On the Quizzical Edge of Liminality: A Critical Study of Thomas Hobbes’s Epistle *Leviathan*

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Abstract

The concept of liminality helps to bring into perspective the otherwise strange and very radical turn to self-foundation, evident in the 16th and 17th centuries. Therefore, the features of liminality are indeed to replace the outside chaos with an order of the inside, having radicalized and brought to exhaustion doubt and scepticism through personal and collective reflexivity. In this sense, the evolution of introspection in the mid-seventeenth century is rightly regarded as forbearer to the Enlightenment, and Hobbes must beyond doubt be considered as path-breaking transitional figures toward European modernity.

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In ancient ages to modernity, one of the most common exercises is to force the intuition to cut off the sensory apparatus from the ‘world’ to gain an inward vision (often received in a dream-like state), a vision of truth that the intuition must elaborate and make manifest in the shaping of his new personality. As described by van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969), during ritual passages, the intuition or the neophytes are brought to question most radically their sensory apparatus, just to challenge the social order by setting themselves apart from any normally accepted social rules from their betwixt and between position.

The peculiar anti-establishment feature with which modern world view evolved from the 17th century. It was the beginning of secular doctrine in both ideation and political disposal, and Hobbes is rightly seen as founders in exactly this sense: in the grounding of his systems of thought he abandoned, once and for all, a divinely-ordained legitimization. In sniffing out new principles, he found a fresh kind of criterion which could surpass and alter religion and its danger-some disruptive inclinations that had fractured Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In most readings, Hobbes is therefore also primary figures in the rationalization of thought and practice that paved the way for a wider secularization process, as a new boundary between the secular and the sacred would slowly become accepted and institutionalized.

Reality is experienced as contingent and uncertain, with lasting forms yet to be made. The anxiety and doubt that characterizes liminality are ultimately overcome by shaping the subject, who through a series of tests is brought to reflect on his or her self, in the search of a new identity and role to take upon the return to his or her society. There are indeed historical periods in which the social order is very fundamentally questioned and where widespread infra communal violence and lack of social hierarchy
render normal interpersonal relations difficult if not impossible. This was a social collapse, culminating in a prolonged period of permanent religious and civil wars.

It is with this approach in mind that the general life experiences during the crucial period in the development of the modern state, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, need to be considered as the conditions of the emergence of the model of ‘absolutism’.

Therefore, understanding ‘absolutism’ is not possible only by looking historically and substantially at what it offered in terms of territorial, politico-administrative arrangements. Absolutism was a solution to a specific problem. Understanding the breakthrough of absolutism in the seventeenth century involves a look at the terms in which the problem was posed as a problem, and at the long term consequences of these formulations. It is in precisely this genealogical sense that Hobbes is founding figures: while his solutions quickly became objects of dispute, it was his problematization and the framing of possible answers which would remain the hidden foundations of the modernity he otherwise helped to install.

However, this search for first principles was equally important for modern political thought. Thomas Hobbes’ problem of the order was indeed similar: what plagued Hobbes was how to establish, amid of the reigning disorder, some unconditioned first principle, not only of human knowledge but also of political rule and morality.

Hobbes’ problem can be described in similar terms as those introduced above. Europe had been in a prolonged state of war for almost half a century. His political writings emerged ‘in a period of intense political turmoil’ (Dietz 1990a: 1). During the Thirty Years’ War, Hobbes saw how the schismatic churches shed blood with the intent of establishing a secular order based on their inwardly-felt religious claims to truth. It was exactly this use of religious truth for a political order that Hobbes found both erratic and dangerous. Hobbes’ fear of passionate religious inner-driven sentiments was understandable, considering the historical context and the Puritan revolutions in England. Different varieties of moral philosophy and transcendental truth kept defending different varieties of legitimate public order, and the result was bloody, to say the least. As Hobbes says in his 1641 Epistle dedicatory to De Cive, ‘the war of the sword and the war of the pens is perpetual’ (1998: 5), and to Hobbes, both types of war were causally related. There was a need to clean up the mess, to find some ground from where truth could be established for peace to prevail. This was Hobbes’ problem. Christianity had lost its function as a non-disputed civil theology; its powers had been exhausted, that much was clear. Something else was needed, and Hobbes claimed to have found it.

The contract theories of the seventeenth century aimed to organize society according to the parameters of rational thought established in philosophy and science. What should also be considered, however, is the kind of human self that was institutionalized alongside this process. As was a custom among the contract theorists, Hobbes would typically devote the first section of his reasoning to a discussion of man and human nature. The geometrical grid that Hobbes pursued required basic definitions.
This first definitional part, then, directed the political analysis and its programmatic results. The implicit idea, still dominant in much political theory and ideology, is that once we know and can declare human nature as, for example, either individualistic or collective, peaceful or warlike, we also know how to govern. This construct is inherently blind to another possibility: that ‘human nature’ is likewise a product of rule and power.

Hobbes’ first principle, his ‘uncaused cause’, was the principle of self-preservation: the right for each man to protect his life and limbs as far as he can. It was important for Hobbes to stress that this foundation was a natural right and therefore just (1.7, 27). To Hobbes, this political principle of self-preservation could likewise function as a foundation for ethics. In Leviathan Hobbes launched yet another attack on the ancients, which was here directed not only against their ‘naïve realism’ but specifically against the Aristotelian idea that man is an animal ‘born fit for society’. No, says Hobbes, we are not born to live together in peace and harmony. If people seek each other’s company they do it to maximize personal honor, to gain a personal advantage, or to enjoy their glory. The logical conclusion followed that ‘the origin of large and lasting societies lay not in mutual human benevolence but men’s mutual fear’ (24). Hobbes, of course, did insist on linking political order to more noble civic virtues, such as gratitude (see Dietz 1990b), but such virtues could only be re-injected while based upon a recognition of the true human nature.

The autonomous state of Hobbes rested upon selfish passion-driven individuals, whose order rested in and upon the polity itself. The possibility of peacefully keeping together a society thus came to reside in the negative definition of the human person. While this is a very different reduction of the self when compared with the narrowing of being established in the Cartesian system, the effects of the two constructs can reinforce each other: the rational order that follows in both cases establishes a specifically empty and delimited understanding of the human personality.

The construct Hobbes was after must cut off both ‘nature’ and ‘divinity’, personal belief and transcendental truth, in one stroke. Society should be held together, peace and order secured, by a civil theology whose indisputable truth resided within itself, which it represented, and which could not be brought to justice by any external source of power but itself. Human nature and God’s order would then come together as one, both ordained by the Sovereign. Reduced to a selfish animal, the Hobbesian person became authentically human only through the higher reality of the Sovereign. The Sovereign, in his turn, represented pure order. He, symbolizing the state, was the ordered Cartesian self of politics from whom truth flows. Although in Leviathan Hobbes very explicitly discerned God’s role in society from that of the Sovereign, at a deeper level this means that the Sovereign comes to stand in the same kind of direct contact with God, such that truth and the order of society simply are God himself.

**Works cited**


