



2010

Review of *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640-1700* by Jon Parkin

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Recommended Citation

Vaughan, Geoffrey M. "Review of *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640-1700* by Jon Parkin." *Seventeenth-Century News* vol. 68 no. 3/4 (Fall 2010): 215-218. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/95651>.

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Jon Parkin. *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640-1700*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. \$125. xi + 449. Review by GEOFFREY M. VAUGHAN, ASSUMPTION COLLEGE.

Jon Parkin argues that Hobbes's method of reasoning—formulating a series of paradoxes that result in unconventional conclusions—was so powerful that his contemporaries (a) could not allow him to turn men's heads, and (b) could not refute him. Perhaps that last is stronger than what Parkin actually claims. Rather, he says that Hobbes's contemporary critics chose to adopt many of his ideas even while denouncing the author. The ideas were just too good to

pass up, even if the “Monster of Malmesbury” was too dangerous to range free. Something of a caricature of Hobbes was developed to disguise their borrowings and warn others from even reading him. One might describe this as the B.B. King method of refutation: “There ain’t nobody here but us chickens.”

Far more than a chronicle of Hobbes’s reception between 1640 and 1700, this remarkable book provides new insight into the structure of Hobbes’s arguments, focusing upon what Parkin describes as “Hobbes’s seductive ambiguity” (16). Yet one might characterize Parkin’s argument in similar terms. For instance, in the Introduction Parkin tells us that, had the Royalists won the Civil War, Hobbes might very well have been “the toast of English society rather than its philosophical bogeyman” (12). Yet the first chapter, which details the reception of his work before *Leviathan* and largely while the war was still being decided, records significant and persistent criticisms from figures who would later develop into Hobbes’s greatest opponents, such as Bramhall, and those who had no direct involvement in English politics, such as Grotius (34-35). Could Hobbes’s reputation really have avoided its fate? This is a seductive speculation, but I cannot tell if Parkin actually believes it.

Parkin does not set out to establish Hobbes as a conventional Anglican or a straightforward Royalist. There is no grand effort at revisionism here as he clearly states that Hobbes rewrote Christianity in *Leviathan* in a “radical, and occasionally downright bizarre fashion” (92). Nevertheless, Parkin does a very good job of explaining the ways in which Hobbes’s arguments caught his contemporaries off guard precisely by being so similar to them. In reference to Bramhall, but applicable to many others, he writes, “As would so often be the case, Hobbes’s theory, with its uncompromisingly paradoxical statements, came under fire from those in danger of being associated with its heterodoxy” (43-44). Hobbes’s conclusions were heterodox, his paradoxes were novel, but the trajectory of his arguments were unnervingly similar to those of many more mainstream authors. This, claims Parkin, explains the excessive reactions to what were, at first, some obscure little books. The second edition of *De Cive* and the subsequent publication of *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico* merely entrenched

the earlier responses. And once republicans started using his work to refute royalism, the stage was set for the main event, *Leviathan*.

Parkin gives *Leviathan* its own chapter, covering the years 1651-1654, but the next two, “The storm (1654-1658)” and “Restoration (1658-1666),” are also about his most famous work. Apart from select scholars and, perhaps, a Continental audience, *Leviathan* did and will always command attention. The chronological divisions of Parkin’s chapters, while not novel, are ingeniously developed and portray a cascade of political events that pick up Hobbes’s book and dash it against the dangerous rocks of the engagement controversy, the Protectorate, and the Restoration. That anything survived is testament to the greatness of Hobbes’s work. That Parkin has three more chapters to go lends credence to the suggestion that *Leviathan* is an immortal god.

In the *Leviathan* chapter Parkin presents a judicious account of the changes between Hobbes’s earlier attempts at explaining his political views and his masterwork. This section alone will become a touchstone for scholars and students alike. He covers the argumentative structure, novel content introduced in *Leviathan*, the remarkable rewriting of Christianity mentioned above, as well as the “more obviously ludic manner” (93) of the style. For many this last is the most arresting feature of the book, and Parkin makes the important point that even his political and philosophical opponents “could not resist reproducing his startling metaphors and formulae in their works” (94). The title alone caused, as it still does, occasion for puns and jibes, and Parkin’s near exhaustive recounting of the ways in which critics did so is a pleasure to read.

The remainder of the book takes us to the end of Hobbes’s life and the decade beyond. The constant in the story is that Hobbes’s ideas were roundly denounced and repeatedly adopted. Far from simply demonstrating similarities between Hobbes and contemporary and later authors, Parkin provides detailed accounts of significant borrowing without attribution. Doing so without attribution was the key, for Hobbes had been so clearly and successfully caricatured as a result of *Leviathan* that no one could risk revealing this source. The plot in the story that Parkin tells revolves around which part of Hobbes’s work was adopted. Some significant authors adopted his contractarianism, others his materialism. Still others took hold of his

minimalist doctrine of Christianity. All of these had to be denied, of course, for the charge of Hobbism was both easy to attract and difficult to deny, as the legacies of Scargill and Cardonnel attest.

Hobbes was not spared popular political attention, which only makes the story of his reception more difficult to follow and more interesting. Thus the charge of being a Hobbist was both an intellectual slight and a social curse. Parkin livens his history with remarkable quotations from sermons denouncing Hobbes. In this atmosphere Republicans and Royalists, Tories and Whigs, High Church Anglicans and Dissenters all hurled the term “Hobbist” at each other. As Parkin puts it, his “arguments could be publicly condemned by all parties, but at the same time used to further each of their agendas” (362). For instance, Hobbes’s *de facto* account of sovereignty was useful to almost every party at one time or another. Parkin comes closest to explaining how this could be when he writes, “however disreputable Hobbes might be, it is probably true to say that his was the most coherent and widely known theoretical story about the relationship between protection and obedience” (414). One might say that he ought to have attended more to the coherent theory of the original author.

Parkin concludes his chronicle of the attempts to tame Leviathan, the king over the children of pride, by explaining that these efforts uncover “the strategies and tactics of his critics, but also the true scale of Hobbes’s intellectual achievement” (416). This is certainly true, and neatly explains what this reader finds so valuable in his book. However, I am also left wondering if a similarly close study of the reception of Hobbes’s ideas to the present day might not reveal the same scale of achievement. What is the particular value of attending to his critics, especially those whose intellectual achievements never amounted to as much? Is not Hobbes himself the more interesting subject? He is, and what Jon Parkin has offered in *Taming the Leviathan* provides us with every reason for returning to his works and questioning our own strategies for challenging and adopting Hobbes’s ideas.