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## *Thomas Hobbes and the Perils of Pluralism*

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Scholarly opinion has been split uneasily between those who view Thomas Hobbes as a defender of Royalist absolutism and those who see him as the intellectual forefather of liberal individualism. While both these positions are compatible with Hobbes's deep-seated fear of intermediary associations between individual and state, this article will contend that it is his fear of the violent and irrational properties of groups that motivates his well-known individualism and gives a potentially illiberal bent to his political thought. Attending to Hobbes's neglected thoughts on the dangers posed by parties, sects, and other groups between individual and state sheds light on both the historical context and intellectual legacy of his thought. Hobbes's metaphorical complaints about those "lesser Common-wealths" akin to "wormes in the entrayles of a naturall man" also should prompt us to rethink many versions of contemporary pluralism and the vogue of civil society: Much of what today is recommended as "civil society" was considered anything but "civil" in the early modern political imagination.

Civil society is among the most widely discussed and hotly debated topics in contemporary political science. At least among normative theorists, a great deal of attention has been focused on the ways in which civic associations can advance both individual liberty and participatory democracy. While some have defended civic associations on grounds of the intrinsic goods of voluntary association (Kateb 1998, 48), perhaps the most influential recommendations of civil society have focused on their ostensible benefits for liberal democracy at large (Barber 1998; Etzioni 1996; Putnam 1995). It must come as some shock, however, to discover that much of what is today extolled as "civil society" was considered anything but "civil" by Anglo-American political thought's most extreme critic of pluralism, Thomas Hobbes.

Especially given the common emphasis on Thomas Hobbes's "modernity," his pessimistic thoughts on associational life appear strangely out of season. Against many today who recommend a vibrant civil society and pluralism as

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alternatives to the extremes of anarchy and Leviathan, Hobbes rejects pluralism as an untenable middle ground. Intermediary associations do have a place within political society; but they owe their very existence to the constitution of political authority, without which there can be no civil society. In an argument that is both historically grounded and a timeless work of social philosophy, Hobbes spurns associational life as the foremost limiting condition on political order. The perils of pluralism unfold in their most extreme version in Hobbes's attack on civic associations.

This article will pursue three main lines of inquiry. First, it will draw attention to Hobbes's neglected thoughts on associations, demonstrating how a sense of the perils of pluralism runs throughout his work. These serious misgivings about the nature of group life very well may have contributed to the more familiar individualism at which he ultimately arrived. Second, bringing front and center Hobbes's thoughts on civic associations yields a novel set of criteria for mediating contemporary debates about his alleged liberality or illiberality. Finally, and most important, exploring the context and rationale behind Hobbes's antipluralism brings to light a potential incoherence in contemporary endorsements of civil society and political pluralism, one that cuts to the very heart of liberal constitutionalism.

### Hobbes's Case against Groups: Factions and Sects against Civility

Hobbes begins his *Leviathan* with a detailed portrait of natural man, apparently freed from all conventional restraints. This radical independence precludes even those nonpolitical attachments characteristic of what today is known as civil society. Nevertheless, it is possible that Hobbes himself devoted more attention to the ambivalence of group life than contemporary commentators have to this "pluralistic" aspect of his thought.<sup>1</sup> For in his litany against the dangers of faction, sedition, and sectarianism, Hobbes demonstrates a profound understanding of the darker properties of associational life. These sociological assumptions have been ignored by most influential Hobbes scholarship, and it will be my task to demonstrate how his fear of pluralism casts light on the nature and source of his individualism. Whether one finally sees Hobbes as a Royalist defender of sovereignty or a liberal proponent of individuality, either interpretation implies a bias against groups between individual and state.

Hobbes never uses the word "association" to describe subpolitical collectivities. He prefers instead the terms "Systemes" or "Bodies Politique" to describe

<sup>1</sup>Typical of this approach is Sir Leslie Stephen (1967, 212–13), whose assessment merits citation. "What is overlooked (by Hobbes) is the truth that other (nonpolitical) parts of the system are equally essential, and that there is a reciprocal dependence indicated by the word 'organic.' Society is held together not simply by legal sanctions, but by all the countless instincts and sympathies which bind men together, and by the spontaneous associations which have their sources outside of the political order."

groups of individuals organized in what would be known today as civil society. As Hobbes observes, “The variety of Bodies Politique, is almost infinite: for they are not onely distinguished by the severall affaires, for which they are constituted, wherein there is an unspeakable diversitie; but also by the times, places, and numbers, subject to many limitations” (1968, 279).

Before turning to the “many limitations” to which Hobbes alludes, even the categories he uses to distinguish the different forms of human association are revealing. For Hobbes, subpolitical collectivities may be divided into several classes: “subordinate” versus “independent,” “public” versus “private,” and, most important, “lawful” versus “unlawful” (1968, 274–75). The commonwealth alone is an “independent” system, and all subpolitical collectivities are classed as “subordinate.”<sup>2</sup> Among these subordinate systems, those “political” include all groups “which are made by authority from the sovereign power of the commonwealth.” Those “private” are voluntarily constituted by the people themselves toward some common design. Provided they do not interfere with the sovereign power, such groups are “lawful” or “tolerated” by the sovereign (1968, 275).

The “systems” that most bedevil Hobbes fall into this latter class of “private,” “irregular” or nonhierarchical associations—what we might consider today to be the range of voluntary associations from private clubs or religious congregations to political demonstrations, militias, or street gangs. The political problem is to determine which of these potentially dangerous private and irregular groups should be classed as “lawful” or “unlawful.” Of this category of associations, Hobbes carefully distinguishes:

Concourse of people, is an Irregular Systeme, the lawfulness, or unlawfulness, whereof dependeth on the occasion, and on the number of them that are assembled. If the occasion be lawfull, and manifest, the Concourse is lawfull; as the usuall meeting of men at Church, or at a public Shew, in usuall numbers: for if the numbers be extraordinarily great, the occasion is not evident; and consequently he that cannot render a particular and good account of his being amongst them, is to be judged conscious of an unlawfull, and tumultuous designe. (1968, 287)

Hobbes admittedly grants some discretion for the sovereign to determine if a particular “concourse” endangers civil liberty (1968, 275, 285–87; Oakshott 1991, 265, 282). Under the best of circumstances, this may afford significant room for associational life.

But putting aside the question of whether the prudent Hobbesian sovereign will tolerate any given association, Hobbes’s account of intermediary association is distinguished by his broader pessimism about conflicts between associational liberty and sovereign power. To cede any natural autonomy to the group

<sup>2</sup>Patricia Springborg (1976) outlines Hobbes’s attempt to model political association along the lines of the *persona ficta*, or the legal corporation. She does not consider that in doing so Hobbes undermines the legal doctrine of “corporate personality” as traditionally applied to churches, universities, and municipalities. Contrast F. W. Maitland (1958).

ignores the inevitability of conflicts between the group and sovereign power. By its very nature, then, group life can never be absolute or self-constituting:

And to give leave to Body Politique of Subjects, to have an absolute Representative to all intents and purposes, were to abandon the government of so much of the Commonwealth, and to divide the Dominion, contrary to their Peace and Defence. which the Sovereign cannot be understood to doe by any Grant, that does not plainly, and directly discharge them of their subjection. (1968, 275)

While this definitional scheme gives us some idea how Hobbes would distinguish the various classes of human associations, his underlying assumptions are equally revealing. Hobbes elsewhere emphasizes the strictly consensual basis of political society. Yet the vocabulary he uses to describe subpolitical collectivities does not immediately suggest a voluntary basis of organization and even seems a throwback to an earlier organic metaphor of the body politic. “Bodies Politique” or “Systemes” move as multitudes and not as reasoning individuals. This tension bears exploration for it serves to reinforce the distinction between the empirical world Hobbes appreciates and the philosophical world he recommends.

In his treatment of these “Bodies Politique,” Hobbes struggles with the sense in which these attachments are both voluntary and compulsory. Our representation in the activities of “Bodies Politique” implies that an individual can be held responsible for group actions: “whatsoever the assembly shall decree . . . is the act of the Assembly, or Body Politique, and the act of every one by whose Vote the Decree was made; but not the act of any man that being present Voted to the contrary” (1968, 276–77).

In many ways, this argument parallels his more familiar description of the personation of sovereignty: our assent or will makes us accountable for those collective actions we have authorized (cf. Baumgold 1988, Chap. 3). Yet this tension between collective responsibility and individual agency yields an important difference in Hobbes’s treatment of group belonging. “Bodies Politique” are not simply analogous to “lesser commonwealths.” Unlike our personation in the sovereign power, which is irrevocable and unconditional, we are encouraged to dissent from group activities whose actions would seem imprudent or unjust: “It is manifest by this, that in Bodies Politique subordinate, and subject to a Sovereign Power, it is sometimes not onely lawfull, but expedient, for a particular man to make open protestation against the decrees of representative assembly, and cause their dissent to be Registered, or to take witness of it; because otherwise they may be obliged to pay debts contracted, and be responsible for crimes committed by other men” (1968, 278–79).

This concern to liberate the individual from the sway of group involvements has an obvious affinity for liberal individualism. Related passages would seem to bear out recent arguments (Flathman 1993; Kateb 1989; Ryan 1988a) that Hobbes values moral individuality for its own sake. However, there is an equally plausible case for interpreting these passages in light of his more obvious con-

cern for public order. As we shall see below, by forcing the individual to distance himself from group actions and to think through his commitment to collective goals, Hobbes defends not only an impulse amenable to liberal individualism; he also unveils an attack on pluralism in the name of public order.

In distinguishing the criteria for “lawfulness” or “unlawfulnesses” of the various sorts of “Bodies Politique,” Hobbes speaks only obliquely of the particular strictures groups can legitimately impose on their members. Yet he explicitly insists that groups are to be judged according to the ends for which they are formed, in particular whether or not these ends are potentially at odds with sovereign power:

But Leagues of the Subjects of one and the same Common-wealth . . . are unnecessary to the maintaining of Peace and Justice, and (in case the designe of them be evill, or Unknown to the Common-wealth) unlawfull. For all uniting of strength by private men, is, if for evill intent, unjust; if or intent unknown, dangerous to the Publique, and unjustly concealed. (1968, 285–88, esp. 286)

This passage is representative of the broader assumptions of Chapters 22 and 29, where Hobbes’s complaints about collective action are driven not by his worries that individuality will be squashed by the group, but instead by the dangerous public consequences of group fanaticism.

Hobbes’s language in these two chapters tells us much about his animus toward the group. The organic metaphor of disease and dissolution provides evidence of the tension between civic associations and sovereign power and testifies to Hobbes’s worries about the former’s danger to the latter: among the foremost “Diseases of a Common-wealth” are “many lesser Common-wealths in the bowels of a greater,” which “like wormes in the entrayles of a naturall man” are “perpetually meddling with the Fundamentall Lawes, to the molestation of the Common-wealth; like the little Wormes, which Physicians call *Ascariides*” (1968, 373–75). His very choice of words suggests that Hobbes’s complaints about the deforming effects of group life on individuality are at the very least subsidiary to his worries that once joined together, these collectivities will undermine the sovereign power without which there can be no measure of political liberty.

### Imagining Pluralism and Civil Society

Religious sectarianism and factionalism occupy the majority of Hobbes’s attention. But he also recognizes that corporate attachments lead to standards of friendship, loyalty, and duty that are potentially at odds with political obligation. One’s ties to family, friends, and lovers are among those carrying the most weight in social life. Each such relationship generates a set of imperatives with legitimate claims to oblige. As recognized in his brief overture to the paternal bond in Chapter 43 of *Leviathan*, it is “right” to obey one’s father, just as it is “right” to follow one’s conscience and to be true to one’s sovereign (1968, 609–610). Each sphere of human life generates a set of duties, values, or truths that

at successive moments overlap and diverge. Beyond the monistic philosophical world of the “ought” presented in *Leviathan*, Hobbes displays a striking sociological appreciation of the pluralistic “is” of social life.<sup>3</sup>

By positing multiple allegiances, pluralism yields what Rousseau called “divided” or “partial” beings (1987, 156). Hobbes’s psychology of “proximity” further suggests that all other things being equal, those obligations acquired in groups exercise a greater sway than more remote obligations to the sovereign. Hence arises their danger:

For the common people have been, and always will be, ignorant of their duty to the public, as never meditating anything but their particular interest; in other things following their immediate leaders; which are either the preachers, or the most potent of the gentlemen that dwell amongst them: as common soldiers for the most part follow their immediate captains, if they like them. (1840, 212)

Any organized resistance to sovereign power depends on these personal ties and corporate loyalties.

Foremost on Hobbes’s mind are those sectarians, congregations, parties, militias and other mass movements at the heart of seventeenth-century social unrest. Such organs of pluralism trouble him: as he laments “the great number of Corporations; which are as it were many lesser Common-wealths in the bowels of a greater, like wormes in the entrayles of a naturall man” (1968, 375). This polemic against corporations has been taken by Macpherson (1965) as an indictment of voluntary economic associations such as the joint stock company, the progenitor of the modern firm. But while Hobbes’s logic might be carried through to a modern context, when multinational corporations or other economic firms become so large and influential as to threaten public order, these are not Hobbes’s primary concerns. As Thomas (1965, 221–27) suggests in his historical rebuttal of Macpherson, to imply that economic associations prove anything other than a matter of relative indifference to Hobbes is to miss the point of his indictment. It further ignores direct textual evidence

<sup>3</sup>With the prevalent emphasis on Hobbesian “psychology,” remarkably little attention has been focused on his “sociology.” Given the stress Hobbes lays on his idealized world of philosophical individualism and his goal of fostering a more rational and calculating human psychology, it is very easy to lose touch with his underlying assumptions about how humans actually do behave. This point is often obscured in the explicitly philosophical literature on Hobbes. Several recent commentators have nevertheless distinguished between the “theory” and “practice” of Hobbes’s writings, suggesting that Hobbes’s philosophical portrayal does not always match his assumptions about how humans will actually behave. Like S. A. Lloyd (1992) and Holmes (1995, Chap. 3), my account explores this tension between the idealized, meliorative world of philosophical individualism described in *Leviathan* and the empirical world of affectual passions and convulsions (*Behe-moth*) for which *Leviathan* represents the ostensible cure. Of this recent literature, Richard Flathman (1993, 139–42) perhaps best captures Hobbes’s own recognition of the limits of methodological individualism, of the qualitative difference between “aggregates” of rational individuals and those “multitudes” within which individuals surrender their interests and reason in the selfless pursuit of a cause. My disagreements will become apparent below.



revealing Hobbes's concern in this passage to be with those political and religious subsocieties that foster disorder and revolt, and only secondarily with economic firms whose political impact, unintended if any, leads just as easily to quietism:

Private Bodies Regular, but Unlawfull, are those that unite themselves into one person Representative, without any publique Authority at all; such as are the Corporations of Beggars, Theeves and Gipsies, the better to order their trade of begging, and stealing; and the Corporations of men, that by Authority from any forraign Person, unite themselves in anothers Dominion, for the easier propagation of Doctrines, and for making a party, against the Power of the Common-wealth. (1968, 374)

A number of commentators have been misled on this point. Macpherson (1964, 93-94) faults Hobbes for ignoring the problem of social classes, and further extends this anachronistic demand into the mistaken objection that Hobbes does not recognize any intermediary organizations or social groups between sovereign and individual. Similarly, Wrong (1994, 167-68) overlooks the sense in which a war of group against group looms in the back of Hobbes's mind, leading him to conclude that Hobbes is ignorant of the especial problems posed by group conflict.

These are the interpretative difficulties arising from Hobbes's strategy of prescribing the individualistic society of his mind's eye while at the same time denouncing those corporate entities in civil society that would frustrate his philosophical individualism. Yet, even in the midst of his polemics against the perils of pluralism, Hobbes reveals a striking appreciation of the bonds that do in fact unite society.

Notably, the familial bond, both in its natural or primordial incarnation, and as represented in the divine sanction "Children obey your parents in all things," represents one imperative potentially at odds with political citizenship (1968, 610). The institution of the family is the sole exception to Hobbes's general rule of denying that any groups exist "by nature." Hobbes will allow a primordial "natural" existence to the family that he denies to associations such as the church, party, or university (cf. Schochet 1990). Although the state of nature may well have been comprised of many "naturally" constituted families constantly at odds with one another, these patriarchal units retain whatever authority they hold at the leave of the sovereign: "such as are all Families, in which the Father, or Master ordereth the whole Family. For he obligeth his Children, and Servants, as farre as the Law permitteth, though not further, because none of them are bound to obedience in those actions, which the law hath forbidden to be done" (1968, 287, 285; cf. Schochet 1975; Wrong 1994). Regardless of Hobbes's concession to the "natural" origins and primordial allure of patriarchal authority, the family's autonomy—like that of the church, party, or university—depends entirely on the silence of the law.

Hobbes similarly acknowledges the draw of charisma and its attendant dangers to the civil order. The vulnerability of the "affections" of the subject to the



“witchcraft” of charismatic leaders like Julius Caesar reveals “the Popularity of a potent subject” to be one of the “diseases” of perennial threat to the commonwealth (1968, 374). The fundamental human desire for novelty, spectacle, and adventure, inflamed “by the neighbourhood also of those that have been enriched by it,” makes insurrections likely (1968, 368–69).

Contrary to the claims of Baumgold (1990, 76–78, 81–84), Hobbes’s criticism of public rhetoric takes aim at the psychological properties of both leaders and the amassed collectivities over whom they cast their spell. As Baumgold rightly appreciates, leadership is undeniably a problem for Hobbes: “Eloquence and want of discretion” on the part of the rhetors, motivated by a fundamental human drive for recognition, accounts for one of the perennial dangers that dispose the commonwealth to rebellion (1969, 175–78).

But in addition to his criticism of the psychological vainglory driving certain “elite” men to seek recognition at any cost, Hobbes also appreciates the sociological proclivities of those groups that are subject to public rhetoric, liable to draw them into political actions they would best avoid. As Hobbes explains in the context of his argument against the merits of involving the masses in public deliberation, public orations “are delivered not by right reason, but by a certain violence of mind” (1841, 138). In marked contrast to Hobbesian nominalism, public rhetoric arrives at truth only by chance; its chief “property is not to inform, but to allure” (1841, 138). Even when the rhetorical contest between rival factions does not lead directly to violence, the inconstancy of mass politics gives an evanescent quality to public deliberations that undermines public authority: “Insomuch as the laws do float here and there, as it were upon the water” (1841, 139).

Hobbes’s anatomy of discontent outlines the recipe for civil strife. Discontent, pretense, and hope, taken together and catalyzed with “mutual intelligence,” “sufficient number,” “arms,” and the presence of a charismatic leader, make for disorder. But Hobbes significantly describes this not in terms of an aggregate of individuals, but instead as a “multitude” or “one body of rebellion, in which intelligence is the life, number the limbs, arms the strength, and a head the unity, by which they are directed to one and the same action” (1969, 175).

Hobbes’s anticorporate argument is not, as Baumgold (1990, 89n.) implies, merely a figure of speech, thoughtlessly developed later in *Leviathan* in the organic metaphor of the body politic. The organic metaphor is already present in *The Elements of Law*, as evidenced by the above-cited passage. Even granting its likely origins in Harvey’s work and its evocative function as a figure of speech, this metaphor more significantly bespeaks the sociological assumptions that animate Hobbes’s distrust of corporate bodies. A “multitude” is more than just a mass of individuals standing as easy marks for predatory elites, though in some cases it may be that as well. Rather, such corporate bodies enjoy a spontaneous, organic life of their own in which the individuals so conjoined put aside individual interests and subordinate themselves to either a principle, a cause, or a leader. Visible when such individuals become divorced from

the reason and restraint that informs the actions of solitary individuals, this tendency of associational life profoundly disturbs Hobbes:

Though the effect of folly, in them that are possessed of an opinion of being inspired, be not visible alwayes in one man, by any very extravagant action, that proceedeth from such Passion; yet when many of them conspire together, the Rage of the whole Multitude is visible enough. For what argument of Madnesse can there be greater, than to clamour, strike, and throw stones at our best friends? Yet this is somewhat lesse than such a multitude will do. (1968, 140–41)

We find here one of the earliest sociological accounts of collective behavior. Like Le Bon ([1895] 1995), Simmel (1971), and others, Hobbes fears the release from individual inhibitions provoked not just by the “few” “elite” leaders or the “children of evil” (cf. Baumgold 1990, 76–78; Kateb 1989, 363–66), but also by the intrinsic properties of the group. “Ambition,” he notes, “can do little without hands” (1840, 252). Hobbes’s metaphorical portrayal of the qualitative transformation that associational life introduces into human behavior forms a constant thread throughout his theoretical and historical writings. From the former writings, he attempts to abstract this sociological reality by means of an idealized philosophical individualism; in the latter, he laments its dangerous properties.

For instance, in his treatment of the historical conditions contributing to the English Civil War in *Behemoth*, Hobbes faults not particular historical actors, nor the behavior of solitary calculating individuals, but rather culls an important sociological criticism of methodological individualism:

I see by this, it is easier to gull the multitude, than any one man amongst them. For what one man, that has not his natural judgment depraved by accident, could be so easily cozened in a matter that concerns his purse, had he not been passionately carried away by the rest to change of government, or rather to a liberty of everyone to govern himself. (1840, 211–12)

As Holmes has observed of this same passage, Hobbes possesses a rich and complex understanding of social psychology that would refute critics who reduce his psychology to “possessive individualism” or “atomism” (1995, Ch. 3).

These tendencies are undeniably part of the individual psyche and the “vain glory” of human nature. But these individual proclivities are most often invoked by public activity within a group. Not only does a qualitative and irrational transformation occur when solitary individuals form groups (Yack 1993), but in fact, as the sociological tradition later appreciated, these sectarian associations of principle are moved to conflicts of an order of magnitude greater than those among rational and solitary individuals:

Furthermore, since the combat of wits is the fiercest, the greatest discords which are, must necessarily arise from this contention . . . Which may appear hence, that there are no wars so sharply waged as between sects of the same religion, and factions of the same commonweal, where the contestation is either concerning doctrines or political prudence. (1841, 7–8)

Provoked by the slightest doctrinal difference, or by matters of disinterested principle or ideology, this extreme collective viciousness can hardly be explained by the circling of self-interested elites. These tendencies most often arise in voluntary associations like sects or political parties, where doctrinal disputes become a matter of self-conscious affirmation and denial.

This collective fervor may be “enthusiastic,” as in the subordination of a group to some positive cause that precludes all prudence and moderation; or it may be negative, driven by a “panic-terror” that is equally dangerous: “Feare, without the apprehension of why, or what, PANIQUE TERROR . . . whereas in truth, there is alwayes in him that so feareth, first, some apprehension of the cause, though the rest run away by Example, every one supposing his fellow to know why” (1968, 124). Groups contribute to these idealistic and fanatical tendencies in two ways. First, associational involvement represents a departure from the privatism of family and economic life and an entrance into the public realm of political ideals and causes. Even if responsibly undertaken by rational individuals, this mobilization for public involvement would be unsettling enough (Coltman 1962). But this self-overcoming represents not just a shifting of an “aggregate” of solitary individuals from private concerns to matters pertaining to the commonweal. Instead, it delivers individuals into political involvement en masse, carried along by the collective fervor of the “multitude” or group.

Hobbes’s writings abound with similar criticisms of the perils of pluralism. The growth of municipalities within the commonwealth offers a similar threat. Denouncing the “immoderate greatnesse of a Town,” Hobbes implicitly recognizes the tendency of local or regional attachments to eclipse more distant ties to the sovereign authority (1968, 374–75; 1840, 168). Universities are “the core of rebellion” and must be bent to the will of the sovereign power (1840, 236–37). Likewise, armies have imperatives of their own that subvert civil order just as often as they support it (1968, 374). In all these cases, Hobbes endorses undivided sovereign power as an alternative to the rival imperatives of personal and familial loyalty, local attachments, and the draw of charismatic personality.

### On Hobbes’s Liberalism: Individualism as Fact or Value?

So far two distinct but related themes have emerged from Hobbes’s work. The first is his broader fear of the perils of pluralism, or the way in which disorderly and unregulated groups pose a threat to civil order. This fear itself rests on even more fundamental assumptions about the special dangers of collective behavior, as otherwise civil individuals become cruel and irrational under the influence of those around them. It remains for us to consider more directly the connection between these two strands of Hobbes’s argument. This will tell us much about the nature and source of Hobbes’s celebrated individualism.

It has been suggested that Hobbes’s criticism of pluralism may prove compatible with a defense of either liberal individuality or sovereign power. But

arguing, as have many recent commentators (Flathman 1992, 1993; Kateb 1989; Ryan 1988a), that Hobbes's political thought is theoretically compatible with liberal individualism does not prove that the emancipation of the individual is Hobbes's ultimate goal. Given Hobbes's explicit and recurrent link between pluralism and its dangers to civil order, it can at best be misleading and at worst incorrect to conclude that his animus against groups is solely a matter of defending liberal individuality. Focusing exclusively on the liberal potential of Hobbes's critique of collective behavior requires one to discount Hobbes's emphasis on the threats such groups pose to civil order. What we have suggested so far is that individualism for Hobbes is as much an instrumental or functional good—to be praised for its contribution to a reasonable, privatistic, and civil society—as a value ultimately desirable for its own sake. This claim must be defended more directly.

In the abstract, one can imagine many ways of defending liberal individuality. One could simply and directly extol the virtues of the rational, autonomous individual, as did Kant, Mill, and countless subsequent liberals. Yet even the most casual reference to *Leviathan* reveals that this first, thick defense of individuality is notably lacking. At no point in *Leviathan* does Hobbes simply come out and say that individuality is valuable for its own sake. Defenders of the liberal Hobbes are undoubtedly correct that this is not the end of the story. Criticizing pluralism as a tendency within civil society likely to coerce or overawe such hypothetical individuals might also be a plausible, if backhanded, way of defending liberal individualism were there not a more obvious explanation for Hobbes's animus against groups. This article has developed an equally plausible historical and textual explanation that makes Hobbes's complaints about civic associations directly subordinate to his obsession with a tranquil civil order.

Many passages in which interpreters have teased such an interpretation out of Hobbes's writings—notably, in Chapters 22 and 29 where Hobbes complains about the undue sway of groups over individuals—are set forth in the context of the broader dangers of pluralism to civil order. Further, in those passages in which Hobbes comes closest to directly praising individuality—for example, in his carefully qualified endorsement of the individual believer, prophet, or religious virtuoso—he makes it clear that such individuals are to be preferred not because this is a desirable way of life, per se. Instead, such a world of autonomous individuals is “perhaps the best,” so long as “it be without contention” (1968, 711). Carefully couched in these functionalist terms, this is hardly a ringing endorsement of individuality for its own sake. Furthermore, if individuality is really such an absolute value for Hobbes, it is unclear why he should so willingly acknowledge that it must be limited when it conflicts with civil order. Given that he has few misgivings about the state's unlimited and undivided power to coerce individuals, why suppose that Hobbes is any more concerned about the undue sway of families, predatory ministers, enthusiastic sects, charismatic leaders, universities, or armies, except insofar as these prompt the gullible to revolt against the sovereign?

It has been suggested that Hobbes's doctrine of "the silence of the law" allows for a generous balance between liberty and authority that may lend a liberal dimension to his work (1968, 271; Oakeshott 1991, 264–65). But even a defender of Hobbes's liberality like Michael Oakeshott admits that while this domain of liberty established by the silence of the law offers a sphere of individual autonomy, it leaves precious little room for associational life: "What . . . is excluded from Hobbes's civitas is not the freedom of the individual but the independent rights of spurious 'authorities' and of collections of individuals such as churches, which he saw as the source of the civil strife of his time" (Oakeshott 1991, 282; cf. Flathman 1992, 45–51).

Leo Strauss has similarly suggested that "if we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes" (1953, 181–82). Strauss's careful qualification notwithstanding, these are far from the only criteria for defining liberalism. Moreover, the incautious converse application of Strauss's argument has led to the distorting conflation of liberalism with the social contractarianism and hedonism of Hobbes. In effect, if one takes liberal thought to be more than individual autonomy, then there is a deeply illiberal dimension to Hobbes's thought. Hobbes's treatment of civic associations gives us several important reasons to reject these criteria as misleading or inadequate.

Oakeshott, Strauss, and other "liberal" interpretations cite Hobbes's individualism as evidence of his liberality. But we should also notice how this individualism robs Hobbes's account of one of its liberal dimensions. By dissociating individuals from nonpolitical attachments, or by allowing these engagements only at the behest of the sovereign, Hobbes relieves individuals of the privileges accruing from such engagement. The subsidiary rights they might gain by participation in corporate associations like the religious community, the intellectual community, or the security of family life are accessible only at the discretion of the sovereign. As the frontispiece of *Leviathan* ominously depicts, these solitary atoms surrender themselves individually to the unmediated imperatives of citizenship; in this ideal, they are not vexed by the divided loyalties or partial attachments that worry both Hobbes and Rousseau.

Hobbes's reasons for extolling the life of the rational, dissociated individual may escape his interpreters in a liberal age. For us, liberty is to be understood merely as the absence of restraint, the willful emancipation from the influences of both civil society and the state. But this is to overlook the deeper sense of disempowerment accompanying the life of the solitary individual. Hannah Arendt (1951, 294–96) captured an important truth in her observation that she who is shorn of all subsidiary identities—family, party, locality, religion, friendship, social class, or trade's union—save that of political citizenship alone stands in dire fear. Experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism testifies to the fact that the isolated individual faces the most treacherous life of all.

Granting these doubts about whether Hobbes's celebration of the rational individual stems from a sincere commitment to individual liberty introduces the related problem of how or why he should have adopted his individualistic premises. Secondary literature has explained his individualism in widely different ways. More traditional Hobbes scholars have accounted for his individualism by focusing on the influence of Baconian science and materialism (Watkins 1965; Wolin 1960); medieval natural law and humanism (Tuck 1989; 1993); nominalism (Krook 1959); thoroughgoing and consistent psychological assumptions (Brown 1965; Plamenatz 1965), and the Biblical covenant tradition that Hobbes both appropriated and modified in seeking an individualistic baseline upon which to ground his politics (Eisenach 1981; Mitchell 1993). These influences converge upon a logical resolute and decompositive method that is fundamental to his task of merging solitary individuals into a single sovereign power. Another influential school of thought has focused attention on the normative roots of Hobbes's individualism. Led by Strauss (1953) and Macpherson (1964, 1965), this view holds that Hobbes's turn to individuality follows necessarily from his "modern" rejection of the teleological natural science of Aristotle, in the first case, or his endorsement of a "possessive individualistic" socioeconomic order, in the latter.

In focusing on what would seem to be Hobbes's positive *endorsement* of individualism, interpreters have neglected his reasons for *rejecting* associational life and the variety of pluralistic subsocieties he perceived most threatening to civil society. Instead, following John Dewey's (1974) suggestion about the significance of what Hobbes *did not choose*, the perils of pluralism must be seen as an equally plausible context for his turn toward philosophical individualism. Hobbes's case against groups—those "wormes within the entrayles of the naturall man"—explains his bias against the common law, universities, armies, political factions, religious sects, corporations, the "immoderate greatness of a towne," and the dangers of political participation. Intended to rescue solitary and rational individuals from the irrational passions that inflame groups, Hobbes's individualism merits attention as an alternative to the pluralism he rejects.

This explanation makes logical as well as historical and textual sense. Perhaps the most obvious corollary to a theory that says that groups are to be discouraged primarily for their danger to civil order is the converse suggestion that rational and solitary individuals are to be preferred if for no other reason than because they pose little threat. These functionalist roots of Hobbes's endorsement of the solitary individual give us compelling reasons to propose a reversal of common assumptions about the sources of his celebrated individualism. Rather than taking Hobbes's individualism as a given, the basic tenet from which his entire normative and empirical philosophical system derives, one can also take it as an endpoint or desideratum toward which the whole system aims. For Hobbes, multitudes are insurgent; individuals are rational, deliberative, and decent. Given this basic sociological assumption that constantly reappears throughout Hobbes's corpus, it is difficult to imagine why he



would seek to found his *Leviathan* on anything but the firm bedrock of the isolated, rational, and instrumental individual.

In fairness, this account cannot exclude the possibility that Hobbes's individualistic theory may have other sources. Undoubtedly, such a complex system as Hobbes's represents the convergence of a number of influences, historical as well as normative. But what this argument does establish beyond doubt is that the perils of pluralism were a significant enough preoccupation of Hobbes's that they deserve to be listed alongside other more familiar explanations of his celebrated individualism.

### Hobbes's Counter-Reformation

This faith in individual instrumentality as preferable to collective fanaticism does not imply the ultimate coherence of Hobbes's position. For the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, which seemed to dissolve once and for all the possibility of a permanent, institutional solution to the problem of religious conflict, is never far from Hobbes's view. Given the sheer volume of literature devoted to connecting Hobbes's project with Protestantism and toleration, a few brief thoughts are in order.

Many commentators have been struck by the affinity between Hobbes's political theory and the logic of Protestantism. For example, Eisenach has explored this point in much detail and concludes finally that Hobbes's accommodation entails a further extension of the Protestant distinction between internal conscience and external action: "Religion would then become an extremely personal affair, its only institutional marks being a multitude of ever-shifting voluntary sects, each headed by ministers with no legal authority" (1981, 62–63; cf. Mitchell 1993, 47–48). However, the Protestant nature of Hobbes's starting point may well disguise the underlying casuistry of his conclusions.

Eisenach suggests that Hobbes *ideally* sought to effect a break between inner faith and outward action and that a world of de-fanged sectarianism *might* logically follow from such a transformation. Yet, however much the philosophical logic of Protestantism serves as a model for Hobbes, the practical reality of religious sectarianism seemed destined to disrupt political order. One must distinguish the ideal logic of Protestantism, in which the individual believer is theoretically free to follow his own best lights in religious matters, from the historical reality of Protestant sectarianism, in which these individuals recombined in violent and politically destructive ways. Hobbes's apparent affinity for the theoretical logic of Protestantism may well serve as the best evidence of his rejection of its historical reality.

In *Behemoth*, for instance, Hobbes takes the Protestant model of individual self-determination as the primary limiting condition on political life (1840, 190–91). It is not, then, a distrust of the institutional authority of the "church" so much as an understanding of the sociological properties of the "sect" that troubles Hobbes. His goal is to restore some institutional control over the unregu-



lated claims of Protestantism. Ironically, in seeking to rescue Hobbes's thought from its objectionable Erastian implications, Eisenach delivers Hobbes back to the very problem he originally sought to overcome: namely, the dilemma of the free and autonomous individual capable of undertaking potentially dangerous sectarian involvements.

Goldie (1991) captures the tension—historical as well as philosophical—implicit in Hobbes's view. Goldie appreciates Hobbes's point that “to allow that private conscience, or the church, may be a judge of religious truth immediately opened a Pandora's box of religious warfare and persecution, the conflict of state, church and disaffected sects,” from which Hobbes's civil religion claimed to deliver us. On the other hand, however, Goldie observes that the troubling implications of Hobbes's Erastian prioritization of the political were patently visible to his critics in his time, in particular to Coke, Bramhall, and Lawson:

Hobbes's 'public conscience,' the equation of religion and sovereignty, was seen to dissolve wholly the claims of church against state. Religious truth was turned into a human fabrication, the shared significations of a civil community. The church's understanding was collapsed into the state's will. Hobbes, said Coke, aimed 'to make all faith, and religion, as well as society, a mere invention and policy of man.' (1991, 611)

Hobbes's recourse to a civil religion was praised by Rousseau, who admiringly observed that “of all Christian authors, the philosopher Hobbes is the only one who saw clearly both the evil and the remedy, and who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle and fully restore that political religion without which neither the state nor the government will ever be well constituted” (1987, 222). While Hobbes and Rousseau concur that religious associations are a perennial source of division and contention, their solution of relegating religion to a merely “civil” function poses a threat to those who take seriously the essence of religious experience, in Hobbes's time and in ours (Cooke 1996; Robertson 1967).

Hobbes's concern to manage the Post-Reformation dilemma of religious pluralism is evident in his attempt to divorce conscience from will (1968, 356–67, 526–30). Given the “naturall Seed” of religion, even an otherwise homogeneous political body will differ on questions of ultimate values (1968, 166–83). Not only do these plural religious standards lead to conflict in their own right, as one religious group is aroused to conflict with another, but they are also disruptive of the civil order at large. Because religious conflicts involve matters of the spirit—a realm divorced of the prudence of human reason—they yield the most violent conflicts.

Hobbes's complaints about groups are inseparable from his effort to circumscribe the realm of individual conscience. He struggles to determine within what limits humans ought to enjoy autonomy in matters of conscience and whether this difficulty entails an individual or a collective solution. Yet even granting his serious doubts about the judgment of individuals, the problem of radical individualism is not the one he most fears. Knowing full well that individuals

will err, Hobbes nonetheless takes it for granted that so long as these errors are individual and not collective, their socially disruptive effects will be negligible. The “Madnesse” of the religious virtuoso, ascetic, or prophet is of little danger to anyone but himself. Placed at the head of a militant sect, however, he undermines any ground for civil order: “so also, though wee perceive no great unquietnesse, in one, or two men; yet we may be well assured, that their singular Passions, are parts of the Seditious roaring of a troubled Nation” (1968, 141).

As a surrogate for the dangers of individual conscience, Hobbes counsels that individuals in doubt ought to look back to the collectivity or “publique Conscience” to clarify their actions, if not also their beliefs (1968, 365–66). Hobbes takes it for granted, as did traditional Christian teaching, that a significant body of knowledge has already been socially determined. In traditional Christian doctrine, “conscience” (*conscientia*) is literally “shared knowledge,” or the judgment of the community. Hobbes’s attack on groups means to ensure that the community to which these puzzled individuals make recourse is the authoritative political community of the sovereign, and not the dangerous pluralism of a myriad of shifting sects.<sup>4</sup>

This dilemma allows for two radically different interpretations. In the former, Hobbes merely extends the Protestant view of individual conscience, making religion into a deeply personal affair about which individuals might disagree without falling prey to social conflicts. In the latter, diametrically opposed view, Hobbes resists this tendency with his insistence on the “public” nature of conscience and his search for the maximum degree of shared beliefs that finds expression in his “Christian Commonwealth.” One defends either extreme view at the hazard of abstracting from the complexity of Hobbes’s thought. But what is significant for the purposes of this argument is that either possibility is affronted by the perils of pluralism. Whether Hobbes desires truly autonomous individuals or the seamless consensus of a Christian Commonwealth, the pluralistic world of sectarianism and social conflict is a barrier.

With but one important modification, these observations bear out Rousseau’s seminal assertion (echoed by C. B. Macpherson) that Hobbes looked back to a prepolitical state of nature but discovered there only the men of his time. Ironically, however, the men Hobbes describes were neither Rousseau’s depraved men of “bourgeois” society nor Macpherson’s celebrated “possessive individualists.” Instead, they may very well have been the contentious Protestant sectarians of the seventeenth century.

<sup>4</sup>Hobbes retains the traditional Christian doctrine that individuals should look beyond themselves to clarify the dictates of conscience. Given the inadequacy of reason to judge among confessional disputes, there must be a single “marked” church, or what Susan Rosa describes as a “procedural” or “institutional” remedy to the problem of conscience (1996, 104–106; cf. Strong 1993). However, Hobbes vehemently opposes the Protestant corollary that the community to which one must turn is that of one’s fellow sectaries. His attempt to construct an authoritative, unitary, and scientific font of sovereignty is therefore intimately involved with his struggle with the explosive characteristics of sectarianism.

This suggestion has broader implications than merely shedding light on the religious context of Hobbes's political thought. For if we take seriously Hobbes's assessment of the fundamental danger of religious sectarianism, we are compelled to reject or at least to qualify much of the eighteenth-century thinking that arose in his wake. Given modern constitutionalism's commitment to repressing difficult group conflicts into the private sphere, and its optimistic hope that this would lead to a world of de-fanged sectarianism, Hobbes's demurrer presents a formidable challenge.

### Thomas Hobbes versus the Tradition of Liberal Constitutionalism

In this treatment of his social philosophy, we have seen that Hobbes takes individualism neither as an empirical fact of human existence, nor as a normative vision desirable for its own sake. Rather, Hobbes's adoption of the idiom of moral individuality represents a way both to cope with the logic of Protestant self-determination and, so far as possible, to prevent this nascent individuality from reconstituting itself into dangerous sectarian forms. These apparently contradictory goals—namely, both controlling *and* fostering an individualistic impulse in society—in fact reveal themselves to be complementary when seen in light of his case against civic associations.

After centuries of conflict over the proper relationship between sacred and secular matters, American constitutionalism largely follows from the hopeful solution of Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other architects of classical liberalism, who sought to formalize earlier philosophical distinctions by separating church from state (Boyd 2000). According to Adam Smith (1976, 314–15), a society so divided into “two or three hundred, or perhaps into as many thousand small sects,” would likely dispel the fanaticism of each, disposing “candour,” “good temper and moderation,” and civil habits of mutual respect. For Madison (1953, 304), provisions for religious liberty similarly promised an end to religious conflicts that had threatened civil order: “The American Theatre has exhibited proofs, that equal and compleat liberty, if it does not wholly eradicate it, sufficiently destroys its malignant influence on the health and prosperity of the state.”

Viewing the American experiment forty-odd years after its inception, Alexis de Tocqueville (1988, 295) credited the separation of church and state with taming religious fanaticism. However, to Karl Marx, another prominent nineteenth-century observer, the “political emancipation” of religion merely begged the conflicts of earlier centuries. Marx's depiction of religious pluralism as the sublimated conflict of an “*omnium bellum contre omnes*” must seem unduly cynical (1978, 35). But his observation that the separation of church and state would only serve to displace religious conflict from within political institutions to the sphere of civil society merits serious consideration. This, we have seen, was substantially Hobbes's worry.

In contrast to eighteenth-century arguments in favor of an inalienable religious liberty residing in each individual, Hobbes instead advocates a prudent policy of toleration. This toleration will be extended so long as no politically disruptive consequences follow from the religious practices in question.<sup>5</sup> While Hobbes's privileging of sovereignty against the dangers of associational life seems at first glance to be reconcilable with the liberal principle of the rule of law, defenders of the claims of the church, university, and other groups could hardly ignore its illiberal potential.

What distinguishes Hobbes from eighteenth-century partisans of religious liberty like Madison and Smith is his pessimism that ultimately this constitutional solution will prove successful in the absence of overwhelming state power. Against the subsequent constitutional faith that a balkanized world of minority religious and political groups would render each impotent to impose its will upon others, Hobbes instead feared that this babel of religious and political ideas could just as easily inflame collective passions as discourage them. This world of evanescent sectarianism might very well prove "best," but it can never be seen as ultimately satisfactory. Although the Madisonian solution to pluralism seems to have enjoyed some historical success, Hobbes's skepticism recalls this timeless dilemma of religious pluralism that liberal constitutionalism so curiously begs. Hobbes's deeper lesson is of the inevitably public consequences of private religious beliefs. Merely forcing difficult moral issues or group conflicts into the "private sphere" does nothing to resolve deeper ethical conflicts (cf. Hirschman 1995; Holmes 1995, Chap. 7).

Because liberal constitutionalism has been so successful in overcoming the perils of pluralism, Hobbes's reservations have been largely forgotten: all the more reason, then, to ponder just how far his assumptions are from most contemporary defenders of voluntary associations. Hobbes's preoccupations challenge proponents of civil society who offer unqualified praise for civic associations, whether in terms of the intrinsic goods of voluntary association or for their functional contribution to liberal democracy at large.

First, Hobbes's treatment raises questions about the liberal conceit that voluntary associations are always preferable to those that are ascribed. Today's liberal defenders of civil society are generally suspicious of group affiliations ascribed by birth—for example, ethnicity, race, nationality, and in some cases religion. Conversely, they struggle to respect the intrinsic goods of group life and the freedom of association. Like them, Hobbes presumes that all associations are voluntary, but for him this is potentially a problem. Willful "sectari-

<sup>5</sup>Beyond our historical understanding of what Hobbes actually intended by attempting to divorce conscience from will, there is also a considerable debate about whether this represents a liberal or illiberal impulse in his thought. A consensus has formed around a more "tolerant" Hobbes, even among those who recognize that a unitary religious order was his primary goal (notably, Ryan 1983, 1988b; Tuck 1990; and Malcolm 1991). What this position seems to ignore is the significant conceptual and historical distinction between an inalienable religious liberty and a prudential policy of toleration.

an” involvements partake of a degree of intensity unknown to the ascriptive institution of the premodern “church” (Troeltsch 1991, 324–26). Religious sectarianism or factionalism—in which religious tenets or political principles must be actively and self-consciously affirmed rather than tacitly accepted—appear as the most likely sources of civil disorder. Pursuing the empirical question of whether the intense commitments of voluntary affiliations are really more threatening than those that are taken for granted since birth would carry us well beyond the scope of this article. But suffice it to say that Hobbes reminds us of the significant conceptual slippage between discussions of the conditions under which groups are formed—whether voluntary or ascribed—and legitimate concerns about their compatibility with liberal democracy. Old Order Amish, for example, may prove more acceptable than street gangs or militias.

Despite liberal aversions to ascribed groups, the principle of voluntary association (and the corollary freedom of exit) is not the axial point of most contemporary endorsements of civil society. Instead, like Hobbes, most proponents ultimately seek to justify associations in terms of their functional benefits for the political community at large (Council on Civil Society 1998). At the margins—as in the case of fundamentalist religions, new age cults, paramilitary groups, and even those orderly associations founded on undemocratic or exclusionary principles—these rival principles of voluntarism and functionalism collide. The liberal cannot both uphold the intrinsic dignity of group life and respect the broader constitutional order upon which that liberty rests when the former conflicts with the latter. Though disconcerting to the contemporary liberal, this sublimated tension is no surprise to Hobbes, who foresees that groups must inevitably endanger political institutions. And as we have seen, in cases of conflict, Hobbes comes down on the side of political order, depreciating the inherent dignity of religion, university life, family life, and private associations. Following Hobbes’s logic to its extreme would dictate that we tolerate only the “right” kinds of associations while forbidding those that either directly threaten or do little to encourage the liberal democratic order. While this potentially illiberal impulse hardly troubles Hobbes, it should force contemporary proponents of associational life to better articulate their grounds for recommending civic associations. By reducing the claims of religious groups, universities, scientific communities, and other nonpolitical associations to their functional political utility or inutility, the intrinsic value of association becomes a matter of political discretion. This is an implication of Hobbism that did not escape the complaints of Coke, Lawson, Ward, and Bramhall in Hobbes’s time, and one that bequeaths to contemporary defenders of pluralism a challenging tension to overcome. It is possible, then, that one learns much about pluralism by recalling one of the least generous treatments it has received in the history of political thought.

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