

**Hobbes' Sovereign Man: Is He the first Democrat,
or Does Sartre Show Him to be a Fascist in Waiting?**

By

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It is no secret that Thomas Hobbes' political thought is paradoxical: on the one hand, he argues for a notion of popular sovereignty; on the other hand, he concludes that the most enlightened expression of this popular will is that of the absolute monarchy, albeit one presiding over an unfettered capitalist economy. What is less well appreciated, I think, is the extent to which Hobbes' logical origin of the popular will, the sovereign individual, presages so many subsequent characterizations by modern philosophers, not only the contractarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also the more radical political philosophers of the twentieth. Such is Hobbes' influence that we are justified in calling his sovereign individual the first fully modern conception of what it is to be human.

This essay is about how Hobbes' characterization of sovereign man concurs with contemporary thinking concerning the human condition, if not with thinking concerning the politics best suited to that condition. Specifically, it will compare Hobbes' view of human nature with that of Jean Paul Sartre – surprisingly, perhaps, both thinkers concur, in a number of important respects, on how to characterize individual sovereignty. This comparison is intended to show that the concurrence of Hobbes' and Sartre's views exposes an error in Hobbes' political thought. That is, if Hobbes' view of sovereign man is in concert with Sartre's to the extent I think it to be, then Hobbes' prescription for the most successful state must be in error. Hobbes thought that the successful state – the state that would be the most long lasting, peaceful and free of factional control and violence – would be one in which sovereign men are free to exercise unfettered economic liberty but

called to unconditional obedience to a state capable of making unlimited demands upon them. However, if the full implications entailed in Hobbes' description of modern man are those fleshed out by Sartre, then the whole history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to date – the rise of mass culture and its successful promotion, first of international political extremism, then, of corporate hegemony OVER all modern states – must be seen as what comes of putting Hobbes' political prescriptions into practice.

Hobbes' Sovereign Man

At first blush, the equation of Hobbesean and Sartrean man might strike many as preposterous. Obviously the deterministic and materialist Hobbes does not ascribe to man the type of unconditioned subjectivity and freedom attributed to man by the phenomenologist and existentialist Sartre. Still, when Sartre says of the individual that he is an ethical legislator – that his every act is a declaration of what is good, not just for himself, but for all people¹ – he is averring something of man with which a close reading of *Leviathan* shows Hobbes to agree. For Sartre, every act denotes a legislating (EH312) – that is, a sovereign command – and a teaching.² We can see the truth of Sartre's thesis in the lies our fathers tell us – it is no secret that paternal double messages make youth crazy – and in adages such as “actions speak louder than words.” For Sartre, individual choice is always in the act, not the word; that is, when action and word conflict, the true command and teaching is expressed in the action. To claim otherwise is to live in bad faith.³ Where do we see this view – that the act is the expression of our sovereign will – articulated in *Leviathan*?

It is well known that, for Hobbes, in nature, men act in accordance with natural right: their right to do what seems “good” to them.⁴ As such, their will is sovereign –

through his acts, each individual seeks to bend the world and all in it to his self-interested will. Each act is a command, instructing all others that they should “give over” or arm themselves against the individual’s designs.⁵ What is less well known is that, when Hobbes says that individuals are moved by reason and the laws of nature to leave nature, to lay down their sovereign power in exchange for protection by a state sovereign (this so that they might obtain the blessings of peace), he is NOT saying that individuals are relinquishing their sovereign will, as well.

For Hobbes, like Sartre, the individual will is forever sovereign. If, as Hobbes says, the individual lays down his sovereign power, it is not something he can do once and for all. Rather, the individual must reaffirm the relinquishing of his sovereign power with every act of obedience: every act of obedience is an expression of the individual’s sovereign will to continue in his allegiance to the state; and just as the sovereign individual can agree to maintain his allegiance, so, in his sovereignty, is he free to dissolve it with acts of disobedience.

Hobbes argues for the inalienable nature of the sovereign will in the following three ways. The first of these is Hobbes’ argument that no man has reason to complain of laws made by the state. Says Hobbes, if any man would complain against a law, he should remember that the law is made in accordance with his will that there be a state sovereign: indeed, the will of the state sovereign is nothing more or less than an expression of the combined wills of all individuals that it be sovereign, exercising all the powers reason would expect of a sovereign (L232).

For Hobbes, the individual’s will that there should be a state sovereign is indicated by his continued allegiance, and allegiance is evidenced in the act. This is

indicated in the negative by a second argument from Hobbes: that an individual who rebels against the state cannot be punished, only warred against, by the state. Argues Hobbes, it makes no difference whether or not the rebel is victorious: by his act of rebellion, the rebel successfully wills an end to the social compact or agreement by which he submitted himself to the state, in the first place. In so doing, the individual reasserts himself as an independent sovereign power. Thus is the state to which he previously belonged bound to treat him not simply as an errant subject, to be punished, but as an enemy. On this reasoning, Hobbes characterizes the state's harm to the rebel as an instance of the war on those who, exercising their sovereign will in acts of rebellion, withdraw their allegiance from the state and set up their own empire in its stead. Such withdrawal is possible any time an individual exercises his/her sovereign will through an act of rebellious disobedience. But logically, the reverse must be true: any act of obedience is the expression of a sovereign will to maintain the individual's allegiance to the state. In either case, the individual exercises his sovereign will ever and always, and this exercising is in the act (L356-357).

Finally, Hobbes' view that the state sovereign is dependent on the individual's continued willingness to maintain his allegiance to it is indicated in Hobbes' assessment of the state sovereign's duties, which he holds to be but two in number. The first duty of the state sovereign is never to give up sovereign power sufficient to maintaining the peace: to be successful in war and effective when punishing. It is from this duty that the state sovereign's right to absolute power springs. Given the changing demands on defense and order in any given society, the state sovereign's means to fight and punish must be adequate to any occasion. The state must allow no challenge to its power that

might prevent it from obtaining the means necessary to maintaining the peace (L376-377).

Yet if the maintenance of the state is ultimately a continuing expression of the unrelinquished sovereign will of its subjects, then even the absolute power of the state will not ensure the peace. It is imperative also that the state maintain in its subjects the conviction that their good is identical with the maintenance of an absolutist state. Argues Hobbes, this punishment alone cannot do. In absence of an explanation of how punishment serves the interests of the state's subjects, individuals must take punishment for an act of "Hostility (sic) [pure and simple]; which when they think they have strength enough, they will endeavour by acts of Hostility (sic), to avoyd (sic)" (L377).

Thus punishment and the duty to have the means adequate to punishment must be supplemented by a second duty: the duty to educate subjects as to the connection between obedience and the benefits of peace (L377). Under this duty, the state sovereign and its educative arms (Churches, schools and universities [L384-387]) must teach its subjects that obedience to the state sovereign's power of punishment is in aid of ensuring their own protection; that the act of obedience by which subjects combine, laying down their own power to use force in order that they might strengthen that power in the sovereign, is the best way to ensure the preservation of all (L354). In other words, the state sovereign must teach subjects that, far from being an hostile act perpetrated by a tyrant at war with his subjects, punishment is the result of the subjects combining together in resistance to those enemies who would deprive them of the blessings of peace. For Hobbes, then, the citizen must be shown the connection between state sanctions and his own protection, lest acting out of the sense that his protection would be better served by terminating the

bounds of allegiance, he exercise his sovereign “right to submit himself to such as he thinks best able to protect him, or if he can, protect himself (sic) by his owne (sic) sword” (L249).

As the three arguments above indicate, Hobbes characterizes the individual’s sovereign will as inalienable: his every act holds the possibility that he will dissolve his allegiance to the state sovereign. And, ultimately, if the perceived self-interest of individuals is at stake, even the threat of punishment will not constrain their sovereign will. Therefore, the state sovereign must educate the individual to the connection between obedience and peace – between the maintenance of the state and the individual’s self-interest – that the individual might not start to see the state as an hostile power separate from himself, but, rather, as the most effective extension and expression of his own power and will. Says Hobbes, “nor do people flourish in a monarchy because one man has the right to rule them, but because they obey him” (L380). For Hobbes, as for Sartre, the will of the individual is always sovereign. Thus Hobbes concludes that one of the great duties of the state sovereign is to educate the individual’s sovereign will concerning the connection between “obedience and security” (L728).

A Sartrean Critique of Hobbes: What Happens When a Sovereign Individual is the State Sovereign? An Exercise in Hypocrisy

While Sartre would agree with Hobbes as to the nature of the sovereign individual – at least, to the extent that the individual’s sovereignty is inalienable – Sartre would not agree that the sovereign individual could be educated to obedience by an absolute state sovereign. This is because, for Sartre, any attempt by Hobbes’ absolute state sovereign to

educate the state's subjects to obedience and peace would be a self-defeating act of bad faith.

According to Hobbes, while the state sovereign rules **as the result** of an agreement between the state's subjects, the state sovereign does not rule **by** agreement with anyone (L230). This is because the state sovereign controls all of the means of coercion – its subjects having given up such means that they might avail themselves to the protection of the state – which guarantees that no power that can compel the state to enter into any agreement with its subjects; neither has any individual the power to educate the state sovereign as to the putative virtues of any such agreement. Hobbes thinks this is a good thing, too. For, the state should not be bound or limited in any way, lest the binding or limiting impede the state sovereign's ability to gather the means necessary for the maintenance of the peace. In effect, then, Hobbes sees the state sovereign as living in what he calls a state of nature: a condition in which sovereign individuals have not yet surrendered their power to the state or agreed to live in obedience to the state. Rather, in a state of nature – “the condition of the war of every man against every man” (L249) – the individual must act in accordance with the rule that all other individuals are potential enemies that that one should be ever engaged in the preparation for war.

Now, Sartre would have it that every act is a command and a teaching, something with which Hobbes also seems to agree. But, if every act is a command and a teaching, what happens when the imperatives indicated by the individual's acts fail to concur with their words? For Sartre, such an inconsistency is a type of “bad faith”: a failure to take responsibility for one's actions by denying their import (BF&F 267). We hear this bad

faith in the father who, between puffs on his cigarette, threatens his children with punishment if they smoke. Here, while the father's deed commands his children's imitation; his words deny the obvious meaning of his actions. For Sartre, the father's treatment of his children is that of cowardice: he desires that everyone accept smoking as good, but is afraid to face the hostile response to the desire he so clearly proclaims in action. Thus does he deny with his lips what his behaviour proclaims. Not surprisingly, the result is often that children smoke in fear and by stealth. They know that that the true command is in the act, not the word, and so follow the lesson given by example.

But then, Sartre could say to Hobbes, as it is with the father, so it is with the state sovereign. Through his educative institutions, the state sovereign's subjects might receive his words, which give voice to the benefits of obedience and peace. But the subjects also see the state sovereign in action: so far removed from the lives of his subjects that he does not even see or feel the harm he inflicts upon them, the state sovereign regularly treats all who do not bend to his will as enemies, crushing them with impunity; ever preparing for, and marching to, war against all who stand in his way. Sartre, then, can remind Hobbes that, even if the state sovereign has obtained his power as a result of the general agreement between his subjects to live in peace, **HE IS NOT A PARTY TO THAT AGREEMENT**: the state sovereign is, rather, an individual living in a state of nature, at war with all and everyone. If, with his words, the absolutist state preaches obedience and peace, with his actions, he preaches the striving for dominance by war. For Sartre, this "mixed message" – an act of bad faith – must have the effect of teaching subjects to see all others as enemies, even the state, and so to prepare for war: but like the children of the hypocritical father, they prepare in fear – by stealth, hoarding

what mean tools they have against the day when the state sovereign shows his weakness. In effect, the state sovereign must teach subjects to become, what I shall call in the final section of this paper, fascists.

Modern Technology and the Blessings of Peace

And what weapons might subjects first hoard and then bring to bear against the absolute power of the state sovereign? Not surprisingly perhaps they will be weapons disguised as the instruments of peaceful discourse, and will represent a subversion of state authority by the very technologies whose development the absolutist state was designed to foster.

Hobbes justifies the absolute power of the state sovereign in terms of its being a necessary condition for the preservation of the peace: something that all rational beings would desire. So why, then, is peace so desirable? According to Hobbes, peace is desirable because it creates the opportunity for the industry and commerce which will allow individuals to achieve a “commodious living” (L188). By commodious living, Hobbes is speaking of something more than survival: he is speaking of living in comfort – comfort being measured in terms of the satisfaction of the individual’s many desires.

Thus does Hobbes see the preservation of the peace as affording all individuals something more than mere survival: no “row well, oh slaves, and live” for Hobbes.

Rather, Hobbes envisions a society in which those who labour might have the opportunity for the kind of life which ancient societies imagined only for the rich and powerful.

What has changed in society that Hobbes can see such a utopia in the preservation of the peace?

Technology, and the view of what technology can be, has changed. Hobbes lived at the outset of the capitalist epoch where technology started to be seen as the product of

human innovation and invention. Unlike pre-modern technology, which the ancients saw as operating, and which for the most part did operate, in a steady state⁶, technology, in Hobbes' time, was coming to be seen, and actually to operate, in a more modern manner: as capable of development and improvement. In part, this was due to the interplay of the new modern sciences and technology⁷, but it was also due to the creativity of the more educated owners and workers employing that technology. By the time of Hobbes, then, those engaged in industry and commerce (broadly defined) were seen not only as users but also as improvers of technology. With this change, even those labourers who were not particularly inventive could be seen as benefiting from the improvements made by their more innovative fellows.⁸

For Hobbes, then, industry is a sufficient condition for the development and use of technologies capable of making life commodious for all. And peace is necessary for industry. So long as individuals labour peaceably by themselves, or in partnerships peaceably entered (that is, without force), they will produce the goods necessary to the satisfaction of everyone's wellbeing. Thus does Hobbes propose that the economy protected by the absolutist state be an entirely voluntary one, unfettered by any involuntary constraints on the individuals laboring in it – in effect, a system of unfettered capitalism.

Thus also is Hobbes the first great proponent of democratic or liberal man, not in the sense that he sees men as properly self-ruling, but in the sense that he sees all men as equal – and not only in that they can all kill each other (Hobbes is infamous for this view [L183]), but in that all individuals should be afforded equally the opportunity to labour for a commodious living as well as the protection necessary for them to have this

opportunity at all. Likewise, Hobbes' democratic man is an individual who must be taught the benefits of respecting the peace keeping state as an expression of the his own will and of dealing with others only in a lawful (peaceable) manner. On this teaching hangs his continued obedience, and on this obedience, the maintenance of the state that affords him the equal protection he deserves as democratic man. For Hobbes, then, an absolutist state presiding over an unfettered capitalism is the one best suited to a society in which technology is modern and man democratic

Modern Promotional Technology and the Subversion of the Peace

But, as we have seen, if Sartre is right about sovereign man, the absolute state sovereign cannot teach its subjects the benefits of peace, only the virtues of war and the preparation for it. Likewise, as subjects also have a sovereign will, they are likely to take the state sovereign's behavior as a sign that each individual should act on the view that the state is a potential enemy and obtain the means to reassert his sovereign power. Ironically, it is among the modern technologies developed in a condition of capitalism that the means of resistance to state absolutism are to be found.

It is a truism that, if the history of capitalism has allowed us to see the causal connection between technological innovation and the increasing ability of producers to **satisfy** the demands of markets, the history of capitalism has also shown us a causal relationship between technological innovation and the increasing ability of producers to **shape** market demand. The rise of the science and technologies of mass promotion (as opposed to production), starting first in print form in the nineteenth century, and then expanding into electronic formats in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has allowed those **who** control these technologies (in what critical theory has come to call the culture

industry⁹) to control the decisions of individuals – members of the mass audience or market – as well. So effective is this control by the industries of mass promotion over the decisions of members of the mass audience that it is as if those members were constrained from making decisions at all.¹⁰ But the attaining of such power, by such means, amounts to nothing less than the subversion of the absolute state’s ability to outlaw the constraint of one individual by another. Since control by way of the industries of mass promotion is not constraint in the traditional sense of the word, that is, since no one is stopped from doing what they desire – indeed they are encouraged to do what they “want” by those very industries that condition individuals to “want” what they do¹¹ – the state has no cause to intervene against the acquisition of this control. And yet the industries of mass promotion grant those who control them the same power as would the constraint that is outlawed by the state.

Given the lessons that Sartre would have us see in the behaviour of the absolutist state, it is not surprising that the promotional technologies have been used both to **overthrow** states by anti-liberal political movements on both the political right and left, and to **co-opt** the power of states for the benefit of large corporations (often the above mentioned overthrowing and co-opting were and are combined, as was the case in the rise of Nazi Germany).

But Sartre would not stop with the example of Germany. He must aver that even contemporary liberal states are shown to be absolute, in Hobbes’ sense, by their awesome power and their willingness to participate in international lawlessness¹², even as they insist, at home, that no one is above the law and that all citizens must live in peace. As it is with all absolutist states, the lesson of contemporary liberal states must be in their

example. They must teach citizens that ultimately the state is nothing more than an unnecessary constraint on the development of each individual's own power (notice how well the promise by any politician to "get the government out of your hair" goes down with voters). It has also become clear that those who control the culture industry in contemporary liberal states can exercise a control over other citizens that rivals the coercive power of the state itself. It is not a stretch, then, to see that states in the liberal west cannot be immune to the following tendency: those who can escape the interference of the state while amassing power to rival it, and who see the state as an enemy to be conquered, must end up destroying or co-opting it.

So co-opted, the state, even the contemporary liberal state, cannot be what Hobbes intended, an honest broker and keeper of the peace. It becomes, instead, the creature of factions who display what I would call the fascist tendencies to see the state as a vehicle for crushing their enemies and to see enemies everywhere. Thus the attempted reach of their conquest must be global; the means of their conquest has been traditionally a combination of the "hard" productive and "soft" promotional technologies provided by modern capitalism. So it was for Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia; so it is for the globalization of capitalist corporate control.

Hobbes, no doubt, would call such states failed states. Sartre would remind him, however, that they are but the children of Hobbes' own modern absolutism which preaches liberal respect for law and order while living above the law. For Sartre, the teaching is NOT in the preaching: it IS in the practice. And, if the student is sovereign man, he will take the point and await his opportunity to reassert his sovereign power.

When the opportunity is created by the culture industry, the result will not be liberty. It may be something that humanity will not survive.

Notes

¹ J.P. Sartre, “Existentialism is Humanism,” from *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, in *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction, Second Edition*, editor, L. Nathan Oaklander (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996) p. 311, hereafter cited in the text as EH.

² J.P. Sartre, “Existentialism is Humanism.” In his “Christian trade union” (p. 311) example, Sartre makes it clear that to choose is to “*show* that the best thing for man (my emphasis)” (p. 311) is what is chosen. To choose, then, goes beyond legislating: choosing has the instructive or illustrative function of a teaching, as well.

³ J.P. Sartre, “Bad Faith and Falsehood,” from *Being and Nothingness*, in *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction, Second Edition*, editor, L. Nathan Oaklander (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996). Sartre calls the person who acts in bad faith a “cynical consciousness, affirming the truth within himself [through his act], *denying it in his words* (my emphasis)” (p. 267), hereafter cited in the text as BF&F.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, editor, C.B. Macpherson (London: Penguin Books, 1988) p. 150, hereafter cited in the texts as L.

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Writes Hobbes, “whenever two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless (sic) they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End ... endeavour to destroy or subdue one another” (p. 184). In this passage, Hobbes clearly suggests that both men have *willed* that the other *should* give over what they desire to the point that they are *willing* to fight for it.

⁶ For a discussion on Ancient Greek and Roman views on technology and technological innovation (or the lack thereof), see M.I. Finley “Technical Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 18, no.1 (1965), 29-45.

⁷ For a discussion of the interplay between religious, philosophical and scientific thought in the renaissance and its relation to a new way of thinking about technology see, G.H. Davis, “Chapter Three: The Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution,” in *Means Without End: A Critical Survey of the Ideological Genealogy or Technology Without Limits, From Apollonian Techne to Postmodern Technoculture*, (Lanham, ML: University Press of America, Inc.) pp. 41-69.

⁸ M.I. Finley “Technical Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World.” Finley comments on the connection between industry and increased productivity in the early modern society to highlight its absence in the ancient world. Given the steady-state technology of the ancient world, argues Findley, “it did not much matter whether [free wage workers] ... were industrious or not” (p. 43)

⁹ For a discussion of the culture industry, see T. Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Adorno Reader*, editor, Brian O’Connor (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) pp. 230-238. See also, E. S. Herman & N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988)

¹⁰ N. Frye, *The Modern Century: The Whidden Lectures, 1967* (Toronto, Oxford University Press). Echoing the analysis of cultural critics, such as Adorno and Chomsky, the literary critic, Northrop Frye, argues that the masters of mass culture do not so much force an acceptance of their ideas upon audiences as create a dependency in audiences on “their version reality” (p. 26). The effect is ironic: it is not that mass culture tells people what to think, it’s more that when people actually have the occasion to think, they have nothing to draw upon but the bromides of advertising that have lodged themselves in their brains. Thus do individuals accept the decisions of mass culture as their own *by default*.

¹¹ T. Adorno, “Transparencies on Film”, in *Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Editor, J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1992, c1991). Adorno acknowledges that the culture industry gives consumers what they want, but then shows us what this amounts to: by obtaining a monopoly on the means of entertainment and then catering to the most infantile desires in the mass audience, the culture industry “actually prevents [the] consciousness [of the audience] from changing [maturing] on its own, as it secretly and, deep down, unadmittedly desires” pp. 159-160.

¹² For an analysis of both internal and international lawlessness on the part of liberal states, see N. Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader*, editor, J. Peck (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).