

Aesthetics and Rhetorics in the Leviathan

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ABSTRACT. The anti-rhetorical stance Thomas Hobbes undertakes in some of his major works is the rejection of rhetorical speech in favor of rightful speech. Although in the *Leviathan* he takes a new position, he keeps highlighting the politically inferior status of rhetorical speech and opposes it to the public use of scientifically right and politically legal speech of the sovereign. My thesis is that in the *Leviathan* both the rejection and the acceptance of rhetoric as means of persuasion play an aesthetic role.

I. Introduction

Analyses from the last three decades consider language in Hobbes' philosophy as a fundamental aspect of the *Leviathan* rather than as an isolated topic.¹ Accordingly the relationship between politics and language can also be viewed in this work as a more complex system of communication, public and private space as well as political power. Both the anti-rhetorical position Hobbes undertook in *De Cive* and *The Elements of Law* and its later criticism in the *Leviathan*² can be viewed as a dilemma between two aesthetic positions. The stake of this dilemma is to advocate or to reject eloquence in the political language of the legal power. Whereas in the two earlier major works Hobbes rejects eloquence in favor of the scientific rigor of the language used by the sovereign, in the *Leviathan* he re-considers his earlier position. Accordingly he considers in the *Leviathan* that the language utilized by the sovereign must recur to rhetorical means if large masses of people are addressed, untrained to be convinced by the language of scientific rigor.

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¹ See also: Terence Ball: (1985), "Hobbes' Linguistic Turn", *Polity*, 17, 739-60; Friedrich G. Whelon: (1981), "Language and its Abuses in Hobbes' Political Philosophy", *American Political Science Review*, 75 (1), March, 59-75

² Quentin Skinner: *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 426

2. Individual and Public Roles of Language

Hobbes mentions in chapter II of the *Leviathan* that individuals who live outside society have their own words (names) for things. Hobbes addresses in this idea a relationship between language and society. Further passages on this relationship appear in the first part of the book entitled *Of Man* which contains a special chapter about speech (chapter IV). This chapter guides the reader into a conception of the difference between the public and private role of language. The underlying anthropological conception of the second – political – part of the book emerges from the first one. In the second part language does not only appear as a human ability, but also in the context of politics and as such it is discussed as a separate problem. Thus if we abandon the strict anthropological framework of the book, the concept of language ceases to refer merely to an individual ability and speech appears as the medium of political deliberation. In this respect the enlightened despotism traced in the *Leviathan* lays the foundation of the separation of private and public speech: “Special uses of Speech are these; First, to Register what by cogitation we find (...). Secondly, to shew to others the knowledge, which we have attained”³ (...) “(Speech) without which there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor society, nor Peace (...)”⁴

This particular duality of the individual and intimate on the one hand and the public and social uses of language on the other is consistent with the central thesis of the volume that the scope of the political state is to avoid civil war: “In cases where the sovereign has prescribed no rule, there the Subject hath the Liberty to do, or forbear, according to his own discretion.”⁵ The tensions between the individual and the political community, between the individual and the sovereign and finally between the civil war that emerges from particular interests (and their public expression by eloquence) insufficiently controlled by the central power on the one hand and the community on the other hand also occur in the role of language of these interactions. A further tension also occurs, that between rational-

³ Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Ed. by Richard Tuck. Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 25

⁴ Hobbes: 1991, p. 24

⁵ Hobbes: 1991, p. 152

ity and interest of which recognition makes Hobbes amend his previous thoughts about the role of rhetoric in the state.⁶ Accordingly although rhetoric is seen by Hobbes as intellectually less valuable than the language of science, the rhetorical means of persuasion appears to be important in the exercise of power upon the ignorant.

Hobbes' scope to specify the criteria of accuracy in the use of language in politics by its use in natural sciences appears already before the *Leviathan* and remains present in this whole work. It is in this sense that the requirement of the coherence between concepts and definitions is described in chapter IV. We learn that superstitions emerge in politics from the improper use of language. Superstitions in politics are the outcome of the rhetorically rather than scientifically established statements. The effect of rhetorically beautiful speech (eloquence) is biased toward private interests and it is opposed to the scientifically disciplined speech of the sovereign which serves public interest.

With regard to the earlier established primacy of the scientific use of language it can be stated that although Hobbes' severe distinction between speech qualified and un-qualified for public use is fundamentally a political distinction, its epistemological background remains implicit in the whole work. Hobbes links the structure of political community to the rigor of science.⁷ The linguistic/rhetoric edifice of this political theory based upon the distinction between peace (public order) and civil war (public disorder) follows the scientific foundation of the intellectual coherence of politics. This model clearly implies the secondary role rhetoric is supposed to play in political affairs. The community is supposed to be ruled by meanings defined by the sovereign which in turn are scientifically provable.⁸ The ambition to scientifically prove this overarching model of science, politics and rhetoric unites the political and semantic integration of the community. Conceived in this way Hobbes excludes the demand for any particular

⁶ Skinner: 1996, pp. 427, 428

⁷ Christine Chwaszcza: „Anthropologie und Moralphilosophie im ersten Teil des Leviathan” pp. 83-109, in Wolfgang Kersting (hrsg): (1996), *Leviathan, oder Stoff, Form und Gewalt eines bürgerlichen und kirchlichen Staates*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin: 1996, pp. 88-89, John W. Danford: (1980), “The Problem of Language in Hobbes's Political Science”, *Journal of Politics*, 42, February, pp. 102-34. p. 104

⁸ Chwaszcza: 1996, pp. 88-90

normative conception according to which the community should be ruled. He elaborates a value-neutral model of government and does not set any further goal of value either for the sovereign or for the community. This is a work in political science rather than in any particular political faith.

The relationship between the public and private expression of words and the ruling of the community primarily appears in the *Leviathan* in the context of representation.⁹ We also learn in chapters XVII and XVIII that the sovereign is not conceived as a private but as the sole public person who warrants the agreement set between all members of the community. Both the sovereign conceived in this way and the members of the community in their own status as agreeing parties exist only publically.¹⁰ In this double ontology we deal with probably the earliest fundamentally modern split between the private and the public role of the individual person. Moreover Hobbes highlights that in his moral, legal and political status the sovereign is in fact not one of the members of the community, but is above.

The enlightened despotism traced in the *Leviathan* establishes the discipline of the distinction between the private and public use of language and sets the sovereign as the guard of this distinction. The power of the sovereign appears in this sense as a political and intellectual power in the meantime. We learn from this model that false political theories and superstitions are the outcomes of the improperly used language, because they descend from the publically addressed private rhetoric rather than from the scientifically proved statements of the sovereign. Yet as we learn from chapter XVI, the influence of the rhetorically attractive speech ultimately leads to civil war.¹¹ Civil war is in turn the end of political order. The expression of private interests uncontrolled by the sovereign on the one hand and the lack of the monopoly of the narrative of the sovereign on

⁹ Hobbes: 1991, III-115; Wolfgang Kersting (hrsg): (1996), *Leviathan, oder Stoff, Form und Gewalt eines bürgerlichen und kirchlichen Staates*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1996, pp. 227, 267

¹⁰ Reinhard Brandt: „Das Titelblatt des Leviathan“ (29-55), in Wolfgang Kersting (hrsg): (1996), *Leviathan, oder Stoff, Form und Gewalt eines bürgerlichen und kirchlichen Staates*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, pp. 29-55

¹¹ William R. Lund: (1992), „Hobbes on Opinion, Private Judgment and Civil War“, *History of Political Thought*, XIII (1), Spring, pp. 51-72

the other hand lead potentially to anarchy.¹² Contrary to this the avoidance of anarchy means that the public interest is expressed only by the sovereign.

We learn in chapter XXXI that governing by words demands that words must be spoken out to the public as clearly as possible, otherwise their meaning is not legal: „To rule by Words, requires that such Words be manifestly made known; for else they are no Lawes”.¹³ Thus in present terms public space consists in the legal space of the word of the sovereign made public, but only that. Public space conceived in this way is not the space of deliberation it is not the space of public debate, but the space where the word of the sovereign becomes heard by the community.

In terms of the ontology of this political order the justification of the publically disseminated word of the sovereign together with its constraining power descend from the original transfer of the inborn right of the individual to the sovereign. Therefore as a matter of fact the speaking sovereign is the speaking Leviathan which in turn is the totality of the political community itself, the “delegated” voice of each individual citizen. Similarly to the acting of the sovereign his word is also the act “delegated” by each member of the community on her own behalf. Hobbes considers acts of communication which divert from those disseminated by the power only legitimate if they remain within the private space of the individual. Individual perspectives are only allowed to be spoken out in the restricted area of the private realm. The only case in which Hobbes’ model leaves space for individual self-expression uncontrolled by the sovereign is self-defense. In any other case the individual path breaks the rule of public order, it is illegitimate rhetorically obstructing eloquence and must be classified as un-scientific and illegal.

3. The Aesthetic Role in Governing

The re-considered role of rhetoric in the persuasion of the masses seems to

¹² Dietmar Herz: (1996), „Bürgerkrieg und politische Ordnung in Leviathan und Behemoth. Zum Kapitel 29 des Leviathan” (259-283) , in Wolfgang Kersting (hrsg): *Leviathan, oder Stoff, Form und Gewalt eines bürgerlichen und kirchlichen Staates*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin pp. 259-283

¹³ Hobbes: 1991, p. 246

alter the aesthetic role of the state power as well. In the *Leviathan* Hobbes amends his earlier radical anti-rhetorical stance by recognizing the positive role rhetoric may play in political stability. If we assume that in the *Leviathan* the speech of the sovereign represents order and to secure the stability of this order the sovereign may recur to rhetorical means of persuasion, public speech conceived as rhetorically “beautiful” becomes part of the otherwise scientifically proved role of the power to lead. The aesthetic role of rhetoric becomes in this way a means to maintain the scientifically defined exercise of political power. This model envisages a rhetorical role of the political power as the legitimate alternative to the rhetorical role of speech that represents individual or group interests. Consequently rhetoric is only re-habilitated in the *Leviathan* for power’s use, not for anyone’s use.

Whereas the words spoken out by the sovereign represent the order of the political community, private acts and “voices” are instances of disorder if carried out publically. Without enforcing metaphors like ugliness and beauty, it is clear that if the legally understood order of the political community the Leviathan itself represented by the sovereign can be opposed to the dis-order publically disseminated private acts and views lead to, then the publically used private rhetoric is politically “ugly” and the uses of rhetoric by the political power are “beautiful” because they represent the legitimate order. The speech of power is the speech of order.¹⁴ Hobbes envisages in this way both a political model of public order and specifies in the meantime, the legitimate role rhetoric may play in this order. By doing this he advocates a unitary, closed model (the Leviathan) against a plural one (public disorder) of the various private opinions and acts made public: “And be there never so great a Multitude; yet if their actions be directed according to their particular judgments, and particular appetites, they can expect thereby no defence, nor protection, neither against a Common enemy, nor against the injuries of one another. For being distracted in opinions concerning the best use and application of their strength, they do not help, but hinder one another (...) but also when there is no common enemy, they make warre upon each other, for their

¹⁴ Kersting: 1996, p. 270

particular interests.”¹⁵

The strict place rhetoric occupies in this system emerges from the political and general intellectual monopoly of the political power of the Leviathan, fulfilled by the sovereign. It is in this respect that chapter IV discusses the coherence of the logical connection between notions and definitions. Thus Hobbes' model is not designed to be ideological, but of philosophical/scientific nature as put forward in chapter XX. Accordingly the requirement that the knowledge political power is based upon must be scientifically proved is above the power of the sovereign. The power of the sovereign, the entire model of the Leviathan is the outcome of the scientifically provable order of things. This model de-personalizes the scientifically proved truth as well as the political power that strives to correspond to it and drives us back to the place assigned by Hobbes to the individual and to the public.

In Hobbes' model the diversion of individual interests from public interest (defined by the sovereign) implies the tension between passion and reason. The access of the private individual interests, uncontrolled by the sovereign into the public space ultimately generates the fall into the chaos of the pre-political state of civil war. As we have seen this public political space can only be governed by the sovereign. But since he is above the community the sovereign is not fulfilling his role as its member. Moreover in terms of the logic of the transfer of the individual rights to the sovereign, the constraint of the laws conceived by the sovereign upon the citizen is in fact the constraint the citizen exercises upon himself by the intermediation of the sovereign. In the abstractness of their political role both the ruled citizens and the ruling sovereign are excluded from the realm of what is personal and private and inhabit the space for the un-personal and public. The outcome of this distribution of roles is the rational cooperation of each individual in declining his mere private way of pursuing his own self-sustaining and the transfer of his inborn right of self-sustaining to the Leviathan represented by the sovereign. The reason why Hobbes considers the actual form of the state as monarchy or republic as insignificant is probably due to this genuine rationality of the system. We are not dealing here with either particular forms of state or with physical persons

¹⁵ Hobbes: 1991, p. 118

but as agents of the rational game of creating and sustaining the political community (the Leviathan) for the sake of each single individual: “For the Laws of Nature (as *Justice, Equity, Modesty, Mercy*, and (in summe) *doing to others, as wee would be done to,*) of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like. And Covenants without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.”¹⁶

The modernity of Hobbes’ model consists precisely in the insignificance of the individual person in his role within and above the political community. Although the sovereign can less be called back as in John Locke’s theory, the fundamental exchange of physical persons in the exercise of the role of leadership is present in Hobbes as well: the individual person (both the citizen and the sovereign) appears as ontologically different from the role he happens to fulfill. The person of the sovereign is less touchable as in Locke’s theory, however not as person, but as sovereign. Hence the falsity of the idea to view the Leviathan as the metaphor of a living being rather than of a rational calculus.¹⁷

It is precisely the deontic character of the Hobbesian model that turns the potentially parallel public narratives dangerous for political order. The possibility of public debate may be a source of questioning the legitimacy of the acts of the sovereign. Hobbes’ personal experience of the English civil war lasting four decades and of the emerging freedom of speech during the Long Parliament, play a role of inspiration in his considerations. If the publically heard private voices provoke clash of views the established political order may be shaken and may ultimately fall into civil war which is the greatest possible danger for the community. Given that according to Hobbes the avoidance of civil war is the highest political goal, the freedom of speech appears in this model as inferior. Chapter XX reveals that Hobbes clearly praises peace higher than freedom.

The strict distinction between the speech approved only for the private space and the speech approved for the public space turns the fact of the intrusion of the sovereign in the private personal life. In this way the

¹⁶ Hobbes: 1991, p. 117

¹⁷ Kersting: p. 265

sovereign draws the line between the public and the private space. However even if the sovereign does not directly involve into the sphere of private communication, by making the demarcation between what is allowed to be private and what is allowed to be public he ultimately gets involved into the sphere of private communication as well.

By defining the space of legitimate self-expression the monopoly of interpretation of the sovereign does not only embrace the control of doctrines but also of passions. Even if the passions are not supposed to be directly ruled by the sovereign, by the demarcation of their limits they are ruled anyway. The fundamental passion Hobbes explores in the *Leviathan* is fear. Accordingly the rationality that gives birth to the political community as scheme of cooperation relies upon the fear of the individual from the short, fearful and difficult life and violent death. As a matter of fact Hobbes' model relocates the target of this fear by channeling the manifoldness of individual fears into the one single fear from the sovereign. The role of the power in this sense is not to eliminate fear but to give a strict direction to it and to control it. In this way the fear of each individual is simply "transformed" by the power with its legitimate and obviously only public scope of "domesticating" it for the interest of the individual citizen.

The irony in Hobbes is that the reason why we have to renounce from most of our inborn rights is because we have them. The foundation of Hobbes' repressive system consists in the very recognition of the inborn freedom of man. The ambivalence of this system is its being repressive and liberating in the meantime: he rejects public plurality exactly because public plurality may normally occur. What is this if not the indirect recognition of the inborn capability of the pursuit of one's individual goals? According to this logic the reason why by representing the Leviathan the sovereign has to channel the individual pursuits into one single whole is that individuals naturally tend to pursue their own way differently from the way other individuals pursue it for themselves.

4. Conclusion

In the *Leviathan* Hobbes elaborates a model which is aesthetic in two senses: 1. in its utilization of rhetoric, 2. in the rejection and re-considered

acceptance of rhetoric as inescapable means of political persuasion. In the first case eloquence facilitates the comprehension of the words of the sovereign by ordinary people. In the second case the aesthetic element is the vision of centralized political order. And what links the two cases - as a matter of fact both of them present in the *Leviathan* - is the role of language: once rhetorical, once scientific/constructivist. If we assume that in the *Leviathan* the speech of the sovereign represents order and this model of power implies the rejection of the rhetorical mode of persuasion, then Hobbes' political model is an aesthetic position. It envisages a rhetorical role of the power as the legitimate alternative to the rhetorical role of speech that represents individual or group interests. The rhetorical mode of the exercise of power appears as an aesthetic stance both in its envisaging a conception of public order and in its rejecting direct aesthetic scopes of privately fueled rhetorical acts. The content of this aesthetic model is the unitary, closed model¹⁸ Hobbes advocates against the plural one of the various private voices.

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¹⁸ Reinhard: pp. 29-55

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