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Hobbes and sociology

A recently published potted guide to the progenitors of social science has revealed no less than twenty-three claimants to this doubtful honour, including a curious hermaphrodite figure called Beatrice and Sydney Webb[1]. Although this genealogy was presumably not intended to be complete, the sheer weight of numbers makes me hesitate to add yet another name to the list for fear that sociology, like history before it, should become too much pre-occupied with its own historiography. Since my candidate is none other than Thomas Hobbes, best known as the most formidable of English political philosophers, my trepidation is increased by two further considerations. First, John Goldthorpe in his introduction to this guide describes the 'embroilment' of early 19th Century sociology with political theory as 'unfortunate'. Second, it has become commonplace at least for introductory lecturers to identify sociology as the child of the industrial revolution and since this is said to have begun in 1760, the credentials of those unlucky enough to have been born before this auspicious date, have to be scrutinized with especial care.

The first of these does not seem to me to present an insurmountable obstacle. While it is probably true that in the second half of the 19th Century, sociology needed to establish itself as a distinct academic enterprise, now that it is so established the argument for introversion no longer holds. Just as Toynbee observes in his *Study of History*, that nations tend to withdraw into themselves before periods of vigorous and effective international activity, so it is possible to argue that once sociologists have defined their own aims and methods they are in a much stronger position to take what is useful and relevant to them from the older political and social theories which they in part inherit.

The aim of this paper is thus not to enter into the discussion of what Hobbes really meant, in itself the basis for a very considerable academic industry, first because I am not qualified to do so, and second because, as Hobbes himself pointed out, we can never really know what is in

other men's minds. Nor is it my intention to appropriate this great 17th Century polymath entirely for sociology. I should, however, like to parallel Lefebvre's assessment of Marx[2], and claim that while Hobbes was not a sociologist, there is a sociology in Hobbes and this sociology is still relevant to contemporary discussion of both methodological and substantive issues.

A closer look at the occasion for Hobbes' political and social thought disposes of the second potential objection, that he could not have produced a sociology before its time. The *Elements of Law* (1640), *De Cive* (1642), and *Leviathan* (1651), all were undoubtedly at least in part a response to the conflicts present in early 17th Century English society which achieved the most violent and intense expression in the Civil War. These conflicts can be seen as symptomatic of a process of far reaching change, which amounted to the breakdown of static, hierarchical and customary feudal relations which had hitherto characterised the society.

In the medieval state the important questions had been those of personal status and privilege, the relations of Lord to serf, of guild members to purchases, of cleric to layman. But by the 17th Century, at least as far as Hobbes was concerned, society had become characterised by more impersonal relations, men who faced each other not as members of states or corporations but as egoistic individuals. Professor MacPherson sees this change in the nature of social relationships as rooted in the process of economic change and more particularly in the development of early capitalism. He claims that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that England in the 17th Century approximated closely to a possessive market society.

> Very nearly half the men were full-time wage earners and if cottagers are counted as part-time wage earners the proportion is over two thirds. While the wage relationship was not as completely impersonal as it was to become the following century, it was already essentially a market relationship. The tendency for land to be exploited as capital was already well advanced to the detriment of such personal relations between landlord and tenant as had survived the changes of the 16th Century.[3]

Hobbes himself had good reason to be aware of this process of relatively rapid social change. He was born in 1588, the year in which the Protestant Establishment was finally secured in England with the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and was to live until 1679. After the death of

his father, a country parson, Hobbes' education was financed by his uncle, a glover and alderman of Malmesbury. On leaving Oxford, Hobbes entered the service of the Cavendishes, one of the former great ruling houses, now experiencing considerable financial difficulty. Christopher Hill[4] suggests that the contrast between his own background and that of his employer, and the insecurity of even the latter, made Hobbes especially aware of the rifts present in English society, rifts which would provefatal to his own position as a hanger-on of the old order.

Hobbes thus lived in a society which, whilst obviously not exactly the same, can nevertheless be said to resemble in several important respects the society which confronted the early 19th Century European sociologists. According to Nisbet the

> fundamental ideas of European sociology are best understood as responses to the problem of order created at the beginning of the 19th Century by the collapse of the old regime... The break up of the old order in Europe, an order that had rested on kinship, land, religion, local community, set free as it were the varied elements of power, wealth and status that had been consolidated however precariously since the late middle ages.[5]

There is thus a remarkable similarity between Hill's description of England in the 17th Century and Nisbett's description of Europe in the early 19th Century. If the 19th Century European sociologists were concerned with the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, from traditional to legal-rational society, then so was Hobbes. It is perhaps significant that Tonnies was writing *Community and Association* at the same time that he was translating an edition of Hobbes' *Behemoth* and *Elements of English Law*.

Obviously, to say that Hobbes was writing against a particular type of historical background, is not to say that this background informed the substance of his thought. However both Hobbes' declared aim and his method suggest that this was in fact the case. Hobbes states in the preface to *De Cive* that his civil philosophy was 'ripened and plucked' from him by the controversies which preceded the civil war. If Hobbes can be said to have had a 'problem of order' at all, it would seem to be a problem posed by rapid and pervasive change in economic and social relationships, and not the universal problems more usually ascribed to him by contemporary sociologists. For both Dennis Wrong and Parsons[6] the 'Hobbesian problem of order' is the problem of why

human society is not a 'war of all against all', why if man is simply a gifted animal, men refrain from unlimited resort to violence and fraud in pursuit of their ends and maintain a stable society. For them Hobbes' problem was 'Why is society possible?'. In some ways it is tempting to accept this assessment, not least because it has recently been asserted that the problem of order is central to sociological theory, and this in itself might seem to strengthen my claim that there is a sociology in Hobbes. The resulting argument would however be rather curious since it would run as follows: sociologists get themselves involved with philosophical questions; Hobbes is a philosopher; therefore there is a sociology in Hobbes. This argument would not only be curious, it would also be wrong. Hobbes' sociology is much more developed than this precisely because he does not have the metaphysical problem so often attributed to him by contemporary sociologists. His aim is much more limited: to construct a model of an authority structure which would regulate the new Gesellschaft of economic and social relationships and thus rescue 17th Century English society from the state of anomie into which it had fallen. It is interesting that Hobbes' attempt to create an authority structure did not lead him, like so many of the early 18th Century sociologists, to attempt to salvage elements of the old Gemeinschaft, but rather to find a new model which would be compatible with, and hence could be legitimated in terms of, the characteristics of Gesellschaft relations. *Leviathan* can thus perhaps be seen as the first attempt to construct a model of legal-rational authority.

As such Hobbes' problem was one of prescription and demonstration and hence not a problem for the sociologist. Prescription however implies prior diagnosis and it is at this latter level in his thinking that there is perhaps most obviously a sociology in Hobbes. If *Leviathan* is primarily an attempt to produce a model super-structure and demonstrate its legitimacy, it begins with an analysis of the sub-structural relationships with which this is to be compatible. It has to do so by virtue of Hobbes' method. It is to an account of this which I now want to turn since it is central to my argument both that Hobbes' problem is more limited than some sociologists have supposed, and to my claim that there is a sociology in Hobbes.

Hobbes describes himself as a student of philosophy. Professor Watkins[7] points out however that for Hobbes, as for the majority of his contemporaries, 'philosophy' was a compendious name for all kinds of rational and scientific inquiry. Like most of the advanced thinkers of the early 17th Century, Hobbes was preoccupied with the problems of

finding a method with which to pursue these enquiries. But whereas his philosophical acquaintances, Bacon and Descartes, constructed a new method a priori, Hobbes believed that some genuine science already existed and like so many latter-day social scientists, [he could point to a method which had been] proved successful in the world of natural science by his friends Galileo and Harvey. This was the resolutive-compositive method, which as its name suggests, consists in two procedures: first the resolution or taking apart of the phenomenon to be understood until its simplest elements are reached and the first principles governing these elements ascertained (a procedure not in itself new but advocated by Aristotle); second the reconstruction of the whole phenomenon in the light of this knowledge about its constituents. In this way what previously appears the confused effect of the whole is transformed into an intelligible system.

While Harvey and Galileo both belonged to this common methodological tradition which had its home in the University of Padua, the different nature of their subject matter means that in practice they used different variants of this method. Harvey studied the blood system, which in itself was not directly observable, by gradually establishing by dissection and inspection the character of its constituent parts, the heart one-way valves etc. On this knowledge of its elements he based a hypothetical reconstruction of the whole system namely, 'that there was motion as it were in a circle'. He then tested and confirmed this hypothetical reconstruction by observing the effects of ligatures, amputations and wound infections. Thus for Harvey the first stage of the method was literal dissection, the hypothetical element coming in at the stage of recomposition. Galileo, in his investigation of the trajectory of missiles followed a slightly different procedure. Resolution for Galileo consisted in the simplification of the problem, disengaging it from certain empirical complications by supposing, for the time being, that there is no resistance or other friction and no curvature of the earth. Once the several factors at work in a complex situation had been isolated and defined, intellectual experiments could be performed by idealising the situation, that is by imagining certain factors which are actually always present in some degree to be diminished to zero. This procedure did not mean that the results of subsequent analysis would apply only to ideal phenomena since the complicating factors could be reintroduced at the compositive stage.

There can be little doubt that Hobbes sought to extend this method and more particularly its Galilean variant to the study of politics. In the preface to the English translation to *De Cive* he writes:

> Concerning my method... I took my beginning from the very matter of civil government, and thence proceed to its generation and form, and the first beginnings of justice. For everything is best understood by its constitutive causes. For as in a watch, or some such small engine, the matter, figure and motion of the wheels cannot well be known except it be taken insunder and viewed in parts; so to take a more curious search into the rights of states and duties of subjects, it is necessary I say, not to take them insunder, but yet that they be so considered as if they were dissolved.

For Hobbes, then, the resolution of society proceeds not by simple dissection but by intellectual experiment for it is only in this way that he can isolate and analyse its constituent parts. These parts were not men *as such*, as Watkins seems to suggest, but certain properties of men and of their social relationships. Hobbes makes it quite clear elsewhere in his writing that ultimately the study of society and of man can be reduced to physics. For Hobbes human action is a form of motion and as such can be explained in terms of the laws of motion. The fact that Hobbes believed that this reduction was possible did not mean that he considered it always necessary. In fact he may well have agreed with Homans, that the fact that one science may be reduced to another is of greater intellectual than practical interest. Thus in constructing his civil philosophy Hobbes resolves society and man not into their more simple elements but rather looks just below their surface. He isolates those elements he considers essential to his diagnosis or analysis by imagining away certain complicating features which are normally empirically present in both these phenomena. Thus the import of the statement:

> Let us consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth and suddenly like mushrooms come to full maturity without all kinds of engagement to each other. (*De Cive* p.109)

It seems to me to be not so much that Hobbes was a methodological individualist as Lukes[8] claimed, but that he proceeded by constructing a model of unsocialised man or at least man unsocialised to the extent that his actions and aspirations were not limited by binding normative constraints. Similarly Hobbes arrives at his 'state of nature' by imagining away this time the complicating factor of authoritative regulation in society. The state of nature is thus 17th Century English society minus its political superstructure.

To say that Hobbes' models of human nature and the state of nature are logical constructs is not, of course, to establish that they are sociological constructs. To make this last assertion it is necessary to answer the further question 'How ideal are Hobbes' ideal types?' The answer which Hobbes himself seems to give on this point is 'not very'. His use of the resolutive-compositive method implies that he starts with an actual society, imagines away certain elements and looks at what remains. To this extent Hobbes' method is dependent on empirical observation. Indeed he suggests that to test his models men have only to look into themselves and their experience, and he writes in the *Rudiments*:

> How and by what advice men do meet will be known by observing those things which they do when they are met...

Moreover he suggests that constructing his model of the state of nature did not place much strain on his imagination since precisely this state had recently been manifest in the civil war, and indeed many of its characteristics could be seen demonstrated in the actions of men in the contemporary society, a society in which the super-structure had beenwithdrawn and in which sub-institutional relationships could clearly be observed.

To the extent that Hobbes' analysis depends on empirical observation it is historically circumscribed. This does not mean however that it is an analysis of a unique situation. It is rather an analysis of Gesellschaft man and Gesellschaft society and consequently Hobbes' substantive analysis still seems to be relevant to the sociological study of complex market society. *Leviathan* begins with the construction of a 'psychological' model which is much more nearly universal that anything which follows. Human nature for Hobbes is composed of two main elements, reason and passion. Reason is ultimately based on the senses. Sensation is caused by the stimulus of some external body or object. The imagination of memory can recall these past sense impressions and store up experience of them. By using this stored up experience man is able to forecast the probable results of alternative courses of voluntary motion, or action. To this extent man is prudent. It is not, however, prudence which makes reason possible. For reason consists in the addition and subtraction of names. Language enables men not only both to communicate and to receive communication, but also to order their own reckonings and to produce rules for their own guidance. It is not so much reason but the passions which for Hobbes

are the driving force in unsocialised man. The two fundamental passions of men are appetite or desire, and aversion. Appetite is motion towards some object, aversion movement away from it. Hobbes' psychology thus to some extent depends on a pleasure-pain theory. But where as for later utilitarians pain seems to be the absence of pleasure, for Hobbes it is a totally distinct movement and for this reason, perhaps, fear remains for him throughout his analysis a distinct motivating force. Some of these appetites and aversions are innate in men, the desire for food, excretion etc. Others are socially acquired. The objects which men desire will vary with their social experience, their cultural and educational background and it is at this point in his argument that Hobbes' psychological model becomes '*homo economicus*' and Hobbes embarks on his analysis of sub-institutional social relationships, in an early capitalist society.

The central concept in Hobbes' analysis of these relations is power. This he defines as man's present means to obtain some future apparent good, and good for economic man is whatever he desires. Man's biological make-up gives him certain power resources such as strength, good looks, intelligence. However it is not these faculties themselves but their eminence which counts, since men value everything by comparison with one another. Eminence can only be established in social life, since by nature all men are virtually equal. No man is so weak that he cannot kill the strongest. Power thus presupposes inequality is a social and not a natural phenomenon. In the *Elements* he writes:

> Power simply is no more the excess of power one above the other.

Power is also transferable and thus it grows, but not only as the result of consensus as in Parsons but also of subservience and fear. Power, says Hobbes, is like fame. It increases as it proceeds. It may be increased as the result of an alliance. Thus to have friends is power. But to have servants is also power. Wealth is one way to win friends and influence people, but only if it is joined with generosity since otherwise it brings only envy and enmity. A reputation for power is in itself a source of greater power because it brings with it the adherence of those in need of protection. Nobility brings power but only where it carries privileges. Scientific success however is the source of little power since the only men who appreciate it are other scientists.

From his discussion of power Hobbes next moves on to his analysis of status. For Hobbes the notion of power and status are even more inextricably linked than for Weber. Although Weber sees class, status and political parties all as phenomena of the distribution of power in the community, at the same time he also claims that not all power entails social honour, and that power is not the only source of status. Thus for Weber either power may lead to status or status may lead to power. For Hobbes the relation between these two concepts is much less equivocal. Status for Hobbes is the social measure of a man's power. Status is power cashed in the market, and since power grows, big status will lead to still more power.

> The value or worth of a man is of all other things his price; that is to say so much as would be given for the use of his power; and therefore is not absolute but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another.

Status is thus insecure to the extent that it will vary with market demand. A general is highly priced in time of war, less so in time of peace. A learned and uncorrupt judge is worth much in peace but less in war time. To this extent it is the buyer, not the seller, that determines the price.

> For let a man (as most men do), rate themselves at the highest value they can; yet their true value is no more than it is esteemed by others.

Esteem is manifestation of the value we set on one another. To value a man at a high rate is to honour him; at a low rate to dishonour him. Honour regarded subjectively by the recipient is the difference between his own estimate and the market estimate of his value. Regarded objectively it corresponds to the market estimate alone. The difference between the two is relative deprivation. Since status for Hobbes is the social value of a man's power, then the sources of status are coextensive with the sources of power. Thus, for example, wealth is a source of status since it is a sign of power. To be asked for help is a source of status since it signifies the recognition of superior power. The more difficult the help asked for, the higher the esteem. To give great gifts to a man is to confer status on him, since it symbolises the buying of protection and again the acknowledgement of superior power. To give small gifts on the other hand is to dishonour, for this, says Hobbes, is simply to give alms and signifies that a man is worth little help. To obey is to honour since no man obeys him who has little power either to help or hurt him.

Having thus defined his main terms, Hobbes now moves on to employ them in the analysis of sub-institutional relationships. It is the desire for power which for Hobbes patterns social interaction. The striving for power is ceaseless not because man's appetites are never satiated – a psychological principle – but because of the situation in which man finds himself in a society without authoritative regulation, thus Hobbes writes:

> So that is the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless striving of power after power unto death. And the cause of this is not always that man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power; but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he hath at present, without the acquisition of more.

Men thus continually need more power to protect that which they already have because their social situation is insecure. This insecurity stems from two other social facts that Hobbes observes at work patterning unregulated Gesellschaft relationships. The first of these is that since, as we have already seen, men are by nature virtually equal in ability, then they have virtually equal aspirations, if these are allowed to go unrestrained. Second, the objects of theiraspirations are in scarce supply. Power itself is a scarce resource by definition since it only consists in the excess of man's personal capacities over others, plus what he can gain by their use. Men are therefore always in competition with one another. Competition is conflict and unregulated competition, war. And so to the most famous passage of all.

> Here by it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called warre; and such a warre as if of every man against every man. For warre, consisteth not in battle only or in the act of fighting. But in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known... so the nature of warre consisteth not in actual fighting but in the known supposition thereto... during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.
>
> Whatsoever therefore, is consequent to a... time of warre whereby every man is Enemy to every man the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without security, than what their own strength and invention shall furnish them with all.

In this situation there can be no place for industry or agriculture, science or society and what is worst of all:

> Continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

This then is Hobbes' model of the economic market society: a society in which aspirations are unlimited, in which the individual's attempts to maximise his self-interest in a situation of scarcity leads him inevitably into conflict with [others]. If my account is correct, Hobbes thus does not provide us with a sociological metaphysic but with an analysis of basic economic relationships in the unregulated Gesellschaft. Order for him is a practical and not an abstract problem. His diagnosis provides him with its solution (which I do not have time to go into here) except to say that his prescription is radically different from Parson's account since order for Hobbes is based not on norms but on rules of rational calculation expressed in the social contract and backed by coercive power – in case men in practice prove not rational enough to recognise their legitimacy. Hobbes thus provides us with two models: a model of the sub-structure of Gesellschaft society and the super-structure he believes is necessitated by it.

His method of analysis bears a striking resemblance to that used by Homans and Blau.[9] Thus Blau writes that his aim is to:

> Contribute to an understanding of social structure on the basis of the analysis of social processes that govern the relations between individuals and groups', and to suggest 'generic principles of social life.

Homans that:

> the study of men's elementary social behaviour may help to answer men's old problems – how to reconcile their social institutions with their social nature.

The first lesson in Hobbes for contemporary sociologists would seem to me to be a reminder that this method is not simply compositive but also resolutive. That is that it does not proceed by deduction from first principles as Homans seems to suggest – these principles have to be discovered by dissolving society. Homans writes that:

> The central problem of social science remains the one posed in his own language and his own era by Hobbes. How does the behaviour of individuals create the characteristics of groups.

To say this seems to me fundamentally to misunderstand what Hobbes was trying to do. The fact that in the resolutive-compositive method one begins not with the part but with the whole meant that Hobbes could and did not ignore, as Homans seems to be doing, the most fundamental idea concerning the nature of social reality – namely that while the larger entities obtain their characteristics mostly from the relations between the parts of which they are composed, the elements of social phenomena themselves obtain many of their characteristics from the larger entities of which they are a part. The resolutive-compositive method thus seems to me to be compatible with a reciprocal relationship between micro and macro levels in social life, whereas the compositive method alone implies that the latter is entirely dependent on the former.

Homans might counter with the protest that since the first principles are now well known we no longer need to bother with analysis but can concentrate on re-synthesis. Indeed he argues in *The Nature of Social Science* that these have indeed been known for several hundred years.

> Before the rise of academic anthropology and sociology at the end of the 19th Century the nature of the answer [to the question what are the general propositions of social science] would have seemed obvious to most scholars. They would have answered with propositions about 'human nature', about the psychic characteristics men share as members of a single species... My contention will be that the original answer was correct, provided we accept the view modern psychology takes as to the essentials of human nature.

While Hobbes would probably have agreed that psychological propositions are the most general, except for physical propositions, he certainly does not find them sufficient for the analysis of the situation confronting him. Hobbes cannot explain sub-institutional relationships without adducing specifically sociological propositions concerning the competition for power and status in society. Further I would argue that he is able to arrive at these social facts precisely because his analysis starts from the whole phenomenon and not from the part, from resolution and not composition. It is perhaps significant that Homans omits the discussion of power in his *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms*. While Blau at least avoids this last omission his discussion of power again seems to me to be in some ways less useful than Hobbes', in that he explicitly rules out the discussion of coercion.

One further lesson can perhaps be learnt from Hobbes and it seems to me to be this. That if sociologists are using the resolutive-compositive method they should not expect the first principles which they uncover to be universal. That is, if they are to be sociological and not simply logical, or for that matter psychological, propositions they must de-pend upon the resolution of a particular society or type of society and that the type of macro [order] will in part determine what one finds at the micro-level. To this extent perhaps Homans is right when he says sociology can produce no general [laws] if by general he means universal propositions. Hobbes then has little solace to offer sociologists looking for a set of first principles with which to explain all social life. But perhaps after all this is really a message of comfort, for on the day that sociologists discover that societies are really all the same, on that day we shall all be out of business.

Conditions? Determines? Defines? Sets intelligible limits? I suggest that what this amounts to is the statement abstractly, in theory if you will, of the conditions which mankind necessarily has to meet in order to continue to be mankind. It's not an invitation to attempt to read off directly from a detailed analysis of a mode of production what that consciousness will be, still less an invitation to 'catch the unchanging properties of a 'solid' factual world'.

> ...At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or, what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed...

(What? No more speech about speech about speech about speech...?)

> ...In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science – [Geology for instance? – Palaeontology?] – and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which they become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradiction of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

And do, by all means, let's bear in 'mind' that the bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals.)

(Here, in the classical tradition, the manuscript breaks off...)