owe their origins to realist manoeuvring, and can be, when perceived as necessary or desirable, disregarded in the realist impulse toward power.

### **Wight’s Realism**

That Wight does not fit text-book definitions of realism is beyond question — his theory scheme is far too complex to fit the various tripartite descriptions of realism often proffered as a definition (Keohane, 1986: 164–5; Vasquez, 1998: 37). His system is one of the critical historical evaluations of attitudes to international relations and employs separate categories in order to place the study of international relations within a tripartite, genealogical interpretation — the Machiavellian/Realist, the Grotian/Rationalist and the Kantian/Revolutionist. Wight’s system is dialogical, not axiomatic, and is described in his own words as follows:

[A]ll I am saying is that I find these traditions of thought in international history dynamically interweaving, but always distinct, and I think they can be

seen in mutual tension and conflict underneath the formalized ideological postures. (Wight, 1987: 227)

It is important to note that the idea of cyclical progress and transformation typical of the dialectical form is absent from Wight's self-diagnostic appreciation of his work; all three traditions are distinct despite their interaction, and each remains distinct — there is no progressive synthesis here, nor any real evocation of a *via media*.

It is this potential for dialogue that distinguishes Wight's theory from the closed realists, and in particular the attempts at creating a discrete science of international relations associated with the 'behavioural revolution' in American international relations. Wight's system is a dialogue of three conversational poles, but that is not to say that one of the poles is not more dominant than the others. It is my contention that Wight recognized the predominance of the Machiavellian interpretation over the other two, and thus in terms of his own theory set he was indeed a realist.

*Representing Wight as Anything But Realist: Bull, Epp and Dunne*

The most important figure in our appreciation of Wight is Hedley Bull — a close colleague of Wight, Bull wrote a number of pieces on Wight, including a memorial lecture and introductions to *Systems of States* and the revised edition of *Power Politics*. Bull's best-known exposition of Wight's theoretical orientation was delivered at the second Martin Wight memorial lecture, claiming that if forced he would place Wight in the Grotian or liberal tradition of international relations (Bull, 1991: xiv). According to Bull, Wight was drawn to the moderate nature of the Grotians, but Bull admits that Wight was also deeply influenced by the other two traditions, and that Wight's Grotianist tendencies were tempered by 'partaking of the realism of the Machiavellians, without cynicism, and of the idealism of the Kantians, without their fanaticism ... a *via media*' (Bull, 1991: xiv). Bull then changes his position and states that:

[I]t would be wrong to force Martin Wight into the Grotian pigeon hole. It is truer to view him as standing outside the three traditions, feeling the attraction of each of them but unable to come to rest within any one of them. (Bull, 1991: xiv)

This is in contradiction to an earlier statement in 1969 that Wight, singled out by Bull as 'learned and profound', was, along with Morgenthau and Carr, a representative of the first generation of realists (Bull, 1995: 191). Bull's detection of a shift of emphasis in Wight's work from 1946 onwards has been attributed to his own Pauline conversion in the 1970s from the realist to the rationalist wing of international theory: as Kenneth Thompson states — 'the reader wonders whether the student occasionally introduces ideas of his own into interpretations of the master' (Thompson, 1980: 51).

Roger Epp also recognizes that Wight was different from the state-centric realists of the American School, because Wight was conscious of the important role played by ideology in determining international relations. He claims that this was as a result of Wight's reading of international theory, which was top heavy with 'a kind of philosophical idealism' (Epp, 1996: 125). Epp points out that Wight, a conscientious objector during the Second World War, never identified himself as a realist in print (Epp, 1996: 122). Perhaps Epp's most important contribution to our understanding of Wight is his emphasis on the Christian element of Wight's thought. According to Epp, Wight was opposed to the neo-paganism of modernity and the idea of an accommodation between Christianity and 'post-Christian civilization' (Epp, 1996: 127). Epp then quotes a speech of Wight regarding the moral shortcomings of the modern system of power politics. The speech describes 'the emancipation of power from moral restraints', in which the Superpowers have carved up the world in an 'inverted and terrifying fulfilment' of the biblical command to 'go forth, multiply, fill the Earth and conquer it' (Epp, 1996: 127). Wight further condemns modernity by reference to four 'demonic perversions' – war, the state, nationalism and revolution (Epp, 1996: 127).

Epp goes on to state that though *Power Politics* was a statement of 'classical' realism, this realism was not at the expense of the 'juridical and cosmopolitan' opinions expressed in *Diplomatic Investigations and Systems of States*, and that in fact realism was 'denied a commanding position' in the dialogue envisioned by Wight (Epp, 1996: 133). Wight, according to Epp, is not concerned with international relations as 'the realm of repetition and recurrence, but as the realm of persuasion' (Epp, 1996: 135).

Within the current incarnation of the English School, Tim Dunne has emerged as a leading historian and a significant theorist in his own right of the grouping that is coalescing around the many initiatives of Barry Buzan to present the English School as a 'third way' in international relations theory. Dunne's *Inventing International Society* presents Wight as a predominantly rationalist thinker and this representation is increasingly becoming canonical in international relations. Although recognizing the realism of a 'thwarted pacifist' in Wight, it is Dunne's conviction that the later Wight became increasingly rationalist.

There is, of course, a certain amount of evidence in support of this contention that Wight was a rationalist — a category apparently wide enough to accommodate Burke, Hamilton, Jefferson and Kant. Dunne also quotes Wight on his preference for rationalist thought: 'I find my own position shifting round the circle. You will have guessed that my prejudices are Rationalist, but I find I have become more Rationalist and less Realist during the course of these lectures.' Dunne also states that Wight's British Committee for the Study of International Politics paper, 'Western Values in International Relations', indicates a 'growing alignment with rationalism' (Dunne, 1998: 60–1).

Together, the contributions of Bull, Epp and Dunne present a powerful *prima facie* case for the proposition that either Wight was not a realist, or that he experienced a conversion to rationalism in later life. While this may

be true of Wight's personal beliefs (a result of the softening of his Christian pessimism perhaps), it does not affect the primacy of realism with respect to rationalism and revolutionism in the context of the three traditions, and most importantly in relation to the nature of international society. In the same paragraph where he proclaims his personal rationalist 'prejudice', Wight states that while rationalism was a civilizing factor, and revolutionism a vitalizing factor, realism is a '*controlling disciplinary factor* in international politics' (Wight, 1991: 268 italics added). In the three traditions, as in international relations, the primary component, the controlling factor, is realism. This is the mature Wight reiterating in a more contextualized form the position of the young Wight. The reason realism is the controlling disciplinary factor lies in the problem of conflict and war: a phenomenon that Wight placed at the centre of his lectures — 'War is the central feature of international relations, although in academic study this is sometimes forgotten.' Wight goes on apologetically — 'If this is too Realist a statement, one can say instead that war is the ultimate feature of international relations' (Wight, 1991: 206).

In a telling statement, Wight defines international relations as predominantly amoral or immoral, while at the same time recognizing that morality plays a secondary role in the decision-making process:

It would be foolish to suppose that statesmen are not moved by considerations of right and justice ... . But it is wisest to start from the recognition that power politics [understood as politics among powers] ... are always inexorably approximating to power politics in the immoral sense, *and to analyse them in this light.* (Wight, 1978: 29, italics added)

Thus, according to Wight himself the Machiavellian conception of international relations is usually correct and is the foundation for the correct study of international relations. The desire for power, which in Wightian terms may be described as the ability of a state to engage in the activities of the world stage without the necessity of recourse to the involvement or mediation of another political entity (whether it be a state or a non-state actor), is the fundamental social reality of international relations (Wight, 1978: 46).

As further evidence of Wight's realist leanings (as he understood realism — the Machiavellian attitude), we can compare his treatment of the three strands of international thought in the chapter of *Diplomatic Investigations* entitled *Why is There No International Theory?* Wight denounces the legalistic tradition, or *irenists*, as 'hard to consider ... as other than the curiosities of political literature' (1966a: 19). While he also dismisses the realist tradition of the prehistory of the discipline, he isolates Machiavelli as the 'tutelary hero of international relations'. Were Grotianism and Kantianism Wight's preferred 'theoretical' positions he would hardly cite Machiavelli's amoral political theory of power as the starting point of genuine international relations (Wight, 1966a: 20). In the same chapter, Wight provides the most telling example of his essentially realist attitude: contrasting the progress of the domestic sphere with the international, he states that if Sir

Thomas More and Henry IV were to examine the international politics of the twentieth century, they would recognize that 'the stage would have become much wider, the actors fewer, their weapons more alarming, but the play would be the same old melodrama' (Wight, 1966a: 26). Here he states that Burke is a key influence upon his thought: international politics is the 'realm of recurrence and repetition' because it is the most 'necessitous' (Wight, 1966a: 20). Progressive Kantian theories in turn are treated as the natural, but ultimately flawed, response to the tyranny of realism's use of historical analogy as a description and prescription in international relations — 'it is surely not a good idea for a theory of international politics that we shall be driven to despair if we do not accept it' (Wight, 1966a: 28). Both principles of natural and positivistic law are derided in the article for ascending 'into altitudes of fiction through the multiplication of worthless agreements in the age of Mussolini and Hitler' (Wight, 1966a: 30). Wight concludes the chapter by isolating the distinguishing feature of international theory: 'international theory is the theory of survival ... (it) involves the ultimate experience of life and death, national existence and national extinction' (Wight, 1966a: 33). In so far as existing theory was appreciable to the truly objective observer, de Maistre's pessimism that '[l]a terre entière, continuellement imbibée de sang ... sans mesure, sans relâche, jusqu'à la consommation des choses' at least 'deserved a mark over some other candidates for not misrepresenting the historical world' (Wight, 1966a: 34).

### **Free Will and Original Sin: a Christian Logic of Realism**

Wight made reference to the depressing picture of international politics that he had drawn, but concluded that 'we must start from the situation as it is, not the situation as we should dearly like it to be' before concluding that human history has been catastrophic, and that we have been forced back to a position where we have to accept the Christian interpretation of history, which has the 'further, not inconsiderable, advantage of being in accordance with our historical experience' (Wight, 1948a: 2–5). The identification of the role of Christian pessimism with the theory scheme of Martin Wight is of crucial importance in understanding the complex realism that issues from the fusion of politics and Christianity. One of his critics, Michael Nicholson, identifies the basic element of Wight's Christianity as it relates to political life: '[t]hrough folly, original sin, basic animal aggressive instincts or some other cause inherent in the human condition, mankind is doomed to misery' (Nicholson, 1981: 17). In addition to the role of immoral man is the key role played by God in international relations; for Wight, at the level of the divine, what matters is not the occasion of war, but rather to understand it as a consequence of God's Justice (if the war occurs) or of His mercy (if the war is averted). Free will is granted by God to man, but conditioned by man's natural propensity to immorality as a consequence of original sin, and acts as a paradoxical tool of God in the divinely ordered

universe. Thus men are free to choose, but the results of their actions are in fact determined as a result of God's judgement — punitive or merciful (Wight, 1948a: 5). As Milton's God described the revolting angels in *Paradise Lost*:

I formed them free, and free they must remain  
 Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change  
 Their nature, and revoke the high decree  
 Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained  
 Their freedom; they themselves ordained their fall.

The doctrine of original sin gave Wight a perfect initial point for the study of human motivation in international politics. Given the strictness of his religious beliefs, it would have been impossible for Wight to adopt anything but the most pessimistic attitude towards human nature. Although as a responsible teacher he presented rationalist and revolutionist theories as to the nature of Man, as a Christian, he could not ignore biblical pronouncements on Man as a corrupt entity.

Wight's Christian pessimism is the ultimate source of his realist attitude and explains why the nature of international relations is always approximating towards the immoral. For Wight, the immorality of man is the ultimate cause of international anarchy, the flawed system of flawed creators. In an article entitled 'The Church, Russia and the West', Wight expands on this theme. The removal of any moral input in Western society in the last three centuries has created the conditions for the logical outcome of the anarchic balance of power system in which the strength of powers increases as their number decreases, rendering the Earth into two mutually opposed camps. Wight expresses the logic of realism in international relations as a consequence of the nature of states: 'Leviathan is a simple beast: his law is self-preservation, his appetite is for power.' If left to themselves, humans will inevitably bring about a Third World War, because the balance of power, the means by which Mankind has, according to its own reason, ordered international relations, is 'inherently unstable' (Wight, 1948b: 30–1).

Immorality, rooted in original sin, is ontologically prior to all other conditions in international relations. Original sin links the two positions of Christianity and Realism. The role of the Christian thinker is to embrace realism, not to disown it:

It is the duty of Christians to analyse the secular situation with ruthless realism, and without the timidity, distaste and self-deception that Communists attribute to bourgeois culture in decline. The Church was enjoined to cultivate the wisdom of the serpent as well as the simplicity of the dove ... Ruthlessly



realistic analysis is not incompatible with hope, for hope is a theological, not a political virtue. (Wight, 1948b: 33)

Liberal notions of progress and advance in human affairs are described as unscriptural and contrary to the knowledge of the future revealed by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount:

[T]he notion that the Christian Era should be a period of the gradual perfection of men and society is the opposite of what we find in the New Testament ... (Jesus) described the remainder of history in terms which suggested that it would be even more full of tumult and confusion, of wars and famines than what had gone before. (Wight, 1948b: 41)

Even in his theological writings Wight recognized the importance of recognizing the existence and primacy of evil in human international relations: he states that secular pacifists underestimate 'the wickedness of men' and also that '[t]he amount of evil in the world remains pretty constant: and my refusal to fight will not obliterate the doctrines of *Mein Kampf* nor change the state of mind of its author' (Wight, 1936: 21).

The doctrine of original sin is central to Wight's world-view as the ultimate source of the necessity of realism. In order to account for this we have to make reference to the issue of Augustine's influence on Wight. Following Augustine, Wight differentiated between the City of God, which was perfect, and the City of Man, which was imperfect. Wight as a Christian believed in the eventual victory of the City of God, but this was after the end of history: Wight the political theorist recognized that the *saeculum* was of a very different order, and operated according to the rule of Man, not God, and thus had a different logic underpinning its relationships, one that was best understood as conceiving Man as a sinful and corrupted being and a slave to his passions, chief among them Greed and Anger. This conception of Man has important consequences for the system of international relations that he creates — logically, the system has to be as flawed as its creators. The best means to understand the international environment is to assume that it is in Wight's words, 'approximating towards the immoral', and the tradition associated with this assumption is Machiavellianism or (in Wight's conception at least) Realism.

Wight's understanding of international society is highly developed, and is dependent upon the interaction of ideas and politics in the transition from the medieval world to the modern: the development of a structure of international society from the Council of Constance to the Cold War. This development is a result of three attitudes in conflict: the Machiavellian, the Grotian and the Kantian. Truth is therefore perspective-dependent rather than the conceptual reflection of an unchanging reality, as in Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*. The attitudes merely serve to illuminate the dominant reasoning of a specific time and place, the political *zeitgeist* of a given era. Ideas and reality are linked by historical experience, hence Machiavelli produced the most insight into the relations between the city states of the Italian wars of the Renaissance, Grotius best expressed the political

philosophy of the legalist peace movement of the period dominated by the Thirty Years' War and Kant best expressed the notions of universalism and systemic transformation in the era of the French Revolution. All of these theoretical positions have had periods of dominance within the thought world of international society, but it is realism that provides the key to understanding the underlying logic of this international society.

This is a very contextual realism: a historically contextualized realism in the sense that realist practices beg the emergence of realist discourses, discourses that are themselves placed into theoretical context by the rationalists and revolutionists. Machiavelli is the 'tutelary hero' of international relations, because in *The Prince* he recognized politics as a secular activity rather than a duty for an ideal archetype:

[I]t appears to me more proper to go to the real truth of the matter than to its imagination ... for how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation. (Machiavelli, 1950: 56–7)

Machiavelli's determination to create a *speculum princeps* that was based on the real in turn provoked a series of responses — rationalist and revolutionist. Wight's invocation that 'we must start from the situation as it is, not the situation as we should dearly like it to be' is a reiteration of Machiavelli's position and a statement of intent by Wight of the correct starting point of theory.

### **The Realism of International Society**

Typically, Wight was unwilling to engage fully with the ramifications of his identification of the theory sets. While allowing the reader to identify the Grotian subtext in his writings through the concept of international society in addition to the Realist analyses based upon the idea of international anarchy. However, neither *Anatomy of International Thought* nor *International Theory: The Three Traditions* does he attempt to get to grips with the social logic of what appears to be the paradoxical situation of a Grotian international structure based upon the institution of diplomacy and alliances operating a realist logic based upon the principle of competition in international anarchy. The key to understanding the implicit relationship between the international society (which embodies Order, and to a degree, Justice) and international anarchy (which is created by the desire for Power and the potential for acquiring it), lies in an awareness of the importance of the role of the balance of power within international society.

The current English School is determined to downplay the realist element of Wight's analysis of international society, but this does not seem to tally with Wight's emphasis upon international anarchy and the struggle for power as the foundation of international society. In *Power Politics* he recognizes that:

Qualifications are necessary: there is a system of international law and there are international institutions to modify or complicate the workings of power politics. But it is roughly the case that ... in international politics law and institutions are governed and circumscribed by the struggle for power. This indeed is the justification for calling international politics 'power politics' *par excellence*. (Wight, 1978: 102)

In this statement, Wight approximates Carr's position on the derivation of law from politics — politics understood as the pursuit of power. When Wight argues in *International Theory: The Three Traditions* that realists do not believe in international society, he is arguing that realists do not believe in a natural predisposition towards the social. He does, however, credit Hobbes with the discovery of a contracted and minimal international society based on the accommodation of interests. Wight's analysis of the UN as a Hobbesian system of international relations demonstrates that it is possible to speak of a realist international society — albeit of a minimalist variety (Wight and Porter, 1991: 30–7). The problem of the existence of different truths about international society is resolved by Wight by stressing the 'complementary' nature of realist and rationalist truths about international society:

[I]t is possible that these truths, Realist and Rationalist, are complementary, not contradictory. On the Rationalist view, the role of force would then be simply to remedy the insufficiencies of custom; where the Realist says that custom gives a coating to acts of force, the Rationalist says that force steps in where custom breaks down. (Wight and Porter, 1991: 39)

This amounts to an accommodation of realism within the international society idea, not a repudiation of realism. What Wight has achieved is a fusion of two 'realities' of international society — the realist and the rationalist. The operation of the balance of power as a Grotian institution and a Machiavellian impulse in international society further explores this idea of realist/rationalist co-existent duality. In the supposedly Grotian repudiation of realism, *Western Values in International Relations*, Wight demonstrates the secondary, epiphenomenal nature of the rationalist position in relation to the Machiavellian by the identification of a paradox in Burke's writings against the French Revolution:

Is it fair to say that Burke's writings against the French Revolution illustrate a central paradox of the view of international society that he propounded, that its principles of legitimacy have been modified instead of being dissolved, only because men have been ready to fight that they should undergo no change at all? It is those who have died to prevent modification who have made possible a modification within limits that posterity can accept (Wight, 1966b, p. 101)

The maintenance and continuance of international society is therefore dependent not upon the continuity of ideas that constitute it, but rather

upon the power struggle between satiated and revisionist powers, for whom the ideas are part of the conflict. In any case, Wight's intention in *Western Values in International Relations* is to account for the emergence of modern Western notions of a positive ethicality in politics, rather than the identification of international society as a rationalist principle *per se*.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the category of Grotian is not reserved for those committed to a legal or formulistic understanding of international politics. For example, Hans Morgenthau, an archetypal realist, is placed in the Grotian category in *International Theory: the Three Traditions* (Wight and Porter, 1991: 160). Grotianism is not simply a 'Third Way' (although there are certainly thinkers who fall unambiguously into this category) of international thought; it is closer to a zone of ideational interaction and interlocution where realist and rationalist and revolutionist ideas merge and diverge.

*The Balance of Power: The Realist Foundation of International Society*

The key to understanding this Heraclitean tension between the competing truth claims of realist and rationalist theories of international society lies in the balance of power. Power lies at the centre of both international society and international anarchy: Wight conceived of both conditions as aspects of political existence. The balance of power plays a key role in demonstrating the logic of Wight's theory scheme, with each of the traditions viewing it from a different angle. For the Grotian tradition, the balance of power is the rational pursuit of equilibrium in international relations; stability is guaranteed by plurality of power within a system (Wight and Porter, 1991: 164–8). The Machiavellian approach emphasizes political analysis of the relationships inherent in a balance of power: in any balance of power there are those powers satisfied with the status quo and others that are dissatisfied. For the revolutionists the term balance of power only reaffirms the authority of the satiated powers. By extension, those revolutionary powers that find their situation 'irksome' are forced into an antagonistic stance by the reiteration of the correctness of the balance of power (Wight and Porter, 1991: 168–72).

The realist understanding of the balance of power is more concerned with the distribution of power in an anarchical society. Its analysis of the system is one in which nations are stratified in relation to their power: great powers, lesser powers and superpowers. Wight termed this the pattern of powers and the ordering logic of this pattern 'the balance of power' (Wight, 1978: 157–85). For Wight, the realist concept of the balance of power 'leads to considerations of military potential, diplomatic initiative and economic strength' (1966c: 149). Yet the concept itself is amorphous, with the meaning of the metaphor changing over time: discovering timeless laws or concrete principles (à la Morgenthau) is therefore difficult (if not impossible) to achieve — the truth about the effect and the nature of the balance of power, like that of international society, is contested. The dualism of realism and rationalism is evident in Wight's attribution of both

descriptive/analytical realist aspects of the balance of power and rationalist/prescriptive characteristics to the balance of power as a rational system of international relations — the foundation of international society (Wight, 1966c: 150).

For the Grotians, according to Wight, ‘the balance of power had been a system of keeping international order’. The balance of power is therefore at the core of international society, that system which Wight identified as most typical of the international political sphere based around nation-states. International society, as opposed to international anarchy, is the embodiment of Wight’s ‘second pattern’ of international cooperation between states; for example, he cites the League of Nations as an attempt to create an international society based around a legal, institutionalized balance of power in an effort to make it ‘more rational, more reliable, and therefore more effectively preventive’ (Wight, 1973: 110). The alliance system, which organizes the powers of varying sizes into groups with shared interests (strategic, economic), creates an impulse toward order which in turn creates the structures of international society — diplomacy, international bodies, conferences, etc. — as an alternative to conflict, or an alternative arena for power contestation. The Italian wars of the Renaissance and the attendant development of an international diplomatic system are classic examples of this development of an international society through the interactions of a realist struggle for power creating the conditions for the emergence of systems of mediation of power.

In the realist understanding of the balance of power, the defining concept is that of the hierarchy of power. This hierarchy has a determining effect upon the conduct of international relations in that the position occupied by a power or state in the hierarchy determines whether it is a great, minor or world power. It is also the primary determinant of how powers relate to one another: the failure of the League of Nations was that it did not recognize the primacy of power politics over the institutions of normative international society:

An attempt had been made in 1919 to restrain the collective authority of the Great Powers within the forms of permanent membership of the Council of the League of Nations. The Great Powers soon threw off these constitutional trappings. Some did not join the League, some resigned from it and those who retained their membership found a greater common interest with the Great Powers outside than with the other members inside the League. (Wight, 1952: 509)

Although the effect of the balance of power can be to create and preserve international society, the logic of its operation is derived from the struggle for power. In his historical analysis of the balance of power in *Diplomatic Investigations*, Wight (1966c) examines the balance of power in terms of the systemic logic of anarchy. From this perspective the balance of power, which is the precondition for the foundation of Grotian order in an international society, in its operation obeys a realist logic:

- (4) The principle of aggrandisement of the Great Powers at the expense of the weak.
- (5) The principle that our side ought to have a margin of strength in order to avert the danger of power becoming unevenly distributed.
- (6) (When governed by the verb 'to hold':) A special role in the maintaining of an even distribution of power.
- (7) (Ditto:) A special advantage in the existing balance of power.
- (8) Predominance.

Each of these definitions points to the realist logic of the balance of power as the pursuit of a national interest expressed in terms of power. 'Aggrandisement', 'margin of strength', 'special advantage' and 'predominance' within the balance of power and the international society all demand Machiavellian policies in order to achieve these goals. To be sure, the balance of power is unstable, and cannot achieve the goal of guaranteeing security, or it could result in universal tyranny, but it is the ordering principle within anarchy, as Wight stated in one of his lectures:

Hobbes saw so deeply into the nature of political life that now after three centuries, when the whirligig of time has brought round conditions similar to those he constructed in the logic of abstract fantasy, things happen much as he said they would. (Wight and Porter, 1991: 36)

### **The Persistent Logic of Realism: Systemic Change, Realist Consistency**

There is then a tension in the system of international society between the structural effect of cooperation and the anarchical logic of the units that compose this system. International society becomes ever more sophisticated in nature, with international bodies such as the EU, NAFTA and MercoSur beginning to transcend the sovereignty *problematique* of the nation-state system. But has the systemic logic of the balance of power, in which actors compete, been replaced by a balance of interests, in which actors cooperate? For Wight, though the players could change, the motives of power remain the same, from the relationship of Greek city states to the modern European international society. Proponents of a rationalist conversion in Wight's international theory neglect the fact that in one of the chapters comprising one of his latest works *Systems of States* he describes as characteristic within a 'triangle' international society an attitude of 'unremitting suspicion, tension, hostility' (Wight, 1977: 174).

In *Systems of States*, Wight examines state systems based upon the operation of the balance of power of which there are two main categories, 'open' and 'closed'. The open system is characterized by continual expansion and is therefore in a state of flux, in the more rigid closed system, expansion ends, facilitating the creation of 'triangles' and 'duels'. Each of these is a form of conflict based upon the balance of power (Wight, 1977: 175). A triangle is a system in which three sides predominate; in this system groups *A*, *B* and *C* combine in a two-against-one system in which *C* defeats *A* and

ultimately *B* to become the system hegemon. Thus the initial triangle becomes a duel, with ultimately one power dominating — this Wight called the Endgame Scenario. In the Semi-Final Scenario, *A* and *B* combine to beat *C*. If the system is open, *A* and *B* can be joined and superseded by another power *D*, thus creating a new triangle system. If the system is closed, after a period of uneasy cooperation a duel ensues between powers *A* and *B* that should proceed to an endgame. In the final scenario, Wight examines the possibility of the Hobbesian war of all against all, *A* vs *B* vs *C* vs *A*, the ultimate result of which is the monopoly of power by *X*, either the victor in the struggle or the successor power from outside the initial conflict. In each case the predominant logic is not cooperation, but conflict (Wight, 1977: 174–200). In terms of the logic of international relations as the sphere of Realism, there is little difference between Wight's analysis of the role of the balance of power and Morgenthau's theory that systems based upon the balance of power were inherently unstable 'as a result of the dynamics of the struggle for power' (Morgenthau, 1973: 355). For both writers the predominant logic of the operation of the balance of power is not cooperation, but conflict.

### Conclusion

It is a difficult task to state with any conviction the intention of Wight's theory of international society, as he did not codify his theory in any one text. Contemporaries attribute this lack of codification to an overly perfectionist approach to preparing his written work (Bull, 1978: 15; Roberts, 1991: xxiv). However, I think it fair to say that his consistent aim, from the first edition of *Power Politics* to the posthumous publications, was to engage with the power politics of his and previous times to attempt to provide a series of answers pertaining to the logic of the system and mechanisms of international relations. Constructed from his unpublished works were the much expanded second edition of *Power Politics*, *Systems of States*, and *The Three Traditions*: in none of these posthumous publications is there any evidence of a totalizing principle in the fashion of the positivist school. This absence of 'totality' gives Wight a connection with postmodernism, in that neither supports a theory of international relations that would put an end to disagreement and uncertainty. There is an awareness that the role of the commentator is not to make claims to understand an objective reality in the international environment, but to concern himself with the debate among the contending theories and doctrines of theorists without an expectation of ultimate resolution. Wight expressed his awareness of the distance between theory and practice in a paper tellingly entitled *Why Is There No International Theory?* 'What I have been trying to express is the sense of a kind of disharmony between international theory and diplomatic practice, a kind of recalcitrance of international politics to being theorized about' (Wight, 1966a: 34).

Ultimately, Wight's position is in fact anti-theoretical in the sense that neo-realists understand the term. There is no model of international rela-

tions in his work, nor is there a commitment to the discovery of timeless principles. Wight's purpose is to uncover the logic of international society. The logic of power and the 'order' of power are reconciled through the structural imperative of the balance of power resulting in the creation of international society and the logic of the operation of the balance of power. In terms of the equations outlined by Wight in *Anatomy of International Thought*, the unspoken corollary of his thought system is that anarchy creates order creates anarchy. International order and international anarchy act as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that ensure the continuance of both patterns within international society. Realist logic and Grotian structure, instead of being understood as antinomian world-views, or in dialectical terms, can be seen as conversational partners in the academic sense and as effective partners in the sphere of political evolution in international relations. Lying outside the primary relationship is the systemic corrective of the third pattern of 'Revolutionism', a species of catalytic thought which according to Wight is 'a series of waves, that have an effect upon the timestream of international politics. Based on principle of supersession, an attempt to accelerate or step out of history' (Wight and Porter, 1991: 12). The ultimate effect of this third pattern is of 'transposing the melody of power politics to a new key' (Wight, 1978: 88). Wight qualifies the importance of revolution by emphasizing the corrective power of the logic of international power systems on revolutionary enthusiasm, citing numerous examples of revolutionary regimes allying with doctrinal or ideological opposites in accordance with *raison d'état* (Wight, 1978: 91). Thus, although the system may take on important new characteristics, the quotidian procedures of the system (and fundamentally the structures and institutions of international order) are not usually affected outside the general systemic effect of the new ideology — thoughts, once expressed and disputed, cannot be unthought, but can be assimilated into the mainstream of international political reference. The last 200 years have been characterized by the huge ideological impact of the French and Russian Revolutions, yet in each case the pariah revolutionary state was reintegrated into both international society and into the logic of realism.

Wight's system of international relations is a complicated attempt to resolve the apparent paradox in the relationship between rationalist structural order and the realist anarchic logic of the operation of power in international relations. Composed of mutually opposed structure and imperative action, the system none the less makes sense. A key component of Wight's theory set is his religious background: the primacy of realism in his thought, while he expresses both pacifist and liberal attitudes in his works, can be explained by the doctrine of original sin, which forms the bridge between his individual convictions and his analysis of international politics. In this analysis of international politics, Wight played out a dualistic drama based upon the relationship between a morally informed 'Order' represented by international society and the immoral (at least from the point of view of his personal morality) anarchic logic of Power.



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SEÁN MOLLOY graduated from Trinity College, Dublin and Dublin City University. He is now a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Centre for European Studies, the University of Limerick.  
Address: Department of Government and Society, Foundation Building, University of Limerick, Republic of Ireland.  
[email: seanpmolloy@hotmail.com]