

# Hobbes' Anti-liberal Individualism

*El individualismo antiliberal de Hobbes*

James R. Martel  
San Francisco State University, United States of America

**ABSTRACT** In much of the literature on Hobbes, he is considered a *proto-liberal*, that is, he is seen as setting up the apparatus that leads to liberalism but his own authoritarian streak makes it impossible for liberals to completely claim him as one of their own (hence the qualifier of *proto*). In this paper, I argue that, far from being a precursor to liberalism, Hobbes offers a political theory that is implicitly anti-liberal. I do not mean this in the conventional sense that Hobbes was too conservative for liberalism (as Schmitt would argue). On the contrary, I will argue that in his writing, Hobbes evinces a concept of collective interpretation, theories of individualism and the nature and possibilities for democratic politics, that is radical and offers a completely developed alternative to liberalism even as it eschews conservative and reactionary models as well. I focus in particular on the idea of individualism and how the model offered by liberals (in this case specifically Locke) and conservatives (in this case specifically Schmitt) offers far less in terms of individual choice and justice than Hobbes's own theory does, however paradoxical this may seem.

**KEY WORDS** Hobbes; Locke; Schmitt; liberalism; individualism; sovereignty; universal.

**RESUMEN** *En gran parte de la literatura sobre Hobbes se lo considera un protoliberal, es decir, se lo ve como quien ha puesto en marcha el aparato que conduce al liberalismo, pero sus propios rasgos autoritarios hacen imposible para los liberales considerarlo completamente como uno de sus suyos (de ahí el calificador proto). En el presente artículo, argumento que, lejos de ser un precursor del liberalismo, Hobbes ofrece una teoría política implícitamente antiliberal. No me refiero al sentido convencional según el cual Hobbes sería demasiado conservador para los liberales (como diría Schmitt). Por el contrario, sostendré que en sus escritos, Hobbes demuestra un concepto de interpretación colectiva, junto con teorías de individualismo*

*y de la naturaleza y las posibilidades de una política democrática, que es radical y ofrece un desarrollo completamente alternativo al liberalismo rehuendo, al mismo tiempo, de modelos conservadores y reaccionarios. Me centraré, en particular, en la idea del individualismo y cómo el modelo de los liberales (específicamente pondré por caso a Locke) y los conservadores (concretamente el caso de Schmitt) ofrecen mucho menos en términos de elección individual y justicia que la propia teoría de Hobbes, por muy paradójico que esto pueda parecer.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Hobbes; Locke; Schmitt; liberalismo; individualismo; soberanía; universal.

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#### **NOTA DEL AUTOR**

James Martel, Department of Political Science, San Francisco State University, United States of America.

E-mail: [jmartel@sfsu.edu](mailto:jmartel@sfsu.edu)

One commonplace about Thomas Hobbes is that he is a *proto-liberal*, that is to say a thinker who is not himself a full bore liberal (for that was to come with Locke and others in Hobbes's future) but who nevertheless can be read as anticipating and even framing liberalism by bestowing it with some of its most vital concepts. Although the word proto-liberal isn't used all the time, there is a great deal of support for the view that Hobbes and liberalism have a strong and critical connection.

For Lucien Jaume, for example (who uses the term directly):

Hobbes may be seen as a proto-liberal, due to the capacity to judge that he allows the individual, even within the latter's bond of submission. By insisting that the sovereign, his subjects, the 'people' and the conditions of civil society are all 'artificial,' or the work of artifice, Hobbes at the same time recognizes the durability and force of natural right that persists throughout. It is not the priority given to security that makes Hobbes a possible candidate liberalism but rather natural liberty, its complementary and veiled face. Natural liberty is the space granted to the human being as the natural *person* exceeding the role of the *citizen*; it is also the reservoir of natural rights that may surpass positive right and substitute for it. (2007, p. 210).

Many other thinkers ranging from Richard Tuck to Judd Owen support this view, arguing that much of Hobbes' apparent disregard for toleration (a mainstay of liberalism) is a product of his own specific responses to the crisis of the English civil war (Tuck, 1990). For Owen (2005), toleration itself is an absolute for Hobbes and so falls within the purview of liberal thought. There are also some anti liberals who saddle Hobbes with a connection to liberalism (which in their view is a bad thing). Although he wrote many decades ago, C.B. MacPherson (2010) is still probably the best known of this group, arguing that Hobbes is an apologist for a nascent capitalist order.

There are some challenges to this view as well, of course. Within the ranks of liberalism itself, Gordon Schochet (1990), for one, is well known for arguing that Hobbes's notion of obligation is incompatible with liberalism.

Beyond the scope of liberalism itself, perhaps the most famous thinker to argue against Hobbes's connection to liberalism is Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, Hobbes exposes the fundamental flaw in liberalism. He states that Hobbes reveals liberalism's reliance on assumptions about legalism and constitutionalism that disguise a harsher truth: that sovereignty is in fact above the law that liberalism would use to bind its within its embrace. The true sovereign is, in Schmitt's famous rendering "he who decides on the exception" (2005, p. 5). In other words, it is the state of emergency that tells you the truth about who really commands, even in a liberal democracy. For Schmitt, it is Hobbes's theory in general, and his notion of sovereignty portrayed in *Leviathan* in particular, that reveals the actual nature of politics. In his view, Hobbes is not only not a liberal but his work exposes the lies and vulnerabilities upon which liberalism is based.

In this essay, I am going to challenge both the liberal reading of Hobbes as well as Schmitt's by arguing that while Hobbes is indeed anti liberal, his illiberalism can be read as coming from a more left rather than right position (to the extent that those terms are helpful for a thinker that predates this division). My argument will be twofold. First, that Hobbes is far from being a proto-liberal but is rather someone who challenges liberalism deeply and secondly, that this challenge exposes something possibly unexpected about liberalism itself. To some extent, this is an argument that I have already made in previous writing but in this paper I'd like to focus on one particular aspect of Hobbes' work that I see as being in strong contradiction to liberalism (and, once again, a contradiction that works against Schmitt's conservative reading of him as well), namely the question of individualism (Martel, 2007). I will agree with Jaumes that Hobbes supplies us with a theory of individualism but in my view it is a remarkably, even radically, different form of individualism than what you find with later liberal versions. Perhaps more provocatively, I will argue that what liberalism offers—which I will examine mainly through an analysis of the work of John Locke—is not really individualism at all, at least not the form of individualism that liberalism usually promises (that is what is unexpected). It is Hobbes and not Locke, I will claim, who give us a

clearer picture of what radical individualism looks like and it is neither autonomous nor connected to sovereign power and authority.

In making these arguments, I will claim that Hobbes' individualism is almost the exact opposite of the liberal version that is to come after him. While the liberal version is autarkic in the way she is connected to others but universal in the way that she thinks and reasons, for Hobbes it is the other way around. Hobbes' individual is heterogeneous in terms of the sources of her thought and judgment but an individual when she tries to think and judge in this larger context. This difference is critical, as I will show further, because, even as liberalism insists that the individuals it depicts are entirely unto themselves, independent of one another in all ways (and, if they are not, this is a political problem for which liberalism offers itself as the solution), I will suggest that Hobbes' own version of liberalism is much more radically decentralized. His model of subjectivity reveals by contrast how much the liberal model is constrained by the individual's participation in the liberal universal, in occult forms of theology that persist long after Locke's more candid regard for theological influences wears away (and which indeed persist to this very day). In this way, Hobbes confounds both the liberals who would like to claim him as one of their own as well as the Schmittian interpretation of him as advocating for a conservative or even dictatorial kind of politics. In my reading, both of these views are belied by the radical and decentralized form of individualism that Hobbes promotes.

### **The Hobbesian Subject**

Let me begin this discussion by an examination of the Hobbesian subject, beginning with her mode of consciousness, how she knows what she knows. As already noted, in terms of the way the Hobbesian subject encounters the world around her, thinks and responds within her environment, she is explicitly and entirely heterogeneous. For Hobbes, even the most basic aspects of human consciousness are not the individual's *own* but rather come from her interaction with the outside world. As Hobbes famously states in the first chapter of *Leviathan*:

The cause of sense is the Externall Body, or Object, which presseth the organ proper to each sense, either immediately, as in the Tast and Touch; or mediately, as in Seeing, Hearing, and Smelling: which pressure, by the mediation of Nerves and other strings and membranes of the body, continued inwards to the Brain and Heart, causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or endeavour of the heart, to deliver itself: which endeavour, because *Outward*, seemeth to be some matter without. (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 1.4, p. 13).

From this passage, we already begin to see that the Hobbesian subject is the product of a Copernican shift during the Renaissance in thinking about human consciousness moving from a being who reaches outwards to discern the world to one who the world *presses* upon, producing sensations and serving as the origin of human thought.

From this basis, Hobbes proceeds methodically through imagination, which he likens to an afterimage in the mind (like the rolling of waves in the ocean long after the wind ceases) and memory, which is imagination over a period of time and finally to particular thoughts which themselves cannot exist (nor can the train of thoughts connecting them) without some original object to inspire it (including an object that has decayed over time and thus produces images in our mind of things that don't actually and literally exist).

One piece of evidence that our mental processes rely entirely on externality comes in Hobbes' discussion of dreams. He writes that:

Whereby the Imaginations there formerly made, appear as if a man were waking; saving that the Organs of Sense being now benumbed, so as there is no new object, which can master and obscure them with a more vigorous impression, a Dreame must needs be more cleare, in this silence of sense, than are our waking thoughts. (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 2.5, p. 17).

Here, we see that while we sleep, there are no external objects that present themselves to us. This leaves us to our own devices and makes us subject to internal "distemper[s]" (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 2.5, p. 17). And, while Hobbes tells us that dreams are "more cleare" than our waking thoughts, this clarity is not itself an indication of greater truth

or grounding in reality but its opposite. That is, left entirely to our own devices, our thoughts run luridly but erratically and are in themselves no basis for further thought nor are they well suited to the formation of reason. Hobbes goes on to say that:

And because waking I often observe the absurdity of Dreames, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking Thoughts, I am well satisfied that, being awake, I know I dreame not; though when I dreame, I think my selfe awake. (1651/1991a, 2.5, p. 17).

In this way, for Hobbes, the kind of thoughts created by internal processes (as opposed to external heterogeneous ones) lead to absurdity and falseness. Hobbes tells us that the ancients' failure to completely distinguish between dreams and waking is the reason that they held to so many superstitions and a belief in witchcraft, ideas that persisted into his own time and which he was highly critical of.

Crucially for my argument, for Hobbes, the *schools*, that is, the professions of academics in his day, reinforce this superstition in their ignorance of the workings of sense and imagination:

For (not knowing what Imagination, or the senses are), what they receive, they teach: some saying, that Imaginations rise of themselves, and have no cause; Others that they rise most commonly from the Will; and that Good thoughts are blown (inspired) into a man by God; and Evill thoughts, by the Divell; or that Good thoughts are powred (infused) into a man by God, and Evill ones by the Divell. (1651/1991a, 2.9, p. 19).

Here, we see a clear rejection both of autarkic thinking ("the Imaginations rise of themselves, and have no cause") and just as importantly of the thought, widely held by Puritans and, I will argue by extension, liberals themselves, that God "blows" or inspires thoughts into a person's mind. This doctrine turns the Holy Spirit into a material thing, a source of knowledge for human beings that bypasses the senses themselves and is, for Hobbes, an absurd and dangerous doctrine (one that I will get back to shortly in some detail).

In addition to relying upon actual objects in order to be able to conceive of something, for Hobbes, human thought requires a second

connection to external reality as well, namely personal experience in the world. He writes: "how much one man has more experience of things past than another; by so much also he is more Prudent, and his expectations the seldomer faile him" (1651/1991a, 3.7, p. 22). Yet, Hobbes also goes on to argue that even a great deal of experience is not in itself enough to make us perfect predictors of the future:

The *Present* onely has a being in Nature; things *Past* have a being in the memory onely; but things *to come* have no being at all, the *Future* being but a fiction of the mind, applying the sequels of actions Past to the actions that are Present; which with most certainty is done by him that has most Experience, but not with certainty enough. (1651/1991a, 3.7, p.22).

In this way, for Hobbes we remain completely dependent upon the exterior world in the end. We can never master it utterly, never know a thing truly but only conjecture and guess. He even says that "the best Prophet naturally is the best guesser," suggesting that even divine revelation doesn't give us full access to truth in the world (1651/1991a, 3.7, p.22).

Accordingly, Hobbes tells us:

Whatsoever we imagine is *Finite*. Therefore there is no Idea, or conception of anything we call *Infinite*. No man can have in his mind an Image of infinite magnitude; nor conceive infinite swiftness, infinite time, or infinite force, or infinite power. When we say anything is infinite, we signifie onely that we are not able to conceive the ends, and bounds of the thing named, having no Conception of the thing, but of our own inability. (1651/1991a, 3.12, p. 23).

It is true that for Hobbes we can reason better or worse. He gives plenty of evidence that he thinks that some are better at this form of mental arithmetic than others. Throughout his work, and perhaps in particular in sections devoted to human thought such as the first part of *Leviathan*, we see a tension in Hobbes between the claims to be able to scientifically know things (presumably including his own knowledge and his own science) and the fact that each of us reasons and thinks differently and that these variations produce not only errors but an

array of approximations of truth that are the best that we are capable of. Given the complexity and heterogeneity of human thought, for Hobbes we must learn to take into consideration the particular nature of the speaker as much as what he or she says or does:

For though the nature of that we conceive be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body and prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our different passions. And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words; which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such as are the names of Vertues and Vices: For one man calleth *Wisdome*, what another calleth *feare*; and one *cruelty*, what another *justice*; one *prodigality* what another *magnanimity*; and one *gravity* what another *stupidity*, &c. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination. (1651/1991a, 4.24, p. 31).

Thus, in this way, the Hobbesian subject thinks not so much for herself but as herself in relation to other persons and other things. One could call this contextually based or heterogeneous forms of thought. It reflects the ways in which thought is always embedded in a relationship to the external world, how even his much vaunted "morall and civill science" is itself a kind of highly educated guesswork (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 18.20, p. 129).

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### **Thinking, and reading, for ourselves**

For all of this, given the externally oriented origins of our every thought, Hobbes urges his readers to think for themselves. The very instability of our thinking process requires that each of us come to that process separately and individually:

For the errorrs of Definitions multiply themselves, according as the reckoning proceeds; and lead men into absurdities, which at last they see, but cannot avoyd, without reckoning anew from the beginning; in which lies the foundation of their errorrs. From whence it happens, that they which trust to books, do as they

that cast up many little sums into a greater, without considering whether those little sums into a greater, without considering whether those little summes were rightly cast up or not; and at last finding the error visible, and not mistrusting their first grounds, know not which way to cleere themselves; but spend time in fluttering over their bookes; as birds that entring by the chimney, and finding themselves enclosed in a chamber, flutter at the false light of a glasse window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in. (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 4.13, p. 28).

Throughout his writings, Hobbes will always protect and insist upon the right for each citizen to think, reason and interpret for herself. Each of us, regardless of our faculties, has the ability to reason (although Hobbes has somewhat disparaging things to say about people who lack certain senses, assuming they have a more limited engagement with the objects of the world). For all of his claims that the sovereign is the final judge of all things, Hobbes decentralizes both the ability to interpret as well as the necessity to do so. This is something I have argued at length about in a previous writing, a concept that is inherent in Hobbes' injunction to the reader in the Introduction to *Leviathan* to "Read thy self" (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, intro.3, p. 10 and Martel, 2007). While the sovereign form of interpretation may be seen as trumping all other readings (an argument I will revisit briefly later in this essay), Hobbes never compromises his understanding of interpretation as a widespread and individualized faculty.

Hobbes reinforces this idea of decentralized forms of interpretation in a much later writing, *Behemoth*, which came out posthumously. That book, which is an account of the English civil war, comes in the form of a dialogue with a schoolmaster (A) speaking to a student (B). The student asks at one point about the wisdom of having Scripture readily available in English for a widespread audience. Did this have a deleterious effect, B asks A, on the war? Did it allow the promiscuous spread of various modes of interpretation which aggravated the war and led to the demise of the monarchy and the Church of England? B asks:

If men be to learn their duty from the sentence which other men shall give concerning the meaning of the Scriptures, and not from their own interpretation, I understand not to what end they were translated into English, and every man not only permitted, but also exhorted to read them. For what could that produce, but diversity of opinion, and consequently (as man's nature is) disputation, breach of charity, disobedience, and at last rebellion? (Hobbes, 1681/1990, p. 52 [228]).

Although A affirms the need and requirement to follow the sovereign in all matters, he goes on say that:

There are so many places of Scripture easy to be understood, that teach both true faith and good morality [...] of which no seducer is able to dispossess the mind (of any ordinary readers), that the reading of them is so profitable as not to be forbidden without great damage to them and the commonwealth. (Hobbes, 1681/1990, p. 53 [230]).

This passage suggests the necessity of allowing widespread reading whatever the risk that such readings might pose to centralized modes of authority. Although this may seem to be in keeping with a later liberal doctrine of tolerance and multiple interpretations, as I will go on to argue, I do not think that this is the case because the liberal subject, as I'll show further, is not suspended in a social context that is the basis for her knowledge, nor is she required or asked to build up from the basics of sensory input the way the Hobbesian subject is asked to do. Most importantly of all, the liberal subject must do her own reasoning in the context of universal truths that are to some extent discernible to her in a way that they are not for Hobbes. Reflecting its own heritage from Puritan thought, liberal subjectivity reflects its embeddedness in a sense of a universal that brings with it many answers that are presupposed and predetermined reducing the variety of liberal interpretations to a quite narrow band.

Unlike the liberals that followed after him (temporally speaking), Hobbes refuses to allow for a universal that is in any way available to human actors, leaving them, once again very much to their own devices. He tells us at one point in *Leviathan* that "there [is] nothing in

the world Universall but Names” (Hobbes, 1651/1991a, 4.6, p. 26). In other words, the only categories that can be considered to be universal are ones of our own invention (and hence not truly universal). Without a broader and more determinant universal, the Hobbesian subject is forced to make choices and guesses, as we have already seen. She can (and often does) choose to simply follow the edicts of someone else but, as Hobbes, shows, this generally leads to her disempowerment, to her subjection to would-be tyrants who use their own supposed access to truth as a way to dominate and control them (and all for the bad).

This point has major political connotations. While formally Hobbes offers that the sovereign itself is something that must always be obeyed (just to keep us from killing one another) his own understanding of how human beings come to knowledge serves as a challenge to the untrammelled authority of sovereign authority. While liberalism requires a sovereign as a kind of spokesperson for the universal made manifest on earth (it is true that liberalism holds that any particular sovereign can be wrong and can be replaced but the absolute authority of the universal remains constant), Hobbes’ sovereign is as fallible as anyone else, perhaps more fallible because its formal connection to the external world is lessened by the sovereigns’ own exalted stature and lack of exposure to other sorts of people and things. In the absence of such ongoing and formative contact with the external world, the sovereign is more like a dreamer than a person who is awake. His or her thoughts may indeed be more vivid and more *clear*, but they are less of a response to the world around them and therefore more absurd, more inchoate, more internal and phantasmic.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize then, the Hobbesian subject is heterogeneous. She exists in a world where the universal is not readily available to human beings. She must learn how to learn, thinking and reasoning according to her own faculties and her own access to the objects and experiences that form the world outside of her own person. While in his insistence on people thinking and reasoning for themselves, we already see a refutation of Schmitt’s reading of Hobbes as endorsing conservatism and even fascism, we can also begin to see more clearly how Hobbes’

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<sup>1</sup> *Subverting the Leviathan* makes a different version of this same point in much more detail (Martel, 2007).

subject diverges from liberal forms of subjectivity as well. In order to contrast Hobbes and liberalism more clearly, let me first discuss the contrast between Hobbes and Puritans (who would be the progenitors of liberalism via Locke who came from their own ranks) in terms of the question of the Holy Spirit and individual forms of interpretation before moving on to a consider the liberal subject herself.

### The Holy Spirit

I begin this discussion with reference to the Holy Spirit because this figure was a key basis of Puritan thought, with critical political implications about interpretation and thought both in Hobbes' lifetime and ever since. Looking at the distinction between how Hobbes and the Puritans respectively thought about this figure is a helpful way to see how Hobbes' own political theory and that of liberalism (and especially Lockean liberalism) take tremendously divergent paths.

Puritan and Quaker thought (which are related to each other but are not exactly the same thing) emphasize the way that the Holy Spirit is a force that inspires human beings in all of their diversity and plurality. Critically, for Puritans, the Holy Spirit was understood as an interpretive spirit, something that allowed them to understand (and in a collective way) the meaning of sacred texts. The Puritans were hardly uniform on this doctrine but rather formed a kind of continuum on the question of the Holy Spirit. They ranged from those mystics who thought that human reason could only get in the way of divine inspiration to those who thought reason and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were in direct parallel (and closer to the doctrine of John Locke in that regard). At the more radical end of things you get considerations like this one from John Owen:

There is no need of Traditions, [...] no need of the Authority of any Churches [...] A Church may beare up the light, it is not the light. It beares witness to it, but kindles not one divine beame to further its discovery. (Nuttall, 1947, pp. 43-44).

Sentiments such as these are in direct contrast to the Catholic doctrine (and, depending on which source you are considering, Anglican thought as well) wherein subjects of the church were expected

to follow church teachings without question. For the Catholics especially (at least in one, more conservative and orthodox wing of the church) it was the church that did the interpreting for each subject; the subjects' role was simply to accept and obey.

Although, once again, Hobbes and the Puritans seem to share a propensity to insist on separate and individual interpretations of Scripture, Hobbes' version strips away any and all supernatural elements (far more than even the most moderate Puritan), leaving his subject, once again, very much on her own. Unlike the Puritans, for Hobbes, the Holy Spirit is a purely and entirely metaphorical force. For Hobbes, the Holy Spirit is the Trinitarian figure that corresponds to our own time. He tells us that God "the Father" corresponds to Moses and the early "Kingdom of God" when God was the King of Ancient Israel. The notion of God "the Son" corresponds to Jesus Christ and the future Kingdom that he will lead. In between these moments we find our town time, bereft of divine leadership and requiring human beings to figure out things on their own.

Given the tendency for human actors to turn to the Holy Spirit for answers in a time when God is largely (otherwise) silent, Hobbes seeks to make this figure unavailable for such rescues. Hobbes clearly strips the Holy Spirit as a figure of any real truth making abilities when he writes:

To say God spake or appeared as he is in his own nature, is to deny his Infiniteness, Invisibility, Incomprehensibility. To say he spake by Inspiration, or Infusion of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit signifieth the Deity, is to make Moses equall with Christ, in whom onely the Godhead [...] dwelleth bodily. And lastly, to say he spake by the Holy Spirit, as it signifieth the graces, or gifts of the Holy Spirit, is to attribute nothing to him supernaturall. For God disposeth men to Piety, Justice, Mercy, Truth, Faith, and all manner for Vertue, both Morall, and Intellectuall, by doctrine, example, and by severall occasions naturall and ordinary. (1651/1991a, 36.13, p. 295).

Thus, as is perhaps appropriate for a time devoid of God's direct (or even indirect) rule, the period of the Holy Spirit for Hobbes is one

marked by a radical aporia in terms of our connection to truth. Hobbes invariably treats the Holy Spirit as it is depicted in Scripture as a metaphor only so that when, for example, it says that certain people were filled with the Holy Spirit, that it means only a "Zeal to doe the work for which hee was sent by God the Father [...]" (1651/1991a, 34.14, p. 273). Here, the Holy Spirit offers no special power of its own, or if it does have any power (because Hobbes also connects this figure to the *person* of the church in our time) such a power is still limited and fallible, an entirely human affair.

For Hobbes, the Holy Spirit represents an aporia in God's universe, a space within which human beings can reason and think on their own (once again, the church may offer its own guidance but church ministers, like the rest of us, have to make best guesses about the correct decisions to make vis a vis Scripture).<sup>2</sup>

In a critical passage on this matter, Hobbes writes:

Whereas there be, that pretend Divine Inspiration, to be a supernaturall entering of the Holy Ghost into a man, and not an acquisition of Gods grace, by doctrine, and study; I think they are in a very dangerous Dilemma. For if they worship not the men whom they believe to be so inspired, they fall into Impiety; as not adoring Gods supernaturall Presence. And again, if they worship them, they commit Idolatry; for the Apostles would never permit themselves to be so worshipped. Therefore the safest way is to beleve, that by the Descending of the Dove upon the Apostles; and by Christs Breathing on them, when hee gave them the Holy Ghost; and by the giving of the Imposition of Hands, are understood the signes which God hath been pleased to use, or ordain to bee used, of his promise to assist those persons in their study to Preach his Kingdome,

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the reasons why Hobbes may have chosen to argue that the political sovereign should also be in charge of Church liturgy. Since the clergy are not necessarily in any better position than the king to make judgments about Christian doctrine and practices, it made sense, he thought to locate such decisions in the hands of the sovereign, a figure who is more evidently and unproblematically arbitrary (as opposed to the clergy who, in claiming to speak for God, may and in his life time did enflame their parishoners with talk of supernatural powers and miraculous forces).

and in their Conversation, that it might not be Scandalous, but Edifying to others. (1651/1991a, 45.25. p. 451).

In this way, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (a term Hobbes prefers to Holy Ghost insofar as the later is more conducive to be taken literally) is nothing but a sign of God's grace, a metaphor that describes how each of us must engage in "doctrine and study" to know or at least guess at the meaning of the passages in question. Although "only" a metaphor, the Holy Spirit as a figure suggests that the power to interpret and to read (i.e. *Read thy self*) can never be, nor should ever be, taken away from the community as a whole.

While, like all of Hobbes' gestures towards the decentralization and wide distribution of thinking, reasoning and judging, there is an inherent risk in turning things over to human actors in all of their multitude, Hobbes once again protects such moves and even gives them the (empty) figure of the Holy Spirit as a way to preserve and keep that interpretive space. Here again, we can see that as opposed to the Puritan/liberal universal, Hobbes gives us an anti-universal, a space that is undetermined by exterior, supernatural forces (including secularized versions of that supernatural force such as ideas about *nature*).

### From Puritanism to Locke

Locke's own connection to Puritan thought is well established.<sup>3</sup> He came from a Puritan family and remained an admirer of Puritan thought. It is not however correct to say that Locke was a Puritan and leave it at that. For one thing, as already noted, Puritanism itself was an immensely diverse set of phenomena and Locke came from its more moderate wing. In addition, the political and social mood of England had changed dramatically from the heyday of the English Civil War to the time when Locke did most of his political and theological writing. In many ways, in serving as one of the key thinkers of and apologists for the Glorious Revolution, Locke continued to fight for Puritan causes but he did so in a way and mode that reflected the changes that had and would continue to radically change England's political landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Locke and his politics and Puritan influences see for example, Dunn, 1969 and Ashcraft, 1986.

One of the key things that distinguishes Locke not only from many previous Puritan thinkers but also from Richard Hooker, who, although nominally an Anglican, was a major source of Locke's political vision, is Locke's belief that the age of miracles were long past. At first glance, this suggests a connection to Hobbes once again because the latter also rejected all forms of divine revelation in a contemporary context. Yet even here there is a contrast because, whereas for Hobbes a miracle is relative, depending on who observes it (reflecting his ongoing insistence on individual judgment and interpretation) Locke, on the other hand argues that God only makes miracles which are perceivable as being *true* by any reasonable person (Locke, 1695/1958, p. 97). In this way, we can already see how we are involved in a world where we have access, however limited and however secular the connection (in liberal iterations after Locke himself), to the universal.

In his commentary on this point, Locke writes that:

God, I believe, speaks differently from Men, because he speaks with more Truth, more Certainty: but when he vouchsafes to speak to Men, I don not think he speaks differently from them, in cross the Rules of language in use amongst them. (1689/1965, p. 173).

In this way, whereas Hobbes makes a firm separation between God and human forms of knowledge, Locke lessens that contrast by offering that all communications aimed towards human beings by God (what could be considered to be the provenance of the Holy Spirit) are available to reason. In this way, reason is not so much groping blindly in the dark (as it is for Hobbes) but is rather a parallel form of knowledge that is readily aligned to what God chooses to tell us. In this way too, the *passing* of the age of miracles is far less critical for Locke than it is for Hobbes because the world of secular reason itself corresponds quite closely to God's created world.

In terms of the ability to reason, Locke also distinguishes himself from Hobbes by making reason something which, if widely available to human actors, still manifests itself mainly in those with a superior class position. Thus, in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke writes:

The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for demonstration, nor can carry a train of proofs [...]. Hearing

plain commands, is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe. And I ask, whether one coming from heaven in the power of God, in full and clear evidence and demonstration of miracles, giving plain and direct rules of morality and obedience, be not likelier to enlighten the bulk of mankind [...] than by reasoning with them from general notions and principles of human reason? (1695/1958, p. 66).

While it is certainly true that for Hobbes as well as for Locke there are better and worse utilizers of reason, we have already seen Hobbes defend the reason of the non-elites exactly because he does not believe in a common pool of truths (the universal) that can be drawn upon. In this way, Hobbes evinces a lot more anxiety than Locke will that the learned too may make mistakes since theirs are only guesses and are colored by their own passions and contexts. In a way, the widespread dissemination of learning I referred to earlier serves for Hobbes as a kind of check on the dangers of bad decisions by elites (perhaps even the elite leadership of the sovereign itself), whereas for Locke there is no need for such a check. Reason is its own proof, its own form of sanctity (and its own form of safeguard against a tyrannical king).

In writings like his *Essay on Human Understanding* and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, Locke reveals the degree to which reason is something far more collective and externalized than one would originally presume for one of the founders of modern liberal thought with its emphasis on individualism. Whereas for Hobbes, as already noted, truth (or at least our approximation of it) is a response to our encounter with objects, for Locke, such encounters are mainly a form of means testing of the higher conceptual categories to which these objects belong. Thus Locke writes in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

This whole mystery of genera and species, which make such a noise in the schools [notice Locke shares Hobbes' antipathy for much of mainstream academia of his day] and are with justice so little regarded out of them, is nothing else but *abstract ideas*, more or less comprehensive, with names annexed to them. In all which this is constant and unvariable, That every more general

term stands for such an idea, and is but a part of any of those contained under it. (1689/1959, p. 19).

Given that for Locke reason involves the development of higher faculties than many of us possess, there is clearly (as there is not with Hobbes) an element of class, gender and racial domination in Locke that is critical for the good operations of reason. Thus, in the *Conduct of the Understanding*, Locke writes: "every man carries about him a touchstone [i.e. reason itself], if he will make use of it, to distinguish substantial gold from superficial glitterings, truth from appearances" (1706/1908, p.31). Locke goes on to write that: "The want of exercising [reason] in the full extent of things intelligible, is that which weakens and extinguishes this noble faculty in us" (1706/1908, p. 31).

Accordingly, Locke requires an elaborate social network to ensure that *some* members of society can reason on behalf of everyone else (something that is safe to do because Locke expects such persons to actually reason well and in accordance with nature and God's will).<sup>4</sup> Locke also writes that: "[the obtaining of reason in those who don't have the background or training for it] will not be done without industry and application [...] and therefore, very seldom done" (1689/1959, p. 43).

Furthermore, since he tells us that "knowledge and science in general is the business only of those who are at ease and leisure", we end up with a de facto hierarchy based on the calculations of reason itself (1689/1959, p. 46):

The Americans [i.e. Native Americans] are not all born with worse understandings than the Europeans, though we see none of them have such reaches in the arts and sciences. And among the children of a poor countryman, the lucky chance of education, and getting into the world, gives one infinitely the superiority in parts over the rest, who continuing at home had continued also just of the same size with his brethren. (Locke, 1689/1959, p. 43).

Thus, for Locke (as for liberals more generally) it is not technically impossible for a poor or working class person to raise their station in life but it is highly unlikely to the point of being politically and socially meaningless. Because Locke subjects human actors to an

<sup>4</sup> I discuss this process in much greater detail in Martel, 2001.

absolute yardstick where they can be judged to be higher and lower in terms of their reasoning abilities, there is little to no cause for him to protect or respect the interpretive authority of the lower classes. In more contemporary forms of liberalism, of course there has been a greater attention and lip service to a more widespread form of participation in collective forms of reasoning but insofar as the liberal universal remains, we are ranked from lowest to highest according to our conformity to or distance from its standards (as discerned and measured by the elites themselves). Perhaps the most important liberal innovation since Locke's time is the increased possibility of changing social status (but this is already possible in Locke's own theory which insisted both on the possibility of a person of low ranking rising above her status as well as the possibility of a person of high rank falling into dissolution, as relatively rare as both of these events might be). In this case, it may be less important to ask who is on top and who is on the bottom of the social and political hierarchy than the fact that *someone* is on top (what we now call the 1%) and *someone else* (most people, in fact) are on the bottom. The liberal universal, which formally makes us all equal and individuals, is precisely what reduces both that equality and that individuality to the point where other considerations (especially considerations of class, race and gender) are politically and socially far more important in terms of their effects on how lives are actually lived and experienced. This is why I have argued that for all its talk of individualism, liberalism, unlike Hobbesian thought, does not really give us individualism at all, or if it does, it is a peculiar sort of individualism, available only to elites and even then according to a very narrow range of options as determined by the liberal universal.

### **Hobbes and Schmittian individualism**

Before moving onto a conclusion about liberal individualism and the ways that Hobbes diverges from it, let me briefly explore the way Carl Schmitt thinks about liberalism in order to attempt to dispel the idea that even if Hobbes's theory of individualism isn't liberal, it could still be aligned with a more reactionary form of politics. After all, the current right wing in the United States of America and elsewhere is fascinated by visions of radical individualism as promoted by authors

such as Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand. If Hobbes offers us an illiberal individualism, must it therefore be the same kind that right wing thinkers are calling for (and perhaps Schmitt's version in particular)?

I seek to dispel this idea by noting that the radical individualism that we see in Schmitt is almost always set against the masses. His arguments against anarchism come down to the fact that even the anarchist must "decide against the decision" (1985, p. 66). In other words, anarchists cannot avoid the basic fact that politics itself is based on an existential distinction between friends and enemies and that, therefore, the decision as to where to draw the boundaries of politics cannot be avoided. Even to "decide against the decision" turns out not to really be a decision at all insofar as it means to become "in theory the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of the antidictatorship" (Schmitt, 1985, p.66). Decision is for Schmitt not a solitary act but one that involves everyone (and in a deadly serious way) and for this reason, it must be singular, leading to Schmitt's famous line that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (1985, p. 5). The kinds of collective and ongoing decisions that Hobbes calls for and protects stand in great contrast to the solitary and elite level decision that for Schmitt is the heart of politics.

Paradoxically, Schmitt bases at least some of his own reading on the work of Hobbes himself. For Schmitt, Hobbes exposes the lie of *political theology* that the secular world, as opposed to the theological order that it replaces, relies upon. Whereas the theological polity of earlier Christendom held the miracle to be a site of permanent possible exception, Schmitt tells us that the later secular order formally "reject[s] the exception in every form" (1985, p. 37). Hobbes is the thinker, for Schmitt, who reveals how this turn against the exception disguises the way that the exception is all the more embedded in the modern secular states' most central tenets, disguised by the supposed break that has been made from religion.

Yet, Schmitt's evaluation of Hobbes' break from religion is not always laudatory. He tells us that in the parallel he produces between the Immortal God and the Mortal God of the Leviathan, Hobbes has produced a "confusion" (Schmitt, 1985, p. 48) insufficiently separating the two kinds of Gods in ways that dispel some of the clarity Hobbes

otherwise provides. I would argue that this is no small point but actually indicates the way that Hobbes and Schmitt are quite far apart in terms of their respective thinking about individualism and its relationship to the social. In *De Cive*, Hobbes describes how during the “Kingdom of God,” when God was king of Ancient Israel, prophecies episodically erupted into the political and social order. As Hobbes depicts them, and in keeping with the way he values varied and collective forms of interpretations, these messianic interruptions were a good thing insofar as they allowed the people to decide for themselves if any given prophet spoke for God or not, thus giving them a chance to challenge what otherwise amounted to the theocratic rule of the Levite priests. He writes that:

Others did judge of the prophets, whether they were to be held for true or not. For to what end did God give signs and tokens to all the people, whereby the true prophets might be discerned from the false; namely the, the event of predictions, and the conformity with the religion established by Moses; if they might not use those marks? (Hobbes, 1642/1991b, 16.16, p. 325).

Even when the era of human kings begins (and the Kingdom of God thus ends), inaugurated by King Saul, Hobbes does not condemn the way these eruptions violated kingly sovereignty. Hobbes states that: “the civil power therefore, and the power of discerning God’s word from the words of men, and of interpreting God’s word even in the days of the kings, was wholly belonging to [prophets, among others]” (1642/1991b, 16.16, p. 326).

Insofar as the power of prophecy continued to rely on the people’s judgment (there was an ongoing stream of prophets deemed to be false as well as true), in effect this means that the people’s power to judge is not eliminated by its coexistence with sovereignty. Of course, Hobbes saw himself as living in an age (presumably our age as well) when prophecy was silent (much more silent than it is for Locke for whom the created world remains discernible by human reason) so this particular challenge to sovereign authority is no longer germane. And yet we see, by analogy at least, that any popular and collective set of decisions can

survive its coexistence with human sovereignty and perhaps even rise to the level of challenging that source of authority.

Thus, when Schmitt considers Hobbes' excessive mingling (or at least insufficient separation) of the mortal and the immortal Gods, he may be referencing, at least obliquely, the way that Hobbes would not take this alternative and collective form of interpretive power, nor the challenge it poses to the one true individual in Schmitt's system (the dictator), away. What appears at first to be a minor theological discrepancy may in fact reveal a way that Hobbes is insufficiently interested in one individual at the expense (or in the command of) everyone else. Thus, just as he differs from liberal individualism in his insistence that each person reasons separately and in conjunction, so too against the Schmittian model, Hobbes insists on individual thought adhering to each and every individual. As a collective these individuals serve, not to constitute the largely passive categories of political friends or enemies that Schmitt's super individual seeks to rule and/or fight, but rather constitute a collectivity that retains the right to make its own decisions—so that we can speak of decisions and not just *the* decision for Hobbes—and have those decisions come directly out of its communal and collective (but still very much individual) patterns of thought and reasoning.

### Conclusion

Having shown the contrast between Hobbes and Locke, as well as between Hobbes and Schmitt, I want to now reiterate my arguments about why we should not consider Hobbes to be either a proto-liberal, (as countless liberals argue), nor a conservative foe of decentralized politics (as Schmitt argues). As I noted much earlier in this essay, one of the key contrasts between Hobbes and liberalism lies in the respective forms of identity and reason that Hobbes and Locke respectively subscribe to. Whereas the Hobbesian subject is heterogeneous in terms of the way her experience and thoughts are shaped via the collective processes that lead to her judgments and decisions, she is also separate—an individual thinker—as regards her own interpretation and judgment of her context. For Locke—and by extension for liberalism more generally—by contrast,

the subject is deemed autonomous in the way that she thinks (although, as I have argued, that autonomy is gravely compromised by the mass infusion of commonality from singular external figures such as the Holy Spirit and its later iterations), even as in her actual and personal thought processes, she is left utterly alone, cut off at the knees by recourse to a universal that is always and already true, and against which her own thoughts will be judged and ranked. This, I would say, is not really individualism at all but rather is a kind of collective process in which each person is set in her place (up or down the hierarchical ladder) and then told that she is radically on her own and solely responsible for her own fate and actions, even when such responsibility is already rendered impossible. In this way, I see the Schmittian version and the liberal version as being much closer to one another than either is to Hobbes own theory in that both systems instill mass passivity on the part of the vast majority of subjects, even as both systems claim to speak on behalf of the individual. In both cases, individualism is either a myth or a status that only adheres to a very few (in liberalism) or one (for Schmitt) even as it is deeply entangled with those below the social and political hierarchy that *individual* stands upon.

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It is in this way, whereas Locke requires an elaborate social network to sustain the reason of a few elite individuals (who can then reason on behalf of everyone else), and Schmitt calls for a dictator to “decide upon the exception” (basically himself), Hobbes offers no such social model. It is true that Hobbes would submit us to a sovereign whose rule we must accept without question but as liberal thinkers are quick to point out, this requirement lies in tension with Hobbes’ individualism. I agree with that point but then go on to say that liberalism itself — what follows from Locke onward— is, as already noted, not actually individualism at all but a system that manufactures macro individuals who contain a supportive cast of women, servants, children and slaves and who exist in relation to some set or body of universal truths that these subjects must work out and apply in their own communities.

It is Hobbes’ careful exposition of the basis for reason and judgment, something that each of us can partake in for better or for worse, that offers a basis for radical individualism even as Hobbes’ considerations of how we know and think seems to demand a web of

social interactivity that connects us together and in ways that do not necessarily mandate hierarchies and other forms of domination. Hobbes is celebrated for stating that any human relationship based on domination, whether that of parenthood, slavery, gender or other relationships of this sort are not *natural* at all but purely political and therefore entirely subject to change. Locke and liberals to this day frequently turn to nature as a way to cover over the social hierarchies that he (and they) require to sustain his/their own vision of reason. And Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction reinforces the question of who is *in* and who is *out* as well (including enemies that might exist within a polity and not just outside of its borders).

It is true that Hobbes is famous for coming up with an entire set of natural laws but I would argue that by his own precepts, there is nothing natural about his understanding of natural law. By putting the human experience and interpretation of the external world at the center of his thought, Hobbes has put nature into question. Rather than relying on nature as Locke does as an absolute basis for knowledge (an extension of God's will that human's can understand divine principles), Hobbes complicates and possibly even subverts nature by making such truths inaccessible, just as he complicates and subverts the idea of sovereign political authority. Whereas a Lockean system requires a sovereign, even if they can be replaced from time to time should they fail to evince the reason that is the true guardian of the community, the Hobbesian system sets sovereign rule at odds with the widespread forms of interpretation that Hobbes insists upon at any costs. And whereas Schmitt grants the sovereign the absolute authority that he sees Hobbes granting this figure as well, we see in his complaint that Hobbes *confuses* the sovereign with God, an indication that Hobbes' sovereign is never as absolute and never as unchallenged as Schmitt portrays him to be.

This is not to say that Hobbes is perfect while liberalism is utterly false (I'd only be comfortable with the second half of that sentence) or that he has no streak of the authoritarian in him as Schmitt suggests. It may well be that if Hobbes were reincarnated on the spot and read this paper, he'd express some (maybe even a great deal of) chagrin at being associated with radical leftism (although you never know with Hobbes;

his own frequent and loud claims of political and theological orthodoxy were not widely subscribed to in his lifetime and he was called everything from an atheist to an anarchist by his contemporaries). Yet the nature of his individualism, the way we think and reason and judge, has consequences that are not readily squared either with the right wing Hobbes that Schmitt espies or the proto-liberalism that contemporary liberals ascribe to him. Whether as a consequence of a logical clash between his theory of thought and judgment on the one hand and his formal stated political vision on the other, or the result of a deliberate attempt to disguise radical thought in the pose of orthodoxy, Hobbes offers us a vision of the human actor that shows us what individualism might really look like, in contrast to the liberal vision which promises much but delivers less than nothing and the Schmittian version which doesn't even bother with such promises.

For these reasons, when it comes to questions of individualism, I would align Hobbes, however improbably it may seem, not with Locke or Schmitt, but with thinkers from the far left like Walter Benjamin (1996) and Jacques Derrida (1992), as well as with Friedrich Nietzsche (1995)(who perhaps cannot be perfectly claimed by any political position due to the complexity and vastness of his thought). Perhaps this can be seen most clearly in considering a statement that Benjamin makes in the "Critique of Violence" where he says that when faced with an argument even as clear as the Biblical Commandment "Thou Shalt not Kill" we do not give up on the requirement of interpretation. As Benjamin puts it:

Neither divine judgment nor the grounds for this judgment can be known in advance. Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it. (1986, p. 250).

Here, we see something very similar to what Hobbes himself has to offer, a form of individualism that has no clear and absolute guidance from any source (not from the universal, not even necessarily from

God). As such, commandments and laws serve not as absolute anchors that determine our own response but just as Benjamin writes "guideline[s]" that we must struggle with individually and collectively. Like Hobbes, Benjamin leaves us effectively to our own devices even as he recognizes that even if we are reasoning alone, we always do so in a context of mutual implications, entanglements and overlaps of judgment and authority. This kind of individualism, which I would equate to radical anarchism, is not eclipsed by sovereign authority but rather exists alongside it, sometimes retreating and sometimes advancing in its face but never disappearing entirely.

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