

Critical review

**Wight, Martin (2002). *Power Politics*. Brasilia: University of Brasilia
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Martin Wight is considered one of the most influential theorists of the previous generation of International Relations and is a founder of the English School of International Relations. The conception and analysis of different state-systems was developed by him and showed the importance of world history to the study of international relations. He was also one of the main influences of Hedley Bull. Wight was from the realist tradition, but called it rationalistic. He considered the international behaviour of states and the relationship they conducted as a central theme. Wight argues that even if states are the main and immediate members of the international society, members are still individuals.

The basis for Martin Wight's thought arises from his concerns with the absence of a theoretical corpus to explain the relationship between States. This concern was not unique to him, but shared by many thinkers. Like this, Wight sought to understand international phenomena in terms of cooperation and conflict, which went beyond national policies.

For the author, the Theory of International Relations – or International Theory as he called it – was considered the political study of philosophy, or political speculation, focused on the examination of the main traditions of thinking about international relations in the past. In Wight's view an approach to philosophy was needed, which led him to search, organise and categorise everything that had been said and thought about the subject over time.

While behaviorists exclude moral questions from scientific rigor, Wight put these issues at the core of his research. For him, the emergence of his studies was the result of an inventory of the debate between traditions and theories, which conflicted in such a way that no resolution was expected.

His systematic vision and even contempt for behaviorists reflected the confidence and security in his own conviction. He never accepted the fact that a theoretical approach



devoid of history and philosophy could create a solid environment for the understanding of the political world.

According to Wight, classic international theory is primarily a theory of survival; in other words, social Darwinism. Since States are sovereign they exist in an anarchic condition; they therefore rely on themselves for survival. So what political theory considers an extreme case (such as a revolution or civil war), international theory considers a normal case.

In virtue of his analysis, Martin Wight identified three existing classic paradigms existing in different variants that are practically contemporaneous to sovereign States: realism, rationalism and revolutionism, versions also called Machiavellian, Grotian and Kantian. It is worth noting that these triads are also considered the three traditions of Wight. For this thinker, truth should not be sought through any of the interpretations, but in argument and strife between them.

Realism conceives relations predominantly, if not exclusively, by *raison d'état*, in which the political right is the good of the State and sovereignty is the final word in such discussions. The international system is a place in which the rule of men pursue their interests or purposes and, with a certain frequency, provoke conflict that may threaten the survival of some. For Wight, the fundamental problem of international relations is the prevention of conflicts through negotiating solutions, whether through diplomacy, national defence, military alliances or other more adequate solutions. In a nutshell, realism emphasises conflicts conducted between states.

In turn, Rationalism, conceives international relations as a society through the mediated dialogue between States and the rule of law. International society is a civil society where State members legitimate interests, which may cause conflicts; however, they report to the common sphere of international law, aiming to regulate such conflicts.

Revolutionism, the third paradigm of international theory identified by Wight, is reflected in the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution and the Communist Revolution. In this paradigm humans precede the institutions and therefore the sovereign state must be subordinate in some way to a higher authority – or the *civitas maxima*. In short, it emphasises the unity and solidarity of the human race.

The importance of Wight's English School is due to the fact that it serves as an introduction to the main issues of international relations theory, with the objective of helping to understand the historical moment in which we operate. Thus, this school is a good starting point for parties that are interested in the diplomatic issues of today.

In general, the English School has two basic assumptions: the first deals with theoretical pluralism, an effort to cover the totality of international relations, which is considered to be the central point that sustains the English School (the three traditions of Wight). The second comprises of the English School being a tradition of dialogue whose focus is on the three traditions. From this perspective, people can participate without being committed to certain lines. Thinkers linked to the school – including Wight – have richly contributed to ideas related to the study of international relations.

From a holistic analysis of the work of Wight, he did not intend to address a systematic theorisation; in fact, he saw all these theories in the field of international policy with disbelief and disillusionment. There is therefore the need to base the interpretation not on what was said recently, but on the classic pronouncements on the subject, in the



sense that they are the standard or exquisite expression of a certain point of view. Hence, the work of Wight seeks to provide an interpretation not of the current condition of the international political system, but of its fundamental traits and enduring facts.

The idea of Wight works with the continuous or the permanent, recognising changes when they occur or making an assessment of claims that are fundamental.

According to Wight (2002: 3),

"power politics in the sense of international politics, then, came into existence when medieval Christendom dissolved and the modern sovereign state was born".

Therefore, in this fact the generating factor of power politics can be seen. For Martin, power politics refers to a central truth related to international relations; it suggests the relationship between independent powers. As independent units there are States, nations, countries or powers (Wight, 2002: 1).

Wight adds that

"modern man in general has shown stronger loyalty to the state than to the church or social class or any other international bond"
(Wight, 2002:4).

Also according to him, the modern State demonstrates a power of attraction and unique fidelity that has been unequalled when compared to the aforementioned forces.

As for the definition of power politics, Wight adds that this is a translation of the German word *Machtpolitik*, meaning

"the politics of force – the conduct of international relations by force or the threat of force, without consideration of right or justice"
(Wight, 2002: 8).

However, when referring to the term during World War I, the author brings in evidence that it took the meaning of "national interest" from the original French "*raison d'état*". In this sense, unscrupulous actions were justified in defence of the public interest (Wight, 2002: 8).

The book contains twenty-four chapters, plus the preface, two appendices and index, as well as the summary.

From Chapters I to V, the work deals with the powers and their classification. Chapters VI to XXIV address more specific topics, such as international revolutions, international anarchy, diplomacy, alliances, war, and intervention.



Only in Chapter XIV, "The Expansion of Powers" and Appendix 1 (Classification of Powers) does Wight take up the theme of powers. Chapter VI describes surrounding modes, tactics and types of artillery used to assert the dominance of the European state system and the navigation age in the fifteenth century until mid-1945.

In Chapter VII, "International Revolutions", the author believes that the revolution is a violent regime change in a single state. For him, the French Revolution is the classic European example of the term (Wight, 2002: 69).

In Chapter VIII entitled "Vital Interests and Prestige", the author deals with vital interests – things that a power judges as essential for maintaining independence and, because of them, defends to the point of going to war. Prestige revolves around power and brings with it, in a mysterious way, material benefits.

"In general, it is acquired slowly and lost quickly. It is that that was not expected" (Wight, 2002: 87).

In Chapter IX, "In the International Arena", the author classifies anarchy as a multitude of powers without government. Wight describes anarchy as a feature that "distinguishes international politics from ordinary politics" (2002: 93). For him, the study of international politics "presupposes the absence of a system of government, whilst the study of domestic policy presupposes the existence of such a system" (Wight, 2002: 93).

In Chapter X, entitled "International Society", the author describes it as a society different from any other. Because of its shape it is considered the most inclusive that exists on the earth. The legacy is for posterity. Its institutions vary according to their nature, which namely are: diplomacy, alliances, guarantees, war and neutrality (Wight, 2002: 104).

In Chapter XI, "Diplomacy: the Institution for Negotiation", Martin also defines the system and the art of communication between states. He considers the diplomatic system as "the master institution of international relations" (Wight 2002: 1007) and is divided into two categories: embassies and conferences.

In Chapter XII, by appropriating the definition of Aristotle, Wight emphasises that alliances are not the friendships of international politics; they have the function of increasing the security of allies or promoting interests in the rest of the world.

In Chapter XIII entitled "War", Wight defines war as an institution of international relations. Its origins are in government decisions, and sometimes by the passions of the people. It is driven by power relationships.

In "The Expansion of Powers", Chapter XIV, Wight points out that the major powers have shown an expansionary tendency with great success (Wight, 2002: 141). However, the tendency to expand is also found in the history of small powers. The expansion of powers would be the result of two causes: internal pressure and the weakness of adjacent powers.

In Chapter XV, called "Alliance and Organisation", the author refers to power alignments such as NATO, which make up the configuration of power. For him, these organisms are formed under external pressure, never through popular force, and their cohesion varies



with pressure (Wight, 2002: 155). According to the author no State is immune to the configuration of power; however, a great power has broad freedom to modify it, even to the extent of exercising influence over the destiny of their weaker neighbours.

In Chapter XVI, "The Balance of Power", Martin states that in its original meaning the expression takes the idea of an equal distribution of power, in a context where no power is so dominant as to pose others risk (Wight, 2002: 172). The balance of power would be in full operation every time a dominant power strives to dominate international society and momentary means, disrupting this balance (Wight, 2002: 168).

In Chapter XVII, Wight defines compensation as "a principle that governs the overall relationship between comparable forces of States" (Wight, 2002: 187). On the other hand, he states that "it refers to a method of regulating the balance of power through the combined changing of territories" (Wight, 2002: 187). For him, when there are only two parties to the transaction, the compensation it is bilateral; when it involves more than two, it is multilateral (Wight, 2002: 187).

In Chapter XVIII, entitled "Intervention", the term is defined as an interference by force that does not necessarily constitute an imminent declaration of war, which is enacted by one or more powers on another power's affairs. Intervention may take place through foreign policy at a country level or in the domestic sphere.

For the author, chapters XIX (League of Nations) and XX (United Nations) modestly address significant topics. However, due to the heightened importance given to these issues by some scholars, he discusses them succinctly and clearly. However, they still show the weaknesses and/or weaknesses of such organisations.

In Chapter XXI, "The Arms Race", he defines the phenomenon as the "competitive build-up of troops and weapons, whereby each side tries to obtain an advantage over their neighbour, or at least try not to remain at a disadvantage" (Wight, 2002: 247), which can happen between two or a number of rival powers at a regional or global level.

"Disarmament", Chapter XXII, is treated from a traditional point of view, and thus is seen as the solution to arms races. His definition involves the abolition of weapons, or reducing quantity, or setting limits on their growth, as well as restricting certain types or uses. Wight says that with some frequency that "disarmament has been accepted by powers through imposition or losing a war. Compulsory demolition of strongholds may be the oldest form of disarmament" (Wight, 2002: 269).

In Chapter XXIII entitled "Arms Control", the author looks at some basic questions on the subject and some advanced discussions in the field of atomic energy.

In Chapter XXIV Wight addresses issues such as the establishment of the tradition of an international community with a common standard of duty and justice. In his view, the author considers that the international community is the main influence on the functioning of power politics. It also involves morality in international politics as a result of security.

The book is a solid historical introduction of the cardinal principles active in international politics, which makes it a key reference. The way the author exposes the issues, the key concepts of the area – addressed on one historic continuum – delight and fascinate fans of International Relations. The author exhibits the area from the earliest times to the current issues, and involves discussions that were never thought of at the time. For



example, Wight cites Brazil's decision to adopt nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. He recalls in a historic mode how classifications have been developed among the powers from the European state system, and how the tensioned and permanent balance of power developed for them to achieve global hegemony.

For all the reasons presented here, note that students or those interested in International Relations are looking at an indispensable classic, suitable for aspiring diplomats or beginners to the area. Wight's vision of diplomacy – and diplomatic subjects – is a transcendent wisdom of its time.

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