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Hobbes and Locke: Meaning, Method, Modernity

Introduction

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Abstract

An introduction to the special issue on Hobbes and Locke: Meaning, Method, Modernity.

Keywords

Cambridge School – Leo Strauss – Straussians – history of political thought – Christian politics – modernity

Scholars of the life and thought of John Locke have scoured repositories all over the world for decades, searching for anything that might shed light on his interest in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). The evidence would place England's two greatest philosophers in dialogue with one another, when it seemed that Locke had studiously avoided the 'Monster of Malmesbury'. The thought that such a document might exist was incredible. Yet it did, and I found it.

FELIX WALDMANN, "Level Unlocked," *Times Literary Supplement* 18 June 2021.

There is a time for all things. Felix Waldmann's recent discovery of a lost memoir by one of Locke's oldest friends, James Tyrrell, which remembered Locke as an ardent reader of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in his university days,¹ has returned the question of the relationship between the two to centre stage. Tyrrell's memoir was quickly commandeered by votaries of the late Leo Strauss as decisive confirmation of Strauss's intuition and subsequent methodological assumption that Locke had deliberately concealed significant debts to Hobbes. They urge scholars to use the occasion of its appearance to surmount the sectarian divisions that have beset Locke studies since the 1960s and to reconsider Strauss's interpretation as "part of a new look at the character of Hobbes's influence on Locke."² This special issue makes its own contribution to this timely enterprise by looking anew at Hobbes and Locke and the terms in which they have been interpreted in the last three generations.

The enterprise was already underway even before Waldmann's "incredible" discovery accelerated its progress. Jeffrey R. Collins adduces the Tyrrell memoir as proof of the "premise" of his 2020 monograph, *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience*, that Hobbes had indeed exerted an influence on Locke—first positively and then negatively. That influence initially pulled Locke towards "a science of sovereignty" before growing unease at some of its potentially "anti-tolerationist implications"³ led Locke to develop the new account of religious conscience that played a decisive role in the subsequent development of liberal thought.⁴ Collins triangulates his own position with reference to "the hoary interpretive model" that pits "an 'absolutist' Hobbes against a 'liberal, constitutional' Locke" and the revisionist model he associates with "Cambridge School contextualism" which sequesters Hobbes from Locke and by "dogmatic" methodological fiat denies the possibility that they could have "developed their ideas in dialogue."⁵

In its original context the Cambridge approach cut against both "the tendency of Straussian interpreters to associate Hobbes and Locke as fellow

1 Felix Waldmann, "John Locke as a Reader of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*: A New Manuscript," *Journal of Modern History* 93, no. 2 (2021): 245–82.

2 Nasser Behnegar, Devin Stauffer, Rafael Major, and Christopher Nadon, "From Laslett to Waldmann: The Case for Reconsidering Strauss on Locke," *Review of Politics* 84, no. 4 (2022): 570–91 (at 572).

3 Jeffrey R. Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 371.

4 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 3, 8; and see 5 for Waldmann's discovery "confirming" aspects of Collins's thesis.

5 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 2–3.

travellers on the low road from ancient political philosophy to modern political science,”⁶ and the tendency of Marxist scholars to yoke them together as creatures which, if insufficiently swift to be “imperialist running dog[s],” were at least “poodle[s] of the bourgeoisie.”⁷ The ensuing separation of Hobbes and Locke has now become “a shibboleth of Cambridge school method.”⁸ Turning the method against itself, Collins argues that, for an extended period, Hobbes and Locke operated in a shared context: throughout the Interregnum and Restoration, they “navigated the same political waters and developed common interests. The standard source material, however, [he observes] rarely keeps them in the frame together.”⁹ To keep them both within the same frame, the *Leviathan* must suffer a sea change, into something rich and strange.

Collins suggests that, notwithstanding Hobbes’s insistence that his sovereign determines a wide array of ecclesiastical matters (including laws natural and divine, doctrine and worship), there is at the heart of *Leviathan* a “grand evasion”—first identified by Strauss and subsequently accentuated by Carl Schmitt—concerning the respective claims of inner faith and outer confession. “The Hobbesian sovereign controlled only public confession, not private belief.” So understood, the logic of sovereignty as a representational phenomenon “does not successfully empower the sovereign in absolute spiritual terms.” This forces Hobbes “into a series of contradictions.”¹⁰

The sovereign, “as the representative person, acts for subjects in a totalizing manner. There is no normative remainder which might adjudicate the ‘justice’ of a sovereign’s actions.” However, Collins notes, “Hobbes could not accomplish the parallel task of rendering it impossible to accuse the sovereign of impiety [...]. He allowed individuals to distance themselves inwardly from the sovereign’s religious commands. Christians must obey pagan sovereigns outwardly as Naaman had bowed to the Idol Rimmon with the tacit permission of Elisha.”¹¹ But Hobbes did not justify this outward conformity

6 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 2.

7 Ian Harris, “Some Reflections on Critical-Text Editing: The Case of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *Locke Studies* 16 (2016): 215–71, at 235, alluding to C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

8 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 2.

9 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 1.

10 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 11–12.

11 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 12. Collins here alludes to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), ch. 42, p. 784 [271], glossing 2 Kings 5: 17–8. In line with the journal’s guidelines, references to *Leviathan* are provided to page number in Malcolm’s edition, with the page number of the 1651 edition in square brackets.

with the theory of attributed action that Collins, following Quentin Skinner, makes central to the politics of *Leviathan*. Instead, he deployed “a rhetoric of distancing” that re-opened the gap between the sovereign’s actions and the subject’s which that theory had sedulously sought to close, by attributing the outward action to the sovereign alone and freedom of conscience to the subject.¹²

In opening that gap Hobbes moved away from the compulsory confessional state, towards the privatization of religion, and towards Locke. He anticipated Locke in relegating belief to a private, unseen realm¹³ even if, unlike Locke, he formally retained the requirement for exterior conformity with whatever form or forms of worship the sovereign commanded.¹⁴ So it is that, with the collective assistance of Skinner, Strauss, and Schmitt, Collins liberalizes the *Leviathan* and restores to significance “the influence of Hobbes and Hobbism on Locke.”¹⁵

At first glance enlisting Skinner, Strauss, and Schmitt together in any joint enterprise sets a spectacularly high bar when it comes to surmounting sectarian division. Skinner once described Strauss as the “leading proponent” of a “demonological” method of interpretation;¹⁶ another founding father of the Cambridge School, J. G. A. Pocock, complained that American academia was “infested by [Strauss’s] disciples”;¹⁷ one of those disciples responded by stating that Skinner was either a fool or, more likely, a knave, who “purposely misrepresents Strauss in order to establish his own approach against [Strauss’s] growing influence in American political science”;¹⁸ Skinner has largely ignored Schmitt, a “card-carrying Nazi”;¹⁹ Strauss’s admirers—understandably—resent

12 For some difficulties with this line of interpretation, see Jon Parkin, “Thomas Hobbes and the Problem of Self-Censorship,” in *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes*, ed. Jan Baltussen and Peter J. Davis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 293–317 (at 305–9).

13 It should be noted that Collins rejects the “liberal, individualist” reading of Locke which reduces religion to a matter of private belief in favour of an interpretation that emphasizes “its important communal and ecclesial dimensions” (*In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 7).

14 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 8–9.

15 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 5.

16 Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53 (at 12–13).

17 J. G. A. Pocock, “Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 532–550 (at 547).

18 Rafael Major, “The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 477–85 (at 483).

19 The description is owed to Skinner’s Cambridge colleague David Runciman, “History of Political Thought: The State of the Discipline,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2001): 84–104 (at 96).

any implication that he ever made common cause with Schmitt.²⁰ A more searching look suggests, however, that beneath the clamour of division there is an underlying sameness—a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

What unites this unlikely triumvirate is the assumption that modernity begins with Hobbes. The second volume of Skinner's magisterial work *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) concluded with the suggestion that political thought became "modern" through a process by which "the state" came to be seen as an impersonal structure and not merely an attitude of the ruler, and that there was an accompanying process by which "philosophy" came to be primarily concerned with "the state" and the problems it occasioned.²¹ It was Hobbes who went on to construct the modern theory of the state on the foundations Skinner identified.²² Strauss likewise suggested that Hobbes "was the first who felt the necessity of seeking, and succeeded in finding, a *nuova scienza* of man and State."²³ And Schmitt too suggested that, despite himself, and against his best intentions, Hobbes had invented the modern state.²⁴ This invites the question, what exactly was "modern" about it?

Perhaps the clearest answer to that question is provided by John Neville Figgis, whose course Skinner so closely parallels.²⁵ Figgis argued that Hobbes had introduced a new style of politics and philosophy because every other political theorist "up to the end of the seventeenth century either [had] religion for the basis of their system, or regard[ed] the defence or supremacy of some one form of faith as their main object."²⁶ Not Hobbes. Figgis associated him with "utility" and hence with all modern political thought, which was modern because it assumed that "politics and theology have little or no relation to one

20 See e.g. Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

21 Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 357–8, as glossed by Pocock, "Quentin Skinner," 539.

22 See, *inter alia*, Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes and the Concept of the State," in *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 341–83.

23 Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.

24 Carl Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes. Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1938).

25 See Mark Goldie, "The Context of *The Foundations*," in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Annabel Brett and James Tully with Holly Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–19, esp. 17–19.

26 John Neville Figgis, *The Theory of the Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 217.

another.” In making politics “frankly secular” Hobbes made the state, rather than the church and state, the proper object of study—the only thing that really mattered.²⁷ Figgis’s judgement of his own time was that Hobbes had won and that “politics has ceased to be anything but utilitarian.” He was moved to wonder “how far this change is an improvement and whether it is likely to be lasting.”²⁸ More than a century after Figgis first raised them, these remain excellent questions.

The nerve of these introductory remarks is to suggest that it is not the Cambridge approach *per se* which has kept Hobbes and Locke “at arm’s length from one another”²⁹ for three generations but rather an assumption that is an object of unacknowledged consensus across the sectarian divide: the “ecumenical assumption” that modern politics was invented by Hobbes, that he discussed politics within a wholly secular frame of reference, and that he centred it upon the impersonal sovereign state. The purpose of this special issue is to bring a different Hobbes into view by putting question marks beside the ecumenical assumption—to alienate Hobbes from modernity by making more than the state a central object of his interest and by treating him as if religion mattered as much to him as it mattered to Locke.

The decisive feature of the Hobbesian state as Skinner construes it is that *it* is sovereign. Hobbes’s predecessors had argued variously that sovereignty was the defining attribute of kings or that the body of the people was the original and natural bearer of sovereignty. But, at least in *Leviathan*, Hobbes maintained that “no king enjoys a status any higher than that of an authorised representative” and that “there is no such thing as the body of the people”³⁰—having taken the precaution of burying the body in the foundations on which the sovereign state was subsequently raised.³¹ On Skinner’s account it fell to

27 Figgis, *Divine Right of Kings*, 256. Compare Skinner, “Hobbes and the Concept of the State,” 356: “Due to these commitments, Hobbes rarely talks in the manner typical of absolutist theorists about the reverence due to kings as the Lord’s anointed or God’s vicegerents on earth.”

28 Figgis, *Divine Right of Kings*, 256. For a fuller discussion of these matters, see James Alexander, “The Figgistorians, or, Anti-Whig Historians of Political Thought,” in *Neville Figgis CR: His Life, Thought and Significance*, ed. Paul Avis (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2021), 65–92, to which our brief account is indebted.

29 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 1–2.

30 Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes on Political Representation,” in *From Humanism to Hobbes*, 190–221 (at 220).

31 See Quentin Skinner, “Burying the Body of the People,” John Coffin Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of London, 8 May 2003. Skinner discussed the use of the idea of the corporate people by Calvinist polemicists and their Catholic emulators to justify political resistance in *Foundations*, Vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation*, 302–48.

Locke to disinter “the people” from the grave prepared for it by Hobbes whilst developing his own views of popular sovereignty and the right of revolution.³²

James Harris’s article, “The Multitude, the People, and Popular Sovereignty: Pufendorf and Locke in Reply to Hobbes” revisits some of these issues. Decentring the state, Harris addresses himself to the distinction between the multitude and the people in the earlier recensions of Hobbes’s political theory, especially the *De Cive*. He explores the ways in which Pufendorf and Locke responded—or, in Locke’s case, failed to respond—to Hobbes’s claim there that in every commonwealth the people reigns but in a monarchy the king *is* the people.³³ In much recent scholarship Pufendorf has been portrayed as a disciple of Hobbes³⁴ but, according to Harris, Pufendorf rejected Hobbes’s analysis and wished to reinstate the duality of people and sovereign and with it the notion of a compact, and hence a moral relationship, between people and king. Pufendorf was explicit that even when a people surrenders its sovereignty to a king, it continues to exist, and so he needed what he proceeded to provide, namely an account of how the people comes to be constituted out of a multitude whilst also, and at the same time, remaining distinct from the sovereign.

Locke, so Harris argues, had very little interest in these questions. He had no theory of the people to speak of and no inclination whatever to develop or deploy the “science of sovereignty.” Indeed, Harris observes, sovereignty was a concept that Locke eschewed almost entirely when discussing the exercise of political power by one human being against or on behalf of another, perhaps because he presumed that all human beings were “the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business [...], made

32 Skinner, *Foundations*, Vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation*, 348.

33 Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive/ On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). To facilitate comparison references are provided to chapter and paragraph number (here, *De Cive*, xii.8).

34 See e.g. Fiammetta Palladini, *Samuel Pufendorf Disciple of Hobbes: For a Re-Interpretation of Modern Natural Law*, trans. David Saunders (Leiden: Brill, 2020; originally in Italian as *Samuel Pufendorf discepolo di Hobbes. Per una reinterpretazione del giusnaturalismo moderno*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); and Quentin Skinner, “A Genealogy of the Modern State,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162 (2009), 325–70 (at 350–2). This portrayal has been powerfully challenged in Ben Holland, *The Moral Person of the State: Pufendorf, Sovereignty and Composite Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Skinner adopts something like Holland’s view of Pufendorf in “Hobbes and the Concept of the State,” 365–8.

to last during his, not one another's Pleasure.”³⁵ If, as Locke supposed, God is sovereign over all mankind, to attribute the like power to any human agent except by a kind of courtesy is as impious as it is impertinent.

A defining achievement of the Cambridge approach to Locke, led and exemplified by the scholarship of John Dunn, has been to establish that theological conceptions must be central to understanding Locke's politics.³⁶ The result has been to alienate Locke from modernity and from Hobbes simultaneously. A different Locke has come into view in turn.³⁷ Amy Chandran's article, “Transubstantiation, Absurdity and the Religious Imagination: Hobbes and Rational Christianity” approaches Hobbes rather in the manner that Dunn has taught Locke scholars to approach Locke, by devoting sustained attention to the Christian assumptions and motifs that saturate Hobbes's whole frame of discussion.

Chandran argues that transubstantiation—the notion that during the sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood of Jesus Christ is made truly present under the appearance of bread and wine—had become a topic of intense debate at the Parisian Court in exile where Hobbes found himself with the thankless task of tutoring Charles II in mathematics from 1646–1648. Transubstantiation provided a litmus test of the capacity of the new mechanical philosophy to buttress traditional Roman Catholic doctrines or, contrariwise, to expose their absurdities. Chandran demonstrates that some of Hobbes's most critical remarks on the subject in *Leviathan* can be read as responses to a hitherto unremarked tract in the hand of Hobbes's associate Thomas White, which sought to show that the tenets of transubstantiation, although mysteries and held on faith, were not against reason.

Needless to say, Hobbes disagreed. However, as Chandran notes, he was keen to avail himself of the notion when it advanced his own intellectual and practical agenda. He used it negatively to epitomise the vain philosophy of his enemies which pretended that the world was full of invisible powers and immaterial spirits and which harnessed the fears raised by the spectre of such

35 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). References are provided to Book and paragraph number (here *TT* II, §6).

36 See John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

37 Compare Ian Harris, “John Locke and Natural Law: Free Worship and Toleration,” in *Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment*, ed. Jon Parkin and Timothy Stanton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 59–105, and Timothy Stanton, “John Locke and the Fable of Liberalism,” *Historical Journal* 61, no. 3 (2018): 597–622.

powers to make men see double, to feed superstition and to render the mass of ordinary people beholden to the hocus-pocus—*hoc est corpus*—of priests and their secular successors. But he also used it constructively when he cast the transformation of the multitude into a commonwealth in quasi-sacramental terms and imputed to the civil sovereign to which we owe our peace and defence the power to represent or personate the immortal God. These two contrasting modes of use, so Chandran argues, perfectly illustrate Hobbes's ambivalent stance towards Christianity and his deeply political approach to it.

Timothy Stanton and Tim Stuart-Buttle take up the question of Hobbes's stance towards Christianity as part of an extended contrast and comparison with Locke. Their article "Hobbes, Locke, and the Christian Commonwealth" argues that it was essential to Hobbes's agenda that the Commonwealth should be understood in Christian terms. It is not just that Christianity, refurbished in suitably Hobbesian vein, can be put to work to keep the commonwealth in good order by capping the civil covenant with a soothing Christian veneer. It is rather that *unless* Hobbes's sovereign enjoys a status higher than that of a mere authorised representative, any prospect of human beings living together in peace and security is ultimately an illusory one. According to Stanton and Stuart-Buttle, it is Hobbes himself who explains why this is so: a purely human power is insufficient to keep men in awe and so to stimulate the unstinting obedience that sustains the commonwealth. *Pace* Chandran's article, it is the civil covenant that relies upon the projective capacity of the imagination to rationalize "the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN,"³⁸ a "Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill." The sovereign power that sustains it in its twin aspects must be revered by its subjects as a "*Mortall God* [...]" under the *Immortall God*" in whose name the sovereign speaks and acts.³⁹

As Stanton and Stuart-Buttle go on to show, Locke thought in rather different terms. He made clear that there was no such thing as a Christian Commonwealth—a point which makes it all the more surprising that some commentators have sought to discover Christian foundations in his political thought⁴⁰—and treated churches and states as independent societies whose

38 See Timothy Stanton, "Hobbes and Schmitt," *History of European Ideas* 37, no. 1 (2011): 160–67 and compare Robin Douglass, "The Body Politic 'is a fictitious body,'" *Hobbes Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014): 126–47.

39 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 17, p. 260 [87].

40 Compare Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Timothy Stanton, "Christian Foundations; or some Loose Stones? Toleration and the Philosophy of Locke's Politics," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2011): 323–47.

nature and ends were so far removed from one another that they could not be combined except with disastrous results. Locke, like Hobbes, was much concerned with the historic corruption of Christianity and its effects but the lesson that he drew was that its politicisation was a principal cause of conflict, tumult and confusion, not a solution to those ills. The institutional remedy he proposed was to treat the commonwealth as in the strictest sense only civil in scope, and to deny that it was possible to authorize another to speak or act on one's own behalf in matters of religion. In this sense Locke's state sounds like Figgis's modern state; but Locke, like Figgis, thought in terms of churches as well as the state, emphasizing that every church was a free and voluntary society over which the state exercised no jurisdiction and so that the power and jurisdiction of the state was neither unlimited nor illimitable.⁴¹

It will be seen that none of the articles in this special issue deals exclusively or at length with Locke's philosophy—this is, after all, a journal devoted to the study of Hobbes. The editors, too, have purposely eschewed the “methodology of juxtaposition” that prejudges the character of the relationship between Hobbes and Locke.⁴² Our hope is that the three essays that comprise this volume will be viewed by readers as forming their own *coincidentia oppositorum* through a common suspicion of the ecumenical assumption. We further hope that the result will encourage readers to look again at Hobbes and Locke and the relation between the two, and to reflect further upon the decisive role played by this and the like assumptions in shaping meaning and understanding in the history of ideas.

41 See John Neville Figgis, *Churches in the Modern State* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), esp. 79.

42 Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 6.