

# The New Criterion

Features March 2013

## Swimming with “Leviathan”

by *Kenneth Minogue*

*Reconsidering Hobbes’s magnum opus with the release of a new edition.*

---

Books in this article

*Noel Malcolm*

*Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan (Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes)*

Oxford University Press, 1400 pages, \$375.00

---

*Reconsidering Hobbes’s magnum opus with the release of a new edition.*

**T**homas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, published in 1651, has long been recognized as (in Michael Oakeshott’s words) “the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language.”<sup>1</sup> It certainly provoked violent opinions, both then and now. In Hobbes’s own time, his minimalist account of Christian belief advanced in the second half of the book (often omitted by careless modern readers) led to accusations of atheism, and *Leviathan* was solemnly burned in Oxford soon after his death. Luckily, he had been on good terms with Charles II, whom he had tutored in mathematics when the Prince had been in exile in Paris. In our time, Hobbes has been written down as a cynic about human nature and an

absolutist in politics. *Leviathan* thus remains, in one degree or another, a scandalous book. That, as Samuel Pepys complained back in 1668, often made it expensive to buy.

In 1667, however, Hobbes, then aged seventy-nine and afflicted with palsy, translated his argument into Latin, the lingua franca of educated Europeans at the time. The Latin version was last reprinted in Molesworth's edition of the Hobbesian canon, but that was in 1839. This version, much corrected, has now been edited and translated by Noel Malcolm in two annotated volumes (along with a further volume of introduction) as part of the Clarendon edition of Hobbes. Malcolm's introduction explains the immediate context of the entire Hobbesian enterprise, and the three volumes constitute one of the most remarkable adventures in scholarship that our time has to offer. A short review is no place to tangle with the minutiae of such scholarship (even were I capable of doing so), but it is important to understand why such an enterprise is more than academic eccentricity. What led Hobbes to write *Leviathan*?

I do not think we can understand him without recognizing that he sought to understand the conditions that made possible the unique modern civilization of which he was part. The power and range of that civilization were becoming evident in his lifetime. Europe had already become the modernity in which we now live and which today dominates the world. The grander achievements which have transformed our lives—trains, planes, mobile phones, medicine, photography, wheelie bags, and the rest—were still far in the future, but it was clear that the remarkable European individualities that had emerged out of the medieval world were opening up a new kind of human possibility. Most human beings have lived within one encompassing culture, but these early modern Europeans already lived in several quite distinct imaginative worlds. Hobbes, as a translator of Thucydides, was already imaginatively as well as linguistically part of the world of classical Greece, just as his education in Latin thought and philosophy made him part of the Roman world. As a Christian, he also inhabited the Judaic world of the Old Testament. And as he moved through France and Italy in early travels, and wrote about optics for

example, he was participating in the birth of a new world of scientific theorizing about nature. One derivative of this exploratory passion has led to us recently celebrating putting man on the moon, but that achievement is merely one more outcome of the enterprising passions of modern individualists as they opened up both the natural world and the historical past as revelations of the human condition. In the seventeenth century, much even of the world itself was unknown, and it took many intrepid voyages of exploration to convert the planet to which we cling into our familiar mapped and studied “world.” It takes an even more remarkable investigative energy to invent, for example, such an inquiry as archaeology, or the activity of fossicking through the abandoned rubbish of earlier times in a search for clues that might help us to understand the lives of long-forgotten peoples.

**T**he question thus becomes: How could so vibrant a society be sustained? For the birth of modernity in Europe was also a time of such destructive political conflict as threatened the collapse of the whole enterprise. The divergent judgments, appetites, and ambitions of Europeans, indeed perhaps of all human beings, made even peace itself difficult to sustain. It is not quite that they were essentially selfish, but certainly that they were most of the time to be found pursuing their own interests. Above all, many had competitive ambitions for self-glorification. They were certainly marked by what would later be termed a “will to power.” And in the emerging world, such pride found expression in the ambition of many believers, especially those with strong convictions about the true form of Christianity, to impose such convictions on society itself. As Malcolm notes: “the growth of religious ‘enthusiasm’ (a term which Hobbes was one of the first to use in the English language) [involved] . . . sectarians who claimed special knowledge of God’s designs, and an indefeasible warrant for their own actions.” Some believers claimed direct revelation from the divine, and few themes produce so many passages of savage irony in Hobbes as his treatment of “such private men as pretend to be supernaturally Inspired.” The consequence, Hobbes feared, would be “the Dissolution of all Civill Government.”

Christian enthusiasts were a threat to civil peace throughout Europe, but they were far from being the only projectors of ideal forms of society. Proposals for arguably better forms of social and political life emerged from many of the new enterprises which were then coming into being. It was part of the openness of European life, for example, that education was based on the polytheistic Latin texts of the Roman past, some of which taught hostility to the very institution of monarchy. This led Hobbes to remark in *Leviathan* in his discussion of liberty: "I think I may truly say, there was never anything so dearly bought, as these western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues." Again, some reformers sought to make English life conform rather more to currently successful modern European states such as Holland or Venice. Hobbes regarded one of the greatest dangers to peace as resulting from the admiration of foreign models of government.

Hobbes drew the conclusion that there were two quite distinct issues arising in the politics of his time, and that his contemporaries generally failed to distinguish them. The central problem was how to deal with the wars and conflict that had arisen out of disagreement about substantive practices of politics and religion. A secondary concern was how social and religious life in each state ought to be structured. Most later political philosophy has been concerned with just such issues of truth, liberty, justice, rights, and so on, but Hobbes took the view that this was putting the cart before the horse. The fatal mistake was to muddle these two issues, so that questions of the substantive structure of the state were advanced as demands that must qualify the decisions of the sovereign power whose business was to determine the prior issue of civil peace. Hobbes had no doubt that peace must come before any desirabilities of substantive justice. And the only solution to securing peace was the creation of a sovereign power.

The need was for a final word on disputed questions, and without an agreed set of judgments that only a sovereign power could generate, no viable state could be sustained. And indeed, European experience had already recognized such a necessity by generating a set of sovereign rulers as a counterpoint to the rising individualism of modern Europeans. These sovereign powers had already become fluent

legislators, transcending the more consultative practices of many feudal monarchies. They could not only create new laws appropriate to modern conditions, but could also sustain moral and legal continuity by repealing the legal arrangements inherited from earlier times—arrangements often now thought to be frustrating enterprise. Repealing old laws was no less important than making new. *Leviathan* is thus an argument that develops the underlying rationality of what was actually happening.

**T**he common mistake of contemporaries, Hobbes judged, was the attempt to demand that sovereign rule must incorporate some of the conditions that one or other group in society might favor. Above all, reformers were keen to entrench some of the conditions of liberty within the actual definition of sovereign power. For all his reputation as a cynic and an absolutist, Hobbes certainly valued liberty greatly, but some of his sharpest remarks are provoked by simple people who thought that one or other constitution might be a better guarantee of liberty. He is derisive about the city of Lucca which had “liberty” inscribed on the turrets of the city. The point about living in a state—any state—he insisted, was that it involved subjection to the laws of the sovereign power and service to the Commonwealth. Variations in different European states he thought were distinctly secondary. Hobbes was extreme largely in his clear logic of subjection to a sovereign, and on the practical superiority of vesting such power in one man as monarch.

Sovereign power lies with whoever has the last word in civil disputes, whether it be one man, the few, or the many. Other holders of sovereignty were certainly possible, but Hobbes judged that its ideal form was that of the monarchies many Europe states had inherited from earlier times. As he crisply observes in the Latin version (as translated by Malcolm), “a Monarch cannot disagree with himself, out of envy, or interest; but an Assembly may: and that to such a height, as may produce a Civill Warre.” This natural advantage of the monarch as a single individual makes monarchy the most suitable form of sovereign power. And as we have noted, this natural advantage cohered with the developing monarchical realities of most European regimes. Individualists were already flourishing in peaceful conditions

under such rule. Still, the powers Hobbes accorded to monarchy caused great dismay to his many critics. As John Bramhall observed “he maketh the power of Kings to be so exorbitant . . . to render Monarchy odious to mankind.”

It is in pressing hard on the logic of subjection that Hobbes has acquired his reputation as an absolutist. Notionally, sovereignty is instituted when individuals in the state of nature, which is a state of war, covenant to subject themselves to a sovereign power in order to be protected from insecurity. And it follows that a subject is obliged to obey absolutely anything the sovereign may command unless such a command threatens the individual’s self-preservation, for that value is at the heart of the entire transaction. Hobbes knew that the individualists of his time could not be ruled by fear, as in a despotism (however important the motive of fear might be in leading to the covenant). He also knew that his contemporaries were far from sharing in the patriotic virtue of the Romans. His problem was to discover a new moral basis for civil peace, and he found it in the moral relationship of authorization: *Auctoritas* was freely accorded to rulers as the moral basis of sovereign power. The state thus conceived was a free association of individualists responding to the realities of social insecurity and isolation. In this way, Hobbes generated a new political form in which the multitude become one actor in the person of the sovereign.

Hobbes clearly assumed that a single monarch presiding over any European state could only rule it in terms of general laws. Men in a Commonwealth, we learn, have “made artificial chains, called civil laws, which they themselves, by mutual covenants, have fasted at one end, to the lips of that man, or assembly, to whom they have given the sovereign power; and at the other end to their own ears.” He thinks that a monarch presiding over such a society would be unlikely to want to oppress his subjects. Nevertheless, the sovereign has a total right to dispose of the subject as he wishes, and thus cannot act unjustly towards such a subject. On the other hand, any challenge to the vital interests or self-preservation of the subject restores to the subject the right of self-preservation as in the state of nature. Right may thus collide directly with right. Such is the logic of absolutism, but Hobbes

takes it to be an unusual situation. And Hobbes is explicit that under a rule of law, the subject may, for example, sue the sovereign in terms of the Sovereign's own laws if the laws should validate such a possibility.

The point about subjection to a European monarch thus conceived is that the subjects are free to conduct their lives as they chose within the limits established by the civil ruler. Their freedom resides in the silence of the law. The consequence of a covenant of submission, Hobbes tells us, is that the subject is a servant, but a servant is to be distinguished from a slave who is accorded no freedom and thus has no obligation at all. And the point is perhaps to be emphasized, as Malcolm does, that in translating *Leviathan*, Hobbes does not employ *subditus*, the Latin term for a subject, but *cives*, or citizen. Subjection is a function of will and situation, not at all a matter of status, and generated in this way, it is quite distinct from the “top down” systems characteristic of despotism.

**W**hat then is the Hobbesian theory of the state? It is distinguished from more conventional modern conceptions by leaving aside all substantive considerations of justice or rights—how the state ought to be constituted. Its essential character is to distinguish all constitutional aspirations from the prior question of getting a state into being in the first place. His aim is above all to distinguish statehood from constitution, the civil association from any concern with how that association is actually ordered. The state, in other words, must be distinguished from any particular opinions dominant within it. Failure to meet this condition would generate in some degree or another an ideological version of statehood. Hobbes's great admirer Michael Oakeshott poses the same problem in *On Human Conduct*, and solves it by distinguishing “enterprise associations” (based on one or other enthusiasm within the state) and “civil associations.” The essence of the state itself may thus be found in civil associations, whose entire point lay in associating individuals together on the basis of nothing more substantive than an obligation to conform their conduct to a system of law. In Hobbes, the basis of statehood similarly lies in the recognition of the conditions declared by the sovereign. Any actual state, of course, will contain both types of allegiance.

Such a state might well seem to have few reserves of loyalty on which to depend. In fact, these states proved to be remarkably resilient. As Europe became dominantly a set of commercial states in the centuries after Hobbes, critics suggested that such a social order must collapse because of the supposedly selfish interests of the individualists. As economic structures became evident, ideologists appeared who wanted to supply resources of enthusiasm that might become a form of constitutive loyalty—nationalists, egalitarian communities, racists, along with others. In fact, however, these European states exhibited the most remarkable unity and cohesion, something recognized in the commonest complaints made about them in earlier centuries—namely that they were imperialistic. The great—and disastrous—moment of their most prodigious cohesion was the moment when these states entered into the First World War. It was, perhaps, their last fling. There can be little doubt that the state in more recent times has become something much more casual. The very concept of treason hardly survives. Today, even more than in Hobbes's time, sovereignty is commonly rejected as an expression of selfish particular interests, and today's aspirations for political salvation have been invested in the power of international organizations.

Hobbes juxtaposed the demands of freedom against the passion for justice, and he lost. The most powerful enthusiasm of all has turned out to be the supposedly critical belief that our loyalties must not be constrained by the merely accidental fact of being born into some specific society. We must make our own judgments of rationality, and we may appeal beyond the state, to rights, international values, and external bodies. Modern democracy tends to play down the importance of sovereignty. Remarkably, however, it is in these European states, with their Hobbesian echo of pure statehood, that legality and decency survive, and to which the refugees move, in flight from a world that often seems to echo the state of nature Hobbes so much dreaded.

---

<sup>1</sup>. *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan*, edited by Noel Malcolm; Oxford University Press, 1756 pages, \$375.

---

A new initiative for discerning readers—and our close friends. Join  
*The New Criterion's* Supporters Circle.

DONATE

---

**Kenneth Minogue** was Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 31 Number 7, on page 4

Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2013/3/swimming-with-leviathan>