

Hobbes: A Realist and a Liberal?

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Gabriela Ratulea, *From the Natural Man to the Political Machine: Sovereignty and Power in the Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2015, 132 p.

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The book of Gabriela Ratulea is about "Hobbes in context", meaning the insertion of the Hobbesian political thought in the history of modern age, intellectual and political. The first chapter is an introduction in the topics. It starts with the distinction between natural law and positive law in ancient thought, Greek and Latin, and in Christian tradition. This would be necessary for the good understanding of the Hobbesian solution at the problem of opposition between nature and convention, or between necessity and liberty. For Hobbes is, on one hand, the first Modern in politics, but, on the other hand, he seems to be in conflict with those other Moderns which are called "liberals". A clarification of the intellectual sources of natural law doctrines is therefore a well-chosen strategy. In the 17th century the debates around authority and rights have been grounded in different interpretations of these intellectual sources, Greek or Latin, and Christian. Hobbes may be Christian in his theory of authority, but as Anglican and rationalist he is anti-Catholic, anti-Scholastic, and anti-Aristotelian. Therefore his theory of sovereignty is based on a realist theory of human nature, found in Thucydides (who inspired also Machiavelli...). That is

why his theory of social contract is very different from that of natural law school. In a second [moment], precisely, Gabriela Ratulea points out the differences between Hobbes and other non-liberal Moderns, like Grotius, Spinoza, Leibniz and Pufendorf, who identifies natural law with natural right, like Aristotelians and Scholastics... [At this stage, a brief presentation of Locke's political theory is made for an overview of the liberal position which will be discussed later.] A third moment describes the historical context of *Leviathan*, with "the importance of England's political events of 17th century for the construction of a new political philosophy" (p. 39). The struggle between the Parliament and the Stuart kings, the two revolutions and the debate over the rights constitutes the historical background of the question "which legitimate form of government is suited to human nature?" (p. 43). This question was at the very heart of both Hobbesian and Lockean political philosophy, and the differences between Hobbes and Locke were rooted in their ideological positions throughout those social and political struggles. Nevertheless, "setting these theories in the context of the liberal culture of the 17th century England does not make them any less universal" (p. 44).

The second chapter deals with the Hobbesian theory of sovereignty. This is a synthetic presentation of the logic of *Leviathan*, which starts with the presentation of the *human condition of mankind* and the morality of natural laws. Commonly Hobbes is seen as the philosopher who stated that humans are evil by nature, since they naturally are in the state of war of every one against every one. Following Leo Strauss, Ratulea shows that this interpretation goes against Hobbes's intention. The theory of human nature in *Leviathan* relies actually on two postulates: *cupiditas naturalis* and *rationis naturalis*. The doctrine of the two natural faculties, appetite and reason, is connected with Hobbes's intention of demonstrating that man spontaneously and continuously desires more and more power. The author is concerned with the natural character of power: if men limit their power, it is only by fear from another power which is greater than their own. This limitation is said "rational", for it comes from

calculation and leads men to self-preservation. At this point, the book introduces us in Hobbes's conception on the "first good": since "death is the denial of every good", the preservation of life is the first good, and since there is no guarantee of life in the state of nature, men consent to put an end to the state of nature and enter into society.

At this level the book debates on the distinction between the sovereignty by acquisition and sovereignty by institution. The first one is natural; it is politics in the state of nature, but this is the politics of Thrasymachus, i.e. the politics of force. In the state of nature, there is domination of the master over the slave, of the patriarch over his family and of the victor over the vanquished. One could say that this natural society is not a society strictly speaking, because it is grounded in fear. But the same situation occurs when men institute sovereignty by contract: they still act from fear of death. So, as the sovereignty by institution does not exclude fear, the sovereignty by conquest does not exclude consent. Fear and reason are involved in the same way in both cases, and sovereignty is about the rational submission because of fear.

In this respect, the distinction between natural right, understood as liberty to do or not to do [something] according to natural appetite, and natural law – understood as moral and rational obligation – is linked with the need for authority. Authority is nothing else than a power which is able to provide security by bringing together natural right and natural law, and this is possible only by limiting the natural right. The submission by fear and the convention by reason are the only ways to limit the natural right; but the first is rational, and the second needs a power as guarantee. So there is a circulation between fear and reason, nature and convention, liberty and obligation that proves that the institution of society is to be considered at two levels: logical and historical. A state is like a family, and a family is like a state, Hobbes said; but one is natural, while the other is an artefact! I think that one of the great merits of the book I talk about is to prove that Hobbes was not this straw man which was set up by the liberal critique (a man that Locke never mentions moreover).

In the third chapter the author goes against the interpretations by default, according to which the political thought of Hobbes must be judged from the perspective of liberal doctrines. From the generally accepted perspective, Hobbes must be illiberal, as he is in perfect opposition to Locke: he does not accept parliamentary democracy and constitutional limitations of sovereignty. This opposition is undoubtedly true. However, it is strange that Hobbes is never mentioned by Locke in the *Two Treatises of government*! At the same time Bramhall considered, from a royalist position, that *Leviathan* is a “catechism of the rebel”, and Filmer – Locke’s enemy in the *First Treatise* – that the idea of social contract is a revolutionary fiction. There are some reasons for thinking that “the main argument of Locke in *Two Tracts* could be considered as hobbist” (Ratulea 2015, 166). In his book, Ratulea pays attention to some interpreters (Strauss, Macpherson) who talk about “liberalism” in a wide meaning, and state that both philosophies of Hobbes and Locke are grounded in the culture of the 17th century and in the structure of English society. This seems quite common if one have not in mind that the same 17th century was the age of Stuarts, of civil war, of Levelers, of Glorious Revolution, of Arminians, of Puritans and of Latitudinarians! However, above all these determinations there is a special feature of the 17th English society which Macpherson called „generalized market society”. The description of human nature by Hobbes is nothing else but the *reprise* at the theoretical level of the main characteristics of this type of society. Individualism is the first element of this social dispositive transfigured into the logical hypothesis of the state of nature. Its immediate consequence is the idea that “the value, or WORTH of a man, is as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another.” (Hobbes 1998, 59)

For that reason, according to Macpherson view, the Hobbesian individual psychology is rather social. At this stage, Ratulea thinks that any liberal interpretation of Hobbes requires the analysis of moral and political obligation. This is not a revolution in Hobbes studies, since the authors who state

the liberalism of Hobbes (Strauss, Macpherson) have already analyzed the Hobbesian theory of political obligation; on the contrary, those who deny this interpretation (Polin) think that “Hobbes has never directly established a theory of political obligation” (p. 117). However, Ratulea provide an interesting analysis of moral and political obligation with respect to those conventions which are called social *mores*. She establish an interpretive link between the Chapter “Of the Difference of Manners” (XI, in *Leviathan*) and the text called “Of Manners”, published as response to a professor from Oxford (see *The English Work of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. VII, Molesworth edition). The point is that “the status of *mores* is ambiguous in Hobbes, since they depend to a great extent on conventions and they do not have any direct link to natural law; on the other hand, they can be seen as an expression of attitudes and natural interests (civilization being the sum of mechanisms and social rules by means of which people attain their natural purposes). In the absence of sociability, morals cannot be understood in other way.” (p. 119) This leads us to the idea that both moral (natural) and political obligation should be considered in respect to conscience. An analysis of the problem of conscience in Hobbes is therefore required, which is made in the last pages of the book.

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