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Radical Democracy's Religion: Hobbes on Language, Domination, and Self-Creation

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Abstract: In recent decades, prominent political theorists have responded to perceived flaws in liberalism by proposing more “radical” forms of democracy. What might a radically democratic state look like? I argue that we can find one answer, counterintuitively, by looking back to the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’ secularized theory of language introduces into political life a new way of conceiving human agency, one in which the commonwealth fills not only the negative role of stemming conflict, but the positive task of actualizing self-determination. By collapsing the distance between the true source of man’s politics and the nature of governance, Hobbes inaugurates a tradition of radical democratic thought that seeks to close the oppressive rupture of word and deed, maker and made. Yet rather than diminishing religious experience, Hobbes reconstitutes it in a new, profane, and political form. He invites us to acquire a capacity long reserved for God alone: the power to create human nature itself.

Keywords: Hobbes; democracy; radical democracy; language; rhetoric; domination; religion; deification; secular; Leviathan

1. Hobbes, Religion, and Radical Democracy

“Man invents a language and then finds that both his speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar. Man produces values and discovers that he feels guilt when he contravenes them. Man concocts institutions, which come to confront him as powerfully controlling and even menacing constellations of the external world. . .”

“The fundamental coerciveness of society lies not in its machineries of social control, but in its power to constitute and to impose itself as reality.”

—The Sacred Canopy (Peter Berger 1969, pp. 9–12)

“Hegel starts from the state and makes man the subjectified state; democracy starts from man and makes the state objectified man. Just as it is not religion which creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution which creates the people but the people which creates the constitution. . .”

“. . . It goes without saying that all forms of state have democracy for their truth and that they are therefore untrue insofar as they are not democracy.”

—Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (Karl Marx [1843] 1978a)

In recent decades, prominent political theorists have responded to perceived flaws in liberalism by proposing more “radical” forms of democracy (Connolly 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Unger 1987; Wolin 2016). These forms often reject institutions like constitutions, parliaments, and high courts, as well as social structures like capitalism, private property, and individual rights. In their place, they stress ideals like non-domination, inter-group solidarity, and an egalitarian distribution of resources. Radical democracy has attracted many for its critical orientation. Yet it is often vague about what it would entail. What might a radically democratic state actually look like? How would it change



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the way we organize politics and society? In this article, I suggest that we can find one answer looking back to the concept's history, and in particular, to the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Among Hobbes' insights is that radical democracy, counterintuitively, need not imply atheism. On the contrary, it generates a new religion, one in which, as Marx will later put it, man rejects God's "illusory sun" and instead "revolves around himself" (Marx [1843] 1978b). Man comes to recognize that all of human reality—ethics, politics, economics, society—is his to create. He becomes, in Hobbes own words, a "Mortall God" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, chp. 17, p. 120).¹

Turning to Hobbes for insights on radical democracy will strike many as counter-intuitive.² He is often seen as a theorist of absolute monarchy, not popular rule, as a proto-totalitarian, not an egalitarian thinker. Alternatively, he is believed to have laid the foundations for modern liberal order: an ideologically neutral state which safeguards lives, enforces contracts, and is populated by rational and self-interested individuals (Arendt [1951] 1994, p. 139; Strauss 1963). I believe these readings, while not mistaken, also overlook important dimensions of Hobbes' thought. In addition to being a political theorist, Hobbes was a philosopher intensely engaged with the natural sciences of his time, including questions about human cognition. And while these issues might seem orthogonal to politics, Hobbes' views about them, I will argue, are crucial for understanding his political aims.

Of special importance is language. For Hobbes, language originates from us rather than God. It is a tool by which we fabricate our social reality, concurrently shaping our minds and social institutions (Pettit 2008). But words are double-edged swords. In so far as they give us tools to purge society of domination, they are good; they are a prison when they become alienated from their human origin and come to appear as something beyond man—as external limits on our agency. In this way, I believe that Hobbes' secularized theory of language, seen for its full implications, offers insights into the relationship between radical democracy and religion. Politics, when correctly apprehended and structured, takes on a kind of existential significance. It becomes a vehicle for self-creation—for making and remaking the human being as we see fit.

This article advances three claims. First, I argue that conflict for Hobbes stems not only from pragmatic misunderstandings over linguistic use (e.g., you and I disagree over the weight of a pound) or normative disagreements (e.g., I believe something is good, you believe something is bad), causes long identified by interpreters. Conflict also results from competing ideas about the nature of language itself. Words, in Hobbes' materialist epistemology, house no metaphysical truths. Yet some people are convinced that they do. And this gives rise to what I call the problem of popular realism: Those who see in words a deeper reality may be dominated by a nominalist elite whose insight into the true nature of language gives them great power. Hobbes' sovereign is designed to solve this problem. By structuring and stabilizing a nominal order—practically *any* nominal order, however arbitrary, will do—Leviathan not only prevents conflicts that might arise from differences of judgment, but creates an epistemic regime freed from all mystification and domination.

"Democracy is the truth of Monarchy", Marx tells us, "the solved riddle of all constitutions" (Marx [1843] 1978a). This captures the substance of my second claim: It is as part of this tradition, culminating in Marx and his radical democratic descendants, that we should read Hobbes as a theorist of democracy. What Hobbes shares with Marx—and perhaps passes down to him through Rousseau—is a view of the altogether *human* basis of the state, regardless of its self-designation as monarchial, aristocratic, democratic, or otherwise. Democracy, says Marx, is unique in that "the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the actual human being, the actual people, and established as the people's own work. The constitution appears as what it is, a free product of man" (Marx [1843] 1978a). Radical democracy, in other words, is the only regime harboring no illusions about its ultimate origins in human agency. This is Leviathan: a form of political order in which language ceases to appear beyond man, outside of his control, the subject of fantastical or mystified powers.³ By collapsing the distance between the true source of man's politics and

the nature of governance, Hobbes, anticipating Marx, makes democracy the template of all human sovereignty.

My final claim is that reading Hobbes in this way offers clues about the meaning of religion in radical democracy. For Hobbes, a system of rule is designated democratic not by whether it is deliberative, contains more or less liberty, or follows the rule of law, but by the degree to which, in Aristotle's words, "the people becomes a monarch", having "the supreme power" to "supersede the law by their decrees" (Aristotle 1996, 4.4, 1292a, 3-38). Hobbes, to be sure, is not a mirror image of Marx—and certainly not of Aristotle—and it is possible that he regarded democracy merely as instrumentally necessary, given his epistemic commitments, for justifying absolute monarchy (Skinner 2007, pp. 253–55).⁴ Yet whatever the immediate context of Hobbes' work, I believe he cleared the ground for a powerful and radical way of thinking about human political order, one in which the people are at last conscious of their constitutive role. Such a consciousness, I argue, is enabled above all by his theory of language. The sovereign is absolute precisely because its limits are *our* limits as a species, properly understood. Words are finally made to align with their creators. No hypostasized object remains which might restrain our will—not metaphysics, "the sacred", or the deity itself. Yet this does not diminish religious experience. It reconstitutes it in a new, profane, and political form.⁵

I begin by explicating Hobbes' secularized theory of language and locating it within his broader social theory. Speech for Hobbes is not divine but human; through it we become the makers of our social reality. Certain rhetoricians, however, have sought to mystify words in the service of social domination, transforming them into signifiers purporting to house metaphysical truths. Hobbes, I show, offers a twofold response. First, he demystifies language, a strategy that requires different tactics for profane and sacred rhetoric. To combat profane rhetoric, he transforms politics into a civil science. Hobbesian citizens, by understanding the synthetic principles of governance, come to see that the commonwealth is fully of their own making, a city of their own speech. Sovereignty ceases to be alienated from its subjects. To disarm religious rhetoric, Hobbes pursues a hermeneutic strategy. Because revealed texts are thought to be immutable, they can only be reinterpreted, not remade (or eliminated). Nonetheless, the distance between creator and created can be narrowed. Second, Hobbes ensures that the possibilities for domination enabled by mystifying speech are minimized in the commonwealth. The democratic despotism of the sovereign—embodied, ideally, in a single person or small group—constantly reinforces the constitutive position of the citizen. Leviathan is fully human, fully mortal, fully our own creation. Its total control over language is necessary, for Hobbes, to expel any discourse which implies that political order is anything but ours to make.

So understood, Hobbes' political theory inaugurates a tradition of radical democratic thought that seeks to close the oppressive rupture of word and deed, maker and made. It introduces into political life a new way of conceiving of human creative agency, one in which the commonwealth fills not only the negative role of stemming conflict, but the positive task of actualizing human self-determination. Through his philosophy of language, Hobbes minimizes the claims that religion can make of us while simultaneously deifying man. He invites us to acquire a capacity long reserved for God alone: the power to create human nature itself. This is radical democracy's religion.

2. Language and Self-Creation

For Hobbes, all language is conventional. Speech is an invention that enables human beings to classify, reason, construct institutions, and, in this way, transform their created reality. There is no world-sustaining Word, a *logos* that underwrites the cosmos. It is impossible, Hobbes argues, "that names are imposed on things according to the nature of those things"; speech was created only "by the will of man himself", and "could not have had a natural origin" in any other sense (Hobbes 1998, 10.2).⁶ But depriving speech of metaphysical foundations does not strip it of power. Language not only precedes social reality but is prior to thought, constitutive of human consciousness. It is through language

that human beings become makers of their reality and of themselves—their concepts, values, social relations, and politics. Thus while previous thinkers like Cicero, the Sophists, and the Stoics had also argued that words are conventional, none before Hobbes had given them such a foundational role. Speech allows us to exert enormous control over both world and creator—over *us*—for good and ill. Through it we can remake ourselves, structuring a second, human nature distinct from and yet of equal importance to our original (“first”) one (Berger 1969, p. 11).

In developing his secularized cognitive and linguistic theory, Hobbes found a foil in the medieval philosophy of mind, itself indebted to Aristotle. The scholastics, he believed, had gravely erred in ascribing to the world a kind of permanence, a blunder that was itself rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of language. We posit metaphysical universals because we mistake the artificial universals located in our linguistic forms—the generalizability of common nouns—for a genuine universality in the world. That we employ the appellation “tree” to describe certain green and leafy things does not imply the deep reality of “treeness”. Likewise all other objects: The external world is devoid of metaphysical formations; it houses an array of bodies that are unique and particular in themselves, and are given commonality only in the artificial medium of speech (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, p. 26). Critically, the same logic extends to moral properties. “Every man”, Hobbes writes, “callesh that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself, GOOD; and that EVIL which displeaseth him. . . .Nor is there any such thing as *agathon haplos*, that is to say, simply good” (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 7.3).

The most important point of departure for Hobbes, however, was not the scholastic *cosmos* but the Cartesian *cogito* (Tuck 1998). The immateriality of the *res cogitans* made the Cartesian mind an intrinsically thinking thing, its essential property. Consequently, for Descartes, thought precedes language; even before speech, the human being is a thinking being. Descartes was hardly alone in this view: From Plato and Aristotle through the medieval thinkers, language was seen as a *sign* of the capacity to think rather than the *source* of thinking itself (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, p. 29).⁷ For Hobbes, by contrast, language is no mere instrument but a transformative technology which invents thought. Three of his claims are especially critical: language moves us from passive to willful cognition; it allows us to create concepts; and it shows that reason should be conceived in disenchanting and historicized terms.

To begin with, speech animates thought with volition. Speaking with oneself means thinking about oneself. Words become tools for internal definition, categorization, and questioning, “signs of our conceptions” (Hobbes [1655] 1839, 2.5). Man’s entrance into the world of language thus remakes him as a seeking and questioning being, positioned to interrogate his reality and capable, for the first time, of articulating a new concept: “truth”. “Where Speech is not”, says Hobbes, “there is neither *Truth* nor *Falsehood*”. Striving for “the right ordering of names in our affirmations” awakens human thought (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, pp. 27–28). The ability to “register, what by cogitation, we find to be the cause of any thing, present or past; and what we find things present or past may produce, or effect” frees us from the tyranny of simple desires (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, p. 25). For the first time, people can ask of themselves whether their words, and thus their selves, are ordered in the right way.

Speech also frees the will from the particular, allowing human beings to build concepts. Before language, our species was fully determined by the world: The mind, embedded in matter, was little more than an artifact of that matter. With the appearance of words, human beings are able to impose order on this chaotic substrate. “And the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep”: Hobbes proceeds through an inversion of the Genesis narrative. For though “the first author of speech was *God* himself”, the supernal *logos* has been lost, and responsibility for naming and organizing the world—“And *God* said let there be. . .”—has fallen to man (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, p. 24). Human beings may now build categories, classifying different aspects of a single thing that it shares with other things, and grouping things that may have some different aspects into types (Hobbes

[1655] 1839; [1650] 1994, 5.5). In the mind, such categorization is also world-creating, shaping the nature of cognition vis-à-vis external reality.

Finally, Hobbes demystifies and historicizes reason. The texture and extent of our rationality depends on which words are at our disposal, not on an innate, supernatural faculty (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 5, p. 35; [1681] 2005, p. 18). Our linguistic terms come in patterns: Each has associated referents, classes of things that are evoked by usage. Reason, therefore, does not involve the recognition of particular truths, but connections between different conceptions and propositions. The alternative position was well-known to Hobbes, exemplified by Descartes' response to objections to the *Meditations*. Reasoning, Descartes contends, "is not a linking of names but of the things that are signified by the names. . . [it] deals with this something which is signified, rather than merely with the words" (Descartes 1985, p. 126). For Hobbes, this is a mystification (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 2.1n). Words are our own creations, untethered to "signified" things themselves. Consequently, reason should be seen not as an otherworldly gift of God, but an instrument, a thing "attained by Industry", enormously useful but entirely human (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 5, p. 35). Where Descartes perceived a divine spark, Hobbes saw merely another machine, a fabrication of our cognitive building blocks: words.

With his theory of language, Hobbes radically remakes human life. Our reality is no longer cosmos designed for us but a world we build for ourselves from words. We, as the architects of language, should thus be liberated to construct and reconstruct those things that originate in speech—our thoughts, institutions, and ideas. But this creative power comes with great peril. By drawing reason into the realm of the profane, Hobbes has revealed as never before the possibilities for duplicity and obfuscation. The inherent fragility of language does nothing to reduce its power. If our very minds are built by the artifice of speech, words are at once nothing and everything; what they lack in metaphysical status they make up for in the depth of their cognitive influence. "By speech man is not made better", Hobbes writes, "but only given greater possibilities" (Hobbes 1998, 10.3).

3. Rhetoric and the Arts of Domination

Hobbes distinguishes between logic and rhetoric, between an eloquence put to use for "lucid and elegant exponent of thought and conceptions" and one that serves as an "agitator of the passions" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.12). It is the latter that I examine here. Language, with its constitutive role in mental life, forces upon us certain ways of thinking. The "doctrines and passions inimical to peace" operate at the cognitive level; through them, "the minds of individuals are given a certain disposition" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.1). Everyday misunderstandings give way to foundational normative conflicts. The very words that rhetoricians elevate and mystify are transformed into rallying cries, the roots of civil faction and religious schism. Groping through the darkness of invented ideas, human beings forget not only their more pressing problems, like poverty, but the essential truth of their cognition: It is theirs to make. Rhetoric, therefore, is not merely imprecise speech. It is language in the service of domination.⁸

For Hobbes, our desire to dominate accompanies the invention of language itself. Pre-linguistic man shares with animals those passions that "affect the corporeal organ of sense", but these sensual appetites are focused on the self and the present.⁹ With the advent of words comes a new pleasure: "the delight of the mind" (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 7.9; [1651] 1996, 6, pp. 40–41). The human being begins to think about the future and becomes concerned with glory (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 10.3). He registers differences, becoming a creature "whose Joy consisteth in comparing himselfe with other men" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 17, p. 119).¹⁰ Yet because there is no objective measure of success, relative position—our status vis-à-vis our fellows—becomes critical (Hobbes 1998, 11.6).¹¹ "Reputation of power, is Power", and thus "The power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 10, p. 62; [1681] 1990, p. 16). Language places human beings in a position of near infinite vulnerability: There are few things more distressing to men than a lack of honors, "a sense of their want of that power, and that honour and testimony

thereof, which they think is due to them. . . in a contention for precedence to them with whom they compare themselves" (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 27.3).

Linguistic man thus lives out a perpetual and miserable paradox: dependent on others for honor but covetous of their successes, beguiled by present delights but fearful of future torments. Hobbes' anticipation of what Kant would call humanity's "unsocial sociability" also amounts to his rejection of Aristotle's *zoon politikon* (Kant [1784] 2008, p. 44; Aristotle 1996, 1.2, 1253a3). "Man is *not* born fit for society", he insists, for "every voluntary encounter is a product either of mutual need or of the pursuit of glory" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 1.2, emphasis added). Pride, vanity, and advantage: compared to each of these "friends are secondary".¹² With speech, envy blossoms; appetites proliferate; judgments diverge; passions inflame; and everyday harms metastasize into normative wrongs (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 5.5). Human sociality is pathological to the core. Because we use words, our species cannot have the spontaneous order enjoyed by animals, and it is this absence of natural lawfulness, above all, that makes life in the state of nature "nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 13, p. 89). "Man's tongue", Hobbes concludes, "is a trumpet to war and sedition" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 5.5).

If language births the desire to dominate, rhetoric enables us to act on that desire—to gain control over others without coercing them physically. Rhetoric distorts sound reasoning by allowing us to discuss imagined things as if they really existed. "When a man reasoneth with his lips only", Hobbes observes, words can be employed to signify concepts, modes, and objects that have no clear meaning; they remain in use merely out of the inertia of custom or the force of routine. How else could we go on saying things like "incorporeall body"—a body without a body (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 6.3)?¹³ Rhetoricians may also use equivocal or inconsistent expressions, like metaphors, as well as words that retain their character but shift their reference across contexts: "here" means Jerusalem when I am in Jerusalem and Berkeley when I am in Berkeley. While such indexicality need not spark conflict, it often does when people define evaluative concepts according to their own personal rules, e.g., "good" is what brings me pleasure, "bad" is what brings me pain (Hobbes [1651] 1996; [1642] 2003, 5.5; [1650] 1994, 7.3).

Perhaps the most insidious rhetorical tactic is "paradiastole", a cunning redescription of words behind the backs of the uninformed (Skinner 1996, especially chapter 4). Words may be warped from their established referents so as to persuade or rouse an audience, all to benefit "the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4.24). Thus Hobbes, commenting on Tacitus, narrates how Caesar Augustus rose to his position by concealing his extraordinary seizure of power behind a veneer of discursive stability: "For whereas they [the people of Rome] might have heard of the names of Consuls, Tribunes, Censors, and the like, the same they found also in the present State; though the authority of them all, remained only in Augustus" (Hobbes [1620] 1997, p. 60). Regimes, Augustus understood, are built as much in people's minds as on grounded facts. The dark genius of his paradiastole was to achieve a genuine political revolution behind a haze of phenomenological stability.

4. The Problem of Popular Realism

Reflecting on his own context, Hobbes takes aim at five categories of rhetoricians in particular: orators, jurists, professors, religious authorities, and proponents of "enthusiasm". Though using different forms of speech, they share a common tactic: words that purport to contain a deeper reality beyond ordinary human understanding and agency. By invoking metaphysical principles, ideas of justice, or theological concepts like the "eternal now", they cast a veil between human beings and their linguistic agency, crowning words with objective signification even as they obscure their fabricated origins. Basing their authority on privileged access to these ideas, they dominate those who falsely read into words a deeper reality. I call this the problem of popular realism.¹⁴

One of Hobbes' major targets is the "aristocracy of orators" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 10.7; [1650] 1994, 21.5).¹⁵ Oratory is a form of elitist political power because it allows a

skillful few to manipulate the vulnerable, weaken their rational faculties, and increase their susceptibility to illusory ideas. Through clever words, orators turn crowds of unassociated individuals into quasi-metaphysical “peoples”; convince them that private property is inviolable; or, most subversively for Hobbes, persuade them that they can justifiably kill their rulers (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.1–12.8). In each case a word or rhetorical phrase—rights, justice, “the people”—comes to appear as if it is above humanity, eternal and transcendent, existing independent of human will rather than the product of linguistic artifice.

Equally implicated by Hobbes are jurists who elevate the authority of the civil law and make themselves its privileged interpreters. Edward Coke, for instance, had proposed that the common law was the “law of reason”, and, moreover, a specialized kind of reason accessible only to professional lawyers (Coke 1826, p. 282). For Hobbes, this is a clear expropriation of discursive power. By projecting language into an esoteric realm, and bestowing its cipher solely to a select group of men, legal interpretation becomes a tool for domination. The truth, Hobbes argues, is that English common law cannot be seen as superior to the sovereign because law itself is the sovereign’s creation (Hobbes [1681] 2005, 102). “Laws are made for *Titius* and *Gaius*”, he writes, referring to the dramatis personae of Roman law, “even though ambitious lawyers’ jurisprudence have got ignorant laymen to believe that the laws depend on lawyers’ jurisprudence and not on the authority of the commonwealth”. The idea that “sovereign authority in the commonwealth should be lodged in the laws alone” serves as little more than a smokescreen for the elite (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.4). The “rule of law”, understood literally, is undemocratic by definition: it strips the legal structure of its human origins and mystifies its foundations.

Religious discourse poses a more challenging problem for Hobbes. By its very nature the scriptural *logos* is sacrosanct; as divinely revealed, it is thought to be immutable and authoritative, beyond humanity’s ability to change or disregard. And this makes it especially dangerous. As Hobbes argues in *Behemoth*, for example, the English civil war was precipitated by an avaricious Presbyterian clergy struggling for intellectual control (Tuck 1993, p. 343). Entities large and small, from the “Head of the Roman Church” and its institutional structures to the “lowest citizens”, veiled their ambitions for power beneath the “pretext of religion” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 6.11n).¹⁶

More generally, Hobbes indicts religious authorities for perverting speech. The Church, he suggests, inherited the epistemic errors of the Greeks and pre-Christian Romans. Gentile ignorance of the physical processes of vision led them to ascribe incorporeality to objects of matter, an error pathologized by human language. Misunderstanding how ideas take shape, the pagans mistook the words they created for the names of actually-existing things (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 12, pp. 75–82, 45–46, 441–66). These errors were then reproduced in Christian mysticism. Hobbes presents the papacy—with its unreal essences, its “spirits” and “spirit”, its Devil and his angels—as merely a novel vehicle for ancient superstition and idolatry, a “kingdom of fairies” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 47, p. 480). He assails the Scholastic philosophers for their use of vain Latin words, their reliance on terms “taken up, and learned by rote from the Schooles”. “Hypostatical”, “transubstantiate”, and “consubstantiate”: All of these—“names that signifie nothing”, the “canting of Schoole-men”—provide an arsenal of nonsense for religious authorities (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 5, p. 35).¹⁷

Papal power, Hobbes argues, is also built upon a diachronic perversion: the *nunc-stans*, the false theology of an “eternal now”. By confounding God’s messianic “Kingdome of Grace” with the earthly “Kingdome of Glory”, and promising that an authority only possible in an eschatological future could be exercised in the present, the Church is able to claim prerogative over human affairs (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 42, p. 346). Through the *nunc-stans*, the timeless is brought, politically, into time: Privileged access to Christ’s non-temporal kingdom is bestowed upon his ecclesiastical lieutenants—the apparatus of Church authority. Salvation becomes something achieved not through the unfolding of history but via a direct mediation with God. And the result is domination. Those who say they can mediate—priests and others in the Church hierarchy—hold near-limitless authority. Power rests on religious superstition and fear, on the anxiety generated by an

always possible but ever-shifting grace accessible, exclusively, to the papal elite. The masses are ruled by imaginary entities existing outside of space and time—or more precisely, by those men who claim access to these entities.

Religion's discursive power can also come in another, equally perilous form: "enthusiasm", a form of spiritual experience in which the individual claims a personal connection to God. Its political ramifications are plain. Anticipating Thoreau's arguments in *Civil Disobedience*, an enthusiast can cite his conscience, tethered to the heavenly word, as a basis for rightly disobeying earthly authority—and recruit others to his side. He can set himself up as a rival to the sovereign, thinking that even if his words seem incomprehensible, they offer genuine metaphysical access. "When a man has no rational capacity", Hobbes concludes, "but his speech appears divine, he will inevitably be thought to be divinely inspired". For Hobbes, this is at once incoherent and highly dangerous. It is incoherent because it fails to divide between sacred and ordinary language. Sacred speech can no longer be produced, as the age of prophecy has passed, nor can it be interpreted in an ordinary manner (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 18.4). It is dangerous because locating the prerogative of prophecy—the power to change the *logos* itself—within the individual ends makes epistemic authority impossible. It restores the chaos of the state of nature, banishing humanity "back to the private knowledge of good and evil" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.6).

Each of the cases discussed here reflect the problem of popular realism. When the masses see words as gateways into a higher reality, they leave themselves vulnerable to a nominalist elite. As the true human relationship to language is concealed, ideas, terms and concepts come to assume supernatural powers, incomprehensible meanings, and dubious metaphysical privileges. Speech is mystified; the ambitious and linguistically clever seize their chance at power; and human beings forget that language—and social reality itself—is always ours to make. Yet hope remains for Hobbes: If it is language that inflicts the wound, it is language that can heal it once again. Even if "one cannot prevent disagreements from occurring", he writes, "by the use of sovereign power they can be kept from interfering with the public peace" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 6.11n).

5. Maker's Knowledge and Civil Science

I turn now to examine Hobbes' response to the problem of popular realism, and with it, to domination enabled by rhetoric. His key move is to restore humanity's authentic relation to language. Men must refuse concepts that claim an objective or otherworldly status. They must be made to remember that words, and the institutions they produce, are their own creation. "My hope", Hobbes writes, "is that you will measure the Justice of what you are thinking of doing by the laws of the commonwealth, not by the talk or counsel of private citizens, and no longer allow ambitious men to get power for themselves by shedding your blood" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, "Preface to the Readers", pp. 13–14). Not all words are created equal, however, and Hobbes must develop a political program to demystify language on two levels, secular and sacred: for the former, through a new civil science; for the latter, by circumscribing hermeneutic authority. The result is a radically democratic politics.

For Hobbes, politics can be understood in fully secular terms. The elements of civil science are known not via divine revelation but "as Theorems, through natural reason, deducing natural right and natural laws from human principles and human contracts" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 17.13). Social and political bodies are susceptible to *a priori* demonstration because we, via speech, are their authors: "We ourselves make the principles—that is, the causes of justice (namely laws and covenants)". Human beings, not God, fashion the rules for "making, and maintaining commonwealths" (Hobbes 1998, 10.5; [1651] 1996, 20, p. 145).

This capacity to bestow names on things, moreover, gives us a maker's knowledge of our social and political institutions (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 18.4). "Science", Hobbes writes, "is allowed to men through. . .a priori demonstration only of those things whose generation depends on the will of men themselves" (Hobbes 1998, 10.5). If we begin with the synthetic

definition of terms, originating with the maker and moving to the made, we will emerge with verifiable knowledge (Hobbes [1655] 1839, 6.12). Our position as inventors of speech—“those who made the decision and the rule of language”—entitles us to understand the products of that speech (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 18.4). Hobbes thus anticipates a tradition made famous decades later by Vico: *Verum esse ipsum factum*, “the true itself is made” (Vico 1982, pp. 50–56). No speculation should be needed about the constituent elements of human life. With enough time and effort, we should always be able to trace their origins and define their functions.¹⁸

These epistemic dimensions of civil science make it democratizing. By revealing the commonwealth as a product, via language, of human will and artifice, they demystify political order. Gone are orators’ distortions. “Ambiguity is excluded”, Hobbes writes of his scientific method, “We make it true ourselves by defining it, that is, by agreeing about the meaning of the words” (Hobbes [1644] 1963, p. 147). Institutions are ours to shape and change: If we can isolate basic factors in geometry, test our knowledge by making them, and express this knowledge through a system of definitions and a priori demonstrations, we can do the same in politics. If “geometry... is demonstrable; for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves”, so too “civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves” (Hobbes [1656] 1841, 184). The state is known, created, and continually re-created by those who hold its component definitions. Its nature is as much cognitive as it is institutional, formed in words within the psyche and sustained through the intersubjective medium of speech. To know Leviathan is to produce it; the lucid geometric logic of civil science makes the state easily and widely accessible.

Education thus plays a critical role for Hobbes. While civil science is in principle universal, it has to be put in reach of all, rhetoricians’ deceptions replaced with sound reasons: “It is a duty of those who administer sovereign power to root these doctrines out of the citizens’ minds and gently instill others”. The core problem stems from class inequalities.¹⁹ Men of “easy circumstances” have had the resources to acquire the art of rhetoric. The indigent, by contrast, have been left defenseless; errors have “crept into the minds of the uneducated people”, who, angered at social inequity, are often susceptible politicians’ promises (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 13.9). “It is not so much the burden itself that men object to”, Hobbes notes, “as the inequality”. At the same time, Hobbes rejects coercing beliefs, proposing as an alternative—with some irony—the method of persuasion: “As opinions are sown in men’s minds not by command but by teaching, not by threat of penalties but by clarity of argument, laws to resist this evil should be directed not against the people in error but against the errors themselves” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 13.10). He envisions civil science trickling down from the universities—“where the foundations of civil doctrine, which are true and truly demonstrated, have to be laid”—and making its way to the people themselves: “After the young men are steeped in them, they can instruct the common people in private and in public”. Such popular education, he holds, “is a duty of sovereigns” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 13.9).

Consequently, and counterintuitively, what makes Leviathan a democracy is not a kind of procedure—an actual assembly of people at some historical moment.²⁰ Its democratic nature is achieved via cognition: Through maker’s knowledge we are equipped to rationally reconstruct the commonwealth; through language, we can apprehend that it has wholly human origins in language. Leviathan, in short, is fabricated with words. It is a state erected deep within our own minds and a story narrated to our fellow citizens. In Hobbes’ telling, therefore, democracy is conceptualized a kind of *ur*-commonwealth, logically prior to and foundational of all political order:

Let us now see what the founders do in the formation of each kind of commonwealth. When men have met to erect a commonwealth, they are, almost by the very fact that they have met, a *Democracy*. From the fact that they have gathered voluntarily, they are understood to be bound by the decisions made by agreement of the majority. And it is a *Democracy*, as long as the convention lasts, or is set to reconvene at certain times and places. For a convention whose will is the will of

all the citizens has *sovereign power*. And because it is assumed that each man in this convention has the right to vote, it follows that it is a *Democracy*. . . (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 7.5)

Unlike in Rawls, Hobbes' contract theory serves not to reconcile us to the state but to reveal our constitutive place within it.²¹ As citizens, we are invited to mentally recreate the commonwealth's imagined beginnings and see ourselves as present. Indeed if this procedure is followed, even a state erected without "the assembly and consent of a multitude"—that is, by conquest and violence—is just as democratic as one built by institution.²² The critical point is that people recognize themselves as the ultimate architects of political life. So long as this recognition remains, democracy lives in the minds of the people. And when the citizens are made to forget their constitutive role—when the sovereign "sleeps"—this is "the death of a *people*" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 7.16).

In this way, Hobbes' civil science enables human beings to dig to the core of political order and disclose its ultimate origins in humanity's "most noble invention": language (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 4, p. 24). By elevating this reality to the level of citizen consciousness, it clears away the haze of rhetoricians who mystify political order. When we think about the commonwealth in democratic terms, we are constantly reminded that the human being is the true creator of all human institutions.²³ No longer will we be misled into reading into words a deeper reality. In our shared subjectivity and within our minds, ours will finally be a city in our own speech.

6. Democratizing the *Logos*

Hobbes cannot achieve the same thing for sacred as for secular language. The Bible is God's book; there is no path, however winding, by which it can be reunited with humanity's creative powers. When it comes to religious discourse, therefore, the human being can only be an interpreter, not an author. Still, the power that the *logos* wields can be reduced, and with it, humanity's own power amplified. The attention which Hobbes devotes to Biblical hermeneutics reflects his deep concern with diminishing theological authority. And while he does not eliminate religion's influence—an aim he could hardly have telegraphed or achieved, given his context—he does succeed in important ways.²⁴ Much has been made of the different theological-political formulas Hobbes provides in his early work, which supports church establishment, and *Leviathan*, which advocates for greater autonomy in our religious choices. Here I offer a new reading of this reversal. As evidenced by his refusal to repudiate *De Cive*, Hobbes, I believe, sought to offer multiple hermeneutic strategies to disempower religious discourse.²⁵ None of them is indispensable for his political theory; each might be deployed in different contexts. By confining revelation to history and discrediting personal enthusiasm, he clears the ground for radical democracy's religion.

On a basic level, Hobbes' wants to ensure the stability of the *logos* itself. Leaving God's word open to the interventions of "godly men", to prophets and ecstasies, would greatly exacerbate the problem of popular realism. Human agency would be held hostage to the ambitious charlatans with a "store of sacred words" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 12.6). While Hobbes may well have preferred an atheistic world, he could ignore neither theological history nor popular religiosity. With hermeneutics, at least, God's scope and power can be radically narrowed. As long as scripture is stable and permanent, it can be contained, interpreted narrowly so as to minimize our alienation from our creative powers and grant us—to the extent possible with sacralized discourse—an awareness that language, and political order, is actually ours to form. The human being can still be God's sovereign interpreter.

Among Hobbes' key tactics is to distinguish faith from other forms of knowledge. "It is evident", he writes, "that whatsoever we believe, upon no other reason, then what is drawn from authority of men only, and their writings; whether they be sent from God or not, is Faith in men only" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 7, p. 49). Hobbes here turns faith into a matter of history: It depends on our trust in people across time. Consequently, he can cleanly demarcate political from religious authority based on their associated temporalities. The erection of the civil sovereign takes place out of time, by civil science and geometric

reason. Religious faith, by contrast, is the product of diachronic transmission, of narratives and injunctions passed from person to person. Believers can only access God's received word, not the Godhead Himself.²⁶ Salvation is likewise historicized: Our obedience to God is constitutive not of His kingdom on earth, but of a *prospective* "Kingdom of Spirit" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 41).²⁷ Eternity ceases to be a *nunc stans* ("eternal now") to be mediated by an elite church authority and instead exists eschatologically, on the same time continuum with humanity. As Hobbes concludes, "Miracles ceasing, prophets cease, and the Scripture supplies their place" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 32, p. 259).

Hobbes also challenges prophecy's contemporary equivalent: enthusiasm. While many Protestant groups were eschatologically focused, they also gave primacy to the spirit (Pocock 1973, p. 181). This functioned to restore, if not the doctrine, then the effect of the *nunc-stans*, providing the individual saint with access to de-temporalized revelation. Hobbes responds, first, by repeating his charge against the schoolmen: Enthusiasm relies on concepts that are ambiguous, meaningless, or *prima facie* nonsensical. "Spirit", he insists, cannot denote some kind of mystical non-substance; it may be a very subtle corporeal substance, but we cannot conceive of it intelligibly as a medium for communication between God and man (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 36, p. 45). More generally, no individual can have a direct experience of the supreme being. God may communicate with men through words—"faith comes by hearing"—or by supernatural revelations of which we have very limited knowledge, but we can never know Him directly (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 29, p. 224). We are thrown back again upon humanity's revolutionary technology: language, and its historical processes of transmission. The *logos* remains humanity's only access to divinity (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 32, p. 259). No Church institution can contest civil power based on a claim to direct revelation.

In this way, both Hobbes' early support for an apostolic church and his later shift to independency shared the same goal: to minimize the sacred and elevate man, to empower him to the greatest extent possible as self-conscious maker of his social and political world. In *De Cive*, Hobbes saw the Anglican church as the safest means to this end. Subordinating ecclesiastical authority to secular power guarantees the state full and direct control over scripture's meaning. God's (imagined) attributes and essence are determined politically: "The commonwealth therefore. . . will have the right to judge which *names* or *appellations* bring *honour* to God and which do not, i.e., which doctrines of the nature and operations of God are to be publicly held or professed" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 15.16). Still, this strategy has a clear disadvantage: While the *logos* is contained, it retains its potency. So long as an established Church—Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, or otherwise—is granted hermeneutic authority, scripture will retain its hold on the human being.

This, I believe, is one way to understand Hobbes' shift in *Leviathan* to primitive independency. By dissolving all institutionalized claims to religious authority, humanity is freed, at least potentially, from its scriptural yoke. While the sovereign retains ultimate hermeneutic authority and Hobbes never denies its prerogative to regulate or impose religion, he also presses for a commonwealth of autonomous believers: "And so we are reduced to the independency of the primitive Christians to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best". In such a world scripture persists, but every individual can choose for himself what to make of it. The *logos* has lost its established advocate; so untethered, it must rely on the uncertain program of "working faith in everyone. . . according to God himself that giveth the increase". Belief has been expunged of "them that plant and water", of those who would use religion to claim political and civil power (Hobbes [1651] 1996, sct. 47, pp. 479–80). Hobbes may have hoped that such independency would lead to the diminution of scriptural authority itself: By decentralizing religious power, the power of the text over humanity might itself diminish.

In this sense, *Leviathan* may actually be a more democratic work than *De Cive*.²⁸ With established religion gone, humanity is liberated, in principle, from the final form of speech mystified of its human origins. The text is free to wither away; each person can one day be reunited with his creative power through humanity's "Mortall God": the sovereign.

7. Sovereign Power and Radical Democracy

So far, we have seen two strategies Hobbes uses to combat the problem of popular realism. Armed with a new civil science and a democratized hermeneutics, citizens will be shielded against the rhetorical tricks of orators, jurists, and schoolmen. Words, to the extent possible, will be deprived of their transcendent aura and linked back to humanity's creative powers. But dangers persist. No matter their education, men will always be "vainly glorious, and hope for precedency and superiority above their fellows" (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 14.3). Moreover, to build the commonwealth in people's minds without purging it of actual rhetoric would reproduce existing structures of domination. People would be taught that the state is their own without it truly being so in practice. Thus if *Leviathan* is to actually serve the interests of the people—of *itself*—it must bring about a more substantive equality. Hobbes achieves this, I will now argue, by consolidating all power in the sovereign. Horizontal differences among citizens—in wealth, status, or education—will be trivialized by their vertical relationship to the state. At the same time, the commonwealth will use its plenary power to diminish social domination. By demystifying speech and barricading the sovereign from elite interests, Hobbes, in this way, originates a form of radical democracy.

Leviathan's essence is a unified linguistic order. Language does not resolve its own denotative disputes, and so men must "set up for right reason the reason of some arbitrator or judge to whose sentence they will both stand" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 5.3). Via the sovereign, words that men would otherwise exploit for their own gain—precipitating dissent, faction, and violence—are given single, unequivocal meanings. This is true for both conventional and evaluative terms: "There should be a common measure of all things that might fall into controversy; as for example: of what is to be called right, what good, what virtue, what much, what little, what *meum* and *tuum*, what a pound, what a quart, etc." (Hobbes [1650] 1994, 29.8). The sovereign, it should be stressed, has no greater access to reality than ordinary men. Words cannot but be human fabrications; how we define them is ultimately arbitrary. What is critical is thus not that they are given the "right" definition—an incoherent task, according to Hobbes—but that they have a *single* definition, one uncontested and known to all. With concepts like theft, adultery, and murder, for example, "not every killing of a man is *Murder*, but only the killing of someone whom the *civil law* forbids us to kill" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 6.16). So too with justice: It is the responsibility of a commonwealth "to determine what justice *is*, and what injustice or an offence against justice *is*" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 17.10, emphasis mine).

For such linguistic unity to take hold, Hobbes argues, its source must have a total monopoly on violence, a "common power to control individuals" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 11, p. 70). "Covenants without the sword are but words", he writes, "and of no strength to secure a man at all" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 17, p. 117). All power must therefore be consolidated into an indivisible source, a "union" with the authority to frustrate the greedy, ambitious, and other would-be oppressors (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 5.6). In such a union, those who would try to use rhetoric to split the commonwealth—who would deploy meaningless theological and metaphysical concepts—will find themselves deprived of their instruments (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 10.12). Words will instead be woven into a single, shared reality created and constantly reinforced by *Leviathan*. "A popular state obviously requires absolute power", Hobbes writes, "and the citizens do not object" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 6.13n).

Radical democracy is thus best achieved *in effect* through monarchy *in practice*. Here, Hobbes' distinction between "government"—what this article has referred to as "sovereignty"—and the "administration of government"—its everyday apparatus of rule—becomes critical.²⁹ The fundamental characteristic of radical democracy is our awareness of the

sovereign's altogether human origins, its existence in and through our own speech. This plainly cannot be achieved in "aristocracy of orators", with its fractionalization, linguistic perversions, and endless struggles for dominion. It is likewise impossible were administration to become the task of all citizens. While sovereignty would remain unified in principle, in appearance the polity would resemble Aristotle's ideal, where rich and poor, equally involved in government's daily tasks, each believe that theirs is the true ruling class.³⁰ Monarchy, by concentrating and restricting access to rulership, thus prevents the dominion of class interests.³¹

Just as important, monarchy constantly reminds citizens of the true nature and origins of political order (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 10.3–10.19). Through his actual person, a king serves as a locus-point around which we can perpetually recall our status as makers of all things human. He not only wields absolute political power, but also *semiotic* power; he offers a symbol of our ontologically constitutive position. Indeed Hobbes stresses that royalty should be deprived of both the attributes and actions "by which we signify a belief that man. . . is immortal, or infinitely powerful, and so on" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 15.18). The awe we experience comes not from the king's purported godliness but the human will's semi-divinity. The sovereign's power spurs us to recognize ourselves as the ultimate sources, via language, of social and political reality. And this power does not stop at the boundary of cognition, but plunges deep into man, reorienting his subjectivity. Hobbes' key linguistic insight is that words, though our creation, themselves recreate us. The commonwealth's function is thus as much existential as it is political. Through language, it makes and remakes the human being.

But the Hobbesian reinvention of the self is simultaneously a restoration of the self. Through the person of the sovereign, speech is reunited with its human maker and man regains his Adamic capacity: Just as the first human found no barriers to his linguistic creativity—in bestowing names on the world's creatures—neither does Leviathan. This is the meaning of Hobbes' most penetrating definition of sovereignty, the power to define the human being itself:

. . . Suppose a woman gives birth to a deformed figure, and the law forbids killing a human being, the question arises whether the new-born is a human being. The question is, *what is a human being?* No one doubts that the commonwealth will decide. . . (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 17.12)

Here is the essence of Hobbes' radical democracy. Speech is constitutive of the self. To allow others the uninhibited power of speech, therefore, would be to allow them uninhibited power not only to *control*, but to *make* us. We, the sovereign's "many authors", thus reclaim that power through its absolute control over language.³² "And so", Hobbes concludes, "it will come down at last to a power without other limit than that set by the strength of all the citizens together in its full extent. This is the so-called *sovereign power*" (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 6.18). Language—man's greatest technology—both alienates and reconciles him with his original creative agency.

To civil science and democratic hermeneutics, therefore, we can add another tool of popular rule: sovereignty. The great irony of radical democracy in Hobbes is that a total equality of power is accomplished through a unanimous abnegation of power. Next to Leviathan all are nothing; but they are nothing mutually, *as one*. At the same time, because all are nothing in relation to one another, the sovereign, the site of their will, is free to be *everything*, the incomparable personification of popular agency, "as great, as possibly men can be imagined to make it" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 20, p. 144). The sovereign, for Hobbes, *is* the people in the deepest sense. And with the overthrow of rhetoric, the people's prerogative is irresistible, limited only by the horizon of humanity's cognition and creativity. Its power extends to the very texture of human life, to the nature of the human being. In Leviathan, at last, "the true God may be personated": man himself (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 16, p. 114).

8. Radical Democracy's Religion

“SOCRATES: Well, then, what is a human being?”

ALCIBIADES: I don't know what to say”.

—Plato, Alcibiades I (Plato 1997, 129e)

Hobbes' radical democracy lives in the recognition that we ourselves construct the commonwealth. It dies in our collective amnesia, the forgetting of our constitutive role. Directing its fate is the technology of language. Whether a state is democratic is determined as much in our cognition as in political institutions. It is as much a way of structuring life as it is of structuring governance, as much a system of thinking as a system of rule. At the same time, to shield this self-identity against the problem of popular realism demands a radical solution: Leviathan's despotism, including its absolute power over speech. But sovereignty, as we have seen, is not merely an instrument to end domination; it realizes the nature of the political itself. Democracy is foundational for Hobbes because it is in democracy alone that the state is brought back to the actual human being, its true and only founder. The awe that we experience at the sovereign—at our own powers of self-creation—is thus a kind of self-deification. Even as radical democracy diminishes traditional religion's power, it re-channels our religiosity toward ourselves. It is constituted and aggregated, secularized and politicized, in Leviathan.³³

In this sense, Hobbes succeeded in restoring a clarity about the nature of democracy lost since the Greeks. But he also achieved more. Aristotle, it is true, articulated a concept of radical democracy, and this was likely a key touchstone for Hobbes' thought. At the same time, Hobbes' access to early modernity's scientific insights facilitated a *more* deeply democratic vision than was possible with Aristotle's science and metaphysics. Gone were each of the Philosopher's mystifications: the ordered cosmos; man's semi-divine soul; natural slavery; teleology; the *zoon politikon*. In their place was an egalitarian civil science and a democratized hermeneutics. Their effect was to reunite maker and made—the author of words with words themselves, the people with the state. Deprived of the innovations of early modern epistemology, the ancient world could never have envisioned democracy in such a deep, thoroughgoing, and existential form.

It might be said, therefore, that it was a revolution in thinking about language and religion—the secularization of discourse—that precipitated a revolution in thinking about politics. Hobbes, by appropriating from God the power of speech, remakes the human being as a “Mortall God”, the creator of his social and political reality. In this way, he may have helped to lay the conceptual groundwork for a new and radical way of theorizing about popular rule. Thus in Rousseau, the differences in interpersonal judgment naturalized by Hobbes are re-imagined as artificial products of rhetoric; rulers, in Rousseau's retelling, create the very conditions of social domination that make their authority necessary.³⁴ Hegel, seeing a danger in the premature reconciliation of maker and made, sought to shield speech from its creators by displacing language into an historicized *Geist* (Hegel [1837] 1956).³⁵ But it was in Marx that Hobbes' radical democracy reached its greatest culmination: the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (Marx [1875] 1994, p. 328). Though Marx is indebted to Aristotle for the spirit of the idea, he may be as beholden to Hobbes for its epistemological and cognitive foundations.

Indeed Hobbes, untainted by German idealist and historicist burdens, may in some respects be *more* radically democratic than Marx himself. He would likely have seen a new rhetorical danger lurking in the more mythological aspects of historical materialism, especially its eschatology. And by locating the origins of oppression in properties of language itself, he may also offer a corrective against Marx's triumphalism, his utopian vision of man's individual development. If we cannot do away with human pleasure in domination, we still might temper its consequences. Through rhetoric “Man is a wolf to Man”; but in Leviathan “Man is a God to man” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, “Preface to the Readers”, p. 3). Socrates' most essential but vexing question to Alcibiades was “What is a human being?” In democracy alone, says Hobbes, are we permitted an answer, liberated

from the brutal ignorance of the sophists and their descendants. In democracy alone can it be said that man is the creator of man.

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Notes

- ¹ For citations of *Leviathan*, I provide the chapter number followed by the page number in the Cambridge University Press edition.
- ² James Martel and Richard Tuck have both previously argued for Hobbes as a democratic theorist. For Martel, Hobbes' biblical interpretations are designed not, as they would appear, to buttress state power, but to covertly train careful readers to recognize the sovereign's idolatrous nature, and thus to challenge its authority. I also propose that Hobbes' hermeneutics has a democratic agenda—especially in *Leviathan*—though for different reasons than Martel. Tuck offers two reasons for why Hobbes should be seen as a “deep theorist of democracy”, both of which I share and elaborate upon in this article. First, Hobbes elevates what Aristotle calls “tyrannical democracy” as the “only legitimate form of political association”, based on his rejection of the traditional separation between ruler and ruled. Second, Hobbes sought to combat the “informal structures of coercion” which permeate social order, something only feasible via a state with no limits on its power (e.g., a distinct civil sphere, individual, associational, and religious rights, the separation of powers, etc.). For an exchange over Tuck's views, see [Hoekstra \(2007\)](#); [Tuck \(2007\)](#); [Skinner \(2007\)](#). [Tuck \(2016\)](#) has more recently argued that Hobbes' distinction between sovereignty and government, discussed below, was especially important for the development of modern democratic ideas.
- ³ The exception being scriptural texts, discussed below.
- ⁴ For an alternative and fascinating way of reading Hobbes' apparent intentions against his thought's true import—in this case a kind of Platonic politics—see [Craig \(2010\)](#).
- ⁵ Hobbes' state theory could be described as a political theology according to Carl Schmitt's definition, in so far as it is based on an analogy between the sovereign and a certain (voluntarist) conception of God ([Schmitt \[1934\] 2005](#)). But it also goes beyond political theology and anticipates what Eric Voegelin called a “political religion”, where the sovereign is not only conceptually modeled on the deity, but itself becomes a site for deifying self and species ([Voegelin \[1938\] 1999](#)). For more on political theology's meaning, examples of it across European thought, and a critique of its social and political implications, see my *Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology to Jewish Philosophy* ([Lesch 2022](#)).
- ⁶ Hobbes offers a hypothetical account of language's origins wherein an Adam-like figure created words, and “these names, having been accepted, were handed down from fathers to their sons, who also devised others” ([Hobbes 1998](#), 10.2).
- ⁷ Aquinas, for example, conceives of language of as a neutral medium for signifying concepts we have in our minds *a priori* ([Aquinas 1920](#), Part 1, Question 27, Article 1).
- ⁸ Hobbes, it should be noted, does not attribute all linguistic obscurities to conscious, self-interested manipulations. Natural languages are inherently full of uncertain and imprecise terms ([Hobbes \[1650\] 1994](#), 5.8).
- ⁹ As the sensual appetites of pre-linguistic man are non-positional, Hobbes explains, only the scarcity of resources could lead to conflicts. In general, “living creatures irrational” should always be able to live in peace ([Hobbes \[1650\] 1994](#), 19.5).
- ¹⁰ Other animals are not sensitive to intra-species differences because they have no language to form concepts and classifications, as discussed above ([Hobbes \[1655\] 1839](#), 2.13).
- ¹¹ Power, for Hobbes, is a positional property, so its existence depends on inequalities ([Hobbes \[1650\] 1994](#), 8.4).
- ¹² As Hobbes explains in an especially evocative passage, even among supposed friends, everyone “takes most pleasure in the kind of amusing incident from which (such is the nature of the ridiculous) he may come away with a better idea of himself in comparison with someone else's embarrassment or weakness” ([Hobbes \[1642\] 2003](#), 1.2).
- ¹³ “There can be nothing so absurd”, Hobbes writes, “but may be found in the books of Philosophers. And the reason is manifest. For there is not one of them that begins his ratiocination from the Definitions, or Explications of the names they are to use” ([Hobbes \[1651\] 1996](#), 5, p. 34).
- ¹⁴ Here I depart from Philip Pettit, who argues that Hobbes does not regard people as mistaken about the objectivity of value ([Pettit 2008](#), p. 52).
- ¹⁵ The term can likely be traced to [Aristotle \(1996, 5.5, 1305a8-13\)](#). Conceptually it also reflects Hobbes' deep engagement with Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* he translated early in his career ([Hobbes \[1629\] 1959](#)).

- 16 “It is no wonder”, Hobbes writes, that “when men grow warm in dispute, almost any dogma is said by one or the other to be *necessary* for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, so that those who do not accept it may be damned not only for their obstinacy. . .but also for their lack of *faith*” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 18.14).
- 17 In this respect, Hobbes’ argument mirrors a standard Protestant position: The Roman Church’s history has been defined by political usurpation and the introduction of various superstitions (Pocock 1973, p. 195).
- 18 For a study of the contrast between Hobbes’ epistemology and that of the emerging experimental sciences, see Shapin and Schaffer (1985).
- 19 “The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths”, Hobbes writes, “consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry. . .which Rules, neither poor men have the leisure, nor men that have had the leisure, have hitherto had the curiosity, or the method, to find out” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 20, p. 145).
- 20 Indeed Hoekstra (2007, pp. 209–13) and Skinner (2007, pp. 252–55) object to Hobbes being termed a democratic theorist because his political system lacks standard democratic procedures, like elections.
- 21 It is to this end that Rawls draws upon the Hegelian concept of “reconciliation” [*Versöhnung*]: “Political philosophy may try to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form” (Rawls [2001] 2003, p. 3).
- 22 “[A] Patrimonial Kingdom. . .differs from a *Monarchy* by design in origin and manner of formation in that it was acquired by force, but when formed it has all the same properties, and both have the same right of government; they do not need to be discussed separately” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 9.10).
- 23 Here I differ from Skinner, who highlights Hobbes’ distinction between instituted and conquered commonwealths to reject the idea that democracy is paradigmatic for his thought (Skinner 2007, pp. 252–54).
- 24 We do have a tantalizing, though questionably reliable, account of Hobbes’ reaction to Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, a text much more forthrightly critical of traditional theological ideas and religious institutions. Hobbes is reported to have said that Spinoza “had outthrown him a bar’s length [i.e., outdone him], for he [Hobbes] durst not write so boldly” (Clark 1898, p. 357).
- 25 For a rich and illuminating discussion of Hobbes’ “scriptural strategies”, see McQueen (2022).
- 26 Hobbes is similar to Maimonides in this respect, though they extrapolate different political lessons from negative theology’s proscription on apprehending the divine essence (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 31, pp. 250–52). See my *Maimonides and Jewish Theocracy: The Human Hand of Divine Rule* (Lesch Forthcoming).
- 27 Hobbes seems to follow Joachim of Calabria in suggesting that the Trinity has been personated on Earth three times: Moses and the prophets as Father, Jesus as the Son, and the apostles and their successors as the Spirit. These personations, in turn, correspond to successive ages in an eschatological history that ultimately reunites man with God (Hobbes [1651] 1996, pp. 16, 33, 41–42).
- 28 Both those who regard Hobbes as a democratic theorist (e.g., Richard Tuck) and those who do not (e.g., Skinner and Hoekstra) tend to locate his most democratic elements in *De Cive*. I believe Hobbes is equally a democratic theorist in *Leviathan* by virtue of his political epistemology. Even if democracy is not described in *Leviathan* as the necessary first stage of the commonwealth by institution as it is in *De Cive*, it remains foundational because of the democratizing effects of Hobbes’ civil science and hermeneutics.
- 29 “But if in a *Democracy* the *people* should choose to concentrate deliberations about war and peace and legislation in the hands of just one man or of a very small number of men, and were happy to appoint magistrates and public ministers, i.e., to have authority without executive power, then it must be admitted that *Democracy* and *Monarchy* would be equal in this manner. . .For government [*imperium*] is a *capacity* [*potential*], administration of government is an *act* [*actus*]. *Power* is equal in every kind of commonwealth; what differs are the acts, i.e., the *motions* and *actions* of the commonwealth, depending on whether they originate from the deliberations of many or of a few, of the competent or of the incompetent” (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 10.15). In the same vein, Hobbes distinguishes between the “*right* [*ius*] and the *exercise* [*exercitium*] of sovereign power [*summum imperium*]”, using a revealing analogy to God and his deputies (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 8.1).
- 30 The poor will see the state as a democracy and the wealthy as an oligarchy (Aristotle 1996, 4.15, 1299a32–1300b4). Hobbes sharply criticizes “mixarchy”, his jesting name for the “mixed constitution” (Hobbes [1681] 1990, p. 116). He argues, against Polybius, Cicero, and Machiavelli, that such a constitution is “not one independent Common-wealth, but three independent Factions; nor one Representative Person, but three” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 29, p. 228).
- 31 For Hobbes this can also be accomplished, albeit less ideally, through a small group of men (Hobbes [1642] 2003, 7.8).
- 32 Hobbes contends that any given effect is capable of originating from multiple causes. That is, any *complete* cause can be seen as an *aggregation* of the different necessary causes involved, with each of these being in some sense involved (Hobbes [1655] 1839, 9.5). Via the language of “authorship”, he applies something very close to this logic in conceptualizing the difference between the “sovereign person” and the “multitude” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 16, pp. 114–15).

- ³³ This kind of totalizing approach to politics has deeply troubling normative implications, as I have previously argued via studies of Walter Benjamin's engagement with Kantian and Jewish sources (Lesch 2014) and Martin Buber's biblically-derived critique of Carl Schmitt's political theology (Lesch 2019b).
- ³⁴ Rousseau describes how the wealthy, unable to defend themselves through force alone, turn to the rhetoric of sovereign power (Rousseau [1754] 2010, II.28–35).
- ³⁵ The quest for reconciliation itself might be understood as caused by the German Enlightenment's conception of language, one in which words were sometimes seen as gateways to a deeper reality (Abrams 1953; Lesch 2019a).

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