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# The Imagination and International Relations

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The imagination is at the heart of what it means to be human. For this reason, it has been the subject of close examination across time and locale. Yet, while international relations (IR) researchers often mobilize the term rhetorically, its character and operations remain underconceptualized in the discipline and disconnected from the rich literatures that explore this vital faculty. This article identifies a commonsense account of the imagination in IR's most pervasive discourse on order and anarchy. Taking its cues from the Hobbesian tradition, here a distinctly monological imagination is fearful and pessimistic, rooted in the overriding dread of a sudden and violent death. We draw out its underlying assumptions by foregrounding the deliberate, systematic, and sustained construction of the imagination in Hobbes' Leviathan, where it acts as a crucial and animating impetus for the Hobbesian subject, including in the oft-analogized "state of nature" scenario. We argue that this Hobbesian imagination has been superseded by a multidisciplinary contemporary scholarship that presents a markedly different view. Anyone thinking seriously about the imagination today should disagree with the Hobbesian account, reconsider theories of international relations predicated on it, and explore the political possibilities entailed in other approaches.

La imaginación es una de las bases fundamentales de lo que significa ser humano. Por este motivo, ha sido objeto de minuciosos exámenes a través del tiempo y el espacio. Sin embargo, mientras que los investigadores del campo de las relaciones internacionales suelen utilizar el término de manera retórica, su naturaleza y funcionamiento permanecen subconceptualizados en la disciplina y desconectados de la vasta bibliografía que analiza esta facultad vital. En este artículo, se identifica un relato de sentido común de la imaginación en el discurso más generalizado del campo de las relaciones internacionales con respecto al orden y la anarquía. Si seguimos el ejemplo de la teoría hobbesiana, aquí la imaginación claramente monológica es temerosa y pesimista, arraigada en el temor predominante de sufrir una muerte súbita y violenta. Extraemos sus suposiciones subyacentes y destacamos la construcción deliberada, sistemática y sostenida de la imaginación en el Leviatán de Hobbes, en el que actúa como un ímpetu crucial y animador para el sujeto hobbesiano, incluso en el escenario del "estado de naturaleza" que, a menudo, se suele justificar con analogías. Sostenemos que esta imaginación hobbesiana se ha reemplazado por una erudición contemporánea multidisciplinaria que presenta una visión notablemente distinta. En la actualidad, cualquiera que piense seriamente en la imaginación debería estar en desacuerdo con la explicación hobbesiana, volver a considerar las teorías de las relaciones internacionales que se basan en ella y analizar las posibilidades políticas que implican otros enfoques.

L'imagination est au cœur de ce que signifie être humain. C'est pour cette raison qu'elle a fait l'objet d'un examen attentif à travers le temps et les différents lieux. Pourtant, bien que les chercheurs en Relations internationales (RI) mobilisent souvent ce terme rhétoriquement, son caractère et ses fonctionnements restent sous-conceptualisés dans la discipline et déconnectés des littératures d'une grande richesse qui explorent cette faculté vitale. Cet article identifie une analyse au sens commun de l'imagination dans le discours sur l'ordre et l'anarchie qui est le plus omniprésent en RI. S'inspirant de la tradition hobbesienne, cette imagination est distinctement monologique, craintive, pessimiste et ancrée dans la grande appréhension d'une mort soudaine et violente. Nous exposons ses hypothèses sous-jacentes en mettant en avant la construction délibérée, systématique et continue de l'imagination dans le Léviathan de Hobbes, où elle agit en tant qu'impulsion stimulante cruciale pour le sujet hobbesien, y compris dans le scénario souvent analogisé de « l'état de nature ». Nous soutenons que cette imagination hobbesienne a été remplacée par des recherches contemporaines multidisciplinaires qui présentent un point de vue nettement différent. Toute personne réfléchissant sérieusement à l'imagination devrait aujourd'hui être en désaccord avec l'analyse hobbesienne, réexaminer les théories des relations internationales qui sont basées dessus et explorer les possibilités politiques qu'impliquent d'autres approches.

## Introduction

The imagination is a core function of the human mind and its extraordinary remit—from reconstructing the past to envisioning the future—lies at the heart of what it means to be human. As Einstein famously put it, "[i]magination encircles the world" or in other translations "imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth

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to evolution" (see Einstein 1931). For this reason, it has been the subject of close examination across time and locale. Yet, while international relations (IR) researchers often mobilize the term rhetorically, its character and operations remain underconceptualized in the discipline and disconnected from the rich literatures that explore this vital faculty. There is a critical account of "common sense" that is worth taking seriously in this context: the things we take for granted are not neutral, they instantiate particular interests, ideologies, and historical formations. What assumptions does a commonsense understanding of the imagination rest on? What possibilities are furthered or foreclosed? What alternative approaches are available and what might they enable?

This article identifies a commonsense account of the imagination crystalized in Thomas Hobbes' stark rendering of "the state of nature" and embedded in IR's most pervasive discourse on order and anarchy. Here, a distinctly monological imagination is fearful and pessimistic, rooted in the overriding dread of a sudden and violent death. Like individuals caught in "a war of all against all," without a Leviathan to settle the peace, states are driven to imagine the worst and plan accordingly. A dynamic of suspicion and worst-case thinking is the engine of the security dilemma, often considered the most endemic source of conflict. This view of the imagination is taken for granted and reproduced without reflection by many. We draw out its underlying assumptions by foregrounding the deliberate, systematic, and sustained construction of the imagination in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, where it acts as a crucial and animating impetus for the Hobbesian subject.

We argue that this Hobbesian imagination has been superseded by a multidisciplinary contemporary scholarship that presents a markedly different account. Whereas Hobbes' monological imagination leads to a narrow fear of unknowable others, now the imagination is understood to be intersubjective, allowing us to stand in another's shoes and thereby access the broader spectrum of human responses, including empathy, compassion, reciprocity, and hope, as well as a wider range of possible futures. Key literatures across social theory, neuropsychology, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), and evolutionary anthropology highlight the imagination's intersubjectivity. That is, despite differences in methodology, conceptualization, and nomenclature, each literature points toward an imagination shaped by, and integral to, social relations.

We explore the implications of these findings by comparing the defunct Hobbesian imagination with Hegel's intersubjective account, via their contrasting versions of the "state of nature." Under circumstances of conflict and antagonism, we emphasize the distinction between a Hobbesian scenario characterized by suspicion and worst-case thinking and a Hegelian alternative characterized by struggles for recognition within a shared social context. In doing so, we show how the intersubjective imagination requires a shift beyond IR's Hobbesian discourse on order and anarchy. Although the Hegelian imagination provides a useful example, we also foreground other contemporary research programs that can inform a move toward conceptualizations that take seriously the imagination's capacity for diverse and socially embedded responses. We contend that anyone thinking seriously about the imagination today should reject the Hobbesian account, reconsider IR theories predicated on it, and explore the political possibilities entailed in these other approaches.

While this argument poses a challenge to IR's Hobbesian discourse on order and anarchy, it also contributes to recent scholarship in constructivism and critical IR. Relational and practice theory approaches advance a critique of substantialism, the view that basic units of analysis exist prior to interactions, that connects directly with our contrast between the Hobbesian and intersubjective imagination (McCourt 2016, 479; Weber 2020, 641). Here, intersubjective processes shape identities, preferences, and possibilities for action—we show that the imagination, properly understood, is an indispensable part of this same dynamic.[1] At the same time, our account also provides an alternative to the passive subjectivity sometimes evident in social psychology–influenced research, for instance, into the emotional dimension of politics. The imagination can give rise to emotions, but it also animates and transcends them, for instance, when we elaborate and weigh possible scenarios, past, present, and future; when we see a circumstance from another's perspective; or when we speculate, infer, or think theoretically.[2] We show that the imagination is socially derived and mutually implicated but also an activity and a competency of each person.

The potential for supplementing constructivism and critical IR is made clear if we consider the way the imagination already operates rhetorically in much of this literature. The most significant reference point here is Benedict Anderson's (1983) well-known work, which is virtually ubiquitous in IR's discourse on identity and self/other relations. Anderson has this to say about the relationship between national identity and the imagination: "[the nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Anderson's use of "imagined" suggests intersubjectivity, but there is little elaboration. Contemporary literatures on the imagination can deepen this account—and IR research mobilizing the imagination in similar ways—by adding insightful conceptualizations and robust empirics.

Before we go any further, a definition and some caveats are necessary. While the imagination has been the focus of many research programs, there is little interdisciplinary dialogue across findings. For instance, Stevenson (2003) identifies at least twelve conceptions of the imagination, including accounts that position it as an aid to perception, integral to memory, or the engine of belief. Even the *Oxford Dictionary* (2021) defines the imagination in five ways. In view of this diversity, we take an inclusive definition that aims to identify a shared research focus, while leaving space for disagreements between approaches. We understand the imagination to be a cognitive faculty, actively engaged by the subject, capable of both forming and integrating new ideas not present to the senses or reducible to sensate data.[3]

It is also worth positioning contemporary approaches to the imagination within the rich discourse on the imagination dating back to antiquity. In the western tradition, the imagination has been thought of in at least three ways: first,

[1] On process ontologies versus traditional IR constructivism, see, for instance, Adler-Nissen (2013) and McCourt (2016).

[2] Rich and compelling research on the emotions has been at the cutting edge of IR for some time now, and this article points toward further avenues for exploration. For a sense of this literature see, for instance, Crawford (2000), Hutchison and Bleiker (2014), Koschut (2017), and Hutchison (2016).

[3] Although the imagination often gives rise to emotions such as fear and compassion, draws in and animates emotions, and is entangled with emotion in a number of contexts, the imagination cannot be reduced to the emotions and emotions/imagination are not interchangeable conceptually or analytically. The imagination is much more than its involvement with a subject's emotional life, however broadly that is construed. For useful explorations of these issues, see Casey (1984), Moran (1994), and Morton (2013).

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as being inferior to other mental faculties; second, as being superior to other mental faculties; and third, as playing a mediating role between faculties (Casey 2001, 15–18).[4] Plato is the preeminent example of the first approach, condemning the imagination—or *eikāsia*—as "a pernicious strategy of simulation," subordinate to belief, reasoning, science, and rational intuition (Kearney 1998, 3; Sepper 2013, 3). At the other end of the spectrum, the Romantics exalt the powers of the imagination (Engell 1981). Johann Fichte, for example, asserted that "all reality is brought forth solely by imagination," while Baudelaire regarded it as "the queen of the faculties" (Fichte and Baudeladire cited in Kearney 1998, 3 and 4). The third approach, centered on mediation, groups together disparate thinkers, including Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, and Husserl, who allow the imagination to play a role in synthesizing the sensible and the conceptual (Elliott 2005, 7).

The majority of contemporary scholarship on the imagination is situated in this third tradition. As Dennis Sepper (2013, 9) explains:

> [t]he most successful attempts to understand imagination have been those that do not isolate it or explain it as though it were a module, routine, or procedure separate from other human psychological powers. Human imagination cannot be properly conceived apart from sense perception, from memory, and from rationality—nor even from pain, pleasure, aversion, and desire. Imagination is understood most clearly and amply when it is seen as integrating other human powers, as the matrix of the entire economy of the psyche. […] Imagination provides a place where the psychic powers *co*-operate in locating the possibilities and the faces that the world presents.

Crucially, for our purposes, this tradition encompasses both Hobbes and the contemporary cross-disciplinary research on the imagination. Working within the same broad synthesizing framework allows us to meaningfully compare Hobbes with more recent scholarship while also speaking directly to the Hobbesian discourse in IR.

The article begins by identifying a fearful and pessimistic account of the imagination in the work of Thomas Hobbes, with particular reference to the "state of nature" scenario in *Leviathan*. We then trace this account into IR's Hobbesian discourse on order and anarchy, focusing on the example of the security dilemma. The second section establishes the contemporary consensus on the imagination's intersubjectivity and the third section charts its implications for the discipline of IR.

### *The Hobbesian Imagination*

The Hobbesian discourse on order and anarchy is pervasive in IR. It provides latent preconditions of analysis for even avowedly critical approaches (Williams 1996, 213; Browning and McDonald 2013, 242). As RBJ Walker (2010, 168–69) notes, Hobbesian ideas "continue to have a daunting presence in the way we engage with the possibilities and limits of contemporary political life." While manifold studies have grappled with this legacy, very little attention has been given to the role of imagination in Hobbesian thought—even though it was a central concern for Hobbes (Herbert 1994; Skinner 2008; Geuss 2010). In this section, we explain how Hobbes' understanding of the imagination underwrites more familiar aspects of *Leviathan* that have had a powerful legacy in IR, in particular, the "state of nature" analogy, which is often implicit in its most prominent discourse on order and anarchy.[5] Working through his account systematically, we highlight a fearful and pessimistic view centered on a monological subject governed by unbridled anxieties.

In the first instance, Hobbes' understanding of the imagination can be described as mechanistic and empiricist: "Sense, in all cases, is nothing els but original fancy, caused… by the pressure, that is, by the motion, of externall things upon our Eyes, Eares, and other organs thereunto ordained" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 86).[6] The imagination is derived from sensory data and can be categorized in a number of ways: memory, dreams, visions or apparitions, and understanding (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 89–94; Lemetti 2004, 54–56). Linking imagination and understanding necessitates the introduction of language into the scheme: "the imagination that is raysed in man (or any other created indued with the faculty of imagining) by words, or other voluntary signes, is that we generally call *Understanding*; and is common to Man and Beast" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 93). Here, imagination sits between sensory experience and the rational understanding of reality through language (Lemetti 2004, 68).

In chapter III, "*Of the Consequence or* Trayne *of Imaginations*," Hobbes outlines the processes of "Mentall Discourse." "*Unguided, without Designe* and inconstant" thoughts are set against thoughts that are "*regulated* by some desire, and designe" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 95–96). The former is everyday thinking, thoughts "without harmony." In this sort of "wild ranging of the mind, a man may oft-times perceive the way of it, and the dependance of one thought upon another" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 95). The latter form of thinking Hobbes divides into two further kinds: thoughts about causes and thoughts about effects:

> The Trayn of regulated Thoughts is of two kinds; One when of an effect imagined, wee seek the causes, or means that produce it: and this is common to Man and Beast. The other is, when imagining any thing whatsoever, wee seek all the possible effects, that can by it be produced; that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it, when wee have it." (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 96)

Hobbes then outlines a hierarchy of desires, appetites, and aversions, which are produced and animated by the imagination. Chapter VI, "*Of the Interiour Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; commonly called the* Passions," begins with Hobbes emphasizing the relationship between the imagination and voluntary motion: "And because *going*, *speaking*, and the like Voluntary motions, depend alwayes upon a precedent of thought of *whither*, *which way*, and *what*; it is evident that the Imagination is the first internall beginning of all Voluntary motion" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 118). All such motions are called "endeavours" and are directed either *toward* something and thus described as "appetites" or "desires" or *away* from something and described as "aversions." The

[4] Up until the twentieth century, the great majority of philosophers had understood the imagination negatively, as a depraved, potentially injurious, or generally inferior human faculty. This prejudice has been corrected over the last century or so (see, for example, Merleau-Ponty 1962; Castoriadis 1987, 1994; Arnason 1994; Ricoeur 1994; Rundell 1994; Kearney 1998; Elliott 2005; Kneller 2007; Geuss 2010; Bottici 2014; Sparks 2015).

[5] To be clear, the legacy of Hobbes in IR may not accurately reflect Hobbes' own understanding of international affairs (for instance, see critical engagements from Bull 1981, Williams 1996, and Kristov 2017). The important point is that the "state of nature" *has* been taken up by the discipline as a powerful analogy for interstate relations, and along with it a set of assumptions about the imagination that *are* implicit in it.

[6] On the simple and compound imagination see Hobbes ([1651] 1985, 86).

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important point here is that, for Hobbes, the imagination is integral to *all* conscious activity.

Yet, it is a particular sort of conscious activity that Hobbes elucidates: the imagination is underpinned by a radical individualism, centered on self-interest (Herbert 1994, 56). What is "good" and what is "evil" are determined by the individual's own conception of their desires and aversions: "For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 120). The imagination is mobilized by individuals as they conceive of their interests, which take the form of desires and aversions, then involved again as the individual assesses relevant causes and effects.

At the same time, aversions are positioned as an individual's most potent passion. While Hobbes claims that desire is limited by experience (i.e., we cannot desire some object of which we are ignorant), aversions are potentially unlimited: "But Aversion wee have for things, not onely which we know have hurt us; but also that we do not know whether they will hurt us or not" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 120). Herbert offers a powerful abridgment:

> Any object whatsoever, known or unknown, visible or invisible, is an imaginable threat to one's well-being and, hence, a conceivable object of fear. To the extent that there is nothing, literally, that cannot be a conceivable cause of one's harm, Hobbesian fear exposes simultaneously the limitless hostility of nature and one's own frightening insecurity (Herbert 1994, 56).

Humans have many aversions—to hunger and thirst, pain, grief, misery, panic, and so on. However, in order to ground self-interest and the natural right to secure it, the primary aversion must be existential. Thus, death and the fear of it are positioned at the very heart of Hobbes' philosophy (see, in particular, Hobbes [1651] 1985, 168–73, 183–88).

By the time the reader comes to the much-cited chapter XIII, "*Of the* Naturall Condition *of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery*," the significance of death for the imagination is starkly apparent. Hobbes explains that the equality of individuals is ensured by universal fear and aversion in the face of death, and this leads to the "equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 184), which puts all in relentless competition with all, underscored by gnawing anxiety. "And," says Hobbes,

> from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himselfe, so reasonable, as Anticipation, that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: And this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 184).

Here, an individual's ability to avoid death is also premised on how well they anticipate, which is to say, imagine, the means to prevent it.

This dynamic is crystalized in Hobbes' by-now-canonical "state of nature" scenario, where life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 186). The absence of "a common Power to keep them all in awe" leads necessarily to a condition of war of all against all (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 185). In such a condition, industry, art, culture, knowledge, and even time itself cease to exist since individuals are wholly consumed by "continuall fear, and danger of violent death" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 186; Seth 2010, 72–74). This bleak outlook makes plausible Hobbes' subsequent recommendation that individuals should give up a portion of their freedom to The Mortal God. Again, Herbert is instructive:

> [I]t is his undoctored fear of death that reveals the truth of this situation to man. Recognition of the self-vitiating character of actions governed by fear of violent death—the fact that they cannot pacify the natural situation except through actions that rekindle the violence—has the self-mediating effect of making men reasonable; at least this is how Hobbes sees it. Fear of violent death is the passion Hobbes considers able to transform man into a paragon of civil reasonableness. It has the effect of making one reasonable, less inclined to act precipitously on the urgings of unmediated fear and desire. Fear, if it is great enough, convinces one that there is no other way out of his dilemma, thereby revealing to him the reasonableness of submission" (Herbert 1994, 59).

Put like this, it is clear that Hobbes' conceptualization of order and anarchy is predicated on the overriding potency of aversions in the hierarchy of passions that the imagination helps establish and then animate. Order and anarchy are based in a fearful imagination, apt to conjure the worst-case scenario and suspect the motives of others.

What we are pointing to here is the extent to which this fearful imagination flows from a particular account of the subject.[7] Hobbes view is atomistic and mechanical: individuals occupy positions within a finite space; they are set in motion by their self-interested desires and aversions, and this puts them in tension with other individuals as subject positions conflict.[8] Thus, even in the normal course of things, the Hobbesian subject's engagement with the world is distinctly monological. Under the extreme uncertainty of the "state of nature," this subject finds the motives of others unknowable; instead, it is their own dark aversions that provide the frame of reference, and this disposition primes spiraling cycles of fear and suspicion.

### *The Hobbesian Imagination in IR*

While Hobbes' made the case for absolute sovereignty, IR scholars have focused not just on the state as the primary unit of action but also on the dynamics distilled in the "state of nature."[9] In the absence of a Leviathan to settle the peace, states are said to exist in an anarchical international environment where survival is the most basic imperative. The connection between Hobbes' "state of nature" and the discipline of IR has been widely recognized through extensive

[7] We do not claim that the Hobbesian imagination is solely fearful. However, we do suggest that in conditions of extreme uncertainty the Hobbesian imagination is dominated by powerful aversions, a point especially relevant for the IR discourse on order and anarchy. In this context, it is worth noting that Hobbes was born as the Spanish Armada sailed and lived through Thirty Years War and the English Civil War, circumstances that no doubt shaped his engagement with the subject matter, including the primacy of existential fear in his hierarchy of passions (see, for instance, Sommerville 1992). At the same time, Hobbes was also influenced by the skepticism made popular at the time by Montaigne, among others, and Descartes, with whom he corresponded, which may have informed his search for a primary fact to build his account of political life on, and the choice of a monological subject to fill that role (see, for instance, Missner 1983 and Williams 1996, 216–22). Taken together, this context suggests the account of imagination given has as much to do with the historical, intellectual and personal circumstances of the theorist as the character and capacities of the faculty, a point that has significant ramifications, not least for scholars writing in critical, postcolonial, feminist, and normative IR.

[8] See Weber (2013, 5) and Hobbes ([1651] 1985, 261–62).

[9] On Hobbes account of absolute sovereignty, see Runciman (2016).

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intellectual history and textual and empirical studies for at least 50 years. Lechner (2017, 1) makes this point crystal clear when she identifies "…three broad families of IR theory where anarchy figures as a focal assumption – (1) realism and neorealism, (2) English School theory (international society approach), and (3) Kant's republican peace. Despite normative and conceptual differences otherwise, all three bodies of theory are ultimately based on Hobbes's argument for a 'state of nature'." Likewise, Williams (1996, 213) gives a compelling account of this Hobbesian legacy, which, he emphasizes, is centered on the "state of nature." He goes so far as to argue that Hobbes and anarchy are almost synonymous in IR, that "the adequacy of a Hobbesian vision of international politics provides a common rhetorical and analytical touchstone, much as it has in varying forms for generations." The exemplar is, of course, the realist tradition, where the significance of Hobbes is undeniable. As Gallarotti (2013, 1) makes plain:

> [m]ost scholars… firmly believe that Hobbes discussion of the state of nature continues to ring true as a metaphor for relations among sovereign states without an overarching power that can guarantee their safety… In this latter respect, Thomas Hobbes is regarded as a major intellectual precursor of realist theory, and realism is still the dominant paradigm in the study of international relations today.

Smith (cited in Gallarotti 2013, fn4) reinforces this consensus positing that "Hobbes' analysis of the state of nature remains the defining feature of realist thought. His notion of the international state of nature as a state of war is shared by virtually everyone calling himself [sic] a realist." In this section, we show that the account of the imagination developed by Hobbes is embedded in IRs most pervasive discourse on order and anarchy. We do this by focusing on the security dilemma, often regarded as the most endemic source of international insecurity in an anarchical international system, which recapitulates the logic of "the state of nature."

The security dilemma is one of the most significant and enduring concepts of IR. It was first articulated by John Herz (1950), although Herbert Butterfield (1951) was also independently working on the same idea.[10] We begin with Butterfield here because he directly acknowledges the animating role of the imagination:

> It is the peculiar characteristic of… Hobbesian fear… that you yourself may vividly feel the terrible fear that you have of the other party but you cannot enter the other man's counter-fear, or even understand why he should be particularly nervous. For you know that you yourself mean him no harm, and that you want nothing from him save guarantees for your own safety; and it is never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since *he cannot see the inside of your mind*, he can never have the same assurances of your intentions that you have. As this operates on both sides… neither side sees the nature of the predicament that he is in, for each only *imagines* that the other party is being hostile and unreasonable (emphasis added Butterfield 1951, 21).

Butterfield reproduces Hobbes' subject, including an imagination gripped by the prospect of a sudden and violent death, extrapolated to international relations between states. Herz's reproduction of this Hobbesian discourse is less explicit, although no less pervasive. Compare his explanation of the security dilemma with Hobbes' account of the anarchical conditions society must overcome:

> Wherever… anarchic society has existed… there has arisen what may be called the 'security dilemma' of men, or groups, or their leaders. Groups or individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such an attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on" (Herz 1950, 157).

And now Hobbes ([1651] 1985, 161):

> So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. […] Competition of Riches, Honour, Command, or other power, enclineth to Contention, Emity, and War: Because the way of one Competitor, to the attaining of his desire, is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repell the other.

The continuity between Hobbes and Herz is plain enough. Both are premised on the assumption that uncertainty leads to the imagination of hostile others and worst-case scenarios. This wicked dynamic is the basis for Hobbesian fear, which, in IR, is taken to denote the "irresolvable uncertainty" that accompanies anarchy (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 13).

The reproduction of the Hobbesian subject is particularly clear when the security dilemma is stripped back to its basic logical structure. This is often understood in terms of the Other Minds Problem, which "arises because we are inclined to regard each person as a separate individual with a private 'mind', furnished with beliefs, desires, emotions, and experiences directly known only to its owner" (Hollis and Smith 1990, 172; Booth and Wheeler 2008). The reduction to first principles is also evident in rational choice theory, where the "state of nature" provides the structure for utility maximizing individuals. In both these settings, subjects are self-regarding and an unknowable other is interpreted through the prism of worst-case scenarios. Both link seamlessly with the Hobbesian subject's unlimited aversions, where "any object whatsoever, known or unknown, visible or invisible, is an *imaginable threat* to one's well-being and, hence, a conceivable object of fear" (Herbert 1994, 56). Whether it is acknowledged or not, the imagination is central to these heuristics: if one cannot *know* what the other intends, one has to *imagine* what they might be planning. It is through that act of *imagining* that one feels threatened and the propensity of a monological subject to imagine the worst drives them toward suspicion and competition. This account of imagination—fearful

[10] Hobbes' perspective may have resonated with realist writing in the wake of two catastrophic world wars and the distinct possibility of nuclear annihilation. On this point, see Alison McQueen's (2017) incisive engagement with what she identifies as the common apocalyptic context in which Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau articulated their versions of political realism.

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and pessimistic under conditions of uncertainty—is simply assumed in contemporary accounts of the security dilemma.

Of course, the Hobbesian legacy in IR is much broader than the security dilemma. Indeed, the basic unit of analysis for the mainstream of the disciple is the state, very much conceived of in Hobbesian terms: self-contained and interest maximizing, caught in an anarchical international system where the worst intentions of other states must be imagined. With this in mind, it is worth thinking seriously about how this conceptualization of the imagination shapes the way we understand IR. In the following section, we contrast the Hobbesian account with contemporary literatures that present a markedly different account of the imagination.

### *The Intersubjective Imagination*

While contemporary accounts of the imagination are diverse and sometimes in tension, there is now substantial consensus that points toward the imagination's intersubjectivity. This consensus poses a serious challenge to IR's Hobbesian discourse on order and anarchy: put simply, if the monological imagination has been superseded, then theories of IR predicated on it must be revised.

So, what do we mean by intersubjectivity? We take intersubjectivity to mean that our understandings of the world around us, ourselves, and others included, are collective and coproduced. Standing in contrast to positivist notions of objectivity and individualist notions of subjectivity, intersubjectivity registers and reflects the presence, weight, and necessity of others in the construction of shared and contested realities. Encounters with others are produced, animated, and amended by the subjects involved in them, who are in turn situated within a similarly constructed society, history, and ethics. Martin Buber conveys some of what is implied in an intersubjective encounter:

> Imagine two men, whose life is dominated by appearances, sitting and talking together. Call them Peter and Paul. Let us list the different configurations which are involved. First there is Peter as he wishes to appear to Paul and Paul as he wishes to appear to Peter. Then there is Peter as he really appears to Paul, that is Paul's image of Peter, which in general does not in the least coincide with what Peter wishes Paul to see; and similarly there is the reverse situation. Further, there is Peter as he appears to himself, and Paul as he appears to himself. Lastly, there are the bodily Peter and the bodily Paul, two living beings and six ghostly appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversation between the two (Buber 1957, cited in Scheff 1973, 504).

Of course, giving an account of oneself is initially made possible by the ability to *imagine* oneself from the other's perspective. The success of an encounter relies on how adequately each party does this—and, moreover, how adequately they imagine other alternative selves and others. The capacity to do so relies on the extent to which the imagination is shaped by and animates a shared understanding—at its most comprehensive, what Habermas referred to as a "lifeworld"—which it participates in and reproduces.

Each approach we engage below shows how the imagination is inherently intersubjective. We begin with social theory, closest in disciplinary terms to Hobbes and IR, which grounds the imagination in a social world that is collective and coproduced. Next, we engage with neuropsychological accounts that point toward an imagination shaped by and integral to an individual's social relations. CHAT deepens these findings from neuroscience by situating the subject in a framework rooted in the dialectical tradition, which focuses on social circumstances that activate and condition the imagination through shared participation in cultural practices. Finally, taking a macrohistorical perspective, we highlight the significance of the imagination in evolutionary anthropology, where the very development of the human species is tied to our capacity to imagine collectively. We do not intend to advocate here for any particular approach, buttress social theory with scientific findings, nor establish a hierarchy of evidence that values one approach over another. Instead, what we show is that IR scholars attempting to understand the imagination will need to take its intersubjective character into account, regardless of their research tradition, assumptions, and methodological commitments.

### *The Imagination in Social Theory*

The deep, millennia-old attempt to understand the imagination has until recently unfolded within the remit of social theory. We delineated three traditions at the outset (pessimists, optimists, and synthesizers) and indicated that contemporary approaches are overwhelmingly situated within the third tradition. In what follows, we highlight three recent approaches that together indicate the contours of the consensus on intersubjectivity running across current social theory treatments.

One of the most prominent reference points here is the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987). Rather than simply imagining unseen causes and effects, Castoriadis focuses on the way individuals constitute and are in turn constituted by a social imaginary, without which human activity would be meaningless (Clark 2002, 67–74). While a social imaginary is more than the sum of its parts, it is instantiated by individual subjects that imagine its binding precepts and normative contours. At the same time, unruly and indeterminate psyches are disciplined by their social context, thus internalizing the broader imaginary, which they then participate in and reproduce. Crucially, despite distinguishing an individual psyche that imagines from a broader social imaginary, Castoriadis drives home the extent to which they are inseparably entangled and indeed symbiotic (Bottici 2011, 61–62). This account of the imagination is inherently intersubjective—its purview is both the external dynamics of the social world and the internal emergence of a subject in that context.

A similar double relation between self and society is taken up by recent scholarship in the Hegelian tradition. Identifying a distinct account in the Hegelian corpus, here the imagination is directed inward, toward the development of a subject's own consciousness, and outwardly, toward social relations with others (Rundell 2001; Bates 2004; Vieweg 2020). Bates (2004), whose work remains exemplary in this field, shows how Hegel's concept of imagination develops between the Geistesphilosophie period (1803–1804) and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the former, Hegel looks at the role of the imagination in our conscious experience and thus as a function of our identity-making; in the latter, the imagination extends to the mediation of self–other relations, where consciousness may shift from mere self-involved existence to universality, which Hegel believes symbolizes the course of history. These dimensions are crystalized in Hegel's master/bondsman dialectic, initially, through the bondsman's emerging consciousness of themselves as an autonomous identity in a relationship of dependency but also more provocatively in the transformation of that relationship. Sublation requires that the subject imagine the other

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in a different form of subjectivity, that the subject imagines themselves changing into something they are not yet, and that they imagine a changed relationship premised on reciprocity, which is to say recognition. This account positions the imagination as a capacity that allows the subject to occupy more than one identity, be it oneself or another, to understand the relationship between these identity positions, and to situate this within a broader social context that is also subject to reimagining. Not only does this capacity underpin a subject that is ethically engaged and other-regarding, it indicates the dynamic creativity and innovation implicit in an intersubjective imagination that undergirds the possibility of relational change.[11]

Chiara Bottici's (2011, 2014) work on "imaginal politics" charts a middle course between approaches that focus on the individual's imagination and approaches that focus on the idea of a social imaginary. Responding to a "political world full of images, but deprived of imagination," she argues that images themselves—how they are made and what is made of them—draw in and integrate the individual's generative and interpretive imagination as well as the wider social imaginary that shapes the individual and contextualizes images (Bottici 2011, 56). This dynamic constitutes "the imaginal," a distinct and increasingly significant site in a contemporary politics characterized by rapidly circulating aesthetics that crystalize complex world views, sentiments, and affects. While critical engagements with the aesthetic dimensions of politics have often emphasized its depoliticizing dimensions, Bottici highlights the potential for autonomy, innovation, and dialogue, enabled by a common aesthetic ground that has no prior political status.

Bottici's innovation is to conceptualize a site where the poles of self and society are seamlessly integrated. For our purposes, she also usefully foregrounds the structure of contemporary social theory literature on the imagination: in one trajectory the emphasis is on the social imaginary; the other begins with the dialectic interaction of subjects. Yet in both, the individual and collective imagination play into one another and are in some sense inseparable. In contrast to the Hobbesian account established in the first section, the imagination is inherently intersubjective across all these approaches. We return to social theory in the next section to show the implications of an intersubjective imagination for IR's discourse on order and anarchy.

### *Neuropsychology, CHAT, and Evolutionary Anthropology*

While contemporary social theory engagements are increasing, the imagination has received sustained attention in other disciplinary settings. Two prominent research programs—CHAT and Evolutionary Anthropology—explicitly identify the imagination with intersubjectivity and do so with reference to the way our understanding about the world is collective and coproduced. We begin, however, with neuropsychology, where basic research has yielded surprising findings about the "social brain" (e.g., Vogeley 2017).[12] The account of intersubjectivity is less elaborated here than in the other literatures, but we show that neuroscientific findings have informed and been compatible with CHAT approaches that are rooted in the Hegelian-dialectical tradition.[13]

Advances in the field of neuropsychology are particularly relevant because its focus on individual brain function comes the closest to the individualized Hobbesian subject and yet the picture of the imagination that emerges is strikingly different.[14] Neuroimaging has allowed the identification of commonalities in the underlying information-processing mechanisms of the brain (Abraham 2016, 4202).[15] What emerges is a view of the imagination that involves a dynamic interplay between specific brain functions and multiple processes working across neural networks. This "synthetic model" (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016) suggests the imagination operates as a loop between the abstract and concrete, a highly flexible capability that can be used in different contexts and with different aims. For example, the imagination can plan an activity without performing the actions, reconstruct events from the past without forgetting they are not our present, and explore future possibilities without losing sight of the here and now (Smolucha and Smolucha 2018). Moreover, as these examples suggest, the imagination is at once perceptual, generative, recollective, emotional, and analytic.

One of the most important neural networks for imagination is the default mode network (DMN). All forms of intentional imagination—whether episodic memory, future-thinking, reasoning, self-reflexivity, or moral cognition—consistently activate key regions of the DMN. Spunt, Meyer, and Lieberman (2015) argue that the DMN actually primes cognition prior to social interaction, a dynamic that has evolved, at least in part, as a response to social context. On this account, an "intentional stance" drives interpretation of behavior, guided by unobservable mental states such as belief, desire, and intention. What this research indicates is the signal importance of social relations for imagination's development and function (Vygotsky 1978; Zittoun 2016).

Taken together, neuropsychological research establishes the imagination as both an organic capacity of the human body *and* specific to particularities of sociocultural and personal experience. Crucially, neural networks that support the imagination are shaped both by our relations with others and our socialization. Indeed, it is common to see in this literature references to the way intersubjectivity is "enacted" or "shared" as a basic form of consciousness that grounds sociality (see Morganti, Carassa, and Riva 2008). The importance of the latter cannot be understated since it links the imagination, not just to personal biography (memories, education, and socialization) but, more profoundly, to the totality of human understanding. Semiotic resources, cultural knowledge, societal norms, and much more form the deep context in which the imagination is shaped and then operates.

This neurological research has been taken up in CHAT as part of an effort to integrate cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of the human developmental process. Here, neurological function emerges by internalizing social

[11] Bates (2004, 137–38) argues the imagination is so central "that it figures implicitly at every moment of the dialectic" and that imagination is the "inwardizing and externalizing activity" at the "heart" of sublation. For Stampoulis (2020), the "dawn" of relational intersubjectivity is indelibly linked to imagination through which the process of social rationalization occurs.

[12] This literature has referred to intersubjectivity ever since Trevarthen's ground-breaking work in the mid-1970s (indicatively, Trevarthen 1993).

[13] We do not take these literatures to show that the imagination has evolved in a biological sense (this is an empirical matter beyond the scope of this essay). What they do show is that the imagination has always been intersubjective and that this plays a significant role in human development, including the way we grapple with uncertain and challenging environments. They also highlight the degree to which Hobbes' account unduly restricts this faculty.

[14] From the perspective of neuropsychology, there are certain functions unique to each domain of the brain as well as commonly shared neural networks that work across these domains.

[15] This basic view has been established despite fierce debate around the interpretation of brain imaging data.

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interactions and cultural activities, and this begins remarkably early. For example, the development of neuropsychological systems related to creativity begins in 18-month-olds through pretend play with caregivers, which promotes the development of imagination—and this takes places across all cultures (Vygotsky 1978, 97; Bloch 2012).[16] Significantly, children often engage in pretend play in ways that reflect society, including family dynamics, social behaviors, practices and norms, and social hierarchies (see Gillespie and Martin 2014). These early instances are buttressed by later experiences that utilize imagination. Fairy tales, parables, myths, and the like help all ages to learn emotional regulation and socially accepted behaviors (see Smolucha and Smolucha 2018, 273). Key neural pathways continue to develop up to our twenties, eventually allowing the individual to simultaneously use several consciously directed higher psychological functions when they imagine.

This rich and empirically grounded literature takes its conceptual cues from Vygotsky's (1960, 1990, 1991) theory of creativity, outlined through the 1930s, which posited that creativity involves the integration of consciously directed imagination and analytical thinking that develops across all life stages. This approach is heavily influenced by Hegelian dialectics, among the most powerful articulations of intersubjectivity ever produced (Langemyer and Roth 2006, 20–27). While contemporary CHAT research has sometimes been criticized for a perceived tension between its dialectic and scientific idioms, Vygotsky's approach is inescapably intersubjective in its account of socially constructed human development and the imagination therein (Langemyer and Roth 2006, 27–38). As Vygotsky (1994, 269–70) famously wrote,

> …imagination is as necessary in geometry as it is in poetry. Everything that requires artistic transformation of reality, everything that is connected with interpretation and construction of something new, requires the indispensable participation of imagination.

Building on these conceptual grounds and buttressed by a sustained research program, contemporary CHAT positions the imagination

> as a deeply sociocultural phenomenon that includes a large range of psychological processes enabling us to draw on past experiences, recombined in unique ways, so as to create new alternatives and possible futures… [these] imaginative processes grow out of social interactions, use cultural resources, and build on our experiences of the world while constantly transforming and expanding them (Zittoun, Glăveanu, and Halwina 2020, 143).

CHAT sees imagination and culture not as independent factors that may influence one another but as "completely intermeshed and recursively co-constructive facets of human experience" (Zittoun, Glăveanu, and Halwina 2020, 155). It is absolutely clear that intersubjectivity is inherent to this account of the imagination.

Evolutionary anthropology shifts the scale of analysis by analyzing the development of the imagination within the macroevolutionary dynamics of the species. This field emphasizes the ability of humans to imagine responses to challenging circumstances and then convert such imaginings into actions, innovations, material things, and social practices. In this account, imaginative creativity is a powerful force in cultural evolution, driving changes in norms, technologies, and aesthetics (Wadley 2013; Fogarty, Creanza, and Feldman 2015, 736, 754; Fuentes 2017a).[17] For this reason, Fuentes (2020, 14) contends that imagination is as central to human evolution as "bones and genes." A range of evolutionary developments, such as the sharing of linguistic and moral norms, evolved through coevolutionary processes in which intersubjectivity was pivotal (Zlatev 2014). Indeed, Toren (2012) positions manifold forms of sociality and intersubjectivity as nothing less than the emergent form of human ontogeny. These systems of shared intentionality, as Tomasello (2008) calls them, directly implicate the imagination with intersubjectivity.

Evidence for these conclusions can be found in archaeological records, beginning with innovations in tools and then later the creation of meaning-laden artifacts. Imaginative tool use enabled changes in human cognitive and social processes, which then opened novel opportunities for behavioral, physiological, and perceptual development. Specifically, tool-making exerted influence on brain size and neurobiological structure (between two and one million years ago), which can be observed in skeletal remains and associated with the shift from Oldowan stone tool-making to the more complex Acheulean technologies of wood and bone (see Wadley 2013). Later, the earliest forms of aesthetic creativity, such as the use of repeated symbols in prehistoric rock art, illustrate an emergent shared social imaginary (Tomasello 2014).[18] As far back as twenty to thirty thousand years ago, there is compelling evidence of meaning-making manifesting in symbolic and ritualistic practices. Collins (2013) has mapped various selective processes that shaped the human genus into the preliterate imagination, preparing our capacity to imagine with and through others. From the perspective of evolutionary anthropology, the slow evolution of our species has developed and been driven by a powerful capacity to imagine, with the social and technological innovations this engenders exploding in the Holocene (Durand 1999; Fuentes 2017).

At this point, it should be clear that contemporary understandings of the imagination pose a serious challenge to the Hobbesian account embedded in IR's discourse on order and anarchy. It is not our intention to champion any particular version of the imagination from the approaches canvased above nor to suggest that each approach builds inexorably toward a unified vision where social theory is proven out by scientific findings or vice versa. The important point is that, contra the Hobbesian account, there is now a consensus that points toward the imagination's inherent intersubjectivity.

### *Beyond the Monological Imagination*

What this consensus suggests is that, far from a binary choice between spiraling insecurity and absolute sovereignty, humans have the capacity to imagine a much broader range of political resolutions than IR's Hobbesian discourse admits. This section begins by critically highlighting the limits of the monological imagination in the Hobbesian framework. We then demonstrate the political potential of the intersubjective imagination by exploring one approach from the contemporary literature—Hegelian inspired work in the social theory literature, already introduced above. By relating this

[16] Bloch (2012) has found that children engage in pretend play across cultural and historical horizons. See also Connery, John-Steiner, and Marjanovic-Shae (2018).

[17] Evolutionary anthropology focuses on the development of the human "niche," which refers to the dynamic totality of biotic and abiotic factors in which organisms interact.

[18] Both can be seen as markers that reflect a convention deliberately replicated with the same intended impact across a shared imaginal field (see Fuentes 2020, 22).

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perspective to Hegel's own version of the "state of nature," specifically constructed as a critique of Hobbes' original scenario, we draw out some of the most significant implications of an intersubjective imagination for IR. Of course, this is just one possible avenue into IR from a single perspective in the contemporary literatures, albeit with significant resonance to CHAT.

One way to begin critically engaging with the Hobbesian imagination is to note that the move from "state of nature" to absolute sovereignty implies a deeper imaginative capacity than Hobbes ever grants his subject—an inconsistency that points directly toward the intersubjective aspects we have outlined above. This potential was first identified by Talcott Parsons:

> This solution [of a social contract] really involves stretching, at a critical point, the conception of rationality beyond its scope in the rest of the theory, to a point where the actors come to realize the situation *as a whole* instead of pursuing their own ends in terms of their immediate situation. (Parsons 1968, 93, emphasis added)

Parsons shows that the Hobbesian individual has the implicit ability to imagine the situation from the point of view of other individuals.[19] By virtue of this imaginative capability, an otherwise solitary subject is able to reasonably predict that others will sign up to the social contract too and that they will not be left looking the weaker (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 190–91). An intersubjective imagination allows not just fear but also empathy with the motives of others, and it is this ability to "walk in another's shoes" that enables the ensuing political resolution.

Yet, the Hobbesian subject's monological imagination means that other social relations, for instance, recognition, solidarity, emancipation, or even love, are rendered secondary.[20] Hobbes contends that a weak man may band together with others to form a "confederacy" but only in order to protect himself from some danger (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 183). Likewise, he asserts that man can and should follow through on his promises, or covenants, only "when he can do so safely" or if he fears punishment for reneging (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 183). For Hobbes, anyone who prioritizes these above self-interest is a fool who would "expose himselfe to Prey" (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 190). Says Hobbes ([1651] 1985, 223),

> For the Lawes of Nature (as *Justice*, *Equity*, *Modesty*, *Mercy*, and (in summe) *doing to other, as wee would be done to*,) of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like. And Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.

This account of the imagination remains contestable, even on its own terms.[21] For instance, it is clear that the fear of death is not the only kind of fear we imagine, nor even, necessarily the most compelling. Our imaginations are rife with the fear of difference, exclusion, failure, loss, loneliness, ignorance, ridicule, and so on. Moreover, we may fear on behalf of others, for instance, loved ones, who we seek to protect or promote. Yet, such fears derive from social relations with others that must exist already.

One of the implications of the Hobbesian imagination is a shallow account of social life. Paradoxically, Hobbes' subject is both the locus of agency essential to the formation of political community *and* so uniform in capacities that every person acts in precisely the same way. Hobbesian subjects forge a new political settlement yet do so almost passively, compelled by their spiraling anxieties. Thus, the Hobbesian subject—and the monological imagination that drives its fearful interpretation of unknowable others—is not just asocial but also apolitical. Indeed, fear of death is an almost primal motive, which tends to naturalize responses to insecurity as near-instinct. In this sense, at the very inception of political community the politics, which is to say the dynamics of social struggle, conflicting values, accommodation, reconciliation, and solidarity, falls away.

If Hobbes did invest his individuals with intersubjective imaginations, then fear of death could not be the *only* nor the most compelling rationale for establishing social order. We can usefully demonstrate this point by exploring one of the above accounts of the intersubjective imagination. For our purposes, the Hegelian tradition is particularly helpful since Hegel directly engages with the Hobbesian "state of nature," including adopting the same scenario as his starting point for working through the dynamics of autonomy, conflict, and social contract.[22] The recently recovered Hegelian imagination—an account that allows subjects to inhabit multiple identities, understand the relationship between them, and integrate these dynamic interactions into a shared social context—can be easily recognized in Hegel's reprisal.

For both Hobbes and Hegel, conflict in "the state of nature" occurs in the absence of an overarching rule. Yet, contra Hobbes, Hegel situates his subjects in already existing social contexts, for instance, by associating individuals with their families.[23] The decisive move away from the Hobbesian framework occurs when Hegel analyses the motives of conflict. In the Hegelian scenario, one family takes something from another and conflict springs up between them. However, the essence of this conflict is not the fearful imagination of worst-case scenarios and ensuing dynamics of suspicion and insecurity. Instead, it is *feelings* of disrespect, crystalized by the subject's ability to *imagine* a pejorative relationship within a symbolic universe that provides a

[19] While it is clear that Hobbes positions the fearful imagination as the primary impetus, according to Geuss, "the reality of the modern state arose in part from a construction in imagination … The activated imagination is not a mere historical epiphenomenon." Indeed, Hobbes thought that imagination and reason work together in persuasive rhetoric (Skinner 1996, 367). This goes some way in explaining the prevalence in *Leviathan* of rhetorical tropes such as metaphor and simile, hyperbole, satire, and irony; indeed, even the mythic beast referenced in the title itself is noteworthy in this regard (Mintz 1989, 3; Skinner 2008, 187).

[20] A narrow and suspicious imagination is still possible, for instance, in the conspiratorial mindset that has been increasingly apparent in contemporary politics, which some have associated with a retrograde and potentially authoritarian imagination. For IR engagements with these issues, see Aistrope (2016) and Aistrope and Bleiker (2018).

[21] Of course, never has a human society existed that is anything like "the state of nature" (Neal 2009, 43). Indeed, Hobbes ([1651] 1985, XIII) goes close to admitting as much. Contemporary scholarship has established that while Hobbes mobilized the example, he never studied the political-sociology of the First Nations in North America. Todorov, among others, has shown definitively that the American Iroquois had strong governance structures and even international forms of governance (Todorov 1982; Molony 2011; Martens 2012). The persistence of the Hobbesian perspective in the discourse of IR has no doubt served to suppress other possibilities and politics, a point that resonates with the concerns of critical, normative, postcolonial, and feminist IR.

[22] Elsewhere in *Leviathan*, Hobbes situates his subject within the family and outlines a starkly different scenario. Here, the father lock's all his chests because he treats his own family as if they are unknown others who may rob him at any time.

[23] See, for example, special issues on Honneth in *Review of International Studies* and *Global Discourses* as well as recent work from Lindemann (2011), Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi (2018), Brincat (2017), and Duncombe (2019).

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normative grammar for the circumstance. When the second family, the wronged party, reacts aggressively in retribution, the first family, the instigators, are forced to *imagine* the motive of that response by standing in the other's shoes and to calibrate their own feelings of aggrievement. Axel Honneth (2013) captures the significance of this dynamic:

> …the conflict that breaks out between subjects represents, from the outset, something ethical, insofar as it is directed towards the intersubjective recognition of dimensions of human individuality. It is not the case, therefore, that a contract among individuals puts an end to the precarious state of a struggle for survival of all against all. Rather, inversely, this struggle leads, as a moral medium, from an underdeveloped state of ethical life to a more mature level of ethical relations. With this reinterpretation of the Hobbesian model, Hegel introduces a virtually epoch-making new version of the conception of social struggle, according to which practical conflict between subjects can be understood as an ethical moment in a movement occurring within a collective social life.

This account is animated by an intersubjective imagination that allows for dynamic interaction between subjects, based in cycles of empathetic engagement, self-reflection, and calibration, which draw out shared normative and ethical commitments and thereby constitute a common world. Whereas a monological imagination drives the Hobbesian subject toward worst-case interpretations of unknowable others, an intersubjective imagination drives a socially embedded Hegelian subject towards the possibility of reciprocity and transformation.

For a discipline like IR that is often framed by a Hobbesian discourse analogized from the "state of nature," the Hegelian account points toward an entirely different understanding of the international system. Extrapolating from the Hegelian version, we might reframe conflict in terms of struggles for recognition animated by the capacity of conflicting subjects—be they states, non-state actors, or individuals—to imagine the motives of multiple others and the relationship between them, and to imagine these interactions as "an ethical moment in a movement occurring within a collective social life." This account resonates with emerging scholarship on recognition theory in IR, which takes seriously the Hegelian dialectic via the ground-breaking work of Axel Honneth.Honneth shows how Hobbes' model cannot account for the transition from the state of nature to the social contract because it cannot provide any answer for why subjects in such a situation could ever "arrive at an idea of intersubjective 'rights and duties' between them" (Honneth 1995, 41). While this is just one indicative trajectory drawn from the many approaches we have canvased, it demonstrates the transformative potential of the intersubjective imagination for a discipline still heavily engaged with a discourse on order and anarchy animated by Hobbes' account of this vital faculty.

### *Where to from Here?*

This article has shown that anyone thinking seriously about the imagination today should take issue with the monological Hobbesian account, reconsider IR theories predicated on it, and explore the political possibilities entailed in contemporary approaches. Despite differences in methodology, conceptualization, and nomenclature, key literatures across social theory, neuropsychology, CHAT, and evolutionary anthropology indicate that the imagination is shaped by, and integral to, social relations. Rather than building a hierarchy of evidence or buttressing social theory with scientific findings, we have highlighted the relevance of this insight for IR researchers across traditions and methodologies.

One way to begin thinking about the implications this has for IR, as well as the potential research directions it opens, is to focus on the alternative heuristics made available by an intersubjective imagination. We provided an indication of the possibilities by contrasting the Hobbesian and Hegelian "state of nature." As we outlined in the first section, the Hobbesian analogy—animated by a monological imagination—provides the basis for IR's security dilemma, including its expression in philosophic and rational actor terms, as well as underpinning a broader discourse on order and anarchy. IR scholars working in these traditions might consider the consequences of reflecting contemporary scholarship on the imagination in their heuristic models, as well as the virtues of alternative schemes, including the Hegelian heuristic we introduced. Of course, the intersubjective imagination may well be relevant to approaches beyond the Hobbesian tradition and also inform new thinking.

The intersubjective imagination also has the potential to deepen constructivist and critical IR research. For instance, our account connects directly with a sustained critique of substantialism at the heart of process ontological constructivism. We show that an intersubjective imagination is inherent in social processes that produce and shape identities, preferences, and possibilities for action. In doing so, we provide a useful contrast with the passive subjectivity sometimes evident in social psychology–influenced approaches, not least in the burgeoning scholarship on emotions. The imagination is socially derived and mutually implicated, but it is also an activity and a competency of each person.

At the same time, where the imagination *is* referenced in IR research, the contemporary literatures we introduced can offer insightful conceptualizations and robust empirics. To give but one example, research mobilizing Anderson's (1983) work on "imagined communities" might be significantly enhanced by CHAT's emphasis on the interrelationships between self and society forged in imaginative play, which cascades down through individual interpretation and shared practices to undergird social formations, not least the political hierarchies that help define international politics. According to Zittoun, Glăveanu, and Halwina (2020, 154),

> [a]s we grow up, we often forget or fail to notice that societies themselves are a sophisticated form of pretend play; they are an intricate, ever-evolving configuration of collective imagination that is intersubjectively shared and materialised in institutions and cultural artifacts such as constitutions, flags, history, books, newspapers, monuments, national anthems, and so on.

Whether drawing from CHAT or another contemporary approach, the intersubjective imagination offers powerful supplements to constructivist and critical IR scholarship engaged with issues of identity and intersubjectivity. It also points toward the potential normative implications of the imagination to the extent that it situates intersubjectivity as an activity. Rather than an ethics grounded in an isolated subject's self-reflection about the "good" and the "just," an account of intersubjectivity animated by the active imagination reinforces the possibility of an ethics generated through dialogue with others.This normative trajectory is implied in the Hegelian treatment of the "state of nature" and taken up, in different ways, by

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contemporary thinkers such as Habermas and Honneth. The intersubjective imagination draws together relational and process-orientated approaches to IR with this less familiar normative tradition, which, nevertheless, shares similar ontological commitments.All these openings point beyond IR's discourse on order and anarchy, and the fearful imagination that underpins it.

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