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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

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Source: *Polity*, Summer, 1991, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), pp. 505-525

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Northeastern Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3235060>

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Thomas Hobbes: Power in the State of Nature, Power in Civil Society

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Thomas Hobbes may not be the first power theorist in the history of western political thought, but he is surely among the most thoroughly studied. This essay analyzes how Hobbes's description of power changes in the transition from the state of nature to civil society. While the zero-sum idea of power does not change, the author argues that the changed context from a state of war of each against all to one in which common interests can be realized results in different reasons being given to justify the use of power. In civil society, the zero-sum conception becomes the paradigm for the sovereign power of command.

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The Power of a Man (to take it Universally), is his present means to obtain some future apparent Good.

—*Leviathan*

Because the power of one man resisteth and hindereth the effects of another: power simply is no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another. For equal powers opposed, destroy one another; and such opposition is called contention.

—*Elements of Law*

It is often taken for granted that Hobbes has a zero-sum understanding of power: one's gain is by definition another's loss.¹ This may seem

1. See for instance Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973), p. 190; see also C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) as well as his Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 32-39.

altogether obvious, since Hobbes himself, in the second of the two passages quoted above, tells us directly that one's gain of power is another's loss. Yet the puzzle posed by the first passage in its relation to the second has not received sufficient attention. When power is defined (in the first passage) as the present means to obtain some future apparent good, nothing logically requires that one's gain must come at another's expense. Why then does Hobbes claim that in practice power is no more than "the excess of the power of one above that of another."²

One answer to this question is straightforward. In the state of nature as Hobbes describes it, where trust is nonexistent, one is forced to act *as if* one's gain were always another's loss, even though, as Hobbes points out, the collective outcome of such action is loss for almost everyone.

And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as Anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: And this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed.³

Under such conditions, a purely relative description of power is appropriate.

But if this is the reason why power is described in zero-sum terms, then the establishment of a civil state, which makes trust and cooperation possible, should also change Hobbes's description of power. In fact it does not: even here, where the existence of common interests and the means to realize them are admitted, Hobbes describes power in purely relative terms. The power of the Sovereign, for instance, is a function of the lack of power of the subjects: "The Power and Honour of Subjects vanisheth in the presence of the Power Sovereign."⁴ Why should this be? The fact that the Sovereign remains in the state of nature with respect to his subjects does not answer the question, because an established, uncontested Sovereign lacks the destructive orientation toward his subjects that makes the state of nature a zero-sum battlefield. "The riches, power and honour of a Monarch," Hobbes tells us, "arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his Subjects,"⁵ and thus the Sovereign has no

2. The second of the two passages above comes from a work written a decade earlier than *Leviathan*, and Hobbes's ideas changed in many respects. But the passage from *Elements of Law* accurately characterizes power in the state of nature as portrayed in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*.

3. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 13 (New York: Penguin 1968), p. 184.

4. *Leviathan*, Ch. 18, p. 237.

5. *Ibid.*, Ch. 19, pp. 241-42.

reason deliberately to weaken or harm his subjects. This is *not* the case, however, among men in the original state of nature. In short, it seems that Hobbes's zero-sum concept of power is most appropriate to precisely those conditions which the formation of civil society is intended to overcome.

That is the riddle I will attempt to unravel in this essay. Along the way, I hope to shed some new light on certain old problems connected with Hobbes's political philosophy: the nature of the transition from the state of nature to civil society; the interplay of force, self-interest, and sense of obligation in creating motives for obedience to sovereign authority; the dynamics of "chains of command" in Hobbes's commonwealth. But another aim is to explore the concept of power itself, to gain a better understanding of the practical connection between power understood as self-related capacity ("power-to") and power understood as a relation of social control ("power-over").⁶

The thesis I advance is that, although Hobbes's concept of power is zero-sum both in the state of nature and in civil society, it is so for quite different reasons. Power in fact *changes its nature* in the transition from the state of nature to civil society; it changes from natural to artificial, and in becoming artificial the zero-sum form is retained while the content changes. Whereas in the state of nature, it is the lack of, or the inability to realize, common interests that makes one's gain of power another's loss, in civil society, it is the *causal fiction underlying chains of command*, which presuppose the existence of common interests, that accounts for the purely relative character of power. Hobbes borrows a concept of power from his natural philosophy—power as unidirectional, transitive *causality*—and constructs social power relations so as to mirror the causal relations of nature. In the human "state of nature," the war of all against all, such unidirectional causal relations are lacking, which is precisely the problem.

This change in the nature of power is made possible by a *changed understanding of power* on the part of human beings. Hobbes's subjects internalize a certain "picture" of that power and of their own roles and obligations. Yet the image of power they internalize is a strange one: when power is described as unidirectional causality, then one's gain is by

6. For explicit discussion of the "power-to," "power-over" distinction (which is implicit in many other analyses of power), see Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963); William Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1983); Peter Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1987) as well as an earlier essay, "The Essentially Uncontestable Concepts of Power" from *Frontiers of Political Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980); William H. Riker, "Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power," *American Political Science Review*, 58 (1964): 341-49.

definition another's loss. Therefore, even though on the natural level it is possible for all or most individuals to gain power, the artificially-created power upon which civil peace depends functions according to a zero-sum model. For this reason, our answer to the question of whether it is possible according to Hobbes's theory for everyone to become more powerful must remain an ambiguous one. I will attempt to make this basic ambiguity as clear as possible.

I begin by describing the reasons why one's gain of power is another's loss in the human state of nature. Next I describe the causal concept of power in Hobbes's natural philosophy and show why this causal paradigm does not fit Hobbes's human state of nature. Then I analyze authority relations in Hobbes's commonwealth, emphasizing that they *do* mirror the causal paradigm. I then put these various ideas together to provide a description of the transition from the state of nature to civil society, and close with some reflections on the implications this study of Hobbes carries for our more general understanding of the notion of power.

I. The Definition of Power and Basic Human Motives

Let us begin by recalling Hobbes's most general definition of power as one's "present means to obtain some future apparent good." An interesting feature of this definition is that, although power is described as a relation (between a means, on one hand, and an apparent good on the other), it is *not* in the first instance a relation of control among human beings. One can in principle attain apparent goods through isolated activities which affect no one. Relations of control enter the discussion immediately, however, for practical reasons: typically, the attainment of apparent goods depends on others; one's own "natural power" is insufficient. "Therefore to have servants, is Power; To have friends, is Power: for they are strengths united." The cooperation, willing or unwilling, of others falls under the category of "instrumental powers," without which we would be incapable of attaining most of the apparent goods we seek.

Furthermore, one should note that nothing in this general definition of power requires that the power of one come at the expense of the power of another. Whether and to what degree this occurs depends on the character of the apparent goods at which one aims, and on the methods used to secure the cooperation of others. Let us turn, then, to the prac-

7. *Leviathan*, Ch. 10, p. 150.

tical conditions under which one tries to obtain apparent goods in the state of nature.

Hobbes writes in Chapter 13 of the *Leviathan*:

If any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes their delectation only), endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another.⁸

Clearly if power is the means to some good, then in cases where that good is such that one can only enjoy it at another's expense, the power of one comes at the expense of the power of another. But for what reasons does it happen that different men desire the same thing that they cannot both enjoy? They might after all desire different things; or they might desire the same thing in such a way that both can enjoy it. We need to look more specifically at the causes of quarrel. Later in the same chapter Hobbes gives a more concrete description of the causes of conflict:

So that in the nature of man, we find three principall causes of quarrell. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory.

The first maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, for Reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves Masters of other mens persons, wives, children, and cattell; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue, either direct in their Persons, or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name.⁹

Clearly all of these causes of quarrel can and do combine with one another in complex ways. But let us examine them separately, since the *reasons* why each is a cause of quarrel are different in each case.

We shall begin with Glory, as it is the strongest example of irreconcilable conflict. In the *Elements of Law*, Hobbes defines Glory as "that passion which proceedeth from the imagination or conception of our own power, above the power of him that contendeth with us."¹⁰ Defined in this way, the desire for glory is a motive perfectly tailored to the description of power as the excess of the power of one over that of another. One man's glory is another's lack of glory: it cannot be otherwise. Thus if glory were the only good for which human beings strive, or

8. *Ibid.*, Ch. 13, p. 184.

9. *Ibid.*, Ch. 13, p. 185.

10. Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), Ch. 9, p. 28.

always the most important good, then the power of one would always come at the expense of the power of another. Even the formation of a peaceful state, though it might protect men from violent death, would merely condemn most men to a miserable existence, frustrated in their desire to attain what they want most.

But though Hobbes clearly considers the desire for glory to be an important motive, he denies that it is the principal motive. He claims that the aim of men who endeavor to destroy others “is principally their own conservation”; he adds that “delectation,” under which category glory would presumably fall, is sometimes a motive. Hobbes does not provide any psychological analysis of the motive itself, nor does he make clear exactly how strong a motive glory is relative to motives other than self-preservation. In any event, it would be difficult in the state of nature to disentangle glory from gain or safety as a motive for quarrel. In civil society, on the other hand, supposing that one’s safety and welfare are reasonably secure, glory emerges as a separate and disruptive motive; it may even tempt someone to rebel against a sovereign, Hobbes is clearly worried about this motive. When he describes self-preservation as the strongest human motive, he is not merely describing but also prescribing: human beings should be *persuaded* to care less about glory and more about peace and self-preservation.

To seek “Gain” or “Safety” is quite different from seeking glory, since in the latter case one’s gain is by definition another’s loss, while in the first two cases the matter is more complex. One *may* sometimes enjoy wealth precisely because others lack what you have—luxury goods, for instance—but this is dependent on the person and the situation; there are many other benefits of material wealth that do not depend on invidious comparisons. Nor does the pursuit of wealth always come at another’s expense, for one can acquire wealth in any number of different ways. Some ways of acquiring wealth come directly at another’s expense; others do not. Hobbes recognizes the possibility of common gain in the economic sphere; one of the problems with the state of nature is precisely that such potential common interests cannot be realized: “In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea. . . .”¹¹

With “Safety” there is even less reason why one’s gain should entail another’s loss. One can pursue safety either through peace or war; but unless one enjoys war for its own sake, one turns to war reluctantly and

11. *Leviathan*, Ch. 13, p. 186.

as a second-best solution, because in the long run war makes safety more difficult for everyone. This is a case in which gain for one side is gain for the other—assuming that peace and safety are the real aims of both sides. Hobbes admits that there are some men who truly enjoy war and conquest, but for the most part he describes the motives responsible for the “general inclination” to seek “power after power” as primarily defensive: power is necessary simply to secure what one has, including one’s life. But if most human beings do in fact seek safety and peace, why is it so difficult to secure? In part it is because of the few who do enjoy war, but mostly because of the absence of trust. If neither side can be sure that the other will honor his agreement to “lay down his arms,” then war will continue to subsist even among those who genuinely desire peace. Hobbes’s Fundamental Law of Nature perfectly reflects this problem: “That every man, ought to endeavor Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of Warre.”¹² Peace cannot be obtained without Covenant, and Covenants are extremely fragile in the state of Nature.

Let us recall at this point the two passages quoted at the beginning of the essay—the “present means” definition and the claim that power for one means lack of power for another. Our discussion so far has made clear that nothing in Hobbes’s account of basic human *aims* requires a zero-sum understanding of power.¹³

II. Power as Cause

Nothing yet has been said about the *means* used to secure another’s cooperation—about power as control, power as the instrumental use of other human beings. Even in cases where the aim of one is compatible with the aim of another, the power of one might come at another’s expense for reasons connected with the *methods* used to realize the aim. Since many if not most aims depend on the actions or inactions of others, we must ask how one will cause another to act in the appropriate way. If the methods someone uses to cause me to serve his ends prevent me from realizing my ends, then his gain of power is my loss, even if our aims are compatible in the abstract. We might both, for example, desire leisure, a good which, unlike glory, does not logically depend on the deprivation of another; but his gain is indeed my loss if his method of securing leisure is

12. *Ibid.*, Ch. 14, p. 190.

13. For interpretations of the relative importance of glory which differ from mine, see Spragens, pp. 182-83 and 190-91, and Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), Ch. 11.

to enslave me. We must therefore consider not only Hobbes's description of typical aims, but also his description of typical methods of control.

But before we consider power-as-control on the human level, it is instructive to examine power-as-control in Hobbes's natural philosophy. Many students of Hobbes argue that there exists a disjunction between his description of nature and his description of human society and motivation, despite the fact that Hobbes apparently thought his political philosophy was firmly based on natural science.¹⁴ I do not quarrel with the scholars who make this claim. Yet some of the *patterns* underlying Hobbes's natural philosophy have striking parallels in his political philosophy, especially the patterns related to power and causality. These patterns, even if they cannot be directly transferred to the political sphere, may nevertheless offer new insights into Hobbes's theory of political power.

In Hobbes's natural philosophy, the concept of power is identical to that of cause.¹⁵ In *De Corpore* he writes: "Correspondent to *cause* and *effect*, are POWER and ACT; nay, those and these are the same things; though for diverse considerations, they have diverse names." He goes on to say:

For whensoever any agent has all those accidents which are necessarily requisite for the production of some effect in the patient, then we say the agent has *power* to produce that effect, if it be applied to a patient. . . [T]he same accidents, which constitute the efficient cause, constitute also the *power* of the agent. . .¹⁶

Power—or causality—in nature has some interesting characteristics in Hobbes's perfectly deterministic universe. There are no partial causes: if A is the cause of B, then it is the complete cause of B; there are no plural causes. Furthermore, it follows that power in nature is unidirectional: if A is the cause of B, then B is in no sense the cause of A; A and B cannot exert power over one another simultaneously. Furthermore, power is transitive: if A is the cause of B, and B the cause of C, then A is the cause of C; there is no point at which any other partial causes of C can enter into the chain of events, nor can C function as a cause with respect to either B or A.

How does this conception of power compare with the definition of

14. See for instance Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*; Spragens, pp. 164 ff; Stanley Benn, "Hobbes on Power," in *Hobbs and Rousseau*, ed. Cranston and Peters (New York: Anchor, 1972), pp. 184-212.

15. My understanding of Hobbes's conception of causality and power has profited from Stanley Benn's essay "Hobbes on Power."

16. Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore*. Citation borrowed from Benn, pp. 187-88.

human power discussed above, i.e., power as one's present means to obtain some future apparent good? The two are not identical, but neither are they obviously inconsistent. Power on the human level could be regarded as an effective cause of the "apparent good" one seeks.

But more interesting are the implications of this concept of causality for the exercise of power over other human beings. Suppose for a moment that the units of cause and effect here are human individuals rather than atoms and forces. An individual exercising power over another would exercise *complete* power; it would be the most absolute of tyrannies. Furthermore, one's gain of power would be another's loss for reasons that have nothing to do with the compatibility or incompatibility of intentions. The zero-sum condition would be a pure formality: if individual A is "cause," then individual B is "effect"; A is active, powerful, causal; B is passive, a mere effect. Finally, it would be possible to construct chains of command of indefinite length: suppose A (the Sovereign) is the first cause in the chain of causes and effects. If he is the cause of B's action, and B the cause of C's action, and C the cause of D's action, and so on without limit, then, in this perfectly deterministic world, A's power has perfectly and absolutely determined the actions of all of the others. Hobbes of course admits that only God, as the first of all causes, possesses such absolute sovereignty.

This strictly causal, unidirectional power existing in nature is precisely what is *lacking* in the human "state of nature." This is made clear in the opening paragraph of Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*:

Nature have made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himselfe any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himselfe.¹⁷

Yet victory is short-lived: "And the Invader again is in the like danger of another." Human beings do exercise power over one another (all of these successive invasions are expressions of power) but the dynamics of power in no way resemble the perfect unidirectionality of natural causality. Individual A may be stronger than B, but the latter of quicker wit than A; therefore, each could exercise power over the other in some respect. Fur-

17. *Leviathan*, Ch. 13, p. 183.

thermore, circles of power—impossible in natural causality—may occur here: A might command B, B might dispossess C, and C kill A. Nothing guarantees that chains of causes and effects on the human level will travel in one direction only.

This does not mean, of course, that the human sphere is separate from that of natural causality; Hobbes makes it quite clear that human beings are just as determined by natural causes and effects as anything else in nature, animate or inanimate. But these causes and effects operate at the level of some material substratum, not at the level of human individuals and human intentions. Causes and effects continue as they always have, but in the state of nature they have almost no connection with human aims because human intentions are not effective causes of anything.

One can examine more closely the ineffectiveness of human intentions as causes by considering three of the basic methods by which one individual might cause another to act in a certain way: force; persuasion (“Counsel”¹⁸); and command based on obligation. These three methods of control are quite different from one another (some important differences will be discussed below); but they are alike in that none of them can be used effectively in the state of nature. No one is strong enough to establish lasting power based on force alone; persuasion depends on unstable congruences of interest, and on trust (which is absent); obligation depends on prior agreement and on someone able to enforce agreements. As a consequence, human beings in the state of nature are relatively powerless, both with respect to realizing aims and with respect to determining the actions of others. Everyone acts as though one’s gain were another’s loss (zero-sum); the collective consequence is the loss of power for everyone (negative-sum).

III. Coercion, Command, and Counsel

Let us now jump forward to the dynamics of power under an established civil society with an effective Sovereign, leaving aside for the moment the question of how sovereignty is established. The first thing one notices about the operation of power is that now it *is*, or at least seems to be, unambiguously causal and unidirectional in its operations. This is clearly true for the power of the Sovereign, and since (as will be discussed below) the Sovereign somehow embodies *all* the power in the entire society, it follows that power exhibits the same characteristics wherever in society it is found. What are those characteristics?

18. “Counsel, is where a man saith, *Doe*, or *Doe not this*, and deduceth his reasons from the benefit that arriveth by it to him to whom he saith it.” *Leviathan*, Ch. 25, p. 303.

A few passages from the *Leviathan* will illustrate the way in which sovereign power is implicitly described as strict causality. First consider Hobbes's definition of "command," a privilege that lies at the core of sovereign power: "Command is, where a man saith, *doe this*, or *Doe not this*, without expecting other reason than the Will of him that says it."¹⁹ Command is distinguished from "counsel," in which one attempts to persuade another that a certain action is to the other's own benefit, but without possessing any authority to command the other to act. The concept of command directly mirrors natural causality: the will of the one who commands is, at least in principle, the efficient cause of the other's action. No "partial causes," like the self-interest of the commanded subject, play any role here; it is as if the one who is commanded possessed no will of his own.

Hobbes's notion of Dominion, which establishes the right to command, likewise mirrors natural causality. In Chapter 20 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the characteristic of Dominion:

He that hath the Dominion over the Child, hath Dominion also over the children of the Child; and over their Children's Children. For he that hath Dominion over the person of a man hath Dominion over all that is his.²⁰

The resemblances between Dominion and a natural chain of causes and effects are difficult to overlook; only if we think of dominion in strictly causal terms does the passage above make sense. Hobbes claims that if A has dominion over B ("the Child") and B dominion over C ("the children of the Child"), then A necessarily has dominion over C. It is the same as saying that if A is the cause of B and B the cause of C, then A is the cause of both B and C. One should recall that in the human state of nature, power does not follow this unidirectional pattern. Dominion, like command, mirrors natural causality only because it has been *designed* that way; neither dominion nor command is natural.

Once one begins to look for it, one notices the same causal pattern throughout Hobbes's political theory. Hobbes's rejection of separation of powers, for example, displays the same logic. To limit the power of another is to exercise power over him and, according to Hobbes, whoever can limit the power of another is the latter's master: "that King whose power is limited, is not superior to him, or them that have the power to limit it; and he that is not superior, is not supreme; that is to say

19. *Ibid.*, Ch. 25, p. 303.

20. *Ibid.*, Ch. 20, p. 255.

not Sovereign.”²¹ Once again, power is described as though it operated along strictly causal lines: if the king is “cause,” the assembly must be “effect”; king and assembly cannot both be causal with respect to each other at the same time.

If power relations do not naturally follow the unidirectional causal pattern, how is it possible to construct them in accordance with that pattern? To answer this question, it is necessary to look more closely at the basic mechanisms of control: persuasion, coercion, and obligation. All three of these are effective to some limited degree in the state of nature, for if they were not, Hobbes could not build upon them. They may overlap and blend in any number of ways, but they remain analytically distinct. Persuasion (or in Hobbes’s terms, “Counsell”) depends on the present existence of shared interests between the one who persuades and the one who is persuaded. Coercion implies the absence of shared interests, or at least the inability to motivate the other by appealing to shared interests. Thus, coercion is the method most appropriate to the pure zero-sum model of power where interests are irreconcilable and for that reason one’s gain is another’s loss. Obligation is based on prior *agreement* and is supposed to bind whether or not it is one’s present interest to fulfill the obligation. We can assume that the original agreement establishing the obligation was based on perceived common interest, but the agreement is binding even if it is no longer in the present interest of one or the other to fulfill his end of the bargain. If the other has performed first, for example, one may be tempted to default. Obligation, therefore, to be effective, must be backed by the power to compel. Nevertheless, despite this need for enforcement, obligation is qualitatively different from coercion, just as both of these are distinct from persuasion.

If we keep in mind the respective characteristics of persuasion, coercion, and obligation, while recalling the artificially constructed causal model of power discussed earlier, we notice some interesting things. Persuasion is unique in that it can in no way be assimilated to the causal model: the persuader’s arguments are never a sufficient cause of the desired outcome; the self-interest of the other is always necessary as a partial cause of the desired outcome. Furthermore, persuasion rarely moves in one direction only; far more common is the bargaining situation in which each side seeks to persuade the other, or in other words, seeks to exercise power over the other. Therefore persuasion displays none of the formal characteristics of a strictly causal chain of command.

The threat or direct application of force, in contrast, does approxi-

21. *Ibid.*, Ch. 19, p. 246.

mate the formal characteristics of natural causality. Suppose one possessing a preponderance of military force confronts another who is wholly unarmed. If the former simply kills or imprisons the latter, then the act of control is purely unidirectional. Suppose on the other hand the desired behavior is induced by means of threats: do such and such or I will kill you. In this case, the act of control is not unambiguously causal, for there are after all times when human beings choose to die rather than obey, but it comes very close because most of the time this "cause" will achieve the desired "effect."

But this is not the only way in which to mirror natural causality. Power relations based on an internalized sense of obligation may likewise be constructed according to a unidirectional causal model and may operate with very little use or threat of coercion. Consider, for instance, the military chain of command. In theory, the manner in which superiors command inferiors is strictly unidirectional: the general commands the colonel who commands the sergeant, and so on; never does a sergeant command a captain, a captain a colonel, a colonel a general. It is as though one billiard ball were striking another, and that one a third, the third a fourth. This simplified military model describes well the way in which, at least in principle, the power of Hobbes's sovereign is communicated.

How is this mysteriously efficient chain of causes and effects possible? One might point out, correctly, that formal command is not the only form of power here, that subordinates in the military or in a civilian bureaucracy possess any number of means of exercising power over their superiors. Yet the formal chain of command does operate to an important degree, for if it did not, the organization would collapse. To the degree that it does follow the unidirectional causal pattern, it does so because the chain of command has been deliberately *designed* to resemble a causal chain and because those within that chain recognize their duties and roles, not because their actions have been mechanically "caused." In order for such a chain of command to function effectively, the behavior of a subordinate must be as much active as reactive; some degree of initiative and discretion must be entrusted to the subordinate. Yet insofar as the action is in obedience to a command, it is symbolically understood by superior and subordinate as though it were strictly cause and effect. In other words, the causal relation is based on a fiction shared by superior and subordinate: one knows, at one level, that the subordinate's action is not a direct effect of the superior's will (if it were, no sense of obligation on the part of the subordinate would be necessary); on the other hand, one is obligated to "pretend" that the superior's command alone is the cause of the subordinate's obedience.

Which of these two methods of mirroring natural causality is more important for Hobbes? Certainly he considers both coercion and obligation necessary to some degree. But he considers the latter at least as important as the former, if not more so. Otherwise, why would he consider it so important that men know their obligations?²² The grounds of the Sovereign's right to command, he says, "have the rather need to be taught diligently, and truly taught; because they cannot be maintained by any civil law, or terror of legal punishment."²³

But how are these artificial causal chains, whether based on obligation or coercion, established in the first place? And how are they related to the first notion of power discussed in this essay, i.e., the means of obtaining some apparent good? Given that, on the formal level at least, this causal model of power is zero-sum, does it follow that power itself remains zero-sum even in civil society? Or should we conclude that power is not zero-sum since human beings mutually secure their "apparent goods" better than in the state of nature? To answer such questions we must turn, finally, to an analysis of the transition from the state of nature to civil society.

IV. Power Transformed

Let us recall at this point the puzzle posed at the beginning of the essay: it would seem that Hobbes's zero-sum concept of power is most appropriate to precisely those conditions which the formation of civil society is intended to overcome. By making it possible for most of us (or at least those of us not motivated principally by the desire for glory) to better realize our "apparent goods," the presence of a Sovereign ought to make most of us more powerful. Yet Hobbes makes it difficult for us to draw this conclusion, for power remains zero-sum in important respects albeit for different reasons than in the state of nature. My purpose here is to show that the transition from the state of nature to civil society depends on a redefinition of power: artificial power is created, and predominates over natural power. Whereas on the natural level power need *not* be zero-sum in civil society, it is zero-sum by definition on the artificial level.

In Chapter 17 of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the nature of sovereign power: "The only way to erect such a Common Power . . . is,

22. Brian Barry asks: "If Hobbes's 'message' were that we ought to obey for fear of the police, why should he have thought that having his doctrine taught in the universities and preached in the pulpits would make England a less turbulent country? It was precisely because he had seen the fragility of regimes resting only on bayonets that he wrote *Leviathan*." "Warrender and His Critics," from *Hobbes and Rousseau*, pp. 37-65.

23. *Leviathan*, Ch. 30, p. 377.

to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will.”²⁴ The power described here is qualitatively different from the types of power found in the state of nature. The method by which power is created—the conferral of all power and strength upon one man or assembly of men—distinguishes sovereign power not only from the power of an individual, but also from the power of any faction, no matter how large. Factions can exist in the state of nature; sovereignty cannot. The following passage illustrates the difference between sovereign power and factional power:

The Greatest of humane Powers, is that which is compounded of the Powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, Naturall, or Civill, that has the use of all their Powers depending on his will; such as is the Power of a Common-wealth: Or depending on the wills of each particular; such as is the Power of a faction, or of diverse factions leagued.²⁵

The Power of a commonwealth, where all wills become one, is quite different from that of a faction, where the wills remain particular. One might suppose that the difference between the power of a faction and that of the Sovereign is one of degree, that the Sovereign is simply the “biggest fish in the pond,” i.e., the most powerful faction in the society. But Hobbes specifically rejects such an interpretation:

. . . there is little ground for the opinion of them, that say of Sovereign Kings, though they be *singulis majores*, of greater Power than every one of their Subjects, yet they be *Universis minores*, of lesser power than them all together. For if by *all together*, they mean not the collective body as one person, then *all together*, and *every one*, signifie the same; and the speech is absurd. But if by *all together*, they understand them as one Person (which person the Sovereign bears,) then the power of all together, is the same with the Sovereign’s power; and so again the speech is absurd.²⁶

Hobbes shows in this passage that the Sovereign literally disposes of *all* the powers of *all* subjects. The one exception, of course, is that each subject retains the right of individual self-preservation.

From the perspective of natural power, this is impossible: no king, however powerful, however large his army, however loyal his subjects,

24. *Ibid.*, Ch. 17, p. 227.

25. *Ibid.*, Ch. 10, p. 150.

26. *Ibid.*, Ch. 18, p. 237.

ever has *complete* control over the actions and possessions of his subjects. Muscles and brains, for instance, are forms of power, yet the Sovereign does not strip the subjects of their muscles and brains. Nor does he strip them of “instrumental powers” such as wealth and reputation: “The riches, power and honour of a Monarch arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his Subjects.”²⁷ In what sense, then, is the Sovereign all-powerful?

The all-powerful sovereign is *all-powerful* only by definition. It is *agreed* that he is omnipotent; this is the condition under which power is granted to him in the first place. It is in the common interest of all to put an end to the “war of all against all,” and according to Hobbes, the only way to do so is to grant absolute power to someone. Since the power itself is an invented one, those who design it can endow it with whatever characteristics they consider necessary or useful to its operation. Sovereign omnipotence is one of these definitionally-created characteristics; unidirectionality and transitivity, as described in the preceding section, are likewise invented for the purpose. The whole system works because the subjects themselves accept its symbols and duties. The power exercised over the subjects *originates from the subjects themselves*, from their agreement that there shall be an absolute power. There is nothing comparable to this for power in the state of nature.²⁸

One could regard sovereign power as a sort of “banking” of natural powers of individuals: subjects transfer their natural powers over to a sovereign, who possesses those powers insofar as he reserves the right to use them in whatever way he considers necessary. But just as in banking the same money is counted twice—once as a deposit, once again as a bank loan—so too in this case power is counted twice: the “riches, strength, and reputation” of the subjects count once as their own, and once again as instruments under the direction of an all-powerful sovereign. There are of course flaws in the bank analogy: Hobbes’s sub-

27. *Ibid.*, Ch. 19, pp. 241–42.

28. David Johnston in *The Rhetoric of Leviathan* writes: “By depicting sovereignty as the product of a positive act of authorization, founded upon the united strength of all subjects, rather than an essentially negative act of renunciation [as Johnston claims was the case in the *Elements of Law*], it implicated those subjects in the acts of their sovereign more fully than the earlier versions of his theory had done.” *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 82.

“. . . No sovereign could maintain the power and rights of his office without achieving general recognition of the grounds, legitimacy, and proper scope of those rights. This recognition is in effect the product of an *interpretation men impose upon their circumstances, a set of lenses through which they read and understand their relationships with others*” (84; emphasis added).

jects may not freely withdraw the deposit once made. (There is a “substantial penalty,” not merely for “early withdrawal” but for any withdrawal at all.) Power may be susceptible of universal gain on the natural level, when counted as belonging to subjects, and yet be zero-sum when regarded as a transfer of power over to the sovereign, whose gain is their loss. The power they transfer is different in nature from the power they keep.²⁹

It is the common interest of human beings that establishes sovereign power in the first place. But once established, this power works as though common interest were unnecessary: command and obligation, unlike counsel, are supposed to control the actions of subjects independently of considerations of interest. Common interest is not part of the *operation* of sovereign power because it is common interest that *creates* sovereign power. Common interest is an element built into the machine itself, so to speak, and there is no need to load the machine twice.

This is not to deny the role of coercion as a necessary support. Although the principal source of sovereign power is the self-interest of the subjects, important conflicts of interest among subjects, as well as between Sovereign and subject, will remain and would be repressed by force if necessary. Mutual gain in some respects does not preclude conflict in other respects: glory may be a weaker motive, but will remain; commerce and industry may increase the supply of goods, but they remain scarce and men will contend over their distribution. For these reasons, among others, the need for coercion will never disappear altogether.

V. Conclusion

Before concluding this essay, I will make brief comparisons between Hobbes’s view of power and that of three contemporary social theorists who describe power and who, like Hobbes, take as their starting point the conception of power as cause. I cannot do justice to these writers in such brief treatment; my purpose is only to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the problems Hobbes raises. One point of view on the concept of power as cause is represented by Robert Dahl³⁰ and Felix Oppenheim;³¹ a quite different understanding of cause is found in the work of Steven Lukes.³² Each of these schools of thought about power bears

29. For an interesting discussion of the concept of “banking” of power, see Barry Barnes, *The Nature of Power* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

30. Dahl, “The Concept of Power.”

31. Felix Oppenheim, *Political Concepts: A Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1981.

32. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

resemblances to one side of Hobbes's theory of power: the former to power in Hobbes's state of nature; the latter to the unidirectional, transitive Sovereign power of command.

For Dahl and Oppenheim, power is causality. But one human being is not necessarily the cause of everything another human being does; the power relation is not always a unidirectional relation of command and obedience. Instead, power is differentiated into any number of different aspects or "scopes"; A might exercise power over B in one respect while B has power over A in another. Thus "countervailing power" and "checks and balances" are clear possibilities: power may be unidirectional and causal, but only within one narrowly defined scope; within the same social or political relation there may be other scopes in which power goes the other way. Therefore, power is in no sense necessarily despotic or oppressive, as would be the case if there were no differentiation among scopes.

We saw earlier that power in Hobbes's state of nature is plural rather than causal and transitive: A may dispossess B, but B kills A. Such pluralism is exactly what Hobbes seeks to change; pluralism of power leads to anarchy and civil war. Here, of course, he differs from Dahl and Oppenheim, both of whom believe that power can be plural without being anarchic.

Steven Lukes, on the other hand, believes there exists in modern capitalist democracies something akin to the absolute, unidirectional, causal power of command described by Hobbes. One must, however, substitute a bourgeois "power elite" for Hobbes's Sovereign. Pluralism is a sham; in fact the ruling class manufactures the appearance of consent by giving the ruled the beliefs and desires it wants them to have: "Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have—that is, to secure compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?"³³ Therefore it *is* the case that one class entirely controls another with respect to all important scopes of power. Power *by definition* excludes common interest: "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests."³⁴ Therefore it would follow, though Lukes does not explicitly say this, that power is zero-sum: one's gain is another's loss. Luke's own radical ideal is a social order in which power itself is abolished.

The most interesting and important difference between Hobbes's view

33. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 34. For a similar, though somewhat less one-sided view of power, see William E. Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

of power and that of Lukes concerns the role of common interest. One might readily equate the internalized fiction of absolute, causal sovereign power with the false consciousness described by Lukes. In both cases a unidirectional relation of power and subjection depends on the subjects believing that their own interests are best served by supporting the ruling authority; neither Hobbes nor Lukes believes that violence alone is sufficient to establish a ruling power. The type of power characteristic of sovereign command is, as noted earlier, highly artificial; it requires the active cooperation of those subject to it. But for Hobbes the subjects' belief that their own interests are best served by the existence of a sovereign power is an authentic belief; without that belief, sovereign power could never have been created in the first place. A subject might later conclude, contrary to Hobbes, that the belief in the necessity of an absolutely powerful Sovereign was a mistaken one—it could be that the cure turns out worse than the disease, or that some less harsh cure could be developed for the same disease—but at any rate the belief originates with the subjects themselves.

For Lukes, this belief in common interest under bourgeois authority is a deception, deliberately manufactured for the subjects by the ruling class itself. But then Lukes has no way of explaining how this structure of causal power could have come into existence in the first place. The (false) belief that the authority structure serves one's real interests, on which the operation of that structure depends, could only have been created by some previously existing absolute power capable of molding the passive minds of subjects like clay. Where could this power come from? The effect would have to become the cause. Lukes does not address this problem.

I return now to the original question: is Hobbes's conception of power zero-sum, where one's gain necessarily entails an equal loss for another? The answer is: yes and no—no for natural power, yes for artificial power. When power is regarded as the capacity to realize some interest—some “apparent good”—it is not the case that one's gain necessarily entails another's loss; everyone, or almost everyone, gains by the establishment of civil society. Furthermore, that act, at least initially, is their exercise of power, not something they passively receive. But Hobbes combines this with a concept of power-as-control in which one's gain is another's loss.

Therefore, one cannot unambiguously conclude that individuals become more powerful by subjecting themselves to the authority of Hobbes's Sovereign, even if he promotes their common interests. The reason is that it is questionable whether a mutual increase of power can

occur unless it is consciously *recognized* as such by those involved, unless it is founded on a concept of individual autonomy.

Hobbes's subjects realize their interests, but only at the cost of internalizing an *interpretation* of their own actions which mirrors the causal determinism of nature, a determinism which, if it functioned literally on the human level, would constitute the most complete form of slavery. Of course this determinism is a fiction. The only reason why the grand fiction of absolute, unidirectional, causal Sovereign power works at all is that it serves the common interests of those subject to it, who give it their active support. But strangely enough, it works because they actively regard themselves as passive. It is as though the left hand did not know what the right is doing. Power, understood as the capacity to realize some "apparent good," implies that one still actively chooses what those apparent goods are. No matter how much discretion one retains over one's own actions in practice, if one has truly transferred to the Sovereign "my Right of Governing my self" then it is questionable whether the individual has power at all, no matter how much one benefits.

This raises an important question: how can one describe power such that it is compatible with notions of individual autonomy, and vice versa: what notions of autonomy are compatible with the unavoidable fact that in civil society someone exercises power over someone else? Any Robinson Crusoe-like concept of autonomy, in which to be free is to be unaffected by the power of others or, conversely, to be affected in any way by another's power is to be unfree, would effectively make it impossible to increase power for everyone. Yet neither is it possible to re-educate human beings so completely that they experience every exercise of power over them as true liberation. Autonomy may be flexible but it is not infinitely malleable.

I would suggest that in some respects our practice is ahead of our theory. A democratic political order in which the principle of consent has been successfully incorporated into the public and private spheres is in fact one in which individuals exercise power over one another all the time, though in a manner relatively compatible with the power of the other. A contract is a bilateral exercise of power; so too is an exchange. On the more abstract level, the contract theories which serve to justify democratic political orders could be regarded as attempts to make governmental power compatible with the power of those over whom it is exercised. But contract theories rarely speak explicitly of power on both sides; instead, we speak of the power of the state, the liberty of the citizen, as though the liberty enjoyed by citizens were not also a source of power for them.

We have trouble conceiving of anything mutually beneficial as power. Tradition has handed down to us a political language in which certain things have been divorced. Those, such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick, who take contract theory seriously, tend to conceive of contract as the *cessation* of the power of one over another rather than one way in which power can be expressed; and those who regard contracts and exchanges as expressions of power and dismiss social contract theory as ideology tend to fall back on a crude notion of power as exploitation.

This split within our political language has the effect, not only of impoverishing our analysis of presently existing institutions and practices, but also of limiting our capacity to handle power conflicts in the future. To an ever-increasing degree, our world is one in which the actions and hence the power of one affect in some way the action or capacity for action of another. The problems caused by such a high degree of interdependence are difficult enough already; to continue to conceive of power in zero-sum categories, in terms of unidirectional control and subjection, will not make solutions any easier.