Pierre Hassner, La Revanche des Passions: Métamorphoses de la Violence et Crises du Politique

Reviewed by Christopher Hill
SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy and The University of Cambridge (UK)

The death of Pierre Hassner in May 2018 silenced one of the most acute observers of the hopes and tragedies of international relations. Although not so well-known on the inward-looking Anglo-American university scene of International Relations, Hassner was for decades France’s leading intellectual commentator on world politics – a role he inherited from his mentor, Raymond Aron.

Hassner’s influence was felt as much in seminars and conferences as through his writings, while his range of contacts on both sides of the Atlantic was legendary. Yet while never producing a magnum opus to rival Aron’s Peace and War, his output was extensive, mostly in the form of essays. Over the years he collected the most significant pieces into books, of which La Revanche des Passions is the third and last. Its very title is intriguing and not easy to translate into English – revenge and passion are, revealingly, terms which English-speakers normally associate with personal relationships rather than politics. But Hassner wanted to address the ways in which the rationalist hopes of liberals of all stripes – so boosted by the events of 1989-1991 – have come under fire from many sources. His book therefore begins with a section on the relationship between politics and emotion, with section two grouping together five pieces of reflection on whether the post-1945 assumption of a deepening international ‘order’ still holds. The third part focuses on the changing nature of war and violence, before the fourth raises the spectre that totalitarianism might not in fact be dead. The last section contains essays on nationalism, frontiers and identity, in an attempt to explain how the third element of Clausewitz’s trinity of politics, force and popular passions has come to destabilise not just individual societies, but also the wider system.

The passions identified here included the forces of fear, hate, pride and anger – which Hassner summarises through his use of the Greek term thymos. There is an apocalyptic tone to some of his warnings that atavistic feelings are returning to the fore after three hundred years in which the rationalism of the Enlightenment had steadily contained and defused them. This is an odd reading given his personal sensitivity to the horrors of the Holocaust and Stalinism. It would have been more convincing to focus on the way in which complacency crept in during the second half of the twentieth century as the horrors of the first half receded, through rising...
living standards, interdependence and the peaceful resolution of the Cold War. But perhaps this was a mere rhetorical slip, for Hassner’s analysis of the institutional and moral vacuum which has opened up between the processes of globalisation on the one hand, and the rise of identity politics on the other, is acute. The former represents the apogee of the illusion that material gains in trade and growth will create a peaceful world; the latter is both a reaction against that very process of homogenisation and the eruption of unsatisfied needs for the feelings of togetherness – a form of Aristotle’s \textit{philia} – which, with the help of dominant myths, hold a society together.

Hassner was thus aware that passion is far from having only destructive effects. Indeed, he believed strongly that the feelings of pity, compassion and solidarity – and the values which attach to them – are essential if we are to resist the tendency to see the other always as an enemy, and to avoid the creeping return of totalitarianism through ‘the cult of an iron will, a hatred of compromise and a scorn for civility’ (p. 274) – a description which might well fit Donald Trump. Yet even Trump cannot be accused of the ‘fanatical delirium’ displayed by the Nazis, and now by members of Da’esh. Hassner feared the conjunction of such fanaticism with changes in the nature of war. Always alive to the impact of new technologies, he saw drones and weapon miniaturisation as making possible a Hobbesian dystopia where small groups, even individuals, might return violence – the war of all against all – to the domestic realm. He insisted that war has not gone away, but just presents itself in new ‘furtive and hybrid’ forms.

Human passions are diverse and inevitably in conflict with each other. But passion in general has its downside; it needs to be tempered by moderation. These two observations have been central to political philosophy from the earliest times. Where Hassner gives them a contemporary twist is in his emphasis on paradox and dialectics. He hardly refers to the idea of prudence, so important to classical realism, but his constant stress on the complexities, contradictions and inconsistencies of world politics means that in practice his ethic of international politics is one of care, watchfulness, and the avoidance of ‘great simplicities’, whether the ‘end of history’, a ‘war on terror’, or simply the conviction of moral superiority.

Hassner is a wise and humane guide. The views which he expressed in hundreds of round tables in the demi-monde of academics, think tanks and practitioners, are collected together here, to compelling effect. One hopes that they might have left their mark on some of those responsible for conducting foreign policy, at least in the West, and that a younger generation will now be introduced to them in this written form. It is noticeable here, however, that the optimism which carried the author through six decades of engagement with international relations had begun to fade in his last years. The book is run through with a note of pessimism about the future. Hassner’s concern for the fate of refugees – recent events no doubt having awakened painful personal memories – is marked by a sense of the insolubility of the dilemmas currently facing European governments. He acknowledges as legitimate the fears of those who see immigrants as taking their jobs, or their way of life changing without having a say in the matter. But ‘my solidarity goes before anything … to those who have fled war or famine’ (p. 332). His basic values are those of human rights and attachment to the rule of law, but increasingly he seemed fatalistic about our ability to uphold them, or even our ability to maintain a minimal degree of international order. His observation that ‘a state must be faithful to its past without being a prisoner to
it, open to the future while retaining coherence and identity’ (p. 228), does not carry conviction, as if he was weighed down by the unforeseen setbacks of recent years.

Pierre Hassner was both a political philosopher and a brilliant interpreter of the changing world. His deep familiarity with a very wide range of authors, both classical and contemporary, led him always to bring the ideas of the great thinkers to bear on the key issues of the day. He is particularly taken with Rousseau, whom he sees as the only political philosopher, apart from Kant, to confront directly the problem of international relations, by which he means ‘the necessary pluralism of political communities and the difficulty that creates for the fostering of a good society, whether at the international or the local level’ (p. 174). The vocation of politics more generally ‘consists in the effort to reconcile opposites or at least manage their co-existence and limit their conflicts’. But in international relations diversity can lead to disaster if differences become irreconcilable. The two extreme outcomes, of universalism or anarchy, are to be avoided at all costs, because however we define rights, individuals and groups need healthy political communities. Yet they also necessarily transcend them. People cannot and should not be forced into procrustean beds by oppressive states, empires or spheres of influence. Mediation, compromise and balance are essential.

Pierre Hassner reasoned with passion, embodying the very tensions which are explored in this book. He stressed the importance of respect for others, both in itself and as a way of sustaining a healthy personal and group identity. In his writings, as in the way he lived, argued and taught, he has left us with a remarkable legacy, one difficult to live up to but inspiring all the same.