



Book Reviews

Kant's Critique of Hobbes: Sovereignty and Cosmopolitanism

Howard Williams

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I wish I liked champagne and caviar, but in fact I prefer real ale and haggis. I wish I liked Immanuel Kant, but the truth is that I prefer Thomas Hobbes. Ever since I can remember I have tried to change my preferences and to investigate the link between Hobbes, real ale and haggis. This new book by Howard Williams is probably targeted to people such as myself — people who are unable to ignore the questions raised by Hobbes and yet embarrassed to accept Hobbes's solutions. Williams argues that Kant engaged seriously with Hobbes's ideas, that he regarded Hobbes's system as an essential starting point in political theory (a view put forward also by Tuck, 1999, pp 207–225), that the critique of Hobbes is one of the central themes of Kant's political philosophy, and that Kant was able to offer a defensible alternative to Hobbes's absolutist model of politics. Williams examines Hobbes's influence on Kant's doctrines of the state, war, peace, and cosmopolitanism. The argument is organized in nine chapters that are easy to follow, pleasant to read, and accessible even to the most recalcitrant of undergraduates. All of Kant's political writings are taken into account and special attention is paid to the second section of his essay on *Theory and Practice* where Kant addresses Hobbes directly. There is also a chapter where Williams explores the different attitudes held by Hobbes and Kant to the revolutions of their times. Both introduction and conclusions are very clear and helpful to lead the reader through the text.

I enjoyed greatly reading this book, but, on reflection, there are three main areas that left me unsatisfied. First, whereas in places Williams suggests that his book aims at examining *Kant's understanding of Hobbes*, elsewhere instead he describes the book as an account of the differences between *his own understanding of Hobbes* and Kant (e.g. p. 221). This is confusing: is Williams claiming that there is no difference between Kant's interpretation of Hobbes and his own? This unanswered question spoils the otherwise exceptional clarity of the argument.

Second, Williams underplays the development of thought in Hobbes's works especially with regard to the passions (fear and glory) and the role of education. Although Hobbes's theory of political obligation remained the same



throughout his long life, his views on a number of issues examined by Williams did change over time. Again Williams should have made clearer whether he was concentrating on Kant's understanding of Hobbes (based chiefly on *De Cive*) or on his own understanding of Hobbes based on Hobbes's whole opus. For example, whereas fear is regarded by Hobbes as the passion 'to be reckoned upon' in *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, its role changes in *Behemoth* where people fear the wrong things, misguided by their own ignorance.

Third, as Williams is more interested in highlighting the differences rather than the similarities between Kant and Hobbes, he tends to overstate these differences, sacrificing in places the richness, complexity, and subtlety of Hobbes's political thought. Here are two examples. Williams contrasts the role of rationality in Kant's construct with the role of fear in Hobbes's model (see, e.g., p. 79 or 18). But, of course, reason plays a crucial role in Hobbes's argument too, in so far as it makes individuals understand the necessity of entering the social contract. Fear is for Hobbes no more than an incentive (as it is for Kant), although Williams is right in claiming that what is missing in Hobbes is the Kantian view that the other incentive is moral (p. 19). Rather than contrasting Hobbesian fear with Kantian rationality, it would have been more helpful to discuss the different notion of rationality at work in Hobbes's and Kant's systems.

My second example is Williams's comparison of Hobbes and Kant on equality. He claims that 'there is no greater ground of contrast in the political philosophies of Kant and Hobbes than in their attitudes to equality' (p. 103) and contrasts the Hobbesian notion of natural equality with Kant's concern for equality of status. He claims that 'Hobbes will not in any circumstances countenance equality of status under state organization in a properly constituted civil commonwealth' (p. 103). Williams's discussion of Hobbes's notion of equality is rather problematic. First, natural equality in Hobbes's construct is the foundation of a more important form of equality: the political equality of all subjects. Hobbes writes: 'As in the presence of the Master, the Servants are equall, and without any honour at all; so are the Subjects, in the presence of the Sovereign. Although they shine some more some less when they are out of his sight; yet in his presence, they shine no more than the Starres in presence of the Sun' (Hobbes, 1996, Chapter 18, p. 128). This means that for Hobbes, although subjects can enjoy a different social status and therefore be unequal among themselves, nevertheless they owe equal obedience to the state — their obligation is the same. In his attempt to highlight contrasts between Kant and Hobbes, Williams overlooks the function of political equality in both constructs. Also, as for Hobbes the sovereign can do whatever he wants, in principle the Leviathan could promote equality of status, and even gender equality. The fact that Hobbes writing in the 17th century was not interested in



social and gender matters does not imply that his theory cannot cope with them.

In conclusion, although this book has not shaken my commitment to Hobbes, it has certainly provoked me into thinking about it — over a glass of real ale, alas.

References

- Hobbes, T. (1996) in R. Tuck (ed.) *Leviathan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tuck, R. (1999) *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects

Quentin Skinner and Bo Strath (eds.)

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This volume of essays is based on a conference at the European University Institute in 2000. It provides a remarkably unified perspective on the state; one that stresses the difficulty of defining it, the surprising twists and turns in its development, and the dangers of trying to analyse it in terms of contemporary understandings of law, liberty and rights. After a brief overview of the volume by Strath and Skinner, we have a set of essays by Skinner, David Runciman and Gianfranco Poggi that are supposed to set the scene for subsequent articles on the history of the western state by Magnus Ryan, Almut Hofert, Martin van Gelederen and Annabel Brett and then on citizens, states, modernity and postmodernity by Judith Vega, Lucien Jaume, Sudipta Kaviraj, Bo Strath, Michele Riot Sarcey and Andrew Dobson. I must admit, however, to some uncertainties about the target audience for this book. It seems too historical and too uninterested in normative questions to be of much interest to political and social theorists. Despite a chapter on post-colonial India, it is too interested in the Western experience (primarily, it must be said, France, England, Germany and the Netherlands) to be of interest to people in non-European politics. Also, despite a nod to problems in the representation of women, and to environmental issues, it seems to depend on a rather abstract picture of state–citizen relations, in which