

Nancy J. Hirschmann and Joanne H. Wright (editors)
Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes

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"Even if the organization of the book doesn't lead the reader easily to the most insightful contributions, its historical approach--indeed, approaches--produce a very rich resource."

Early modern political philosophers have been well represented in the Pennsylvania State University Press *Re-reading the Canon* series: Hume got his volume in 2000, Rousseau in 2002, Locke in 2007, and now Hobbes has his turn with this historically astute and wide-ranging collection. Yet why has it taken so long for his turn to come?

In their introduction, Nancy Hirschmann and Joanne Wright offer two answers. First, Hobbes does not have much to say about women. They and the other authors highlight passages that are promising, intriguing, and troublesome but undeniably rare. S. A. Lloyd points out that in *De Cive* he writes of men and women that "the inequality of their naturall forces is not so great, that the man could get the Dominion over the woman without warre" (Hobbes 1841, 9.3; *Feminist Interpretations* [hereafter *FI*], 47-48). Indeed, in the same work, he allows that women enjoy a particular sort of dominion in the state of nature: "Originall Dominion over children belongs to the Mother, and among men no lesse than other creatures: The birth follows the belly" (9.3). In *Elements of Law* he attends to the question of how the one who has dominion over children can alienate them (for example, kill them for rebellion or pawn them for hostages [Hobbes 1969, 2.4.8; *FI*, 47-48]).

Leviathan repeats some of these principles. Dealing again with the question of who can have dominion over offspring, Hobbes writes: "there is not always the difference of strength or prudence between the man and the woman, as that the right [over children] can be determined without war" (Hobbes 1968, 253, II, 20). But elsewhere in the same work, as Gordon Schochet's piece in the volume shows, women somehow vanish from family life, and the household turns out to consist of "a man and his children; or of a man and his servants; or of a man, and his children, and servants together: wherein the Father or Master is the Sovereign" (257, II, 20; *FI*, 110). Women do reappear a little later in *Leviathan*, but only as potential booty for men in the state of nature, who use violence "to make themselves Masters of other mens persons, wives, children, and cattell" (185, I, 13).

The essays gathered in this volume add his numerous discussions of Amazons, sovereign queens, and allusions to the she-wolf who suckled the founders of Rome. For all the paradoxes and problems embedded in Hobbes's work--perhaps because of them--there is at least enough for feminists to get to work on.

The second reason for his relative neglect by feminists, according to Hirschmann and Wright, has to do with his apparent reliance on an autonomous, self-interested, and egoistic individual that is of little interest to contemporary feminists. The familiar passages from *Leviathan* bear this out: "Men have no pleasure . . . in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all" (Hobbes 1968, 185, I, 13). But there is also textual support for a more complicated story, as when he acknowledges that, in the state of nature, "there is only the Law of Nature *and the naturall inclination of the Sexes, one to another, and to their children*" (253, II, 20; my italics). Can the claim that men take no pleasure in one another's company outside the commonwealth still be plausible when men and women seek out one another for sex and love, and parents keep wanting to be with their children?

Hobbes is a complex, sometimes contradictory thinker, and feminist responses to his work are themselves complex and difficult to organize into a tightly structured volume. Faced with this difficulty, the editors apply some historical principles. The opening conversation between Carole Pateman and Quentin Skinner sketches the background of feminist and historical scholarship on Hobbes in the last thirty years, and reminds us how much richer the field is thanks to feminist research and the historically sensitive work of the Cambridge School; Part One, "Classic Questions, New Approaches," consists of essays by Susan Lloyd, Jane Jaquette, and Su Fang Ng on an array of topics including sexual subordination, liberalism, and the sovereign body. Part Two contains a reprint of Gordon Schochet's ground-breaking 1967 essay on

Hobbes and the family, as well as Hirschmann's essay advancing and complicating his analysis by raising the question of women's consent and the role of gratitude; Part Three, "Hobbes and His(torical) Women," includes three essays written by contemporary feminists on feminist responses to Hobbes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Part Four brings Hobbes's legacy right up to date with essays on fetal personhood, breast implants, and a Hobbesian theory of sexuality. In fact, only Part One--"Classic Questions, New Approaches"--gives the impression of a slightly arbitrary grouping.

Part One includes both the least successful and most successful pieces in the volume. Susan Lloyd takes up the question of women's involvement in the commonwealth, asking: "If the assumption of natural equality that Hobbes and the later social contract theorists posit is true, as it certainly seems to be, how is it that women are systematically, institutionally subordinated in most societies?" (48). She argues that nothing in Hobbes's theory necessitates the subjection of women, adding:

Locke crafts a social contract theory suited for "property-owning" men only. Rawls finally makes social contract theory take its egalitarian commitments seriously. But Hobbes, properly understood, has as sturdy and sound a philosophical basis as did Rawls to establish the political equality of women. (60)

Pateman, in her conversation with Skinner, argues that Rawls and Hobbes are engaged in profoundly different projects (31). It could be argued further that, if contemporary liberal theorists look to Hobbes as a founder of their tradition, they must be open to the possibility that what emerge as problems in Hobbes are also deep problems in liberalism. That is to say, the conundrum of women's consent is a moment where Hobbes and Hobbesian philosophy reveal that consent is a real problem, and that it cannot function as the sort of foundation that resolves the question of legitimacy for a liberal state. This leads us--if we allow it--to the insight that the liberal state cannot found itself and cannot free itself from the consequent anxiety.

Jane Jaquette's essay, "Defending Liberal Feminism: Insights from Hobbes," pursues the same aims and concludes with a more explicit exhortation to feminists to be more enthusiastic in their embrace of liberalism. She concludes:

Feminist hostility to liberalism is misplaced, in my view, and has contributed to the feminist movement's loss of social conscience and political momentum. By rejecting liberalism and its institutions rather than pressing for their reform, and by holding out a feminist utopian vision that is ultimately homogenizing rather than respectful of difference, many feminists have lost sight of the movement's liberal origins and agenda, for which we owe an often overlooked debt to Hobbes. (78)

The difficulty is in deciding what that debt is. If we see it as including constitutive difficulties and paradoxes, we might hesitate to identify social conscience with liberalism alone. The point about political momentum is well taken, however. Insofar as we live in a state founded on liberal principles, other forms of thinking and activism will not be recognized as political at all and will inevitably be marginalized as radical, revolutionary, or utopian.

The final essay in this section is one of the most satisfying pieces in the volume. Whereas Lloyd and Jaquette are political theorists, Su Fang Ng is an associate professor of English, and her disciplinary orientation makes possible a refreshing approach to Hobbes's sovereign. Hobbes tries to de-gender bodies, she argues, viewing them as mechanical, on the one hand, and bestial, on the other. The beast in question is most often the wolf. It is finally irrelevant whether the sovereign is male or female, or which parent has dominion over children, or whether women enter the commonwealth as individuals or as belonging to a patriarchal household. In the story of Romulus and Remus, the children are abandoned and suckled by a wolf. For Hobbes, this is an intricate fable that allows him to discard familial bonds completely and "to clear a conceptual space for imagining a wholly different structure for society free from kinship bonds" (98). Ng writes: "The absence of human gender in Hobbes ironically invites feminist readings, for it severs the patriarchal link between the gendered roles of family and ideal forms of government" (98). This is an exciting prospect. We just need to remember to take the irony seriously.

Each essay in this volume, like every volume in the series, is its own act of inheritance. Here, the section “Hobbes and His(torical) Women” is a wonderful reminder that we are the recipients of a long and rich tradition. It contains three essays that deal in various ways with Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), Mary Astell (1666-1731), and Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), women who wrote philosophical letters, plays, pamphlets, and essays and all of whom developed valuable critiques of Hobbes’s philosophy. Most exotic are Cavendish’s plays featuring women’s phalansteries, promises of lesbian happiness, and ferociously willful, educated women. The texts lend themselves easily to analysis in terms of gender, identity, and performance, but other scholars have already done that work (Bowerbank and Mendelson 2000), and Karen Detlefsen keeps her focus on the ways in which Cavendish offers a liberal feminist alternative to Hobbes. For instance, Cavendish has a more complex understanding of autonomy as relational (anticipating contemporary feminist thinkers such as Marilyn Friedman and Nancy Hirschmann). Cavendish recommends an education that will allow women to develop their rationality. Detlefsen continues:

Better-developed rationality will allow one to better apprehend how one ought to modulate one’s own free behavior in order to sensitively respect the rationally based subjectivity of one’s fellows. (163)

Mary Astell is one of liberal feminism’s more troublesome grand-aunts. She, like Cavendish, imagines women living together, unmarried and devoted to learning and the development of reason, but, as Karen Green points out in her chapter, she also believes that rationality leads men and women to their appropriate social roles. A legitimate government cannot be based on consent. Instead, reason allows us to recognize legitimate rule--both of the commonwealth by the sovereign and of the wife by the husband--as ordained by “a Just, a Wise and Gracious GOD” (174).

If Astell is a grand-aunt, Macaulay is the grandmother who takes up and departs from Hobbes in a way that gives rise to the distinctively liberal strain of feminist thinking. Both she and Hobbes think of government as a human invention intended to secure the rights of the people, but Macaulay insists on our natural sociability, resists the thought that the social contract requires granting absolute power to the sovereign, and rejects the claim that justice and morality are just a matter of rational self-interest. She also notes that passive obedience to a sovereign makes possible the corruption of a bad prince; will the same not be true of a bad husband? As Green points out, it will be left to Mary Wollstonecraft (who was a keen reader of Macaulay’s work) to pick up this line of thought and carry it home.

Yet the relation between Macaulay and Hobbes is a complex one, and Wendy Gunther-Canada takes a different approach in a chapter devoted to Macaulay’s essay, *Loose Remarks on Certain Positions to be Found in Mr. Hobbes’s “Philosophical Rudiments of Government and Society” with a Short Sketch of a Democratical Form of Government in a Letter to Signior Paoli* (Macaulay 1769). She studies the points of divergence highlighted by Green, and then follows Macaulay as she works through Hobbes’s attempts in *De Cive* to separate paternal authority and patriarchy. Yet, Gunther-Canada concludes, *De Cive* deserves a closer reading and an examination that is altogether less loose. That sort of attention would reveal the complicating factors of 1) Hobbes’s insistence that there is nothing natural or divine about an arrangement that is, after all, just the contingent arrangement made by the group of men who happen to establish a commonwealth, and 2) his disqualification of brute force as the source of paternal authority. This last must go on to open another set of questions because, even if force cannot secure *paternal* authority, it is essential to *sovereign* authority.

How better to inherit the tradition of these feminist interlocutors than to invite Hobbes into the conversation on topics that are of concern to twenty-first-century feminists: abortion, sexuality, breast implants, rape? In words borrowed from the title of the volume’s final section, what *has* Hobbes done for us lately?

In a beautifully self-contained chapter, Susanne Sreedhar pursues the unlikely goal of a Hobbesian theory of sexuality. Of course, the textual evidence is conflicted, but what marvelous texts they are. The first long passage Sreedhar cites is not from Hobbes, but from Quintus Curtius, the author of the classical *History of Alexander* and probably the source of all Hobbes’s references to Amazons. In it we see the Amazon queen, Thalestris, ride into Alexander’s camp with her 300 warriors. She springs from her horse with spear in hand, looks Alexander over and, though she is not very impressed with what she sees, suggests that they

have children together. He would take the male offspring, she the female. She turns down his invitation to follow him on his campaigns, but they come to terms and he stays put for thirteen days “serving her passion.” What Hobbes takes from this story is the contract between sexual partners, maintaining a discreet silence about the wonderful physical details that make the story memorable. For him, this is a striking, anti-patriarchal sexual convention that must be regarded as merely local custom, reflecting the outcome of local covenants. His lack of alarm at such a dramatic possibility is indeed noteworthy.

However, another substantial passage challenges this interpretation. The *Elements of Law* lists the sexual practices Hobbes says a sovereign will have to forbid: homosexuality, promiscuity on the part of women, polyandry, and incest. Why? Because “it is the duty of them that are in sovereign authority to increase the people” (Hobbes 1969, 2.9.2; *FL* 272). The logic is unrelenting. No person living in the state of nature and governed by natural reason has any reason to abstain from these activities. Yet when a sovereign takes on the task of tending to the good of a group of people he must encourage multitude as an element of that good, and so the law of reason directs him to restrict unproductive sex. It would have helped to ask why Hobbes insists on multitude to begin with, and to look for an answer beyond the allusion to the Biblical injunction to go forth and multiply. The chapter reaches a well-moderated conclusion: Hobbes offers a morally neutral approach to sexual mores, which gives no grounds for condemning sexual freedom or for resisting sexual repression.

The other two chapters in this section on “Hobbes in the Twenty-First Century” are the culmination of the book’s central strains of thought. In them, the struggle over the inheritance of the liberal tradition fully emerges as the most compelling theme of the volume. Joanne Boucher’s chapter, “Thomas Hobbes and the Problem of Fetal Personhood” is an intervention in the abortion debate in the US. In this essay she locates herself in that unpromising corner of the abortion debate that begins from the premise that both the pregnant woman and the fetus she carries are persons. Judith Jarvis Thompson and Eileen McDonagh have already offered pro-choice positions reached from this starting point (Thompson, 1971; McDonagh, 1996) Boucher looks to Hobbes for principles that might protect bodily autonomy and give feminists grounds for arguing that the right to abortion is part of the right to self-preservation. Boucher writes: “Imagining the fetus as a person . . . allows one to envisage an unwanted pregnancy as ‘Chains, and Imprisonment’” (235). This has two effects. The first, intended by Boucher, is to remind us that even though the debate often happens in terms of ensoulment and right to life, and even though the fetus seems more present than ever thanks to medical-imaging technology, it is still a matter of a woman’s body. The second, not emphasized by Boucher, is that it forces us to look again at what the *choice* in *pro-choice* can mean. If the fetus is indeed a person, its personhood is unlike any other, thanks entirely to the fact that it has its whole existence in a woman’s body and is completely dependent on *that* woman’s body. It is hard to imagine examples that can reliably guide us here. After all, what is the experience of pregnancy *like*? It is not clear what useful examples we can draw on from the world of persons as we try to track the operation of these particular instances of coercion or consent. Yet choice is central to liberalism, and so long as we think about women’s lives as formed by the choices they make, we must worry about consent and coercion.

This is at the heart of the essay that follows Boucher’s, Joanne Wright’s outstanding “Choice Talk, Breast Implants, and Feminist Consent Theory.” The choices Wright focuses on have to do with having breast-enhancement surgery, or opting to be a stay-at-home mother, but her larger argument goes back to debates early in the Second Wave about how to respond to women’s apparent acceptance of traditional gender roles in patriarchal society (246). Some feminists argued that women needed to destroy the male supremacist ideology and free themselves from false consciousness. Other, pro-woman feminists argued that “women ‘comply’ with patriarchal social relations not because they have internalized their own oppression, or because ‘women oppress themselves’ but because there are real material consequences for failing to comply” (247).

This second trend flourished in the 1990s as choice feminism, which Wright sees as dangerous because it threatens to short-circuit feminist attempts to work through the complexities of coercion, choice, and consent by asserting that anything that women do is an exercise of their freedom to choose. The theoretical underpinnings of this variant of liberalism lie in Hobbes’s understanding of the will, which is no more than “the last Appetite or Aversion immediately adhering to the action” (Hobbes 1968, 127, VI). As Skinner puts

it “it makes no sense to speak of being coerced into acting against your will, since the will lying behind your action will always be revealed by your action itself” (243).

According to Wright, choice feminists regard having breast implants as something women do because they want to, and it is no more politically significant than any other consumer choice. This Hobbesian assumption leaves no room for an examination of the coercive effects of dominant social norms and economic structures. By cultivating an epistemology of ignorance of these effects and the existence of the surgical-cosmetic complex, the decision for surgical enhancements is depoliticized.

This is the same as the process by which the social contract itself is depoliticized. Here, Wright bravely occupies the place of greatest difficulty in Hobbes’s political theory, and the argument culminates in a single fascinating paragraph near the end of the chapter. She initially moves to protect herself and us from the radical force of her thesis by concluding on a historical note:

With his theory of the will and consent, Hobbes was able to get around the political problem of the coercive origins of Cromwell’s rule and to argue that the English people had effectively already submitted to it. (236)

Although this is true, it applies not just to Cromwell’s England but to all political institutions. Hobbes--for whom nothing is good or evil until there is a law and a sovereign--acknowledges that the act that establishes a commonwealth cannot itself be a political act; what brings politics into existence is not itself political. It is an apolitical act but it is not a matter of its having been depoliticized, as Wright argues. It is not emptied of political meaning but is, rather, the condition for the possibility of any political meaning.

Wright pushes further, insisting that the epistemology of ignorance in Hobbes’s theory is carried forward into liberal thinking on consent:

Hobbes’s legacy is alive and well in a liberalism that believes consent can be taken at face value, that our choices reflect our will, and that context is not determinative of the legitimacy of consent. The Hobbesian refusal to engage the messy politics of consent and coercion is a problem inherited by, and still deeply embedded in, liberal political thought, as is evident in the present frenzy for choice. (256)

This is the deepest insight Hobbes has to offer feminists and liberals now. The drama of *Leviathan* shows the protagonist--the individual--moving through the concatenated scenes of the amoral and apolitical state of nature, the decisive founding event that involves little of what we would recognize as consent, and the commonwealth that involves little of what we would recognize as politics. But it is worth remembering that what may be an epistemology of ignorance in Hobbesian liberal theory might be a reluctant irony in Hobbes: irony, because this is where a real difficulty is both shown and hidden, and reluctant, because politics *is* messy, and civil war, which never stops being a possibility, is messier still.

This volume is a valuable contribution to Hobbes scholarship, liberal theory, and feminist theory. Even if the organization of the book doesn’t lead the reader easily to the most insightful contributions, its historical approach--indeed, approaches--produce a very rich resource. It is one thing to read Hobbes in the twenty-first century. It is another to read him now in a context created by Cavendish, Schochet, Pateman, and Skinner, a context that is claimed and renewed by the contributors to this collection. This is inheriting in action.

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