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CARTESIANISM AND ITS
OPPONENTS, OR IMAGING
THE STATE FROM POINT FIXE**

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**17TH CENTURY POLITICAL CARTESIANISM AND ITS
OPPONENTS, OR IMAGING THE STATE FROM *POINT FIXE*³.**

This article examines the relation of two models of civil science in the early modern political literature: the rhetorical science of contingency (*rhetorica primaria*), and *mathesis politica*, associated with Descartes by some early Enlightenment authors. The authors analyze the reception of the rhetorical aspect of Hobbes's civil science with a special focus on Vico's criticism of Hobbes's constructivist state model, showing how Vico counters the Hobbesian 'protosociological' style of theorizing with his own historical way of reflecting on the social and 'open' structure of political action.

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In the last decades of the 20th century, a kind of ‘Copernican turn’ took place in the historiography of early modern political thought. One discovered that, apart from the history of philosophy and the Lovejoy-style history of ideas, early modern political writings could also be analyzed using methods of modal logic and pragmatic philosophy. Thus, Quentin Skinner has repeatedly recognized the influence of Alister McIntyre’s neo-pragmatist philosophy of action on his own body of work [Skinner, 1979: X]. Nancy S. Struever, one of the founders of the ‘new history of rhetoric’, regards Charles Peirce’s philosophy as a possible ‘key’ to the understanding of early modern civil sciences [Struever, 2009: 2-4]. According to Jaakko Hintikka, an influential Finnish logician, studying the history of modal theories allows us to regard the trend towards ‘an expansion of the universe of the possible’ as one of the most significant phenomena of the Early Modern Era [Hintikka, 1981: 7]. The power lines that shaped early Enlightenment political science included criticism of the necessitarian ethical rhetorical paradigm, an appeal to rhetorical competence, search for a way to ‘tame’ contingency and thus to learn how to understand the human will’s universe of effects and how to control it. The change of modality and the change of pragmatic implications of political reasoning that took place in the early Enlightenment ‘civil sciences’ make it attractive to a number of trends in contemporary philosophy, from the speech act theory to pragmatism.

Quite naturally, rhetoric is in the focus of the new historiography of Renaissance and baroque political thought: It is in the early modern rhetorical sciences of the contingency that we may find what Nancy Struever called the ‘missed opportunities of Modernity’. The rhetorical tradition had to die for Modernity to be able to begin. From the outset, Modernity gave preference to order, verifiable certainty, and clarity of concepts [Hobbes, 2002: 15], while the rhetoric ‘lacked explanatory power,’ according to modern standards. The rhetorical science of baroque secessionist thinkers such as Vico and Hobbes remains merely a latent ‘possibility in modern inquiry’⁴. However, along with reformed rhetoric, *mathesis politica*, another idea with an opposing spirit, takes root in baroque political science. The combination of these two trends will be the focus of our attention for this essay.

First of all, we will focus in detail on Thomas Hobbes’s model of civil science (*civilis scientia, scientia virtutum et vitiorum*). This, however, will be only the first step. Our analysis will not confine itself to a static consideration of the logical design of Hobbes’s civil science, which has been done many times already. Instead, we are going to consider its *Sitz im Leben* and its immediate reception history. This will allow us to see Hobbes’s political science through the

⁴ See [Struever, 2009: 9].

eyes of his contemporaries. Of course, it is not the authentic concept of Hobbes that we will deal with, but a projection of it, and it differs from the original. Such a research strategy brings into sight certain aspects and possibilities of Hobbesian philosophy that a study of his texts would never disclose. This retrospective view will show us the ‘Cartesian Hobbes’ of Dutch Republican politicians; this is a reading of Hobbes in the light of Cartesian anthropology and medicine of the time, an Epicurean Hobbes, an associate of Pierre Gassendi, and, finally, Hobbes as an adherent of the *ratio status* theory and an heir to Machiavelli. The latter aspect is particularly important to us. The Italian idea of state interest, meeting in the free intellectual territory of the Netherlands with the ‘Protestant’ theory of sovereignty, will help us discover the *ragion di stato* in the depths of the ‘public reason’ of *Leviathan*. Thus the logic of reception will take us to insights that text hermeneutics took years of efforts to arrive at. Finally, we shall see how this syncretic image of Hobbesian philosophy gave rise to Giambattista Vico’s science of the political world which obtained the right to be called ‘new’ after rejecting such fundamentals of *mathesis politica* as its structure of action, its anthropological background, and its idea of the status of history in a theoretical discourse on the state.

As the starting point of our research, we take Quentin Skinner’s thesis that the concept of Hobbes’s ‘civil science’ evolved in quite contradictory ways between the 1620s and 1660s. The first step in this evolution was emancipation from the rhetorical science of the state. The 1590s saw the peak of Tudor political rhetoric based on a double identification: civil science was equated with rhetorical art (*scientia civilis / ars rhetorica*), and reason with eloquence (*ratio / oratio*). Both history and rhetoric benefited from their fusion in the humanist political historiography. History provided rhetoric with material in the form of numerous *exempla*, getting in return *universalia*, without which, according to Aristotle, there can be no science. A historian using the rhetorical paradigm dealt with ethical principles and moral characters rather than with the boundless chaos of events and facts. Having survived both Lorenzo Valla’s theoretical criticism and Niccolò Machiavelli’s pragmatic one in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, rhetorical historiography reached the peak of its popularity and even conquered new domains. For instance, numerous treatises on the poetics of historical writing and public speaking were translated and written in England at the end of the 16th century [Skinner; Zarka, 2001: 17]. Moreover, humanist rhetoricians claimed to be ‘Judges, Justices and Rulers in the Commonwealth.’⁵

Like many others, Thomas Hobbes had been fascinated by the political power of rhetoric, but it was a short-lived passion. The 1620s saw him working with rhetorical paradigm, as

⁵ Cf. [Skinner, 2004: 73].

evidenced by *Horae subsecivae*, written with William Cavendish. But starting with his treatise ‘On the Citizen’ (1642), Hobbes set his *scientia civilis* in sharp opposition to humanistic rhetoric. The great divorce of reason and rhetoric culminated in the epistolary preface to ‘Elements of Philosophy’. Paradoxically, in the second half of the 1650s a reverse motion began alongside with this, as Quentin Skinner convincingly explains: Geometric purism gave way to a gradual return to rhetoric, a rapprochement that became especially noticeable in the 1668 Latin version of *Leviathan* [Skinner; Zarka, 2001: 18], although some ambiguity with regard to rhetoric was already perceptible in the English text (1651). The anti-rhetoric passages in *Leviathan* are well known, but other fragments of the text suggest that Hobbes considered the use of rhetoric to be legitimate and even necessary in certain circumstances (cf. Chapter XXV and the Conclusion of *Leviathan*). Arguing against D. Thouard, Nancy Struever stated that there was no contradiction in Hobbes’s political science between the geometric discourse when discussing nature and rhetoric discourse when discussing the social world [Struever, 2009: 25]. Rhetorical study provided material for geometry, and geometry organized this material (syntax of unequivocal definitions).

But what kind of rhetoric is in question here? In order to see what place rhetoric occupied in Hobbes’s science, we must first dwell briefly upon his anthropology. The subject matter of civil science, according to Hobbes, is man who has two bodies – a natural one and a political one. The former belongs to the domain of physics, the latter to that of politics. The identification of the natural and the political man (that is, the ascribing of civilian properties to the natural man) was the mistake of traditional ethical and political theories such as those of Cicero and Aristotle with their ideas of the political animal, rational will, and natural sociality. Classical ethics was based on the logical ὕστερον πρότερον. To get rid of all these vague concepts, Hobbes introduces the ‘state of nature’ concept. This allows him to present Man as free from the artificial person of the state and autonomous from ethical and legal language. The ‘state of nature’ hypothesis makes it possible to turn categories of traditional ethics into empty concepts.

The natural body of Man is guided by passions, while the civil body of Man is guided by laws. Historians of rhetoric have recently started to pay attention to a fact of primary importance for understanding Hobbesian political science: Chapter VI of *Leviathan*, entitled ‘Of the interior beginnings of voluntary motions, commonly called the passions’, bears a striking resemblance to a collection of common places.⁶ In this section, Hobbes repeatedly refers even to etymology (e.g. of the word *molesta*), although arguments based on history and language are otherwise not

⁶‘Hobbes’s short definitions of the passions are, in fact, topics as principles or maxims, proverbs drawn from conventional uses, then presented as ready for use in political name-calling: they are definitions or sentences for politicians to employ.’ [Struever, 2009: 17].

typical of him. Resorting to this kind of reasoning has only one explanation: Once there can be no *a priori* principles for political practice (or else Hobbes would have to return to the humanistic normativist model), these principles can only be found (in the sense of the rhetorical *inventio*) in, or drawn from, social life. Hobbes's mechanistic language should not mislead us. Even a quick glance at the second chapter of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* will demonstrate that Hobbes's section on passions is a mechanistic transcription of Aristotelian topics. James R. Goetsch in his well-known book on Vico wrote about the new, 'rhetorical' reading of Aristotle in the early Enlightenment as one of the most significant events in the history of political thought [Goetsch, 1995: 69 – 88]. This ambivalence in the understanding of rhetoric can be found in Hobbes, too: he explicitly states that "eloquentia duplex est"⁷. Already in the early writings of Hobbes, e.g. in the preface to his translation of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, we find the same opposition between 'primary' (primaria) rhetoric as the art of decorating one's speech and 'secondary' (secundaria) rhetoric as a tool of political influence, which Goetsch observes in Vico (in Hobbes it takes the form of contrasting Thucydides's and Isocrates's styles). John Aubrey reported what Hobbes thought of Aristotle: according to the author of *Leviathan*, the Philosopher was the worst politician ever and founder of the most malign ethics, but his rhetoric and arguments about the nature of animals were rare [Struever, 2009: 13]. Particularly significant in this statement is the opposition of ethics and rhetoric, which are integrated in classical politics. Obviously, what the author means here is not the normativist rhetoric of classicists, but rhetoric as the science of human passions⁸ and common places – a rhetoric that Aristotle called the antistrophe of dialectic:

“The man who is to be in command of them must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions – that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited. It thus appears that rhetoric is an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies. Ethical studies may fairly be called political”⁹.

The famous passage in the preface to *Leviathan* where Hobbes argues that one can learn about the motives and goals of other people's actions through introspection (*nosce te ipsum* in the sense of knowing the whole human race in oneself)¹⁰ should not be understood as an appeal to a Cartesian sort of metaphysical meditation. Rather, it is a call for one to detect in oneself

⁷Cf. [Rotthkam, 2009: 153 – 179].

⁸“The Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure. Such are anger, pity, fear and the like, with their opposites” [Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1378a19-22].

⁹[Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a21-27].

¹⁰“He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this, or that particular man; but mankind.” [Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction].

what Nancy Struever (using Charles Peirce's term) called the 'habits of action' [Struever, 2009: 63] that have been formed in the process of social life.

The Hobbesian 'passions' are immanent anthropological characteristics as well as parameters of social interaction, 'social phenomena in the full sense of the word', according to Pierre Dumouchel's definition.¹¹ Thus, in the state of nature, as Hobbes states, *social action* is possible, i.e. one that is centered on the reaction and understanding of others. It is not by chance that Hobbes declares understanding, like speech, to be a constitutive feature of the human condition. As he writes, 'When a man, upon the hearing of any speech, hath those thoughts which the words of that speech, and their connexion, were ordained and constituted to signify, then he is said to understand it: understanding being nothing else but conception caused by speech. And therefore if speech be peculiar to man, as for ought I know it is, then is understanding peculiar to him also' [Hobbes, 1651: 17].

Contextual and common meanings in language that are independent from 'sovereign imposition' – and Hobbes openly admits the relevance of communicative usage and deixis¹² – are vestiges of this 'failed sociality'. But sociality in the state of nature, 'ever becoming and never being,' is constantly being eroded. There are several reasons for this. First of all, passions, *motus animi*, are in constant random and multi-directional motion, which combines several types at once: linear motion as the individual's aspiration to achieve his goals; peristaltic motion as deliberation, or alternation of passions; and circular motion as power.¹³ The second important reason is the inconstancy of signification in the language of natural Man.

'The names of such things as affect us, that is, which please and displease us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times, are in the common discourses of men of inconstant signification' [Hobbes, 1651: 17].

The inconstancy of significations opens a space for political manipulation because, for Hobbes, *power*, as Yves Charles Zarka astutely noted, 'only has reality as a signifié.'¹⁴ In an interpersonal context the effect of action can only be indirect: an individual considered in his relation to other individuals manifests his power by means of signs and this is how he

¹¹Cf. [Struever, 1999: 246].

¹² Concepts depend on '...our discourse, which being derived from the custom and common use of speech... It is therefore a great ability in a man, out of the words, contexture, and other circumstances of language, to deliver himself from equivocation, and to find out the true meaning of what is said: and this is it we call understanding' [Hobbes, 1840: 23].

¹³But this is not a simplistic "physicalist" account. The physicalist, necessary motion evokes indeterminate vibration, open to contingencies, receptive of hitherto unrealized possibilities. Rhetoric, functioning inside politics, seeks out the elements of change, alteration and privileges not *stasis*, universal accord, consensus, but *kinesis*; in politics diversity is engine, generating possibility' [Struever, 2009: 78].

¹⁴[Skinner, Zarka, 2001: 12].

subordinates the will of others. However, this manifestation of power may be fictitious, for signs of passions can be used arbitrarily. ‘These forms of speech, I say, are expressions or voluntary significations of our passions: but certain signs they be not; because they may be used arbitrarily, whether they that use them have such passions or not.’¹⁵

Therefore, Hobbes symmetrically contrasts four uses and four corresponding abuses of speech: ‘First, when men register their thoughts wrong by the inconstancy of the signification of their words; by which they register for their conceptions that which they never conceived, and so deceive themselves. Secondly, when they use words metaphorically; ... Thirdly, when by words they declare that to be their will which is not. Fourthly, when they use them to grieve one another.’ Characteristically, the rhetorical trope, according to Hobbes, is the extreme and obvious, but therefore the least dangerous form of this inconstancy: Of all kinds of manipulation, the rhetorical is the most explicit and therefore easy to detect.

But the main obstacle to achieving social stability naturally is reason. The ‘right’ reason (*recta ratio*) calculates the optimum action script based on the objectives of self-preservation, and thus it paralyzes the effect of natural laws and ‘constructive’ natural passions (charity, etc.). The chaotic interaction of people in the state of nature cannot produce any persistent forms because the predictive ability of the human mind systematically questions the benefits of following positive passions and natural laws. Thus, no positive natural sociality is possible. This is why nature has to give way to fiction.

The transition from the state of nature to the civil one, according to Hobbes, is the transition from the natural to the artificial, carried out by the means of signs (agreements). This suggests that it must take place in the realm of representation or fiction. The artificial body of the State is built over the human nature, which is incapable of independent existence. The ‘dialectical leap’ from the natural to the constructed is a constitutive feature of the Hobbesian style of theorizing in that it determines his doctrine of the state as well as his philosophy as a whole. Yves Charles Zarka described the Hobbesian model of science as the ‘metaphysics of separation’ based on a pre-predicative separating of the *representatio* from *res*. Hobbes’s idea of representation objects (*phantasmata*) as the sole subject matter of science refers to the dispute that was paradigmatic for the 17th century, namely the dispute on the grounds of parallelism between ideas and things, i.e. on the objective truth of our ideas. The main arguments in this dispute are well known: Descartes spoke of the veracity of God, Spinoza of the correlation of the attributes of substance, while Leibniz referred to pre-established harmony [Zarka, 1999: 20sqq]. Hobbes, we may remember, identifies metaphysics with ontology and excludes any element of

¹⁵ Ibid.

the supersensible from it. To bolster his opinion, he even refers to Francesco Patrizi's philological research that showed that the name 'metaphysics' itself was not authentic but assigned to Aristotle's treatise by Andronicus of Rhodes [Leijenhorst, 2002: 21]. For Hobbes, metaphysics is *physica generalis*, the science of the being insofar as it is being, but there is only physical being. At the same time, it is the science of phantasmata not of things in and of themselves independently of our perception [Leijenhorst, 2002: 20]. This may explain the famous thought experiment that opens *De Corpore*: Hobbes says that the best beginning for natural philosophy is mental 'annihilation of the world' (*annihilatio mundi*). This thought experiment is intended to show that, even in the absence of any objective correlatives of our ideas, science is still possible.

Zarka rightly pointed out that we should not reduce Hobbes's political doctrine to his materialist physics, given the importance of reflection on language for his philosophy [Skinner, Zarka, 2001: 10]. Thus, the first Hobbesian philosophy, i.e. ontology, does not deal with things but with 'concepts, or the most common names of all Beings' (*notiones, sive nomina illa communissima omnium Entium*). Accordingly, the aim of science, as defined by Hobbes in all his works including *Leviathan*, is to clearly define the meanings of fundamental concepts, and then link these concepts together in statements of impeccable logical form.

The recognition of signs as the only possible subject matter of science explains the intensity of Hobbes's reflection on language, a reflection that in many respects is neither independent nor original. Typically, even the examples Hobbes adduces to illustrate his doctrine of signs are absolutely identical with those in late scholastic philosophy courses. For example, in Chapter IV of *Leviathan*, titled 'Of speech', Hobbes replicates a thesis from the scholastic discussion about Adam's language:

'The first author of speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as He presented to his sight; for the Scripture goeth no further in this matter. But this was sufficient to direct him to add more names, as the experience and use of the creatures should give him occasion; and to join them in such manner by degrees as to make himself understood' [Hobbes, 1651: 12].

'Author of speech' is one of the most important categories of the scholastic science of signs because it designates the authority that imposes signs [Vdovina, 2009: 283]. The author of speech has unlimited power over his creation. In particular, he may 'withdraw' imposition. For example, the King can withdraw an imposition and make the word 'Man' mean 'stone'.

However, authors of scholastic courses took little interest in the figure of the author of speech, hence the variety of figures eligible for this role: the king, the people, the assembly of wise men, and so on [Vdovina, 2009: 283]. In Hobbes, on the contrary, this figure fills the entire picture.

In Hobbes, sovereign imposition provides a transition from equivocal speech (i.e. one that takes place in the state of nature and, as mentioned above, does not imply constant meanings of concepts) to public speech. Using the language of scholastics, it could be defined as an external denomination (*denominatio extrinseca*) of the public will. In the civil state, chaotic action disappears, as does the inconstancy of words:

‘As I have heard some say that justice is but a word, without substance; and that whatsoever a man can by force or art acquire to himself, not only in the condition of war, but also in a Commonwealth, is his own, which I have already shown to be false’ [Hobbes, 1651: 176].

The emergence of the state is made inevitable by a fundamental communicative failure for which reason is responsible. Nor can it be overcome, because of the original equality of all men, which Hobbes calls ‘equality of hope’. A world of spontaneous action that generates failed forms of sociality gives way to a homogeneous world – an orderly civil state. The transition from nature to fiction, from humans to numbers opens the door to decisionism. In fact, the constitutive characteristic of political power is that it acts arbitrarily as the authority of arbitrary imposition in the broadest sense of the word. The content of this action does not matter. Here we see an original understanding of causality typical of Hobbes: A cause continuously produces effects that are not kindred to it. The outside world produces phantasmata that are linked with it causally but not referentially; phantasmata produce arbitrary signs. At that, there is no continuity either between the outside world and phantasmata or between phantasmata and arbitrary signs: Terms of both pairs form autonomous spheres which are not reducible to each other but in fact generate each other. It is the inexplicable mechanisms of their propinquity that account for the secret of Leviathan’s birth and its transcendence.

* * *

Contemporaries of Hobbes saw the design of his civil science rather negatively – so much so that Richard Blackburn in his biography of the philosopher (published in English in 1680) was able to cite only one work about Hobbes whose anonymous author was favorable to him [Parkin, 2003: 32]. This book, *Epistolica dissertatio de principiis justi et decori* (1651) was, as it later

became clear, written by Lambert van Velthuysen, a Leiden physician, philosopher, and theologian, as an apologia for Hobbes's treatise *De Cive*. As rightly pointed out by John Parkin, Hobbes barely had any followers – at least faithful ones – because of his *scientia civilis* being extremely complex. In the process of reception it began to fall apart and enter bizarre synthesis with different political doctrines. Especially important for our study is its rapprochement with Cartesian physics and anthropology, which was particularly characteristic of Dutch republican intellectuals. One of the most illustrative examples of this synthesis is Gerard van Wassenaer's treatise *Bedekte konsten in regeringen en heerschappien* ('The Secret Arts Used in Governance and Domination'). The first edition of this work was published in 1657, and the second, titled *Nieuwkeurige consideratie van staat* ('A Careful Study of the State'), was published in 1662. Van Wassenaer was an Utrecht physician and an intimate friend of Hugo Grotius. The composition of his treatise is quite interesting: The first part opens with a paraphrase of Giovanni Botero's definition of *ragion di Stato* which Wassenaer changes it in a peculiar way, with only the middle term – 'to strengthen the existing governments as well as to protect and preserve [the states] governed by them'¹⁶ – being left of Botero's tripartite formula (*notizia di mezzi atti a fondare, conservare ed ampliare un dominio*). This shift of emphasis, however, is grounded in the book of Botero, for he identifies preservation of the state as the most significant element of his *ragion di Stato* concept.¹⁷

The next part of van Wassenaer's treatise contains the doctrine of the indivisibility of sovereignty, which is the provision that Dutch republicans appreciated the most out of Hobbesian philosophy.¹⁸

However, it is the second part of van Wassenaer's treatise that, in our opinion, is the most interesting. It deals with 'manners and passions' and contains numerous borrowings from *Foundations of Physics* (*Fundamenta physices*, 1646), a treatise by the Cartesian physician Henricus Regius. Here we find whole chapters devoted to tacitist concepts such as *arcana* and *simulacra imperii*.

An even more colorful alloy of Hobbes's social-contract doctrine, Cartesian anthropology, Aristotle's doctrine of the soul, and even the theory of humors are found in Johan de la Court's *Political discourses in six books* (1662).¹⁹ It features a completely different idea of

¹⁶ 'De tegenvvoordige Regeringen vast te stellen, als te behoeden en te behouden de beheersert van dien' [Wassenaer, 1657: 1].

¹⁷ 'Egli è vero che, se bene, assolutamente parlando, ella si stende alle tre parti sudette, nondimeno pare, che più strettamente abbracci la conservatione che l'altre, e dell'altre due più l'ampliatione che la fondatione' (quoted after the Biblioteca italiana: <http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/xtf/view?docId=bibit000589/bibit000589.xml>).

¹⁸ 't Reght der Hoge Heerschappie is een onbepaalde en vollkomen maghtende uysterste recht van alles dat tot de Hooghvvaerdighheydt van 't Ryk en Regeringh behoort' [Wassenaer, 1657: 2]. The versified caption of Hobbes's portrait in the 1667 Dutch edition of *Leviathan* enumerates his main merits, one of them being that he 'defined the highest authority as a single whole' ('De Hooge Opper-magt aen EEN heeft vast geset'). Cf. [Schoneveld, 1996: 32].

¹⁹Cf. [De la Court, 1662: 242-255].

civil science that is understood here not as constructing *more geometrico*, but as the poetics of manipulation based on thorough (medical and natural philosophical) knowledge of human nature. However, such ‘use’ of Hobbes must not be regarded as arbitrary, since it is based on the ambivalent nature of his civil science itself. The latter has the rhetoric of passion as its fundament, and on the top of it is the sovereign’s law-making mind, which through arbitrary imposition creates the artificial body of the state. Such inversion of the Hobbesian *scientia civilis* presupposes a totally different understanding of political reason: The solipsistic ‘Public Reason’ is substituted for by the totalitarian-manipulative ‘reason of state’.²⁰

Actualizing the rhetorical foundation of Hobbes’s civil science, however, was not the only possible form of reception of his concept of reason and his ‘descending sovereignty’ model. The Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) drew attention to the fact that Hobbes regarded sovereign authority as established by means of reduction, with history, natural sociality and, indeed, human nature itself being left aside. Characteristically, Vico was an attentive reader of Henricus Regius’s *Philosophia naturalis* (1654), which was an amended and enlarged edition of the *Fundamenta physices* that van Wassenauer drew upon. Vico himself says in his *Autobiography* that it is through Regius’s book, which he had secretly taken from his father's bookcase, that he was first introduced to Cartesian physics (Vico, 1999: 20 - 21). But the way Vico read Regius was quite different from the way van Wassenauer did: For him, the Cartesian physics was not a key to the secrets of political manipulation, but a fictitious product of a solipsistic mind unable to overcome the boundaries of its own self – an ‘anthropology of embodied subjectivity’ [Tosel, 2006]. Vico noted that the Cartesian man described by Regius was never seen by an anatomist (*‘l'uom di Renato dagli anatomici non si ritrova in natura’*).

It is in this point that, in the opinion of Vico, there is an affinity between Descartes and Hobbes, whom the Neapolitan philosopher puts on par with Epicurus and calls, quite characteristically, a ‘monastic philosopher’. Vico had no direct access to the writings of Hobbes and had to be content with a polemical digest of his political philosophy in a treatise *De novis inventis, quorum accuratiori cultui facem praetulit antiquitas* written by Georg Pasch (lat. Paschius, 1661-1707), a Lutheran professor at Kiel University. In this work, the presentation of the entire Hobbesian philosophy – and Pasch claimed to describe the contents of all political writings of Hobbes – fits on 15 pages (p. 190-205), with much of the space being occupied by a lengthy invective of Samuel Parker. As one would expect, Pasch portrays Hobbes as an heir to the Epicurean tradition (‘he took all his wisdom from Epicurus’) that was revived by Pierre

²⁰ Richard Tuck and Mark Neocleus argue that the absence of the notion ‘*ratio status*’ (or ‘reason of state’) from Hobbes's writings doesn't add up to much, because the abundance of books on the subject in the Bodleian Library, where he used to work during the 1630s, and a number of other clues suggest that he knew this context quite well [Neocleus, 2003: 47].

Gassendi [Paschius, 1700: 194]. Of course, we do not find here any systematic exposition of Hobbesian philosophy, but for us it is crucial that Pasch emphasizes the geometric nature of Hobbes's science as presented in *De Cive* ('*in hac de Cive tractatione instituit secundum ἀκριβίαν mathematicam rimari societatis humanae et civilis compagem*'): Vico sticks to this perspective and makes it the basis of his criticism of the Hobbesian political-science model.

From his early works on, Vico criticized the idea of geometric science (*mathesis*). In the famous first section of his treatise *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language* (1710, the section is called 'The Genuine and the Created'), he writes:

'Man then turns this fault of his mind to good use and creates two things for himself through what is called "abstraction": the point that can be drawn and the unit that can be multiplied. But these are fictions: The point, if you draw it, is no longer a point; the unit, if you multiply it, is not entirely a unit. Moreover, man arrogates to himself the right to proceed from these fictions to infinity, so that he is allowed to project lines indefinitely and to multiply the unit countlessly. By this device, man has created a kind of world of shapes and numbers which he can embrace entirely within himself, and, by lengthening, shortening, or putting together lines, by adding, subtracting, or reckoning numbers, he achieves infinite effects because he knows infinite truths within himself. ... Of course, the physicist cannot truly define things, that is, he cannot assign to each its own nature and thus truly make it, for that is God's right but is unlawful for man. So he defines the names themselves, and on the model of God (*ad Dei instar*) he creates from no substrate the point, the line and the plane, as if from nothing and as if they were things. Thus, he understands by the name (*nomine*) 'point' that which has not parts; by the designation (*apellatione*) 'line' the extension of length of the point devoid of width and depth, and by the expression (*acceptio*) 'plane' he understands the conjunction of two different lines at one point only, or a length and breadth with the depth cut off' [Vico, 1988: 50].

The abundance of school-like semantic termini in this passage, like *nomen*, *apellatio*, and *acceptio*, strikes the eye. Actions of a mathematician are semantic operations, while a geometer acts as the authority of arbitrary imposition, 'the author of speech', to use the scholastic terminus. On the model of God (*ad Dei instar*), he creates a fantasy world of concepts to which he gives arbitrary meanings. Researchers have noted long ago that the *verum factum* principle in Vico is twofold: Its status in the world of mathematics is different from that in the world of nations. Mathematics for Vico means alienation of reason from its parent social substratum. Failure to understand this has led Hans-Georg Gadamer to an incorrect interpretation of Vico in *Truth and Method*. Paradoxically, Gadamer reproaches Vico precisely for what Vico reproaches

Hobbes and other ‘monastic philosophers’: the ‘privatization of reason’.²¹ To understand the difference more clearly, it is methodically useful to refer to a case of radically ‘solipsistic’ use of the *verum factum* principle by Vico’s contemporary John Toland. Upholding the Newtonian ‘I-feign-no-hypotheses’ principle, Toland [Daniel, 1984: 72] clothes only propositions produced by ‘pure and original Reason’ with the status of the dogmatic, i.e. not hypothetical truth. For him, truth is the result of a purely individual act. This is why the use of reason divides people instead of uniting them. The individual use of reason forms the basis of Toland’s aesthetic program, the cornerstone of which is originality [Daniel, 1984: 66 – 75]. We see how the fiction that Vico uses exclusively in the epistemological sense in relation to geometry turns for Toland into an aesthetic category – a fiction in the true and original sense of the word.

If we now turn to the famous passages in *Leviathan* that define reason as reckoning, ratio as *ratiocinatio*, and the scientific method as a technique of computing, we will see that Hobbes introduces the reader to the very world which Vico defined as fantastic and solipsistic: ‘The world of men, consisting of lines, numbers, and algebraic entities’ (*‘nel mondo degli huomini, il qual fossesi composto di linee, di numeri e di spezie algebraiche’*).²² The political sphere, defined by Hobbes as ‘the realm of reason’ (*Imperium rationis*), is a sterile world, created, in the words of Pierre Nicole, from *point fixe*, i.e. originating from the mind of an armchair philosopher or, even worse, a philosopher on the throne. (It is not for nothing that Vico makes ‘monastic philosophers’ citizens of Plato’s Republic!)

However, for Hobbes himself, the necessity of a *point fixe* is well founded. Recall that he considers a situation where ‘everyone is governed by his own reason’ as one of the causes of permanent war. This opinion becomes especially interesting when placed in the context of later eirenic projects of the 1660s and 1680s, when making use of reason came to be regarded by a number of authors, such as Lambert van Velthuysen, Lodewijk Meyer, and John Locke, as the key to peace and social stability. Advocates of this thesis argued that reason is one and the same for all members of the human race, and, therefore, it encourages them all to seek the same goals. For Hobbes, on the contrary, making uncontrolled use of reason results not in unity but in chaos, which is why ‘Private Reason must submit to the Publique, that is to say, to God’s Lieutenant’. A single public reason can be defined in many ways, but for the purpose of this study Vico’s definition is relevant, which says that it is Cartesian reason, i.e. the one which makes laws in the realm of politics and creates the political world just as the geometer’s reason creates the world of

²¹‘For that man is concerned here with himself and his own creations (Vico) is only an apparent solution of the problem posed by historical knowledge. Man is alien to himself and his historical fate in a way quite different from the way nature, which knows nothing of him, is alien to him. ... *That is why the prejudices [pre-judgments, Vorurteile] of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*’ [Gadamer, 1991: 278].

²² Quotation from Vico’s letter to Francisco Xavier Esteban (January 12th, 1729) [Girard, 2008: 75].

lines, points, and other mathematical entities. Particularly illustrative in this respect is Chapter 26 of *Leviathan*, ‘Of civil laws,’ in which the question is raised as to with whose reason laws must comply. We take the liberty to quote this passage in full:

‘... Doubt is of whose reason it is that shall be received for law. It is not meant of any private reason; for then there would be as much contradiction in the laws as there is in the Schools; nor yet, as Sir Edward Coke makes it, an “Artificial perfection of reason, gotten by long study, observation, and experience,” as his was. For it is possible that long study may increase and confirm erroneous sentences: and where men build on false grounds, the more they build, the greater is the ruin: and of those that study and observe with equal time and diligence, the reasons and resolutions are, and must remain, discordant: and therefore it is not that juris prudentia, or wisdom of subordinate judges, but the reason of this our artificial man the Commonwealth, and his command, that maketh law: and the Commonwealth being in their representative but one person, there cannot easily arise any contradiction in the laws; and when there doth, the same reason is able, by interpretation or alteration, to take it away’ [Hobbes, 1651: 139-140].

Public reason performs in the practical sphere what demonstrative cognition performs in the theoretical: It creates its own principles and communicates them with clear and unambiguous signs²³. But in what sense does the sovereign ‘make’ the laws and concepts of good and evil, of the just and the unjust? Does not Hobbes himself declare in Chapter 26 of *Leviathan*, that ‘the law of nature’ is ‘the eternal law of God’? Is, then, the sovereign’s law-making an imposition or an interpretation? Carl Schmitt, in his famous ‘esoteric’ notes to the *Concept of the Political*, defines the relationship of the sovereign to the transcendent truth (in this case, the supreme truth of the Christian doctrine) as hermeneutic (‘*Quis interpretabitur? Quis judicabit?*’).²⁴ But at the same time he also points to the paradoxical nature of the ‘sovereign’ interpretation: ‘*Autoritas, non veritas, facit legem.*’ It is the authority that ‘transforms truth into a passable coin’ (‘*münzt die Wahrheit in gültige Münze um*’). The interpretation discussed here is a performative act: There is no natural law independent from sovereign imposition, which could be found in the will of the Divine legislator or in the teleological cosmos. The law must be created from a single point in order to put an end to the confrontation of ‘private reasons’, just as the meanings of words must be defined by a single authority to put an end to verbal battles and rhetorical abuse.

²³ ‘Earum tantum rerum scientia per demonstrationem illam a priore hominibus concessa est, quarum generatio dependet ab ipsorum hominum arbitrio. ... Praeterea politica et ethica, id est scientia justii et injustii, aequi et iniqui, demonstrari a priore potest; propterea quod principia, quibus justum et aequum et contra, injustum et iniquum, quid sint, cognoscitur, id est justitiae causas, nimirum leges et pacta, ipsi fecimus. Nam ante pacta et leges conditas, nulla neque justitia neque injustitia, neque boni neque mali publici natura erat inter homines, magis quam inter bestias’ [Hobbes, 1839: 92-93].

²⁴ Schmitt, 1963: 122.

The deficiency of Cartesian reason in its practical (social and political) aspect has to do, according to Vico, with ‘scholarly vanity’ (*boria dei dotti*), a special kind of flaw that is typical of philosophers. It causes them to measure others by their own yardstick and recreate the social and historical reality in their own image and likeness. But the knowledge of the historical world – the main goal of the *New Science* – implies insights into the ‘dark and rough’ beginnings of human history that are not immediately accessible to rational analysis. Vico says that in order to get insight into the beginning of sociality, a philosopher has to ‘put on the nature of the savages’ (*revetir la natura dei bestioni*). To prevent the ‘barbarism of reflection’ and to avoid the antisocial philosophy of the Stoics and Epicureans, he needs to make a very serious, almost impossible ‘kenotic’ effort (*meditando con i principi di questa Scienza, dobbiamo vestire per aliquanto, non senza una violentissima forza, una si fatta natura*). Thus, the historical origin of reason and its logogenesis coincide: Historically, reason comes to life as an effort and opens up (*ragione spiegata*) as an effort (*conato*). Hobbes and other ‘monastic philosophers’, who refuse to make this effort and prefer instead to ‘live in Plato’s Republic and not grovel in the dirt of the city of Romulus’ (*rovesciarsi nella feccia di Romolo*), are betraying the cause of philosophy, which, according to Vico, should not leave the human race to themselves but to accept people as what they are.

Vico’s intuition, which makes him turn to the dark origins of human history, is akin to the intuition of Hobbes, who assigns the ‘natural condition’ a very important part in his civil science. Nancy Struever described this common trait in the philosophical styles of both authors as ‘the continual resort to the most humble life processes.’ Vico’s topic corresponds to Hobbes’s rhetoric, and the chapter ‘Elements’ in the *New Science* corresponds to the section ‘Of Passions’ in *Leviathan*.

However, there are some fundamental differences between the natural state as described by Hobbes and by Vico. As we know, Vico’s pre-political people are not the outcome of speculative dissection of man in a civil state into the natural and political body, but the result of the original exegesis of Biblical history. The reintegration of Biblical history into a discourse about the origins of sociality reveals a fundamental difference between the styles of theorizing of both Hobbes and Vico. Hobbes works in broad brushstrokes; he ‘seems to prefer to elide the confusion and contradictions of historico-legal practices’ and ‘thus reduce the amount of historical information for theorizing’.²⁵ His perspective is ‘macro-sociological’ (‘macro-solution

²⁵ ‘While Hobbes refuses to engage with the wealth of all-too-human detail of historical political practices, Vico found this wealth of intrinsic interest as revealing the sources of civility, if often only ironically so. Where Hobbes seems to prefer to elide the confusion and contradictions of historico-legal practices of the community, and thus reduce the amount of historical information for theorizing, in contrast the many Vichian invocations of etymology are central to his diagnosis because the traces

of macro-problems'), and the issues he handles are extreme and ultimate, allowing neither interim decisions nor close attention to historical niceties. In Vico, on the contrary, history (and he explicitly defines *New Science* as 'history' at some point²⁶) discloses a vast field of political opportunities, examples of institutional transformations, and action scenarios: the Vichian '*ars diagnostica*' involves an optics that is completely different from the Hobbesian 'civil science' [Girard, 2008: 327 – 343].

This difference allows Vico to find his own solution to 'the Hobbesian problem'. The conditions under which a society is possible are, according to Vico, rooted in the history of its origin. In his theory, the 'cunning of Absolute reason' takes the place of the Hobbesian contract of rational individuals, and historically versatile anthropology takes the place of Hobbes's static one. Vico's primordial men differ markedly from 'Hobbes's men', even by physical parameters. Hobbes never misses an opportunity to point out the weakness and vulnerability of a single person, thus setting off the power of the sovereign. In addition, 'Hobbes's men' apparently inhabit some very small territory, like Aristotle's polis, all of which can be overlooked from a hilltop. That is why they are forced to engage in communication, which is doomed to failure for reasons mentioned above. 'Vico's men' are giants, Polyphemus, *los Patacones*, of fierce and indomitable temper and tremendous physical strength. The place these giants inhabit is not a polis but 'the great forest of Earth' (*gran selvaggio della terra*). They have nothing to share and no one to fear. Vico never misses an opportunity to emphasize the isolation (*'silvan alienation'*) of Noah's descendants, the first inhabitants of Earth after the Deluge [Vico, 1994: 48]. Trade contacts and conflicts between them are rare and short-lived. Thus a war, which Hobbes is known to determine as a state, not an event, (*warre* as opposed to *war*, *bellum omnium contra omnes*) appears in Vico only as a rare and minor episode in the life of ancient people. Against this background it becomes clear what Vico means in Axiom XL of the *New Science* where he states that social life originates from of people's fear of themselves and not of others. The emergence of the State in Vico does not have the fateful role that Hobbes ascribes to this event. The state, according to Vico, comes into being to protect the natural hierarchy, a statement unacceptable for Hobbes who in the beginning of Chapter XIII explicitly states the natural equality of men. Vico regards the birth of the state as an epiphenomenon of social relations in a certain stage of human history; the state is created by the noble ('heroes') to protect themselves against the plebeians.

of social-legal practices in the language archive are the sources of his political wisdom, in giving an account of the tactics of maintaining national identity' [Struever, 2009: 60].

²⁶ 'Thus our Science comes to be at once a history of the ideas, the customs, and the deeds of mankind' [Vico, 1948: 100].

The social instinct (*conato*) wakes up in the giant men, to use Hobbes's term, under the influence of *terroure*, which, however, is but a 'cunning of Absolute reason.' Two hundred years after the Deluge, land becomes dry enough to produce 'dry vapor' that generates lightning. This physical phenomenon, the nature of which the reasonless giants, of course, cannot explain, generates the image of Jupiter in their imagination, that is, a vague idea of Deity. Not only is the image of Jupiter a vague idea, but it is also an outright false one – it is this image that pacifies passions. Thus, the giant is afraid of himself; he fears the fruit of his own imagination, but this fear of a fiction becomes a *conditio sine qua non* of civil order. Fear generates a special kind of spiritual (*insensibile*) ability in man (*conato*), which, in contrast to the 'Epicurean physics', Vico regards as a skill of the soul and not as a function of the body.

Vico's giants avoid the Hobbesian Trap simply because anthropologically they are radically different from the men living in the 'era of reflection'. Being endowed with an irrepressible imagination but devoid of reason, they act without reasoning. Primordial men are unable to foresee, and this is a guarantee of their natural sociality. Hobbes's belief in the goal-instrumental rationality of human action, his static anthropology (it remains the same in the natural and in the civil status) and the related idea of social contract as a conscious agreement between rational individuals makes the collapse of any positive sociality inevitable. The reference to history makes it possible to set the static Hobbesian anthropology in motion (while anthropology *in toto* and the understanding of the motivation of human actions in Vico and Hobbes are the same²⁷). But how can we determine the status of the natural condition in Vico? Since 'the first human thoughts' are the beginning of his 'new science', it cannot trespass the borderline of 'humanity': Even the rational cognition of these 'first human thoughts' is only possible through extraordinary efforts (*'immaginar non si può, indendere appena si può'*). The natural condition, or 'bestial state' (*ferinitas*) is the limit concept of 'new science', i.e. one that sets the limits to the rational understanding of the world of nations.

Vico avoids the Hobbesian trap by reinterpreting the structure of human action. To this end he reintroduces the historical dimension of social life excluded by Hobbes. It offers a view of historically real human actions and allows one to substantiate the spontaneous generation of social institutions such as Law, Language, and the State. That is why Vico calls 'fortuity and choice' (*'occasio et electio'*) the 'lords of human things' (*'dominae rerum humanarum'*). Vico's understanding of action is akin to some of the modern sociological theories that favor such category as serendipity – an unintended happy result of action.

²⁷[Struever, 2009: 60].

‘Men mean to gratify their bestial lust and abandon their offspring, and they inaugurate the chastity of marriage from which the families arise. The fathers mean to exercise without restraint their paternal power over their clients, and they subject them to the civil powers from which the cities arise. The reigning orders of nobles mean to abuse their lordly freedom over the plebeians, and they are obliged to submit to the laws which establish popular liberty. The free peoples mean to shake off the yoke of their laws, and they become subject to monarchs. The monarchs mean to strengthen their own positions by debasing their subjects with all the vices of dissoluteness, and they dispose them to endure slavery at the hands of stronger nations. The nations mean to dissolve themselves, and their remnants flee for safety to the wilderness, whence, like the phoenix, they rise again. That which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same’ [Vico, 1948: 382].

Vico’s analytical tool correlative with this model is irony – a way of reflective discussion of unreflective practices;²⁸ Hobbes, according to Nancy Struever’s quip, ‘has not an ironic bone in his body.’²⁹ Thus the language of research transforms radically. The pragmatics and the modal characteristics of this language could be the subject of a separate study.

According to Pierre Nicole, one of the authors of the *Port-Royal Logic*, to establish metaphysics and all the other disciplines on a Cartesian *fundamentum inconcussum*, one has to find a ‘fixed point’ (*point fixe*)³⁰ in each science, i.e. the point from which its content could be ‘re-created’ from scratch. For the Cartesian science of society, such *point fixe* is the solipsistic mind successfully taming contingency and leaving aside the historical dimension of the human condition. This leads to decisionism and the impossibility of communication between the sovereign and those governed. An alternative model of civil science is proposed in the *New Science*, which Friedrich Meinecke defined as an ‘organon of historical thinking’. It is this status that makes it possible to bring back *natural sociality*, *communication*, and *history* to the discourse about society. These two ways of ‘taming contingency’ have remained present in social sciences in one way or another up to now. In particular, an implicit opposition of Hobbes and Vico underlies two competing trends in mid-twentieth-century sociological theorizing.

²⁸Irony has its place in Vico’s methodology as the fourth trope; but this is the trope of commentary, reflection, and is unlike metaphor as a mode of unreflective judgements of the *gentes*; it is an investigator’s reflection on the unreflective, in short’ [Struever, 2009: 53]. Vico adopted the classification of tropes put forward by Peter Ramus. Cf. [Battistini, 1973: 67 – 81].

²⁹[Struever, 2009: 55].

³⁰He took over the metaphor from Decartes. Cf. [Piqué, 2010: 285 – 286].

Given that Talcott Parsons's structural-functional sociology was, in essence, an attempt to resolve the 'Hobbesian problem', it is probably not for nothing that some historical sociologists criticizing Parsons appealed to Vico as one of their most important predecessors.³¹

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³¹See [Weber and Tönnies, 1995: 171 – 201] for one attempt to discover in Vico's heritage a hidden potential for historical sociology.

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