

JON PARKIN

TAMING THE LEVIATHAN: READING HOBBS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

Hobbes's influence on seventeenth century thought is a topic which is often taken for granted, rather than investigated seriously. Assumptions about Hobbes's impact on other writers are based frequently upon an anachronistic conception of Hobbes's canonic importance. To modern writers Hobbes tops the list of important seventeenth century philosophers, and on the basis of this assessment it is all too readily assumed that other important philosophers were necessarily influenced by his work. This tendency is most problematic when Hobbes's ideas are simply juxtaposed with another writer to produce a correspondence, which is held to demonstrate a meaningful link or influence. However, it is necessary to be aware of the dangers of such an approach. Using a modern rather than a contemporary understanding of Hobbes can mislead as to the nature of the intellectual debt. Our understanding of what Hobbes said may be very different to what his contemporaries thought he was saying; their sense of what was new and shocking about his work, and what was conventional and unoriginal, can often be odds with modern interpretations of Hobbes's work. Clearly all of these factors will have a bearing upon the nature of Hobbes's supposed influence.

As historians have increasingly focused upon the recovery of authorial intention in works of political theory, we are perhaps less likely to make anachronistic assumptions about influence. But if we can dispense with the notion of Hobbes's necessary influence, we do need to develop a more nuanced and historically sensitive account of the manner in which texts are read and received.¹ Striking work has been done on the intended meaning of Hobbes's writings.² However, should bear in mind that, for his contemporaries, much of Hobbes's meaning was generated in acts of reading, and in particular the many acts of interpretation to which his work was subject. In these contexts, and for reasons which I want to explore in this paper, Hobbes's intentions certainly do not tell us the whole story. Finding out what Hobbes meant to his readers, and how this changed over time, should enable us to make more detailed comments about the nature of his influence. There is no doubt that Hobbes was a distinctive presence in seventeenth century discourse. However, for reasons that I will discuss, he was the bearer of multiple identities, each of which could be important in conditioning the reception of his ideas.

Hobbes presents particular problems when looking at reception.³ His books undoubtedly became well-known, but the notoriety which became attached to his public reputation made it difficult to acknowledge his influence openly. For this reason, Hobbes's direct impact is usually taken to be negative, his positive presence

minimal. Even Hobbes's contemporary admirers were forced to admit that Hobbes had few open defenders or supporters. In 1680 the English doctor Richard Blackburne concluded his eulogistic Latin biography of Hobbes with helpful bibliographies of pro- and anti-Hobbes material.⁴ Although the list of Hobbes's opponents continues for several pages, the category of Hobbes's defenders contains just one entry, and an anonymous one at that, the *Epistolica dissertatio de principiis justitiae et decori* (1651). This was in fact the work of the Dutch writer Lambert van Velthuysen, but although Blackburne could have claimed to have found a work explicitly defending Hobbes's *De cive*, Velthuysen, as I shall discuss later, was far from being an uncomplicated disciple of Hobbes.

We have to ask what this means for the reception of Hobbes. The idea that Hobbes had no influence at all is clearly not plausible given the considerable and sustained reaction to his work. This leads us to the alternative suggested by G.A. J. Rogers (dealing with the case of Henry More) that Hobbes's legacy was more oblique and that individuals did use Hobbes's ideas without acknowledging them.⁵ I would like to take Rogers's argument as a starting point but I would like to refine this notion of 'hidden influence' and also suggest a model for the processes by which Hobbes's ideas were discussed and adapted, criticised and appropriated.

Perhaps the first point to make is that, quite apart from Hobbes's subsequent notoriety, there were other reasons why he was never likely to have simple disciples. Important here are the ambiguities in Hobbes's doctrines. It was difficult to be a pure Hobbist, because it was far from clear, certainly for Hobbes's more attentive readers, exactly what being a Hobbist entailed. If three centuries of scholarship has yet to establish Hobbes's intentions beyond reasonable doubt it seems to be asking a lot of contemporaries that they should have grasped Hobbes's meaning immediately and easily. In fact, it seems to be a feature of Hobbes's work that one is simply denied the interpretative resources to do this. This is easy to forget when approaching Hobbes from a modern perspective, coloured as it is by the cumulative propaganda of Hobbes's successful critics. Today Hobbes's heterodoxy as a misanthropic atheist appears to be obvious. But to accept this is to accept the account of the critics and to miss the force of Hobbes's method. This did not depend upon the creation of a wholly novel form of political discourse, as is all too often supposed. It relied instead upon a subtle critique of existing theories and ideas. Indeed it could be argued that much of the force and consistency within Hobbes's arguments comes from their proximity to the arguments being dissected. Hobbes tends not to generate a new clear-cut political theory (which might, incidentally, have condemned his work to historical irrelevance). What his work does contain are mechanisms by which the reader is encouraged to reflect in a certain way upon various forms of received doctrine. The role of the reader is critical to Hobbes's method. Much of his work, particularly *Leviathan*, aimed to transform the passive reader into a politically responsible author, the author of a commonwealth, as chapter 16 of *Leviathan* makes clear. Hobbes's technique was to take genres familiar to his target audience, particularly genres that had been used as the basis for civil disturbance, in order to subvert or redefine them from within.

Hobbes's discussion of natural law offers one of the most obvious examples of how Hobbes could take a familiar language and transform it with devastating results. I shall use the most familiar recension of Hobbes's views in the *Leviathan* to make the point. Of particular interest is the manner in which Hobbes orders the argument to unsettle the reader's perspective. After encountering the unforgettable account of the state of war in chapter 13, Hobbes then embarks upon his discussion of natural laws in chapters 14 and 15. For the reader, the unembarrassed account of natural laws after the consideration of an apparently lawless natural state could seem slightly anomalous. The Earl of Clarendon asked why Hobbes should have made it "unavoidably necessary for every man to cut his neighbour's throat" when he would "in the same, and the next Chapter, set down such a Body of Laws prescribed by Nature itself, as are immutable and eternal"?⁶ The natural laws, as Clarendon noted, provide 'a full remedy against all that confusion', suggesting that Hobbes was developing an account of sociability more in tune with Grotius or Selden. However, the reader's respite lasts until the final paragraph of chapter 15, where Hobbes suddenly raises a doubt as to whether these laws of nature are, properly speaking, laws at all. A law, Hobbes argues, is "the speech of him who by right commands somewhat to others to be done or omitted".⁷ This meant that the laws of nature he had spent the previous chapters discussing are not laws. They are, in fact, rational conclusions or theorems, propositions that are derived by the individual to further his self-preservation. It is hard to imagine that this passage could do anything other than unsettle the reader, but Hobbes has no sooner raised the doubt than he has quelled it again. In the last sentence of the chapter he comments that because these theorems are actually delivered in the word of God, who commands over all things by the greatest right, then they are in fact laws.⁸ This resolved the issue in a manner which was likely to be familiar to his target audience. For Protestant theologians reluctant to ascribing to reason the power of interpreting God's will, the fact that Scripture contained natural law meant that it could act as a proximate source of moral obligation. However, Hobbes does not leave the matter there, and sets a more convoluted trap for the reader, who later learns that although Hobbes was prepared to discuss the authority of Scriptural texts with many references to familiar passages from the Bible, his subversive conclusion is that Scripture is only authoritative when authorised in turn by the magistrate.⁹

The overall effect of these subtle position changes is to unsettle the reader's perspective about the practical sources of moral obligation. The loosening and redefinition of key terms mean that the reader is ultimately left to infer heterodox conclusions from familiar and seemingly innocuous premises. In the case of natural law, the result is the unusual inference that civil law effectively defines the practical external obligation behind natural law. This example of reader entrapment might seem over-complex, but it was identified as such by Hobbes's contemporary critics. Richard Cumberland, writing in 1672, noted Hobbes's apparently orthodox statement that the laws of nature were enacted by God in Scripture. But Cumberland was also quick to point out that Hobbes's view of the authority of Scripture was problematic to say the least. On Hobbes's account, writes Cumberland, "it follows that the law of nature, even as contained in Scripture, is not properly a law except by



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1569-4>

Early Modern Natural Law Theories
Context and Strategies in the Early Enlightenment
Hochstrasser, T.; Schröder, P. (Eds.)
2003, XVIII, 342 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4020-1569-4