

The ghost of Thomas Hobbes

Ann Talbot
12 May 2010

It is said by the locals that the ghost of Thomas Hobbes can be heard grumbling to himself and singing out of key as he walks along the lower terrace of Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, where he died in 1679 at the age of 91. It is a hard and undignified fate for a convinced materialist who denied the existence of all boggarts, goblins and sprites, to be posthumously converted into an immaterial spirit, but Hobbes's reputation has suffered worse indignities at the hands of posterity. An article by Corey Robin in the *Nation* last year lined up Hobbes alongside the Italian Futurists and Friedrich Nietzsche as a "blender of cultural modernism and political reaction". [1]

Robin teaches political science at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). He is the author of *Fear: the History of a Political Idea*, [2] which aims to cover topics as diverse as the fear of Communism during the Cold War, the fear among black Americans of the police, white fears of black revolt under segregation, the fear a woman feels towards her abusive husband, or an employee might feel towards an employer. Robin self-consciously identifies with the sense of panic that afflicted sections of the American intelligentsia after 9/11.

Robin's *Nation* article purports to be a review of Quentin Skinner's *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, [3] but the points of contact with the book are slight to nonexistent. It is really a vehicle for his "fear" theme. For Robin, Hobbes is one of the great purveyors of fear in the modern era. Hobbes used to say that he and fear were born twins, so he would seem to be the ideal figure for Robin's purposes.

Hobbes, in point of fact, had a good deal to be afraid of, since most of his adult life was dominated by the Thirty Years War, which was the bloodiest European war until the twentieth century. An estimated 30 percent of the population of what is now Germany was killed. Neighbouring France was rent by the Fronde, and, in the 1640s, two civil wars consumed England, Scotland and Ireland. As if that were not enough for one lifetime, Hobbes was born in 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada. His mother was said to have given birth to him prematurely when she heard that the invasion fleet had already arrived. That was what he meant by saying fear was his twin.

This endemic European war was the basis of Hobbes's famous view of the state of nature expressed in chapter 13 of *Leviathan* where he describes the life of man in a state of nature as "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short." The state of nature was the condition into which human society fell when civil society broke down. For Hobbes, the state of nature was not an abstract, theoretical construct, it was something that existed in large parts of Europe and could cause him to alter his travel plans.

Hobbes's response to these very real causes of fear was to attempt to construct a scientific and materialist theory of politics that was revolutionary in its implications and was to reverberate through the Enlightenment. Robin's response to his fears is to attack the Enlightenment and one of its early representatives—Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes, Robin argues, recognised that the theory that the king ruled with absolute power by divine right had become obsolete and set out to craft a counter-revolutionary theory that took into account the role of the people. He aimed to make the people "actors without roles, an audience that believes it is on stage." The key to Hobbes's strategy, according to Robin, was his materialism, his denial of free will and his insistence on determinism.

The result is that, Robin claims, Hobbes has become the inspiration for everyone from Pinochet to Margaret Thatcher and the current Democratic Party in the US. It is Hobbes who is preventing us from "enjoying a fuller freedom." Robin writes, "And though it may scandalize the *bien-pensant* of the center-left to hear this, their soft liberalism owes a good deal more to the spirit of Hobbesian counterrevolution than they realize."

In short, if Americans do not enjoy free public health care today, it is Thomas Hobbes they have to blame for it. Robin's article is entirely consistent with the attempt of the *Nation* to obscure Obama's prostration in front of the financial elite and their own willingness to follow the president in his right-wing trajectory. The problem according to Robin is not that Obama is serving the interests of Wall Street, but that he has read too much of the counter-revolutionary Hobbes. No doubt Obama read a little Hobbes at college or high school, as most American students do, but his right-wing agenda cannot be traced to that source.

If the ghost of Thomas Hobbes were to board an airplane and head across the Atlantic, he would surely point out to Robin that men's politics are determined by their class interests, because that was the lesson that he had learned through hard experience by the time he came to write *Leviathan*. Hobbes would recognise in Obama a man whose political actions are determined in the most blatant way by the interests of the financial oligarchy.

And what would Robin do if the ghost of Thomas Hobbes came knocking on his door? He would certainly consign him to one of the inner circles of hell, because Hobbes the materialist, Hobbes the determinist, certainly belongs at the very least in a rogues' gallery of evil Enlightenment figures for academics like Robin who derive their arguments, at several removes, from the theories associated with the Frankfurt School. The diverse and often antagonistic trends in twentieth century thought that spring from the Frankfurt School are often regarded as some form of Marxism, but they owe more to nineteenth century German irrationalism. They were taken up by the radical left in the postwar period and influenced the ensuing waves of postmodern, poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought in more recent years. What is common to them is the desire to trace back all the ills of modern capitalism to the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, to rational thought, to materialism and most of all to determinism.

These irrational anti-Enlightenment traditions of thought are entirely foreign to the ideas of Marx and Engels. Writing of the Renaissance and

Scientific Revolution, Engels described the period as “a time which called for giants and produced giants—giants in power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning.” [4] Thomas Hobbes would certainly qualify as one of those giants.

Hobbes was born in 1588 near Malmesbury in Wiltshire. He was educated at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, a heavily Calvinist establishment, where he rejected the traditional Aristotelian curriculum of the University. He preferred travel literature, maps, atlases and astronomy. Many of the faculty probably shared young Hobbes’s outlook. In 1608, Hobbes graduated BA and became the tutor of William Cavendish, the heir of Baron Cavendish of Hardwick. It was a position that gave Hobbes access to an extensive and growing library of books that were essential to the new learning and the opportunity to travel on the continent. He visited Rome and Venice, where he met Paolo Sarpi, the friend and patron of Galileo. Sarpi had survived a papal assassination attempt in 1607 and was suspected of Protestant sympathies, even materialism and atheism. Hobbes and Cavendish maintained a correspondence with Sarpi’s assistant Fulgenzio Micanzio for the next 13 years. [5] It was Sarpi who first told Galileo about the use of telescopes in the Netherlands and the two corresponded on many scientific subjects. [6]

Hobbes was a very much an international scholar. He made a second tour of the continent in 1629 as tutor to Gervase Clifton, taking in Geneva and Paris. It was in Geneva that he said he first encountered Euclid’s *Elements* and was delighted by the method of reasoning deductively from axioms. A third trip to Europe with the young third earl of Devonshire in 1635-1636 may have allowed Hobbes to meet Galileo in person. But whether or not he met the latter, Hobbes had already read his *Dialogo*, and his work reflects the same philosophical concerns that he would in any case have encountered through his contact with Marin Mersenne.

Mersenne publicised Galileo’s work through his network of correspondents and among those who met in his cell at the Place Royale monastery in Paris. Among his visitors and correspondents were Galileo, Gassendi, Descartes, Huygens, Fermat and Pascal. It was from the period of his association with Mersenne that Hobbes came to be considered a philosopher. He and Descartes regarded one another with a wary mutual respect. Hobbes was now part of the international republic of letters that was at the heart of the Scientific Revolution and gave intellectual impetus to the Enlightenment.

Through the Cavendish family, Hobbes came into contact with another of the great intellectual figures of the period—Francis Bacon. He is thought to have served as a secretary to Bacon at some point, probably after Bacon’s fall from office in 1621, but he knew him from at least 1616. Bacon’s family, like that of Hobbes, and indeed that of the philosopher John Locke, was an example of the social mobility operating in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. [7]

Bacon’s grandfather was a Suffolk yeoman and sheep reave who sent his son Nicholas to university, enabling him to become a lawyer. Locke’s grandfather was a West Country clothier. Hobbes’s father was a clergyman with, it seems, no university education, but many of his family were clothiers, gloves and alehouse keepers in and around the town of Malmesbury. Hobbes’s elder brother, Edmund, went into the wool trade. Social mobility was not a one-way process. If it was possible to rise in the social hierarchy, it was also possible to fall, often disastrously. Bacon fell from the highest office in the land. Hobbes’s father ended his career when he was forced to flee the district after a fight with a neighbouring minister in the churchyard. He was already known for his drinking and gambling and seems to have spent more time in the local alehouse than in his pulpit.

The Hobbeses and the Bacons and Lockes are recognisably bourgeois. Yet it is a long stretch from the striving, brawling, rambunctious bourgeois that Hobbes sprang from to the financial oligarchy that run the capitalist world today. Only if we discount the material basis of people’s ideas is it possible to argue that Hobbes’s philosophy represents the

ideological basis of present-day capitalism. The capitalism of his own day was very different from the capitalism that came into being with the Industrial Revolution and far removed from anything a Wall Street financier would recognise in the twenty-first century. The market place at Malmesbury was not Wall Street, nor was it even Manchester.

The Protestant Reformation gave some of this class the opportunity to profit from the sale of monastic lands. It was in this period that the Cotswold sheep with its long staple wool became the basis for a cloth trade rather than just the export of raw wool. Substantial clothiers emerged, but small independent and semi-independent weavers and clothmen survived. There were frequent petitions against the wool jobbers and broggers who sold yarn to the weavers on credit and could build up a monopoly control, some of them signed by Hobbeses. Looms might be brought together in workshops, but this did not go far, and such workshops often represented a family work force.

There was no great advantage in a factory system because weaving and spinning were still done by hand. When mills are mentioned, they are fulling mills and gig mills for finishing the cloth. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the industry began to be mechanised with the introduction of carding machines and spinning jennies. A small factory with flying-shuttle looms was set up in Malmesbury in 1790, but domestic manufacture was still profitable and actually increased during the French Revolutionary Wars.

Most of the Cotswolds cloth went to London from where it was exported. The Thirty Years War produced a crisis for this trade as markets on the continent were disrupted and many clothiers went out of business. The Civil War disrupted the cloth trade even further with Malmesbury sitting uncomfortably between Royalist Oxford and Parliamentary Bristol. What Hobsbawm described as the general crisis of the seventeenth century hit Hobbes’s home town hard. [8] Hobbes’s view of the state reflects the unsettled conditions in which he lived. He thought the state should protect its citizens from foreign invasion and ensure civil harmony so that its citizens could go about their business in peace.

To some degree, Hobbes’s attitude to the state reflects a situation in which the bourgeoisie still needed to shelter under the wing of the monarch because capitalist social relations did not yet dominate society. As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, the bourgeoisie of the manufacturing period were a class that served “the semi-feudal or the absolute monarchy as a counterpoise against the nobility, and, in fact, cornerstone of the great monarchies in general”. [9] Men such as Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell and Thomas More, played that role for Henry VIII, as Nicholas Bacon was to do for Elizabeth and Francis Bacon for James I.

Hobbes was already 52 years old when he wrote his first statement of political theory in 1640—the *Elements of Law, Natural and Political*. He was 63 when *Leviathan* was published. Few of his contemporaries survived to such an age. He was a man of immense vitality, who was still playing tennis at 75, and writing love poems in his nineties and who, at 6 foot tall, towered over his contemporaries. His vitality is as distinctive of the man as his philosophy and gives to that philosophy an unusual depth of historical experience. Locke, Leibniz, Hume and Hegel all took Hobbes seriously. Hegel wrote of *De Cive* and *Leviathan*: “Both works contain sounder reflections on the nature of society and government than many now in circulation.” [10]

The careers of Bacon, Hobbes and Locke all show the importance of patronage and of the proximity of their patron to the monarch. Hobbes depended on the Cavendish family, both its Devonshire and Newcastle branches, and while he was paid a salary the relationship went far beyond cash. The bond between patron and client entailed loyalty on both sides. When, in the final weeks of his life, Hobbes was carried on a feather bed as the family moved from Chatsworth to Hardwick, which they did periodically when the drains began to smell, the relationship had lasted for

more than 70 years. His commitment to the Stuart cause during the Civil War was an expression of personal loyalty and integrity in a world where such things mattered intensely. Yet, despite his undoubted loyalty to the Cavendishes, Hobbes's works contain no statement on behalf of the Stuart dynasty or in favour of the divine right of kings. [11] As a propagandist for the royal cause, he was entirely useless and, because of his materialism, determinism and atheism, a liability to it.

Contemporaries, such as his opponent, the royalist John Bramhall, Archbishop of Armagh, did not think Hobbes was sound in his political or his religious opinions and said so as early as 1645. As far as Hobbes was concerned, Oliver Cromwell could represent the state just as effectively as Charles Stuart, and he professed his loyalty to the new Commonwealth when he returned to England in 1651. His conception of the state was, in that sense, a modern one rather than a feudal one, nor was it even one appropriate to the absolutist *ancien regimes* that were to emerge in the latter part of the seventeenth century on the continent. It was not a democratic one, but Hobbes was not alone in that. Even the Levellers rejected the idea of enfranchising servants, the propertyless, or women.

What Hobbes set out to do in *De Cive* and *Leviathan* was to create a genuine science of politics [12] that he aimed to base on sensory experience or experimental evidence. In this, he was as much an advocate of empiricism as Locke was to be later, but for Hobbes observation and experiment were not enough to establish a science. It was necessary to begin, he argued, from agreed definitions of the most evident principles and to proceed from those principles to more elaborate arguments. In this he can be compared to Descartes and Spinoza, who employed the same rationalistic or geometrical manner of reasoning derived from the method employed in Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*.

John Aubrey said that Hobbes came across a copy of Euclid in a gentleman's library and fell in love with the geometrical method. [13] When he came to write his first book, the title *Elements of Law, Natural and Political* was an acknowledgement of this intellectual debt. "I reckon, I do not merely debate." Hobbes wrote in the preface to *De Cive*.

By the time Hobbes came to write *Leviathan* in 1651, he was still determined to develop a science of politics, but was less certain that he could persuade his readers of the truth of his arguments by scientific demonstration alone. The experience of the Civil Wars had shaken his earlier confidence. He had become acutely aware that men's political actions were guided by their interests, which he now realised would even cause them to challenge the self-evident truths of geometry if it were necessary to do so.

"For I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any man's right of dominion, or to the interest of men that have dominion, that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two angles of a square, that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry suppressed, as far as he whom it concerned was able." [14]

What he had taken to be the irrefutable certainties of the geometrical method had failed in the face of contending class interests. There is an air of bitterness, even despair, in this realisation for Hobbes, who had hoped that logical reasoning could put an end to civil dissension.

It was the geometrical method that Hobbes attempted to apply not only to political science but to the whole of science that led Marx and Engels to describe Hobbes's materialism as "misanthropic" since it lacked the "poetic glamour" that materialism still possessed in Bacon's writings. Marx and Engels summed up the development of English philosophy in *The Holy Family* in 1844.

"In its further evolution, materialism becomes *one-sided*. Hobbes is the man who *systematises Baconian* materialism. Knowledge based upon the senses loses its poetic blossom, it passes into the abstract experience of the *geometrician*. *Physical* motion is sacrificed to *mechanical* or *mathematical* motion; *geometry* is proclaimed as the queen of sciences. Materialism takes to *misanthropy*. If it is to overcome its opponent,

misanthropic, fleshless spiritualism, and that on the latter's own ground, materialism has to chastise its own flesh and turn *ascetic*. Thus it passes into an *intellectual entity*; but thus, too, it evolves all the consistency, regardless of consequences, characteristic of the intellect." [15]

Quoting this same passage in 1892 in the introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels adds

"Thus Karl Marx wrote about the British origin of modern materialism. If Englishmen nowadays do not exactly relish the compliment he paid their ancestors, more's the pity. It is none the less undeniable that Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke are the fathers of that brilliant school of French materialism which made the eighteenth century, in spite of all battles on land and sea won over Frenchmen by Germans and Englishmen, a pre-eminently French century, even before that crowning French Revolution, the results of which we outsiders, in England as well as Germany, are still trying to acclimatize." [16]

Hobbes played a vital role in the development of modern materialism and formed a link in a chain that passed from Britain to France that was, in turn, an organic part of the political developments that found expression in the French Revolution of 1789. Dialectical materialism and historical materialism would have been impossible without that earlier development. In his battle against the power of the Church, in his courageous stand for materialism at a time when the vagaries of fate favoured superstition, in his struggle to create a science of politics, and his insistence that there was no area of experience that was not susceptible to scientific analysis, Hobbes was a man who transcended his times. But he was a man of his time and expressed the interests of his class and the experiences of the social layer to which he belonged.

"Yet," as David North wrote, [17] "it would be simplistic and superficial to see in the work of the Enlightenment nothing more than the narrow expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against a decaying feudal order. The advanced thinkers who prepared the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century spoke and wrote in the name of all of suffering humanity, and in doing so evoked universal themes of human solidarity and emancipation that reached beyond the more limited and prosaic aims of the capitalist class."

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