

Introduction

Within the history of ideas, few concepts have been subject to such a rapid and radical shift in the way that they have been normatively evaluated as that of democracy. It is a striking fact that although throughout the history of political thought the vast majority of so-called canonical thinkers have been explicitly anti-democratic, in the present day almost all political theorists and practitioners claim to be committed to democratic ideals. The content of these ideals, however, varies widely, democratic advocates affirming a wide range of distinct and often times mutually incompatible principles and values. There is thus little consensus on the necessary institutional physiognomy of the democratic regime, let alone the social and cultural background conditions that facilitate its effective reproduction, or the philosophical assumptions—such as those regarding human sociality and the source of fundamental law—that render it a political possibility. Universal ideological appeal to the language of democracy has thoroughly mystified the concept.¹ Although the most egregious of such mystifications are evident to most, certain others are more credible, yet nevertheless problematic. When, for example, democracy is considered in epistemic terms—as the discovery of specified procedures facilitating competent decision-making and culminating in the resolution of factually correct determinations—or in consensual terms—as looking toward the establishment of a realm of mutual understanding that mediates opinion so as to maximally enable the harmonization of interest—something fundamental about democracy’s being and object is obfuscated.

It is this conceptual situation that renders the clarification of the nature of the democratic imaginary particularly urgent. In order to specify what should be seen as essential to this imaginary, I perhaps counterintuitively turn to the political thought of one of democracy’s

most notorious enemies, Thomas Hobbes. Despite his antipathy to democratic sovereignty in relation to its aristocratic and especially monarchical expressions, and the fact that he never elaborates a systematic account of democratic self-organization, I argue that Hobbes nevertheless exceptionally understands not only its fundamental characteristics and conditions, but also those risks embedded within it, risks that are covered up by most forms of contemporary democratic theory. At a first level of analysis, I show how Hobbes's engagement with democracy is absolutely central to the elaboration of his civil science, the democratic imaginary functioning as a negative counterfigure that perpetually menaces, and thereby orients, his political philosophy. At a second level, however, the reconstruction of the terms of this engagement deeply clarifies our understanding of (1) the essence of democracy as a form of regime, (2) the ontological conditions that structure democratic possibility, and (3) the normative ground upon which an ethical preference for democracy might be constructed. In the final instance, I suggest that even if we cannot imagine, contrary to some readers, a democratic Hobbes, we can nevertheless imagine a Hobbesian democracy, and that such can enrich contemporary democratic theory.

Democratic Non-Sense

The question of Hobbes and democracy is certainly one that has been explored before, and most especially recently. It is a curious feature of Hobbes's intellectual legacy that his body of work, one of the most enthusiastically anti-democratic within the history of political thought, has become a conceptual resource for the articulation of a variety of different normative defenses of democratic life. It is no doubt the case that some potentially democratic implications of certain Hobbesian principles were recognized immediately, both by Hobbes's critics and sympathizers alike. Hence, for example, the important contribution made by *De Cive* to the development of the Dutch republican tradition.² It was only within the latter half of the twentieth century, however, that a large percentage of Hobbes scholars began to appreciate the extent to which Hobbes's political thought was, although not in itself democratic, nevertheless capable of contributing to democratic thinking. Initially this democratic appropriation was firmly situated within the philosophical horizon of liberalism.³ A variety of scholars argued that Hobbes could be

seen—despite his anti-constitutionalism, his absolutism, and his preference for monarchy—as prefiguring, initiating, or participating in the modern liberal tradition.⁴ Central to such readings was the issue of the voluntary consent of the contractors, *Leviathan's* concept of authorization being seen to speak to a deliberate exercise of democratic will by individuals possessing a fundamental natural right.⁵ Hobbes is interpreted as moving in a democratic direction through stressing the extent to which citizens in any form of regime must actively assent to sovereign rule after rational reflection on political necessity.⁶

Already here, however, we can observe what I will identify shortly as the fundamental error of Hobbes's democratic readers, those whom Kinch Hoekstra calls the “democratical Hobbesians.”⁷ As I will have occasion to note in chapter 2, Hobbes's entire theory of authorization is developed in an effort to think the possibility of political institution independently of the expression of democratic will. Specifically, Hobbes in *Leviathan* reconceptualizes political foundation as a process defined in terms of the simultaneous individual authorization of a set of representative relations on the part of each distinct natural person belonging to the multitude, as opposed to the collective self-activity of an already unified people capable of acting as one. Democracy for Hobbes, however, is defined precisely in terms of such latter self-activity. In short, the democratic Hobbesian content highlighted by his liberal readers is not democratic by Hobbes's own criterion.

This operation repeats itself in subsequent and more robustly democratic readings of Hobbes, which attempt to either further supplement the liberal construal, or deploy Hobbes in the name of alternative democratic models. Here we can briefly identify several varieties of interpretation. Gianfranco Borrelli, for example, influentially locates in Hobbes the theoretical foundations for modern representative government, going so far as to write that Hobbes anticipates “the entire tradition of Western parliamentarianism and the history of the forms of modern political representation.”⁸ For David Runciman this anticipation is to be located specifically in Hobbes's recognition that the sovereign represents not each individual subject as a distinct natural person, but rather that corporate entity—the state—which their mutual authorization brings into existence, this conception ultimately suggesting a solution to the political problem of “how to reconcile the claims of representatives to take decisions on behalf of individuals with the rights of individuals to judge how well they are being represented.”⁹ On Richard Tuck's account,

meanwhile, Hobbes is the first systematic theorist of modern representative democracy to the extent that his democratic polity does not require perpetual activity on the part of citizens, the sovereign person delegating the administrative business of government to various specialized offices and magistrates.¹⁰ Hobbes, via the image of the “sleeping sovereign,” thus provides us with a model of democracy without a democratic assembly, sovereignty inhering in a people that might only periodically awaken in order to express its will.

In addition to the representative democratic Hobbesians, there are also those we might label the liberal pluralist Hobbesians. The most important of such readers is Richard Flathman, who argues that Hobbes’s thought provides us with the conceptual resources to think the possibility of a “duly chastened democratic politics.”¹¹ Such a politics is constituted not through the instauration of a concrete political form in which self-actualization is achieved via active political participation, but rather the establishment of a social condition in which the power of government is institutionally moderated so as to maximize the scope of the individual pursuit of private goods. For Flathman and other such readers, Hobbes is a pluralist to the degree that he prescribes no single mode of being required for self-realization, the function of the body politic being the provision of security such that citizens may indulge their diverse and multiple ends.¹²

The last group of interpreters I will call attention to are the radical democratic Hobbesians, whose readings are often explicitly framed in opposition to liberal ones. Paul Downes, for example, argues that Hobbes can be seen to contribute to a post-Marxist theory of radical democracy that refutes the limits on democratic organization imposed on the latter by liberal and capitalist logics.¹³ The effort to reclaim Hobbes as a forerunner of liberal democracy pacifies the former’s civil science, ideologically deploying it in order to conservatively legitimate “a conventional liberal-capitalist version of democracy.”¹⁴ Radical democratic appropriations of Hobbes often frame themselves as being necessarily anti- or countersovereign in orientation. James Martel, for instance, proposes that Hobbes’s nominalism suggests to us an alternative mode of reading that decenters the principle of textual authority, the latter being generated through the critical act of interpretation as opposed to being unilaterally sourced in the author.¹⁵ Rereading Hobbes with this in mind allows us to imagine a concept of radical democracy that

has successfully jettisoned the principle of sovereignty, which is always incapable of expressing that human diversity which radically democratic politics seeks to affirm.¹⁶

As creative and theoretically sophisticated as all of these democratic applications of Hobbesian political thought are, my suggestion is that most of them are in fact either not democratic, not Hobbesian, or neither. Such conceptions are examples of what Hobbes identifies as absurd speech, propositions in which the predicate is incapable of naming that which the subject does.¹⁷ Hobbes would assert that the notions of a democracy without sovereignty,¹⁸ or a democracy without absolutism,¹⁹ or a democracy without a democratic assembly,²⁰ are as sensical as the notions “of a *round Quadrangle*; or *accidents of Bread in Cheese*; or *Immaterial Substances*; or of *A free Subject*; *A free-Will*; or any *Free*, but free from being hindred by opposition.”²¹ As opposed to mere error, to which all individuals are subject to from time to time—such as, for example, when they reckon without the use of words and fail to correctly identify a phenomenon’s necessary consequents or antecedents,²² or when they misapply a name to a thing which is incapable of being so subsumed²³—absurdity occurs when reckoning with common words produces false determinations as a result of any of a certain number of causes. In *Leviathan* Hobbes identifies as the first, and for our purposes the most important cause of absurd conclusions, the failure of ratiocination to ground itself in and commence from the generally accepted signification of words.²⁴ Indeed, it is this failure that Hobbes associates with the greater part of scholastic philosophy, writing that “it is most true that *Cicero* sayth of them somewhere; that there can be nothing so absurd, but may be found in the books of Philosophers. And the reason is manifest. For there is not one of them that begins his ratiocination from the Definitions, or Explications of the names they are to use.”²⁵ My suggestion is that the non-sense of the democratical Hobbesians results from their failure to accept what Hobbes sees as the necessary components of the democratic commonwealth, abstracting from them in such a way as to facilitate the mapping of their own particular conceptions onto the Hobbesian schema. Through such operations, though, they violate the logical structure of Hobbes’s civil science. Any possibility of theorizing a normative preference for democratic modes of political life along Hobbesian lines must, on the contrary, be firmly rooted in Hobbesian signification, for “in the right Definition of Names, lyes the

first use of Speech; which is the Acquisition of Science: And in wrong, or no Definitions, lyes the first abuse; from which proceed all false and senselesse Tenets.”²⁶

Hobbes as Democratic Anatomist

My argument in this book is not only that an understanding of democratic potentiality in Hobbes must begin from the terms of his own conception, but more importantly, that engagement with what Hobbes takes to be the core components of democracy sheds important light on features of the latter’s mode of operation and conditions of being that are increasingly obscured in contemporary debates. Specifically, what Hobbes reminds us of is the fact that democracy is always a tragic regime. Here I borrow the characterization of democracy in terms of tragedy from Cornelius Castoriadis, whose analysis engages the problematic that emerges from the recognition that the political institution of the social world is always a specifically self-institution.²⁷ That is to say, there exists no extrasocial rule or law—be it “Nature, Reason, or History as ultimate ‘principle’ ”²⁸—that functions to structure or delimit political determination. The formal institutional configuration of democracies may vary widely, but what the latter all share is the effort to maximally facilitate the universal participation of citizens in the formulation of those legal norms governing communal life, through for example the construction of general assembly fora and the deployment of the modes of sortition and rotation for the distribution of political offices not requiring a special skill or knowledge. In this sense “democracy is not an institutional *model*, not even a ‘regime’ in the traditional sense of the term. Democracy is the self-institution of the collectivity by the collectivity, and this self-institution as movement.”²⁹ To the extent, however, that there exists no transcendent law guiding this movement, any limitation on the instituting power, which is indeed absolutely necessary for the stabilization of social life, must be a specifically self-limitation.

What Hobbes perceives, and what worries him so deeply, is that there is no guarantee that the people will practice such self-limitation. Indeed, for Hobbes the very nature of deliberation in democratic assemblies, which is marked by the discursive confrontation of individual opinions in a process whereby speakers deploy eloquence in order to stimulate the passions of listeners for the sake of the cultivation of political support,

is uniquely unsuited to fostering such restraint. It is this absence of self-limitation that constitutes the hubris of the people. Hubris speaks not to the transgression of established limits, but rather the very absence of self-limitation. To once more quote Castoriadis, the twentieth century's most astute analyst of this phenomenon: "It is the transgression of limits that have never been defined by anyone, and which in a sense will only be defined after the fact."³⁰ That the people as collective instituting power, in the face of the lack of transcendent constraints on the scope of their activity, fail to substitute for this lack their own autonomously formulated limits, is the intrinsic risk of democracy, and what constitutes its tragic dimension: "Democracy is the regime of self-limitation; therefore it is also the regime of historical risk—another way of saying that it is the regime of freedom—and a tragic regime."³¹ Whereas the major part of contemporary democratic theory and practice occults this dimension of democratic being—through, for example, the effort to construct or model various national constitutionalisms or international regimes that are seen as giving a legal form to ostensibly prepolitical norms, such as so-called natural and universal human rights—Hobbes confronts it directly. Political history would seem to show that the transcendent basis of such mechanisms is always illusory, to the extent that, whatever legal function they might serve, this function does not include the capacity to definitively settle all political questions. Regardless of any ideological claims to the contrary, there exists no exterior source to ground and facilitate the perpetuation of the legal configuration, which is perpetually subject to transgression. Such a fact is one that we should be intimately familiar with in the present historical moment, given the multiplication of various authoritarian political movements and governments within liberal democratic regimes, movements and governments which often challenge and threaten the very constitutional context from which they emerge. What Hobbes argues is that popular hubris is always a possible source of such transgressions.

Within the history of political thought Hobbes's conception of democracy is exemplary in capturing the above features of this form of society. His articulation of the constitutional attributes of democracy, however, does not exhaust his contribution to democratic theory. What I call Hobbes's democratic imaginary refers not only to his particular institutional anatomy of the form of the democratic regime, but also what it reveals to us about certain metaphysical conditions of democratic being, and, more subtly, the possibility of identifying an ethical ground for the

normative preference for democracy in relation to other sovereign configurations. The three sections of this book correspond to what I take to be the three democratic images that collectively constitute the Hobbesian democratic imaginary. The constellation of these images not only clarifies our understanding of the social and political problematics suggested by the idea of democracy, but also the importance of this latter idea to the Hobbesian endeavor. Hobbes's reflection on democracy centrally informs significant elements of his political-philosophic project, such that his civil science is incapable of being completely grasped independently of consideration of the place of the democratic imaginary within it.

Summary of Contents

The first Hobbesian democratic image reveals this latter fact, it articulating the role that the idea of democracy plays in the construction of Hobbes's political thought. Democracy functions as a sort of counterimage imperiling the normative goals of his civil science.³² I begin in chapter 1 by outlining the main features of Hobbes's critical anatomy of the democratic regime. Hobbes's strong aversion to democratic sovereignty is well established, and this despite the fact that he is perfectly aware that his civil science is incapable of definitively proving its inferiority in relation to other sovereign forms at a philosophical level.³³ As he concedes in *De Cive*, the preference for monarchy is "the only thing in this book which I admit is not demonstrated but put with probability."³⁴ Hobbes's argument against democracy must thus proceed through a historical investigation of what he intuits to be its intrinsically practical limitations. At the center of his critique is what he takes to be the problem of the multitude. As opposed to a people, a unified collective actor endowed with a singular will capable of initiating action, a multitude is a mere agglomeration of a multiplicity of distinct individuals that remain always nonidentical with one another, this natural nonidentity militating against the formulation of concerted and joint political deeds. Hence the need, if stable life in common is to be possible, to reduce the plurality of distinct wills to a single one through the creation of an entity whose will stands in for and expresses those of all. A commonwealth may be represented by either a monarch, an aristocratic assembly, or a democratic assembly. The superiority of monarchy, however, lies in the fact that the will of the sovereign representative is already unified in the natural being of

the occupier of sovereign office. In assemblies such is not the case, and hence the need for the generation of an artificial unity through a process of deliberation among the multiple people occupying said office. Hobbes's critique of democracy is made on the basis of what he takes to constitute the formal mechanics of such deliberation within major assembly fora. Political deliberations in democratic assemblies are characterized by the confrontation between distinct individuals with unique normative conceptions, who deploy eloquence in an effort to persuade others of their positions. In this process, Hobbes thinks, the passions of assembly members are so enflamed as to render ratiocination impossible, reason being overwhelmed by emotion so as to allow for the generalization of antagonism between people on the basis of their differing interests and opinions. In short, Hobbes considers democracy to be an intrinsically paradoxical mode for generating a collective will, for it is governed by that very logic of multitude—the logic of difference, heterogeneity, and nonidentity—which the effort to construct a commonwealth was aimed at overcoming in the first place. Ultimately Hobbes concludes that democracy is, by its own institutional force, oriented toward uncertainty and instability, democratic citizens being incapable of practicing that rational self-limitation that stable political life depends upon.

After detailing Hobbes's critical anatomy of democracy in chapter 1, in chapter 2 I demonstrate the centrality of this opposition to democracy through philosophically contextualizing the overall elaboration of his political thought in light of it. I argue that Hobbes's opposition to democratic life constitutes a central frame through which we must understand various of the most important theoretical mutations that occur throughout the several expressions of his civil science. Specifically, key alterations that Hobbes makes in his political work from *The Elements of Law* to *Leviathan* should be interpreted as motivated by his antipathy to democracy, each new text being an effort to retroactively foreclose a substantive democratic normativity that the prior theoretical framework allowed for or suggested. In *The Elements* the potential source of this normativity is Hobbes's assertion of a unique type of civil liberty that is found only in democratic commonwealths, to the extent that the latter singularly facilitate shared participation in the formulation of law. Recognizing the extent to which such a conception of liberty might predispose citizens to preferring democratic bodies politic to monarchical or aristocratic ones, in *De Cive* Hobbes attempts to neutralize this source of normativity by, firstly, reconceptualizing liberty in terms of the mere

absence of impediments to motion, and secondly, denying any intrinsic desire on the part of citizens to participate in political modes. *De Cive*, however, continues to think political foundation in terms of a necessarily originary democratic moment, individuals self-organizing themselves as a collective agent prior to definitively choosing, via democratic procedure, a final sovereign form. By the time of *Leviathan* Hobbes had realized the extent to which such a conception of foundation might be exploited so as to produce an ethical preference for democracy as the temporally earliest, and hence most natural of sovereign constitutions. Hence in *Leviathan* Hobbes reformulates political institution in terms of the mechanics of authorization and representation, in which citizens supposedly individually authorize sovereign representation without recourse to collective determination. Overall, then, Hobbes's opposition to democracy is so significant as to fundamentally structure core elements of his political philosophy, the very form of the account of political institution changing in response to the perception of democratic potentiality that it suggests.

In part 2 I turn to the second image constituting the democratic imaginary that can be found in Hobbes's thought. Just as Hobbes recognizes the necessary institutional form of democracy as the direct and explicit self-institution of the people via active participation in the formulation of law, he also recognizes those metaphysical conditions that render such self-activity a human possibility. In this section I thus turn to Hobbes's natural philosophy and philosophical anthropology in order explicate these conditions of democratic being. In chapter 3 I detail the extent to which Hobbes considers the natural world to be open to the type of autonomous self-institution that democracy depends upon. As noted above, he recognizes the fact that the instituting power is not constrained by any exterior limits, such as a law of nature or of history, that would structure or guide political determination. Hobbes's materialism certainly considers the emergence of phenomena in terms of necessity, but such necessitation is irreducible to any teleological principle, matter lacking an intrinsic purpose or essence that would direct its motion. Such applies to material human bodies as much as any other, and hence the impossibility of thematizing the human psyche so as to extract from it certain natural standards of sociality valid in every historical context. Thus for Hobbes we can observe within the world an overwhelming diversity of forms of human association, which are not systematically derived from any shared first principles beyond that directing us to institute some form of society

for the sake of the preservation of our lives. Social-historical alterity ultimately reflects the radically creative human power to autonomously institute our world.

In chapter 4 I turn to the second ontological condition of democratic being. If the first condition speaks to the creative power to institute a social world lacking prior foundation, the second speaks to the equal capacity of members of society to so participate in such institution. Hobbes understands that what fundamentally defines democracy is the lack of all natural titles or qualifications to govern, access to offices of rule not being restricted to a part of the community on the basis of this part's supposed possession of a unique intelligence, skill, or knowledge exclusively identified with it. Hobbes's rejection of all such presumed competencies is revealed through his affirmation of a radical human equality. Most readers of Hobbes have difficulty dealing with this affirmation, some seeing it as existing in fundamental tension with his philosophical-anthropological nominalism, which asserts the absolute singularity and nonidentity of individual beings. Hobbesian equality, however, is not meant to conceptually represent a literal continuity of human characteristics or traits. It expresses, rather, a condition of equality-in-difference, each individual possessing an equivalent potential to adequately deploy practical reason in order to outline as far as possible the nature of their particular goods, and the effective modes to these goods' actualization. Natural equality thus does not deny difference, but rather reflects it. Hobbes's effort to refute democracy does not proceed through the denial of natural equality, but rather through the recognition of the consequences that result when such natural equality is given a concrete expression in democratic modes and orders. Whereas aristocratic thinkers deny that the majority of citizens possess the requisite rationality required to make informed determinations regarding technical political things, for Hobbes the danger of democracy lay in its effort to translate a very real natural equality into a political equality considered in terms of the right of all citizens to utilize their reason in deliberative contexts. Precisely because all individuals are different—possessing differing desires, opinions, normative conceptions, and so on—the realm of politics will always be conflictual, the individual deployment of equal reason for the sake of the advancement of particular values or ends inevitably meeting resistance from opposed projects. The potential for hostile antagonism is thus embedded within democracy's very logic, and given Hobbes's

skepticism that political conflict may be institutionally moderated so as to facilitate self-limitation, this antagonism is bound to eventually destabilize the social order.

In the last part of the book I turn finally to the question of the ethics of democracy and whether Hobbes's political philosophy is capable of functioning as a conceptual resource for thinking a normative preference for specifically democratic sovereign forms. Needless to say, such an undertaking runs entirely counter to Hobbes's own intention, which was always to prevent the emergence of any such preference. The articulation of the third image constituting the Hobbesian democratic imaginary is thus one that is only latent within Hobbes's work. In order to present this image, in chapter 5 I switch methodological modes, attempting not a comprehensive reconstruction of the logic of the Hobbesian argument, but rather selectively deploying certain of Hobbes's concepts in relation with one another in order to generate conclusions about political life very different than Hobbes's own. The unexpected juxtaposition of particular Hobbesian categories in a unique way thus produces new ideas whose content might otherwise remain obscured. I suggest in this final chapter that the constellation of Hobbes's reformulation of the idea of natural law with his concept of the true liberty of subjects allows for the emergence of a theoretical basis to ethically prefer democracy, although counter to Hobbes's democratic readers noted above, on specifically Hobbesian grounds. Contrary to the classical natural writers in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, who assume that legal norms may be derived from the perception of transcendent moral principles of extra-social origin, Hobbes's laws of nature specify only that minimal content that can be said to constitute the immanent tendencies of the natural human being, and the means to institute a political order capable of facilitating these tendencies' expression. This institution exists for the sake of the safety of the people, the actualization of which depends on the creation of a sphere of right that ensures the ongoing facilitation of that general human motion upon which all particular motion depends. It is precisely this facilitation that the so-called true liberties of the subject look toward. True liberty aims at the preservation of those truly universal human powers and faculties whose expression is ethically suggested by natural law as a basic prerequisite for the realization of the safety of the people. My suggestion is that *Leviathan's* recognition, contrary to what is earlier claimed in *De Cive*, that all individuals have a natural desire for political participation—recognizing it as the most effective means for

the pursuit of their particular good—combined with a rejection of the Hobbesian critique of the mechanics of democratic deliberation, allows us to reinterpret democratic self-activity as an important element for the realization of the safety of the people. To this extent, democracy can be rethought as that sovereign form that most adequately facilitates the self-preservation demanded by natural law.